

Travel and Adventure: Whitewater rafting now a family affair

by Brian E. Clark

As a young man, I was drawn to the kayak-cascading white water rivers of the West by the adrenaline rush of big rapids, then seduced by the cathedral-like beauty of the canyons.

FAMILY FUN ON THE RIVER - River trips have evolved into family affairs. The experience of navigating rapids and heart-pounding drops goes along with campfires and nature hikes. CNS Photo courtesy of OARS. MAKING MEMORIES - Many people roam the rivers for the excitement of whitewater rafting, but it is also a wonderful way to spend time with the family. CNS Photo courtesy of OARS. FUN FOR EVERYONE - The rapids, the people and the canyons are the main reasons even hard-to-please teens fall in love with the experience. CNS Photo courtesy of OARS. Later, as a father, I took my now-18-year-old son on numerous rafting trips, sharing with him the joy of hiking flower-filled meadows, the serenity of dying campfires and, of course, the thrill of heart-pounding big drops.

Now, with youngsters almost 5 and 7 ready to begin adventuring with me, I can't wait to introduce them to wild and not-so-wild rivers around the country.

The story is similar for Bernd Kutzscher, a San Francisco eye surgeon who worked for more than a decade - starting 35 years ago - as a raft guide for the California-based ARTA and ECHO river companies.

"I did it all the summers that I was in school," said Kutzscher, 56, who was loathe to give up one of his favorite activities.

When his oldest child, Lauren, was 5, he and his wife, Marilyn, took her to the Rogue, a lovely and picturesque river in southern Oregon.

"She loved it and that was basically it," said Kutzscher of his daughter, who is now 21.

"The next two heard about it and they wanted to try it, too," he said.

Since then, Michael, 17, and Annie, 16, have joined their older sister on the Rogue a number of times, as well as California's Tuolumne and the Middle Fork of the Salmon in Idaho.

Last year, the family added a three-day intensive white water kayak course at the Sundance Kayak School in Oregon, not far from the Rogue. This summer, Kutzscher said, they will spend 13 days together on the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon.

"It became part of our lives," he said. "It's the perfect combination of adventure, but pretty safe, too. The kids can be in their own boat, but you always know where they are. And they've loved the guides, too."

Apparently, Kutzscher's lifelong romance with white water has been passed on to at least one of his children. This summer, Michael plans to work as a trainee on a Rogue trip with ECHO.

"You and Bernd aren't alone," said Joe Daly, co-owner with Dick Linford of ECHO. He estimates 50 percent of his business now comes from families.

"River trips have evolved, no doubt about it," noted Daly, who said three generations of families have come on white water adventures together.

"Many people go for the excitement, and we have plenty of that," he said. "But this is a wonderful way to spend time with family.

"There is no text messaging, no cell phones or other distractions out on a river, so you really can connect again," he said. "Even teens who start out being grumpy, wishing they were anywhere else, fall in love with their surroundings.

For Shelby Becker, getting back on a river took about 18 busy years.

"My husband, Andy, and I went on a Middle Fork of the Salmon trip with ECHO for our honeymoon," said Becker, who lives in suburban Chicago. Shelby was 21; her husband 26.

"We loved it because of the rapids, the people and the canyon," she said. "But three months later I was pregnant and while we always wanted to go back, we couldn't."

For vacations, the family went to a lake in Wisconsin, never venturing west. In the blink of an eye, it seemed, the Beckers' oldest was getting ready to go off to college.

"We realized they wouldn't be home forever," she said.

So in 2002, when daughter Hallie was 18, she and her husband took all four children to the Middle Fork. The others are Luke, now 21, Jake, 19, and Meg, 17.

"It wasn't cheap and cost us \$15,000 for airfare and everything else," she said. "But we figured we could redo the house or go rafting with the family and I'm convinced we made the right choice because everyone loved it."

Becker said she would recommend a family raft trip in a heartbeat.

"It was a great bonding experience and wonderful to introduce them to the river. We grew a lot closer together as a family," she said.

Jennifer Forman, a former scuba instructor turned real estate saleswoman, had never been on a river trip before last summer. But she decided it would be something she and her twin 16-year-olds, Coltin and Brendan, would enjoy. Forman, however, didn't just choose a one-week outing. She picked a multiweek internship program she found on the OARS Web site that took them from Idaho to British Columbia to run several wild rivers.

"We didn't get the white-table treatment and that was great," she said. "We helped the guides and I think that was good for the boys.

"I was elated with how it turned out. We had to go with the flow, but it all went well and it absolutely brought us closer as a family. One of the boys is thinking about going back as a guide. I think that's a pretty good endorsement for the trip."

IF YOU GO

For more information on ECHO river adventures, go to the www.echotrips.com. For OARS, see www.oars.com. Trips range from \$160 to \$300 a day, but the price is usually less for children.

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