

## The Rare Stehekin Trip by Will Hansen

Disclaimer: This story isn't about raging whitewater and raft carnage. If you're an adrenalin junky, you might just want to skip it. This is about a little local adventure, scenery and solitude, nursing 2 ½ days from 10 miles of non-descript class II/III water, and catching a few nice fish. Mostly, this is about coercing my 14' Sotar cat onto one of the more remote rivers around.

Originally, I bought my cat as an addition to the my fly fishing gear. It was to be a tool to see and fish every inch of river, eat steaks, and drink cold beer; a major upgrade from my backpack. Nowadays, most of my river trips are spent looking for whitewater rather than fish. But each year a fishing buddy, Kelly Egan, and I pick a river for a multi-day float and fish adventure. This is the story of one such trip. While it took place a couple years ago and I'm working only from memory here, we had a great time and the tale is worth telling. Hopefully, the logistics information may come in handy for anyone else looking to boat the Stehekin. (To wrap up the disclaimer, let me mention that I haven't bothered to change any names because none of these guys are innocent.)

If you don't know about Stehekin, let's correct that deficiency right away. Stehekin is located at the upper end of Lake Chelan, reachable by a 55 mile (three hour) boat ride, light plane, packhorse, or by foot. On a map, Lake Chelan appears like a long blue knife thrust into the North Cascades. The town of Stehekin is barely visible as a speck on the very tip of the blade. A trip to Stehekin is a voyage back to a simpler time; to a village of a few dozen people, all driving vehicles with long-expired license tags. The community has only 2 or 3 satellite phones and motorized transportation is confined to 20 miles of single-lane dirt roads. 'Downtown' is a paved strip about 100 yards long. Seattle traffic and our hectic lives are one end of the spectrum and at the other end is life in Stehekin. Stehekin is the most isolated town in the lower 48, surrounded by awesome scenery, and a place that all outdoors-minded folks should visit at least once. Having spent time in places as varied as Singapore, Paris, and the barren Alaskan Eskimo village of Kivalina, I know a place or two, and Stehekin rates right up there.

The idea for this trip hit me hard and fast in the summer of 1998. In early August of that year my friend Mike Woodson gave me a lift in his Cessna from Spokane to Arlington. I was in the middle of moving my family from Spokane to Mill Creek at the time, and Mike was saving me yet another drive across I-90. It was a beautiful hot August day so we decided to stay north and take in the scenery around Glacier Peak. About halfway across the state, Mike asked over the din of the engine if I wanted to take a pee and fishing stop in Stehekin. I'd been to Stehekin twice before. Back in my college years I'd taken a detour into town for an ice cream bar while hiking the Cascade Crest Trail, and once came in by ferry for a long weekend of camping with some buddies. A few minutes later Mike put the plane down on the grass strip located up the Stehekin River valley from town and taxied over to the tree line.

He shut the engine down and pulled his razzle-dazzle 21-piece spinning outfit from behind the back seat. We slammed the doors, looked around, and headed for a spot he knew ½ mile downriver. In 20 minutes of walking through the fir and cedar, we scared up one black bear, and eventually arrived at a steep granite ramp, wedging down into the deep emerald waters of the Stehekin River. In six casts, Mike proceeded to land 2 bright, hard-fighting fish which I took to be Silvers that had migrated up from the lake. They were quickly and soundly hooked and so was I. But looking upstream, the banks of the river were tight and brushy with no place to cast a fly rod. Downstream, the river disappeared into a gorgeous grove of big overhanging cedars. The way to fish this river would be by boat. Hmm... I've got a boat.

The following spring, Kelly and I made plans to hit the Stehekin hard over a long weekend trip we scheduled for early July. The plan was to carry both of us, our camp gear, and all recreational equipment and fluids on my boat. I called the Lake Chelan Boat Company and, after describing our gear, including precise dimensions of my cat frame, I was assured the normal Lady of the Lake ferry would handle our needs. I then got through to one of the lodges and to the National Park Service office in Stehekin to learn about ground transportation. Both mentioned a regular shuttle bus service from the town to the edge of the national park that could take us upstream to the put-in. We just needed to make arrangements with 'Jim' the driver when we arrived. We'd then stretch the 10 miles of river over 2 ½ days, arriving back at town by raft. The mouth of the river is right across the lake from 'downtown' so on the final morning we'd row across, dismantle the boat, load back on the ferry and cruise home.

July finally rolled around. I arrived in Chelan, about 9:30pm on a Thursday night, met Kelly arriving from Spokane at the ferry office, and we headed up into the sagebrush hills to sleep in our vehicles. I'd left my boat trailer at home, dismantled my raft, and loaded the cat frame on my canopy roof rack (sort of gives my Toyota truck a bit of the 'Boone and Crocket' look). At dawn we found a serious breakfast in downtown Chelan and arrived back at the ferry office by 8:00. As we purchased our round-trip tickets, I reminded the gal at the counter about our pile of gear and paid the extra fee. We loaded up a big freight cart, got in line with the other passengers, and waited anxiously to get on the boat and settle in for the ride. The weather was perfect and the forecast was for more of the same. It was shaping up to be a great morning. The jet skis weren't out yet so the surface of Chelan was glassy. We warmed up as the sun rose at our backs, and began to settle into our little adventure.

Suddenly, we found ourselves accosted by the owner of the boat company, who, walking down the line of passengers, noticed my cat frame leaning against the cart. He proceeded to fly into a fit like only a man who owns a full-on monopoly can. No way that frame would be going on his boat as ordinary luggage. Didn't we know that equipment such as this must take the barge, rather than the ferry? (He was referring to the freight barge that goes up-lake every two weeks without passengers.) Too big, can't take it. Bikes are OK, but that thing? – no way! The continuation of our trip suddenly in doubt, I emphatically explained the phone assurances I had been given weeks earlier and that retreating back to Seattle was not good for business relations. He raged on, making it sound like he

couldn't take passengers if he loaded that frame. Sirens were going off in our heads - Abort! Abort! Well, I think this guy has played this game before. After much steam was vented, another \$50 baggage charge made the problem go away. The \$25 each to save the trip was not nearly as annoying as this clown's tactics. But we were now good to go.

Eventually, we got to board. The boat captain was cool with the frame and sympathetic, even helping to carry our dry bags up the gang plank. In the end, the raft frame hardly stood out, propped against the back of the boat behind the pallets of supplies bound for Stehekin. We found our places as the boat pulled away from the dock.

Three hours and the aforementioned time-warp later, we pulled into Stehekin. The boat landing and the lakeshore comprise one side of downtown. The daily arrival of the Lady of the Lake is the social zenith of this community. Mail, food, nails, toilet paper, bags of concrete, everything arrives by boat. The Lady of the Lake fleet includes several other boats, one a high-speed hydrofoil, but they don't carry as many passengers so their arrivals are lesser events. When the big boat arrives at noon each day, the town wakes up.

We off-loaded our gear into a pile in the parking area and started checking out the busses and vans, looking for Jim and our ride upriver. Over the next 20 minutes, the place cleared out as passengers were picked up by vans sent by local lodges and bed-and-breakfast joints. Others disappeared into the restaurant or up the road on mountain bikes. For the record, the uphill side of town is comprised of a gift shop, a restaurant with an outstanding deck overlooking the landing, public restrooms, and a bike rental outfit. Up the hill to the right, the National Park Service office occupies an old house. There is a small sporting goods shop/cabin, a T-shirt shop/cabin, and a few rustic homes scattered up the hillside behind downtown. To the left, the single road winds out of town, along the shore for ¼ mile to the end of the lake, and then disappears up the Stehekin River valley, towards North Cascades National Park.

So, we're now sitting on a pile of raft gear in the middle of Stehekin and all commercial vehicles have left the scene. A 30-minute eternity later, a big old blue school bus lumbered into town and we learned from Jim the driver that "he'd been expecting us". OK. But he also said that we now must wait, as he had some other business in town to attend to. We were rapidly being introduced to what the locals call "Stehekin Time". No rush. Stuff happens when it happens. Nobody's going anywhere fast. Get used to it. In fact, we were starting to. Our depressurization had begun.

And, if anything, the weather was getting better. Unlike the city of Chelan, the upper end of Lake Chelan is densely forested, with steep mountain ridges all around. We were now blessed with a perfect dark-blue summer sky framed by big mountains. Across the narrow lake, cliffs plunge down into the mirror surface. We could see the mouth of the Stehekin river emerging from the cottonwoods down at the end of the lake.

As it turned out, we were not the only people waiting for the blue bus. When Jim returned, other passengers materialized out of nowhere. We were just the only un-cool

ones waiting impatiently in the parking area (with the restaurant deck-dwellers watching us like the day's scheduled entertainment).

Jim surveyed our pile. Remarkably, the frame would fit, vertically through the back door of the bus, along with oars and dry bags and fly rods. But, with all our gear and some passengers pack frames and mountain bikes, the cooler was a problem. After a minute of thought, Jim noticed a buddy standing by a pick-up truck over by the restaurant. He wandered on over to talk to his friend. A few minutes later, the friend drove up to our diminishing pile, and loaded the cooler onto the back of his truck. As we watched, our cooler disappeared out of town, heading for the North Cascades. The bright white shape was clearly visible for the longest time, perched atop the perma-load of junk that filled the bed of the rusty old truck.

We finally boarded the bus and paid the driver the modest fee. As I recall it was in the \$7 range), and we slipped him a ten-spot for his friend on the assumption that we'd see our cooler again. In case you've never been stuffed into the very back seat of a school bus with a cat frame blocking the isle and most of a mountain bike on your lap for 10 miles of dirt chuck-holes, let me tell you it makes for a memorable ride. Just getting into the seat was a trip.

Once we started up the valley, of course the bus had to make a long stop at the bakery cabin so the driver and passengers in-the-know could load up on donuts and other fresh baked goods. Underway again, we headed for the edge of the national park, about 14 miles upstream. Our plan was to get off after about 10 miles at a put-in at Bullion Camp we'd been told about. While there is some class IV water above this spot, we elected to skip it, given our heavy load and the solo nature of our trip. The locals seemed to think that was a good idea.

After innumerable stops to let off other passengers at lodges and points of interest, the driver eventually pulled to a stop in the middle of the road, and opened the back door. We hopped out, relieved to find our cooler teetering on the berm beside the road. Gear flew out the back door as our pile rematerialized in the middle of the one-lane road. Then the blue bus lurched to life and disappeared into the dust towards the park. We popped a beer, toasted the moment, then lugged the gear the 100 yards to the edge of the river.

After assembling the boat and dragging it and our gear down the steep boulder bank we did one of those 'flying' launches into fast current. It was probably the most dangerous event of the trip. As I said, my memory has erased the details of the whitewater we encountered; it was nothing to write about. However, the scenery on this upper section was outstanding with the glacier-carved valley walls reaching up into the sky on both sides. The snowfields above are not visible from the river, but the view was spectacular none-the-less. Solitude on this upper section was excellent even though the road was visible at times. Traffic was near-zero. Although we fished hard, we didn't do as well as I expected. I have since come to believe that the migration from the lake that Mike and I enjoyed must occur later in the summer. But when we did catch fish, they were uniformly bright Rainbows in the 15-16" bracket and they fought hard.

My only clear memory of that first afternoon on the water is a two-fer I encountered in the first hour. As we drifted past a major log-jam, I noticed the yellow shaft of a Carlisle oar sticking out of the jam. We pulled off as soon as we could and I walked back to find the river booty. It had a bent shaft, but was equipped with an 'Outfitter' blade in good condition and a rusty clip. As I climbed back along the jam towards the boat, I realized that at high water, this bank was an island. Through the trees to my right I could see the unused river channel was now a string of pools, nestled against the steep rock of the canyon. I left the oar near the boat, walked over to the dry riverbed and began moving up to the pools. The first pool looked great, maybe 50 by 100 feet, deep green glassy water against a mossy cliff with overhanging trees. A fast rivulet flowed in from the top and out the bottom and back toward the river. The spectacle of this little pool gradually unfolded as I approached from below with my eyes first at water level. As I approached, the sensation was of rising until I seemed to tower over the little pool. I'm 6' 4" so I just go for it on these sneak-up deals. I got close enough to cast and laid a wooly bugger all the way over to the cliff. I began stripping along the surface. In the first seconds, doubt began to enter my mind. Was the pool sterile? But before the thought could fully form, a major Rainbow exploded vertically in front of me, ripping my line up out of the water until he was literally at my eye-level, tumbling over in a giant Rainbow-endo. I was so shocked I almost wet my pants, scrambling back away from the pool to take up the major slack and set the hook. I landed the fish just as Kelly arrived. This became one of the greatest memories of my fishing career. I've caught bigger fish, and fish that have fought harder. I've been in some great spots, but this little pool, in that late afternoon light, with that rocket of a fish was just as good as it ever needs to get.

Day 1 ended with a picturesque little camp on a gravel bar, river right. The next day, we floated out of the wilderness and into the relative civilization of the bridge that accesses the airport and the airport campground. We saw two or three people that day. The highlight memory on this day is of a Trident-class fish just upstream from the bridge. We startled each other as I was wading through some backwater areas. As you can tell, I kind of love it when fish scare me! Fish awhile, drift awhile, fish awhile; drift awhile; the rhythm of our day. We did see one other raft – a self-bailer from one of the lodges, launching for an evening of fishing. Day 2 ended on the gravel bar, river right, exactly across the pool Mike and I visited the year before. We had the river on our left and the nice little eddy pool below us. Unfortunately, the fish didn't cooperate. In fact, we felt our luck had diminished as we moved down the river. But two big fish did find their way onto our grill. I still remember that bottle of Australian Shiraz and those two big trout hanging over the edges of our plates.

Day 3 brought more great scenery, the weather continued to be perfect, but now we were drifting through homesteads and cabins, most boarded up and vacant. At one point, we left the boat at the river and hiked up to the road to see the one-room school house. Although it hasn't been used since the '70s, it is retained as an unattended museum. Sorta ghostly; you just walk in and look around. The kids assignments still posted on the wall, pencils in the desks, and the teacher's apartment in back behind the wood stove – very nice. We continued on to the base of Rainbow falls which we had seen from our

campsite the night before. We got soaked by the spray and finally ran out of film. Back on the boat, our journey toward the lake continued with less fishing and more beer as the current slowed. The work began as the river meandered to a stand-still and we started serious rowing. Our goal was the public campground located on the south lakeshore, beside the mouth of the river. As we approached, we realized this was not a good plan. After all, it was now Sunday, and the campground was a zoo. Kids, dogs, lawn chairs and grandma with potato salad. Cabin cruisers filled every space on the dock and more boats were tied up to them, stacked two and three-deep. It looked like a miniature SeaFair, drunks and all! In culture shock, we got out, looked around, and retreated to the boat.

We could see downtown across the lake and knew that the morning would bring a long row. If the wind blew, we're be screwed. But the weather still looked great. Proceeding along the shore, around the end of the lake towards Stehekin was out of the question; no place to camp. We'd done our time in downtown; we certainly didn't want to camp there. That left the south shore. We pushed away from the campground dock, and headed toward the cliffs that form the south shore of the lake. Our eyes strained to see a flat spot, anything. Just some ledge to call our own. We noticed a dock. Actually, the last dock before the shore dissolved into vertical rock. As we drew closer, we noticed that it seemed abandoned. In fact, no cabin. No civilization. No nothing. Just a dock! A nice dock. With a grassy flat area back in the trees. The 'keep out' sign had long since disappeared from its frame (honest!). We had arrived. We made camp and explored the woods behind camp, where we learned that the whole area occupied by the campground was a major resort lodge back in the '20s. Fire has removed all evidence except a treated wooden pipe, whipped with galvanized wire, leading up into the cliffs to a stream that was the lodge's water source.

In the morning, the weather continued and we rowed across the lake to Stehekin. It takes only 20 minutes. We disassemble the boat, once again providing entertainment for the town, and catch the Lady of the Lake when it arrived at noon.

As the big boat emerged from the Cascades, back into the dry sagebrush hills of Chelan, I could feel myself leaving that special mental state we crave. And now as I sit, stalled in traffic on I-405 I plot ways to get back onto Stehekin Time.

Any regrets? Sure. First, that there wasn't more river; stretching the 10 miles of river made us feel like we constantly had our foot on the brake. Fishing could have been better. A trip later in the summer might really fix that. But the hassle of the logistics sure made the trip was memorable. And man, we hit the weather.

Doing the trip with IKs would have obvious advantages. Least of which, you can avoid the wrath of the ferry boat Nazi. We heard from the ferry crew that hard shell kayaks always take the barge. While an IK self-supported trip doesn't sound very civilized, an IK group could shuttle to the airstrip, drop off their camp gear at one of the nice sites in the big cedars beside the river and continue on the shuttle upstream. Traveling light with several boats would bring the class IV water up near the park entrance into play, and you

could float back to the airstrip campground each day. The fast water on this river is above the airstrip. Getting back up to the put-in for another lap would be a minor challenge. Hitch-hiking the boats up to the put-in is a possibility but would take some serious time and a little luck. Making arrangements with a local lodge or citizen is a better plan, or waiting for the shuttle to rumble by each afternoon. Likewise, getting back to town would require some arrangements with the shuttle. Of course, staying at a local B&B would be the optimal approach – one I intend to experience first-hand one of these days.