

Kissing Tiger Wall – My trip down the Yampa
By Will Hansen

For the last few years I've felt a growing interest in branching out of the Northwest to float some Southwest rivers. In my quick assessment of each candidate destination, I characterize them as follows. The San Juan – interesting historical relics and ruins, flat water, long drive to get there. Sections of the Colorado: Westwater Canyon – long drive to do a very short trip but Skull rapid would be cool to do. Same drive to do the Ruby/Horsethief section but essentially no rapids there and very short. Cataract Canyon – long drive, and a long, seriously class IV trip would be a possibility some day but a stretch for a first trip. The Dolores rarely has water and is a complete zoo when it does run. Same with the Salt. The Desolation section of the Green – neat low-adrenalin trip but can have world-class bugs. Timing would be a challenge. Labyrinth-Stillwater section of the Green – got its name from slack water; made for a canoe. So my attention had pretty much settled on a pair of initial targets; the Lodore section of the Green and the Lower Yampa.

That was my state of mind late last winter when Paul from Colorado sent me some campsite photos for my website. We got into an e-mail conversation and before I knew it, Paul had invited me to join his group on the Yampa in late May. Paul had just received his second Yampa permit in 3 years. “Lightening had struck twice” as he put it and he was assembling a trip to be comprised of some old boating friends together with some strangers he'd met on the Internet. Paul was showing about the same level of enthusiasm for the Yampa that I reserve for a Middle Fork permit so I started to get excited too. My impression of the Yampa and the trip ahead was pretty much limited to the first sentence in Cassady's *Western Whitewater* where he says the Yampa “carves one of the West's loveliest canyons as it passes through Dinosaur National Monument”. This sentence had been enough to raise my interest in spite of the next paragraph opening with “Whitewater is not the key to the Yampa Canyon's popularity”.

As the trip slowly filled out there became room for my wife Carla and my brother Dick, a river trip virgin. Ordinarily I'd never get Carla out on a May trip. I tease her that she's a lizard. She loves water and sunshine and for her, our family raft trips are simply a means to bask in the sun. If it starts to rain, in a little while she loses all interest and starts talking crazy. Her idea of a great Christmas gift would be a sat phone so she can call for an air-evac on any future trip. So we do a lot of hot weather trips and I do 'guy trips'. My promise that the Yampa was essentially a 'desert river' was enough to sway her to go along, aided by my timing. I hit her with the idea at the height of her struggle through another long Western Washington winter.

Dick was a different story. He'd been remodeling his house from the dirt up for many years and had a long history of turning down my invitations to go boating. He had also proclaimed my favorite sport to be way too dangerous on many occasions. Now finally his house was finished, and I'd gotten him onto the Green for a day (the other Green near Seattle) and the hook into his mouth. I figured the Yampa would set it deeply.

So on May 23 the three of us started the long drive from Seattle to the Yampa put-in at Deer Lodge, Colorado. We made it to Ogden by about 10pm. The next morning, the local newspaper and TV news were filled with stories of Utah towns flooding out. Water in the streets. This wasn't what Dick and Carla had signed up for. While the weather forecast was promising it was a two-edged sword. It was clear that the continued warming trend was going to put us on the Yampa at very high water.

As we drove on, every creek was flooding its banks. We bought the last of the fresh food in Park City, solemnly enjoyed our Last Starbucks and started off across the lonely north-eastern corner of Utah. As we continued east, taking our minds off the high water, we began noticing and commenting on the local geology. Little did we know that we were about to drop into a state of geologic overdose for the next 5 days.

As we crossed the bridge over the Yampa east of Vernal it looked like the Mississippi. Brown, wide, and up in the bushes. Paul had said to expect 10k CFS tops. A ranger in a Dinosaur National Monument visitor center said it was above 13k and climbing. Our immediate concern was somewhat lessened when she went on to say that 'high water' started at 18k. I knew the Yampa has little whitewater, but it does have Warm Springs rapid, listed as one of the "West's 10 Biggest Drops". We were going to get to experience Warm Springs at a major flow level and this fact would be smoldering in the back of our minds for the next 3 days. We'd come this far and this was not 'high water' by someone in the government's estimation anyway. How's that for a rationalization? We committed to continue on. Besides, the weather was now perfect for a river adventure.

We arrived at the put-in at Deer lodge in the early evening light and launched our new 16 ft Maravia Mistral. This would be its maiden voyage. We tied up to a post and spent an awkwardly pleasant evening meeting other trip members as they arrived and just hung out. Everyone kept an eye on the water lapping at the top of the muddy and collapsing bank. As it turned out, the season high water level of 14,800 CFS occurred that night as we slept in the cottonwood grove at Deer Lodge.

We learned that our group of 16 would consist of a half dozen kayaks, one paddle boat with crew of 5, 4 self-bailers including us and one homemade self-bailing wooden dory rowed by its maker. Paul had assembled the group from Alaska, California, Arizona, and Boston, but most were from the Vail and Steamboat areas. Another observation from Deer Lodge was that the Yampa is not the gin-clear water we're used to. The Yampa is no freestone stream running temporarily muddy. We'd had one chocolate water experience on the Main Salmon, but this was the real thing. Silt and mud is everywhere and it gets everywhere on the boat.

Launch day, May 25 dawned post-card clear. After an awkward on-the run breakfast with strangers, those of us not driving shuttle finished loading the boats, then wandered around for the morning, occasionally fiddling with the rigging. We finally launch in mid-afternoon. After a mile of flat but fast water, we enter Yampa Canyon and see that our long drive has been immediately rewarded. I give Dick a turn at the oars and somehow, in the non-descript no-name rapids of that first hour, he manages to take a full 3' wall of

solid water over the bow, filling the boat to the brim. Welcome to big water. Most rapids are washed out, but big waves remain. We cook along at almost 9 MPH according to my GPS. In less than an hour we reach camp at Anderson Hole. No mystery here. All campsites on the Yampa are marked by huge 6 X 6 posts engraved with the campsite name. Kind of a surprise for an Idaho wilderness guy like me. It's our night to cook but we find a few minutes to check out the dug-out cabin and old corral and hike up to a dry waterfall behind camp. We treat the group to BBQ sockeye and our favorite Dutch oven pasta dish. We figured the least we could do was to introduce poor inland dwellers to the joys of the best tasting salmon there is. We follow up with chocolate cheesecake with whipped cream, and a box of Cabernet as the group starts getting to know one another around the fire.

The next morning is perfect and we launch into the fast brown current and head for more big water. The major named rapids, Tepee, Little Joe, and Big Joe are bouncy wave trains that require no real maneuvering but are fun and fast. Dick doesn't get to row the big waves anymore after soaking us so badly yesterday. We move so fast at this flow we reach camp at Harding Hole by noon. The canyon scenery continues to be outstanding with colorful rock bands and talus fields offset by the green shades of timber, sage, and grasses, all under cloudless blue sky. Our team cooked breakfast and lunch and with lunch cleaned up, our official trip duties are over. A large group heads up the draw to hike to the top of the massive cliff behind camp. Too hot for us so Carla and I hike around down low and check out the other 3 campsites at Harding and the overhanging cliffs at each end of the Harding area. Meanwhile, a game of Texas Hold-em breaks out with Juniper berries as chips. Each player's 'stack' is a neat line of berries in the folds of the vinyl cover of the roll-a-table. The innocent cuteness of the berries masked their value which was backed up by serious quantities of beer and shots of tequila. The rowdy game goes well into the night. I lost a days ration of ice-cold Tecate. Ouch!

In the morning we launch and immediately ferry to the other side where we hike the short distance to Signature Cave, named for the signatures of the early boaters on the back wall. We gaze out at another day of perfect weather. Back in the boats, we enter the 'slick rock' section of the river where the canyon walls become sheer and smooth. We pass Mather's Hole and the huge formation named Cleopatra's Couch and spend most of our floating time with our mouths open, staring upward at the dramatic scenery. And then we reach the Grand Overhang. This thing needs to be seen to be believed. It's almost 2000 feet of sheer cliff which completely overhangs the river. They say a stone dropped from the top, far above the left shore would land on the right shore. Our boats slide into the dark cool shadow and we spend the next few minutes on our backs stretched across the dry boxes and cooler staring upward and mumbling our amazement.

We stop at Mantle Cave, a remarkable place with evidence of 50 ancient storage bins made by the Fremont culture. It's not surprising that they only stored food there. Living in Mantle Cave would be like living in a flour canister. Pink talc is everywhere. The weather is hot and the cave cool. It's a great side trip.

Back in the boats. And then in the distance we pick out the river's trademark, Tiger Wall. The stripes are surreal. Legend holds that boaters who kiss Tiger Wall have good luck. I stand on the dry box and gave it a loud smacking kiss. It smells OK. A bit musty, but I had been expecting the kiss recipient to have bad breath given the drippy nature of the tiger stripes. Little did I know that the legendary good luck reward would be apportioned to us only an hour later.

At this point, we then, and I now, have about run out of words to describe the canyon scenery. Wind carved alcoves and textures, unbelievable rock colors, surreal shapes and profiles, huge flakes the size of football fields tipped on end, vertical, narrow, massive galleries and cathedrals tower above us everywhere. Spires and pillars. Ever changing. The scale completely dwarfing our tiny boats. The afternoon was spent in awe and a growing silence. We were blown away by the Yampa scenery. And we were fast approaching Warm Springs.

I remember that last mile through a cool and shady stretch of canyon. Dark vertical walls on both sides. Lush green trees at the foot of the walls lined both banks. And there at the bottom on the right side was a lone horse, staying cool in the riverside greenery. Where did he come from? And on the left side a group of bighorn sheep grazed at the waters edge. And in the distance the growing roar of Warm Springs. It was at once gorgeous and unnerving.

By this point in the trip, the level of the river had dropped to about 13,000 CFS but Warm Springs was still howling. The sound was coming from around the corner, from the dark and forbidding late afternoon shadows. We landed on a steep mud bank on river right and got out to scout. The scout involved scrambling downriver across a sea of boulders to have a good look at the major feature, a bus-sized churning hole, directly in the middle at the bottom. In all, Warm Springs is about 200 yards long extending along the base of a vertical wall that is the left bank. The rapid was formed in the 1960's by a major blowout of the canyon coming in from the right. The rapid starts as the river curves right, out around the alluvial apron, and speeds up as the water races down a long ramp toward the hole. At this level the obvious line was to hug the right shore the whole way. But this involves staying inside on the first bend and then busting two deep and evil laterals that try to push you back to the center above the hole. Once past the hole, we needed to stay to the right of a low brushy island and catch the eddy at the namesake campsite a few hundred yards downstream.

It was decided our Warm Springs game plan would be to run three boats, leave a short gap, run the kayaks, then run the last 3 boats. My plan could be summed up in one word; avoidance. This was the biggest hole I'd ever seen in my 10 years of Northwest and Idaho boating. The Grand Canyon veterans on the trip said that at this flow the hole would fit right in the same class as the legendary holes in the GC. The fact that a passenger had died two weeks prior after a flip in this hole weighed on our minds. And that was at a much lower flow. Entering that hole was not an option. We would give this, the biggest, nastiest feature on the Yampa major respect and cling to the right shore. After the scout, helmets seemed to appear from nowhere. Wetsuits went on. All boats

were made ship-shape, and boaters helped pull each others PFD straps snug. Dick, who had by this time gotten used to the mellower aspects of river life looked very concerned at this new and unanticipated aspect of the sport that he had otherwise fallen in love with.

The first boats pushed off. I watched as the last of the three made a major effort to hug the rock forming the point around which the river hooked to the right. Ken, the oarsman, decided to spin around and catch a full-on downstream back-ferry to keep his stern tight to the rock. He chose this method in spite of a nasty little lateral in his path. I said to myself that going through laterals backwards at the top of Warm Springs was not for me. I'd instead start farther left and use forward momentum to get back to the right into the quieter water below the rock point. I'd then hug the right shore in the fast bouncy water, drive through the two laterals, stay right, and skirt the huge hole. I even harbored a thought that I'd try, if all went well, to make the little shore eddy below the hole to catch some photos of the boats behind.

We pushed off as the first boat of the second group. The kayaks were ahead and the paddle boat behind us with the dory running last. I pulled hard to get out into the current, lined up on the rock point visible between Dick and Carla's shoulders and began my momentum-building ferry back to the right as we approached the rock point. But that's as far as I got with 'plan A'. The current grabbed our fully loaded self-bailer. Each self-bailer on the trip was carrying a share of personal gear and food and beverages for the kayakers and paddle boat crew along with their own gear. We were unusually heavy for such a short trip and to this point I had not had to make any significant 'moves' in our new boat. I just over-estimated my ability to gain sufficient forward momentum on the correct angle before the bend.

In a flash we shot around the rock point out into the main current and were racing down the middle of the Yampa, absolutely on the prime line to hit the killer hole. While we were picking up speed at an alarming rate, and time and the shoreline were zooming by, I remember it all millisecond by millisecond. As we passed the rock point I remember an instant of deep admiration for the conservative back ferry approach Ken had used. I screamed "Back!" to Dick and Carla to convey to them to use their paddles to give me full reverse bow-thrusters. I pulled hard on my left oar to spin the stern toward the right shore and started pulling back with everything my 260 lb body could muster. In a couple heartbeats the boat responded and begun a nice ferry-slide to the right. Once back into the target line I shouted "We got it, we got it!" and started to relax, despite the fact that the first of the big laterals was in sight and fast approaching our bow. We were flying.

And suddenly I hear people's voices. How can this be? We're alone in the middle of Warm Springs, racing downstream in a crucial situation just above the biggest raft eating hole I've ever seen. Yet somebody's right behind my left ear. It took a few of the aforementioned milliseconds to register. My big back-ferry move had slowed our speed relative to the paddle boat which steers with forward strokes. What were we thinking? Now they were almost on top of us, just a few feet behind my left elbow. I looked back and for an instant locked eyes with Jace the paddle boat captain. In that fraction of a second there were three complete ideas passed between us without saying a word. An

apology on his part, an 'oh, well, so much for that plan' consensus, and mutual recognition of the task at hand; squeezing two boats through the gap to the right of the massive hole. That moment is burned into my memory by adrenalin.

As we hit the first lateral, the paddle boat crew down-shifted into passing gear and pulled alongside. An instant later as we entered the second lateral there was a powerful moment of recognition on my part that we were not going into the hole. What a warm fuzzy feeling that was. If anything, we would have ring-side seats to major carnage as the paddle boat flipped end over end beside us, inside the span of my left oar. That oar was now pinned to my left tube as I held it there to let them sneak by. One could have stepped from boat to boat at that moment. Together we blasted the second lateral and time stood still as our two boats slid past the hole side by side. I remember admiring the hole from across the paddle boat while thinking it could easily serve as a rock polisher for rocks as big as our GMC Yukon. The left side crew of the paddle boat got to look right into the mouth - like students at a dental hygienist school! Just as we got below the hole, Jace shouted "Sorry!" and drove across our bow. I pulled my right oar bringing the stern to the left to let him cross in front. In that instant, angled the wrong way, we missed the move to get to the right of the island and accordingly, missed the campsite eddy.

In a few minutes, the rest of the group caught up to us around the next bend. The three of us were sipping tall cool ones on a sandbar in the sunshine. What a wild ride that was. Jokingly, Paul started to levy a fine of multiple beers on me for missing the campsite eddy, but the paddle boat was still loudly apologizing and cleared my name. All was forgiven in the returning warmth of the sun. We proceed the short distance to camp at Box Elder. After throwing the gear up the high mud bank, we set our tent under overhanging rock wall. Box Elder is a cool setting except for the landing. But there is nothing like returning to the kitchen to have a spicy Bloody Mary on the rocks thrust into your tired palm. Thanks Ken! Damn those were good, and what a great end to our third Yampa day as we sat around the fire with everyone telling Warm Springs stories.

The next morning dawned clear. We packed the boats and drifted the last two miles of the Yampa to its confluence with the Green. Much of this time was spent looking back to appreciate the last glimpses of Yampa Canyon.

After a quick stop at Echo Park to fill water jugs we continued around impressive Steamboat Rock and into the mouth of Whirlpool Canyon. Possibly the most striking geology of the trip occurs here. Mitten Fault is evidenced by a quarter-mile-thick multi-layer Technicolor pancake that is folded over on itself, literally forming a mountain on river left.

In pre-trip correspondence I had learned that a French mountain man, Denis Julien had left his initials in Whirlpool Canyon and I was committed to finding the spot. The group pulled off at one little eddy but after climbing around a bit we realized it was not the place. I pulled out the printout of the e-mail message and re-examined the directions I'd been given. We found the inscription on the second try. Julien roamed the west in the 1830's and left his initials in rather dramatic spots. As we gathered around the little

sheltered wall with its chalky letters forming “DJ” and “1838” in French script I remember looking up at the cliffs above and trying to imagine what life must have been like in 1838, standing alone, right here. Those guys were tough beyond any modern measure of Boston Marathons and Tours de France.

We continue on through Whirlpool Canyon, cross the state line into Utah, and then take an extended lunch at Jones Hole. Many of the group hiked up the creek to see the petroglyphs but returned raving about the fun they had crashing water down on each other at “Butt Plug Falls”. As a fly fisherman I’m frustrated to be without my rod. Carla and I check out the 4 campsites in this stretch, hike up the creek to a shady purple wind eroded alcove and then hang out along Jones Creek watching the dudes who have hiked in catch the trout.

We get back on the river and reach our destination, Cove Camp, located on river left just as we break out of the canyon into the Island Park area. Nice camp. Carla and I hiked to the top of the butte behind camp next morning for a great view in the morning sun. The weather continues to be excellent.

Sadly, this is our last day. We pack the boats and float the quiet waters of Island Park. We stop and hike to some awesome, rarely visited Fremont rock art (no trail). I scared the crap out of myself shuffling along a narrow ledge 40’ above the ground. As I look along this narrow balcony ledge, to my right stretches a 40 foot long panel of engraved rock figures and symbols. I’m nose to nose with a man with rectangular torso wearing a wildly ornate headdress and necklace. And I can clearly see the tool marks made by the artist thousands of years ago, now oxidized over by the weather. To my left is an incredible view of the surrounding territory. It is a spiritual moment for me. I’m at once gripped by acrophobia and the realization that I’m standing exactly where the artist stood, seeing exactly what they saw. No other evidence of man is visible in any direction. The moment is spoiled only by some ass-hole who left his initials “CH” in the midst of the amazing art. Bud, if you should ever read this, my message to you is “rot in hell you jerk”.

Whirlpool Canyon is a long series of bouncy class III sections through yet another beautiful canyon. The colors, shapes, and features are different from all the upstream canyons we’ve passed through, but gorgeous in their own right. We round the last bend and reach the dramatic finish to the trip at an impressive boat ramp complex framed by the remarkable geology of Dinosaur National Monument. We trailer the boat and dump and clean the groover. After a quick group lunch at the picnic area we say our good-byes and hit the road for the long drive home, much of it through driving rain. We dodged a bullet. Extending the trip even a couple hours longer would have meant a drenching end.

We joke about how the geology around Vernal has totally lost its appeal after seeing the amazing Yampa. Don’t leave this life without a trip through Yampa Canyon. We’ll be going back for sure. For a taste of the scenery and Warm Springs, check out the River Scenery and Rapids albums for the Yampa at www.whitewatercampsites.com

