

Food to fuel the adventure.

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Rafting on the Main Salmon River: America's River of No Return

By Nick Como

The Main Salmon River is the government name you might find on a map. However, a more often used and apt moniker heard in river-running circles is, "The River of No Return," derived from the simple fact that there's no reasonable exit for close to a hundred miles. But the Salmon's most alluring and unique attraction is that its frothy rapids, skyscraper-sized pines, and crystal clear water are as far from a paved road as possible in America.

Less than six hours north of Salt Lake City, this river is for those who are truly looking to get away from it all. By our second night with Stanley, Idaho-based [Rocky Mountain River Tours](#), we felt as far from blacktop, houses, jobs, and any other tie to the "real" world you could physically and mentally get. That is, except for the cold beer and gourmet food—not everything is worth leaving behind, after all.

THE RIVER

The (mostly) Class III rapids provide plenty of cold splashes, even more so if you choose to use one of the inflatable ducky kayaks, or for the very bold—one of the Stand Up Paddleboards—brought on each trip. Newbie rafters will find plenty of challenge (read: flipped boats) finding the right line through many of the rapids.

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Even with beta from our guides we had about a 50% success rate paddling the ducky through even the medium-sized waves.

Though you never get cold running the river in mid-summer, no excuse is needed to sample one of the dozens of hot springs on the side of the river. Some springs are easy to spot, but only veteran guides know the trails to hidden utopian soak spots.

We hiked (all of 100 yards) to petroglyphs, as well as longer (half-mile) excursions to cabin ruins from the turn of the century. The relaxation program was the call for our group, and while there was an option to do far longer hikes to the distant rim of the canyon, we chose not to do so.

The Salmon River canyon is so deep and wide, there are few turns in the river you could see the top of the canyon rim. Most of the time the view was “obscured” by pine trees, hillsides, cliffs, and mountaintops. The only breaks in the scenery were the hundreds of side creeks that flow in every couple of miles. I forgot each of their names, but our guides knew every one of them, as well as the last time they flooded and created or eliminated one of the hundred named and unnamed rapids.

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The author tries out SUPing.

TO GUIDE OR NOT TO GUIDE

Having done more than a fair share of river trips as a private group, this was my first time experiencing one at the hands of a guided outfit. Since chances of scoring a permit as a private group for many famous stretches of this river are slim, we chose to sign up with a guide for a five-day, four-night trip. Instead of weeks of preparation, packing, travel itineraries, map searching, and gear checking that we’re accustomed to, we pretty much showed up at the launch with a change of clothes.

Being part of a group of people whom you’ve never met, have little in common with, and will be sharing one of three 16-foot rafts for five days is another reason I wanted to dip my toe in the proverbial water before choosing our guide. Feeling like you’re part of a reality show with hidden cameras was not how I wanted to spend one of the two vacation weeks I have each year. The ability for a guide to not only guide you down the river but to guide the group in terms of mood is, perhaps, on par with importance.

We chose to float with Rocky Mountain River Tours (rafttrips.com). There are several guides in the area—do your homework before choosing as the clientele

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varies from outfit to outfit, whether you are looking for a family-friendly getaway or a bachelor party. We couldn't have been happier with our group dynamic, notably the guides delivering coffee to our tent each morning. Plus, we didn't have to figure logistics for a 10-hour car shuttle.

AT CAMP

The days this far north are long. The sun doesn't dip behind the mountains until close to 9:00 p.m. with usable light for almost an additional hour, creating ample opportunity to keep a slow pace during the day. We stopped to jump off one of the foot bridges that spans the river, took naps upon reaching camp, read books and played camp games, especially since the guides set up our tents and got dinner on the stove while we rested from a day of relaxing.

Speaking of dinner, expect gourmet meals like couscous, enchiladas, homemade cobblers, and nothing requiring it be boiled in a bag or re-hydrated. To put the emphasis on dining into perspective: for a group of seven people we had three 16-foot boats, one dedicated entirely to coolers of food and kitchen wares. Nothing beats ending the day by grabbing a second or third helping of dinner or fresh-baked desserts under a star-filled sky.

WHEN TO GO

Visit the Salmon in July for a good mix of fast moving water, which has warmed a bit from spring runoff.

For slower moving and warmer water go in late August, which (lucky for you) necessitates an extra day and night on the river to complete the journey.

RIVER STORIES

Handmade huts, which we floated by on countless turns in the river, are evidence of a simpler life on these shores. Several mountain men and women gave up modern culture and lived here with no access to the outside world, other than a multi-day hike or river voyage out. Today's inhabitants reside in modest cabins with jetboats or seaplanes, allowing quicker access to the middle of nowhere.

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Gourmet food on the river.

On the fourth day of our trip, we stopped at Buckskin Bill's former hideout. His modest cabin still stands and features a well-preserved collection of hand-made tools and equipment. Bill had quite the assortment of guns, homemade

ammunition, and even a gun tower, which he used in more than one standoff with government officials claiming Bill was trespassing on what they thought to be federal property. The dispute was eventually settled when the rightful owner of the land allowed Bill to live his remaining years on the river with no shots fired.

We learned all of this while sipping Deschutes Brewery's Black Butte Porter ice cream floats at the museum, which now sits on the property, along with a contemporary home one lucky family lives in. The ice cream and beer is an unexpected combination, just as a museum of the river's relics seems strange paired so close to a modern home's reminder of civilization. Fitting, since "The River of No Return" is as far from a paved road as you can get.

Check out trips on the Main Salmon as well as the famed Middle Fork of the Salmon at www.rafttrips.com with Rocky Mountain River Tours. See ya on the river!

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