



AMERICA'S GREAT
RIVER JOURNEYS

50 CANOE, KAYAK, AND RAFT ADVENTURES



American Rivers
Rivers Connect Us®

TIM PALMER

Foreword by RICHARD BANGS

RIZZOLI
NEW YORK

COLORADO RIVER

Colorado • Utah

SOUTHWEST

LENGTH: 6 to 120 miles, plus 112 miles of river (and reservoir) possible below

WHITEWATER: Class 1-2, plus Class 4 in Westwater and Cataract Canyons

SEASON: spring, summer, fall

GAUGE: Utah state line

PERMIT: yes, for Westwater and Cataract Canyons; camping permit for Ruby-Horsethief Canyon

CAMPING: yes

OUTFITTERS: guided trips, rental craft for some sections

HIGHLIGHTS: extended trip, whitewater, gentle flows, wild canyons, easy access

The infamous Skull Rapid in Westwater Canyon of the Colorado requires an urgent move from right to left to miss the hydraulic hole capable of flipping rafts in the center of the river.

FOLLOWING SPREAD: After descending the west slope of the Rocky Mountains, the Colorado River pushes its silty volume past an ancient outcrop called Black Rocks in Ruby-Horsethief Canyon, downstream from Loma.

The very name, Colorado River, evokes a sense of myth, powerful whitewater, and a sweep of dramatic landforms from glaciated summits at the Continental Divide to the grandest of desert canyons. Epic, intriguing, forbidding—all describe the path this artery takes as one of ten major rivers radiating from the highcountry soul of the West, and none compares to this river in its journey from Rocky Mountain peaks to Great Basin Desert, from cliffhanger trails to interstate highways, and from hardscrabble towns of oil boom-and-bust to trendy destinations for leisure. This river storms through four states and 1,450 miles, ending in Mexico's Gulf of California. Upper reaches, not covered in this book, drop from highcountry to cross northcentral Colorado and include intense rapids, several moderate reaches, and a number of dams and diversions.

Below those, 120 miles from Palisade (above Grand Junction) to Moab await with a medley of gentle water and tumultuous rapids, altogether a spicy extended trip for rafters or selected runs for kayakers and canoeists. Additional miles, with distinctive problems, await below as well. While the Grand Canyon, much farther downstream, unmistakably ranks as the most renowned big-water wilderness trip in America, this middle reach of the Colorado has variety and invites exploration with the essence of a stream that has been extolled ever since Spanish conquistadors named it for its silty redness.

Various choices await: gentle canyon cruises, blasts of boiling hydraulics, kaleidoscopes of red-rock walls, or a weeklong sojourn combining all of that across the Great American Desert. This middle expanse of the Colorado can be parceled as follows:

- ➔ Palisade to Loma: Launch east (upstream) of Grand Junction at Riverbend Park in Palisade (dams block the river above there) for this Class 1-2 section. For 30 miles the Colorado meanders among cottonwood bars, islands, and the edge of Grand Junction while cliffs of Colorado National Monument dominate to the south.
- ➔ Ruby-Horsethief Canyon (this is local parlance, though Horsethief Canyon comes first, and the two are indistinguishable to most people): High-volume Class 1-2 extends from Loma to Westwater Canyon. Ancient black Precambrian schist underlies tall red sandstone walls in this reach of 27 miles—two easy days to the brink of Westwater Canyon in Utah. Rigorous hiking up Rattlesnake Canyon leads to spectacular wilderness arches like those in Arches National Park. This reach is great for canoes. But no farther!
- ➔ Westwater Canyon: This stretch is Class 4. Get a permit from the BLM in Moab, two months in advance. This 17-mile wilderness rafting run to the takeout near Cisco confronts frothing challenges at a dozen rapids, including Funnel Falls and the notorious Skull Rapid and its Room of Doom eddy—especially threatening above 6,000 cfs in early summer (peaking at 20,000 cfs and dropping to 3,000 cfs in autumn). Scout here on the left, and avoid a frightening hole and entrapping eddy by pulling vigorously right to left.
- ➔ Cisco to Dewey Bridge and Highway 128: Pleasant riffles pass verdant riparian islands among surrounding bluffs and ranchland



for 15 miles in this Class 1–2 section. Though much is private and a bit buggy, this unsung but pretty reach lacks not only development and roads but also other floaters, and thereby offers unexpected solitude.

➔ Dewey Bridge to Moab: Big-water Class 2 tours awe-inspiring scenery that overwhelms for 32 miles with some powerful riffles but mostly gentle flows to the Highway 191 bridge near Moab. Though shorter than Westwater on excitement and wilderness, the stunning, Monument Valley–type scenery compensates, offering the desert region’s best easily run and readily accessed day trips. Intermediate takeouts make shuttles easy by bike, and campsites also beckon. Views include a parade of monolithic sandstone walls and sheer-sided buttes like visions of an idealized Southwest while the lofty La Sal Mountains rise beyond.

An additional stretch, from Moab to the Green River confluence, is Class 1 for 64 miles but requires a motorboat shuttle back upstream by arrangement with local outfitters—far more expensive for rafts than for canoes or kayaks. Or, below the confluence, skilled and capably outfitted boaters can continue another 15 miles with heavily pounding Class 4 rapids through Cataract Canyon (permit required). But this commits you to a subsequent 33 miles to Hite Marina in the dead water behind Glen Canyon Dam. Some boaters hire tows. I’ve addressed the dreaded flatwater memorably by rowing in starlight to avoid the quotidian afternoon wall of wind and by sleeping on the boat to evade the reservoir’s perimeter of depthless mud.

On tributaries of the middle Colorado, good trips include the Gunnison, which enters the Colorado at Grand Junction. A 16-mile gorge of technical whitewater downstream from Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park requires four-wheel drive (shuttles available) and a steep



mile-long hike to the put-in, with mules on hire to pack rafts. And, below Westwater, the Dolores River offers a renowned Class 3–4 run through pine-clad canyons and then Class 3 through red rock for 50 miles from Slickrock to Bedrock, though runnable flows rarely occur since McPhee Dam shackled the river upstream in 1984.

Few boaters run the Colorado's full Palisade to Moab reach, but the united trip offers a low-key Colorado River alternative to the Grand Canyon and ranks as one of the longest desert trips with spectacular scenery, wilderness whitewater, and gentle flows with easy access. As an expedition or as a series of weekend adventures, this section of the Colorado showcases a varied desert landscape like few other rivers do.

Sandstone walls of Westwater Canyon warm to early morning sunlight below the Colorado's confluence with the Little Dolores River.

FOLLOWING SPREAD: A kayaker strokes through evening light on the Colorado River as it flows toward the Fisher Towers between Dewey Bridge and Moab (left). The Colorado rushes past sandstone monoliths shaped through eons of erosion by the river and its tributaries above Moab (top right). Tributary to the middle Colorado, the Gunnison River flows from a splendid whitewater gorge where the put-in requires a steep mile-long hike downstream from Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park (bottom right).



HUDSON RIVER | New York

LENGTH: 17 miles in Hudson River Gorge; additional day trips below

WHITEWATER: Class 3-4; Class 3 flattening to Class 1 on sections below

SEASON: April to early October; dam-release days from June to early October

GAUGE: North Creek

PERMIT: no

CAMPING: yes, but mostly run as day trips

OUTFITTERS: guided day and multiday trips

HIGHLIGHTS: whitewater gorge, wilderness

A professional guide and his crew confront continuous rapids of the Hudson River Gorge in the Adirondack Mountains.

The Hudson River Gorge was one of the first whitewater runs in the East to be regularly paddled and remains one of the most popular. Come here for the rush of big continuous rapids in a setting of Adirondack wilds with shaded forests where cliffs veer up from shorelines and where ridgetops soar another 1,000 feet. This is principally a kayak and raft run, but expert canoeists appear after the flush of winter snowmelt when the river settles into a rock-studded wilderness just hours from New York City. Any tour of eastern whitewater is not complete without this legendary run.

A legacy of whitewater adventuring goes back to 1957 when the Hudson River Whitewater Derby was started. In 1967 Senator Robert F. Kennedy kayaked the gorge to bring attention to legislation pending for the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. took up the Hudson challenge a generation later by working to stop pollution on the lower river and with the creation of Hudson Riverkeeper—predecessor to a worldwide Riverkeeper movement.

This popular commercial and independent trip starts on the Indian River. After 3 miles the foaming tributary spills into the Hudson, which would otherwise be too low for boating by summer.

With Indian River's flush the Hudson boils downward through dozens of drops. Stops include tributary waterfalls, tall jumping rocks, and deep pools where anglers cast for trout. The takeout lies near the community of North River. Guided raft trips are popular beginning on chilled weekends in April, peaking with high flows in mid-May, and continuing through early fall. From late June to early October, the required and rationed flows from the Indian Creek Dam are released on Saturdays, Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays.





Below the gorge, the Hudson riffles peacefully for 6 miles from North River to North Creek, then enters a bedrock maze with Class 2–3 rapids for 8 miles to Riparius—often too low by early summer.

Farther downstream, below the mouth of the Schroon River at Warrensburg, a sedate but splendid Class 1 reach of 13 miles tours islands, wild shores, and green mountains with adequate flows all summer. Boating ends abruptly at the savage churn of fifteen-foot Hadley Falls; take out on the right on a modest access path a few hundred yards above. Below there the middle Hudson is blocked by dams through Albany, and then its tidal Hudson Valley section swells toward New York City.

Though included in Adirondack Park, the upper Hudson was vulnerable to dam proposals in the 1950s until grassroots activists convinced state legislators to block reservoir plans. Later findings by National Park Service staff recommended the upper Hudson for the initial National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act; planner and *Flow East* author John Kauffmann wrote, “Of all eastern rivers it seemed the most logical first choice.” But lacking political support, the Hudson was deleted from final drafts of the law.

At sunset the Hudson riffles through a quiet section below the community of North River.

GRANDE RONDE RIVER

Oregon

LENGTH: 40 to 91 miles

WHITEWATER: Class 2-3

SEASON: late spring, summer

GAUGE: Troy

PERMIT: yes, at put-in, no limit

CAMPING: yes

OUTFITTERS: guided trips, raft and kayak rentals

HIGHLIGHTS: multiday Class 2 trip, spring and summer run for families

For an outing of three days to a week, with mild whitewater, surrounded by beauty that's more gracefully welcoming than harshly rugged, and running with adequate flows for most of summer, the Grande Ronde in northeastern Oregon is ideal.

This sweet summertime float begins on the Wallowa River at the Highway 82 crossing (Minam Store, with hotel, shuttles, and full service for boaters), runs 10 miles down that swift tributary with a few sizable waves and holes, merges into the Grande Ronde, then continues for another 31 miles to Mud Creek access or another 6 miles to Troy.

This whole trip is an idyll of ponderosa pine forest, grassland savanna, bold basalt outcrops, cliffs that step up as hardened lava flows, and swift but unthreatening water for beginning rafters, intermediate kayakers, and seasoned canoeists. Campsites call out from grassy benches beneath the pines, and ridgelines entice walkers to overlooks.

Most floaters take out at Mud Creek, but more awaits beyond. For 19 miles below Troy, Class 2 waters funnel into wave trains past ranchland and mountains decked out in pines and grass. At Boggan's Oasis restaurant and the Highway 129 bridge, take out, break for a milkshake, or continue for 32 more wild miles through the Grande Ronde's increasingly arid lower canyon. Just a few miles up from the Snake River, The Narrows presents a two-part vortex of Class 3 whitewater, reaching Class 4- in springtime, followed shortly by Bridge Rapid. Take out at Heller Bar ramp on the Snake River south of Clarkston, Washington.

The Grande Ronde is an easier alternative to rivers such as the Rogue, where Class 3-4 whitewater is more demanding, permits are required

The Grande Ronde River flows with mostly easy rafting for nearly 100 miles to the Snake River. Basalt cliffs and ponderosa pines rise above the lower river downstream from the Highway 129 bridge in Washington.





in advance, and crowds flock in summer. Early June and holiday weekends at the Grande Ronde are busy, but quiet awaits at most other times. This stream is the perfect, relatively easy summer escape until levels in dry years might drop too low in August.

Though mostly Class 1 and 2, the Grande Ronde concludes with three larger rapids in quick succession as the stream nears its confluence with the Snake River.

WEKIVA RIVER | Florida

LENGTH: 1 to 14 miles

WHITEWATER: none, Class 1-

SEASON: all year; best in spring and fall, nice in winter

GAUGE: Sanford (Saint Johns Basin)

PERMIT: no

CAMPING: primitive sites bookable through Wekiwa Springs State Park

OUTFITTERS: canoe and kayak rentals

HIGHLIGHTS: transparent spring water, junglelike shores, birds, alligators

This intimate, glassy smooth, spring-fed, semi-tropical gem bursts with botanical wonders, shorebirds, and wildlife.

Start at Wekiwa (spelled correctly here) Springs State Park just north of Orlando. This prodigious spring, converted to a swimming pool, spills quietly through its outlet as the full-grown source of the Wekiva. A ramp there, with rental canoes, leads paddlers immediately to exotic wetland wonders.

Cabbage palms lean over clear dark waters. Bald cypresses tower overhead, bearded with Spanish moss. Sweet gums, oaks, and other southern hardwoods abound with vines curling to high limbs. On logs, alligators calmly sun themselves, perpetually “smiling” with their upturned mouths—no swimming here! Birdlife includes brilliant little blue herons that comb the shores and shallows, and the elusive limpkin.

In less than a mile, and embayed in a garden of whimsically floating water lilies, Rock Springs Run joins the Wekiva from the left. Paddle up this tempting sidelight through its own artsy Eden. Then continue downstream to Wekiwa Island and a marina that’s privately owned but open to the public. Excursions can also be started there with a rental canoe.

To return, simply paddle back upriver against the swirled current, though one can also stroke another 10 miles down to Highway 46, or even farther to the Saint Johns River, but the waterway widens lakelike with shacks and development anchored on hammocks and banks.

Avoid weekends and perhaps entire summer months, as the tiny Wekiva gets jammed. But in spring or fall it makes for a return to the real Florida where nature bursts at the seams.

Junglelike shorelines evoke a tropical feel to the Wekiva River.





This miniature river was enrolled in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System as a specimen of the American semitropics found only in Florida. Across the state's northern expanse, other clear or blackwater rivers include the Econfinna, Wacissa, Ichetucknee, and Alexander Springs Creek. Longer trips can be run on these and other streams, but the Wekiva offers uncommon ease of access and delight in its lushness of life.

OPPOSITE: The Wekiva River's gentle and transparent flows welcome canoeists to this semitropical retreat in springtime.
An alligator and turtle family share a log in the Wekiva River.