

The San Juan

By Lori Major

A good friend, intrepid river woman, ropes course instructor, master's degreed outdoor therapist and all around wonderful friend called and asked if I wanted to row a girls trip for girls 5th to 8th grades and possibly at risk. She had all my favorite women boaters lined up so of course I said yes! It had to be all women boaters on the trip, no men allowed. The purpose was to show the girls that "Girls Can".

As we drove toward the ramp and Sand Island, it seemed swarms of little females ran at us. In reality there were only 8 but they looked so impossibly little and young. We got the boats rigged, ate dinner and then off to bed. In the morning we ate a quick breakfast finished the last minute rigging and Ranger check out and off we went to Butler Wash and the petroglyph panels. Those girls were amazed and so well behaved, I was impressed.

The girls helped with everything they could, rigging, learning to run the boats both oar rigs and duckies, cooking, clean up, and groover duty. They rose to all occasions magnificently.

Onward to camp at River House and then the hike to the ruins in the morning. The ruins are 3 stories tall in places and include a Kiva. You can see indentations in the rock where the inhabitants ground their corn into meal and if you look around you can see the tiny corn cobs they grew. There are mostly pictographs at the ruins but a few petroglyphs as well.

This trip was getting better and better all the time. Sure there were a few problems, say at lunch when the girls bickered about who was eating what and how much! That led to a new rule about no more comments about what other people eat. There were also a few conflicts about who was going to be in the duckies but that was quickly solved too.

The girls swam, played in the duckies, learned to row. We stopped at Chinle Wash for lunch the first thing we did was to say they were supposed to play in the mud. A few girls did not want to get dirty, one came to me and said her mother would not let her do something like this. I said "I do not see your mother here and we said you could." There was a gleam in her eye, she got her arms and legs muddy but kind of left her clothes alone. Then she slipped in the ankle deep red mud and sat down. She was laughing! She sat there for a minute and then took a big handful of mud, she stared at it for sometime and then deliberately smashed it into the front of her shirt! Laughing some more she rolled in the mud got it everywhere, her hair, her face, all over.

Once lunch was ready we took the girls out to the less muddy water to rinse, they played, laughed and came to the table hungry. What fun.

The San Juan has many tributary washes, many are dry much of the time but do come alive in a flash flood. We started with the river a light brown but each day brought a new rain storm somewhere and a new color to the river. The best times were when the river was red on one side and brown on the other. It was a very muddy river. We never knew just where the rainstorms were and could only guess. When the river was VERY red we guessed Chinle and Comb Washes, dark brown we could not know. When it rained on us we saw what we thought were our tans wash away into the river.

We had a few rainfly failures and a little dampness but nothing really problematic.

We played and worked our way down the river, stopping here and there for hikes and sites. At Slickhorn II we camped and then went up the canyon in the morning to play in the remaining pool. They swam, did cannonballs, looked at fossils in the rocks, did henna tatoos, got bindi jewels on their foreheads and were just girls.

On to our last camp, Steer Gulch. All the way down the river there were pour overs and all the washes were running. Nothing violent but even though the sky was blue above us, we knew there was rain on both sides of the river outside of our line of sight.

We played in the clear waterfalls and squealing like girls at the sheer luxury of getting the mud off our bodies. Oh yeah WE ARE GIRLS, BURLY GIRLS! GOooooo Burly Girls! Was Our cheer! The muddy pour overs we passed by. Then there was Grand Gulch... it was flashing. The little waterfall we had seen in April was huge and roaring. Water from the Gulch covered the entire camp area and scouring the rocks there. It created a lot of foam and the bubble line was perfect for avoiding sandbars. The sky was still so blue....

More waterfalls, more play. We passed Ojeto Wash at 8:00 PM and were approaching Steer Gulch at 8:30 PM. The sky was no longer blue, it was dark with rain clouds. It was raining steadily but lightly. Suddenly there was a lightning bolt and a simultaneous clap of thunder. The hair on my soaked head stood up. The rain was coming in dump truck loads. I could see the three boats I was with but I could not see the two about 100 yards behind. I could not see the other side of the river. The rain was coming down that hard.

We got to Steer Gulch Camp and I held the boats while another adult took the girls back to the overhang out of the cold driving rain. A few minutes later the ground (rock) started to vibrate a terrible loud roaring sound just got louder and louder. The girls came flying out of the tammies saying something about being told to get out to the boats NOW.

I could not see what was happening as I was trying to hold the boats in the current. The other adult came flying out yelling to get moving and get everyone in the boats and get the boats into the river. My rope was around her legs so I waited until she was on her boat and then I jumped on mine pulling my rope with me and then turned and saw what was happening.

What is normally a little pour over in a storm was a raging 30 foot wide pressurized torrent shooting all over the camp. According to the other adult and the girls it was right over the cave in which the girls stood. The cave had begun to get wet inside by the time Bonnie had gone back to get the girls. On the way back, herding the girls in front of her, water from the new water fall was hitting the adult leader with such force it drove her to her knees. This leader by the way is in great shape and very strong. In other words she is no wimpy girl! There were also several other smaller pourovers but none with the force the big one had.

We rowed to a quickly disappearing sandbar to see what was happening. There were over 30 waterfalls in sight of our sandbar though only one was like a fire hose and that one was hitting what was to be our last camp. We were screaming with relief, with joy at being able to see such a sight. We were also watching our camp go under the deluge. I have never seen such a site with pourovers coming off every space available on the canyon rims. Falling the hundreds of feet to the river. I will never forget it and I feel privileged for the opportunity to be there when this happened.

Steer Gulch is the last camp before the take out on the San Juan. It was now almost 8:45 PM. Weird because I could have sworn at least 3 hours had passed since we pulled into Steer Gulch. All of our boats were together and the decision was made if there was any sort of viable camp we would stop there.

As we approached whirlygig gulch/canyon, we could see 8 foot waves and I was yelling to Karen there should not be a rapid there. A thought flashed through my head about the Yampa and how Warms Spring Rapid was formed and what happened to the first group through it. Luckily that was not the case here. It was the current of the water being forced through and out of whirly gig slot canyon. We decided we could run it as there were no rocks and as we watched the waves

got visibly smaller so we ran it. As the rain let up there were still waterfalls off all the canyon walls dashing our hopes for a camp.

We rowed the six miles to the take out in the dark and the much lighter rain. Since there was 4 times the water in the San Juan as that morning, we did not have problems with the dreaded braided silt beds and sang songs and rowed through the night with cold wet girls and hope against hope our trucks would be there a day early.

We got to Clay Hills and it had flashed! Mud everywhere but we were able to set up camp around the pit toilet, the highest ground there. Hot chocolate and sloppy joes for dinner at 11:00 Pm and the girls in bed at midnight with freshly washed feet so they did not have to sleep in the mud in their sleeping bags. We carried all of our camping gear over the mud and up the hill. The boats waited until the next morning. We were ready by the time our trucks arrived at 10:00 AM. We had carried everything, gear frames, and boats over the mud to dry ground as we did not want to risk getting stuck in the mud.

By 1:00 PM we were all out of there and on our way to all points, Taos, NM, Austin, TX, San Jose, CA, Flagstaff, AZ and Salt Lake City, UT.

If there was any group of women I would like to be with at a time like that it is them. The girls too. What troopers, and what a story they have to tell the rest of their lives. Not one had hysterics, a little whimpering and soft whining, but hey, they were kids and in some pretty miserable conditions. I wanted to whine too but there was no time for me to do it.

I am glad we had played our way down the river that day and did not have camp set up or even horrors of terrifying horrors had girls in zipped up tents changing their clothes! We had no injuries, or no loss of gear. Good decisions were made when they needed to be made and we were lucky.

Lori