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River Craft Lite: Floats Great, Less Filling



Carmel Zucker for The New York Times

Paddling through rapids on the Arkansas River in Colorado. [More Photos](#) »

By STEPHEN REGENOLD
Published: October 15, 2009

SALIDA, Colo. — HELMET strapped on and life vest buckled tight, I pushed off from the bank into a churning stretch of the Arkansas

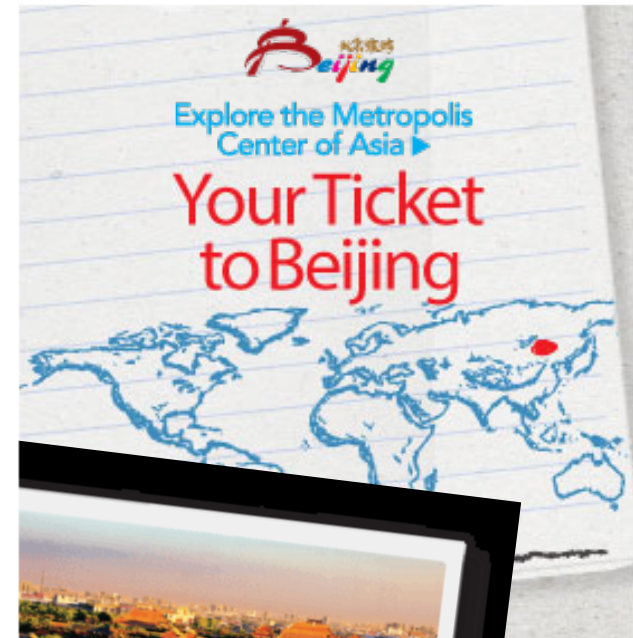
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River near here. A backpack loaded with gear was tied to the bow of my boat. "Lean forward in the rapids!" shouted Chelsey Gribbon, a former whitewater guide, as the current whisked around a corner and dropped from sight.

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Lightweight Rafting

In the mist of the heaving water, my small [raft](#) bobbed on waves. I rocketed downriver and held on for my life.

A whitewater [kayak](#) would have been fitting for the chutes and ledges ahead. Or maybe a six-person raft like the commercial vessels that course the [Arkansas](#) in the summer months. But I was in a pack raft — a portable, inflatable craft that might be mistaken for a pool toy.

Pack rafts have roots in aviator survival boats from World War II. But for decades adventurers have employed the lightweight and durable vessels to cross lakes, descend remote rivers or portage for miles to reach wilderness in far corners of the globe.

The small rafts have seen a resurgence with outdoors fanatics. Competitors in adventure races have used them, since they are equally capable of handling rapids, ocean bays and long lake crossings. They can weigh as little as three pounds and are easily stowed in a backpack for transport on dry land.

"Pack rafts are the Swiss Army knife of boats: small, versatile, packable and a jack of all trades," said Andrew Mattox, an owner of Alpacka Raft, based in Mancos, Colo., which sells a range of models starting around \$600.

For explorers like Roman Dial, a mathematics and biology professor at Alaska Pacific

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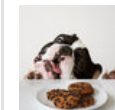
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University in [Anchorage](#), pack rafts have opened new vistas. Mr. Dial wrote a book on them, “Packrafting: An Introduction and How-To Guide” (Beartooth Mountain Press, 2008), after more than two decades of pack-rafting expeditions to places like Borneo, [New Zealand](#), [Patagonia](#), [Tasmania](#) and the Western [United States](#). In 1986 Mr. Dial traversed the Brooks Range in [Alaska](#), a 1,000-mile trip on foot and skis, and — for the rivers and lakes that dotted the terrain — in a pack raft.

In the foreword to Mr. Dial’s book, Jon Krakauer, the author of “Into the Wild,” wrote, “Roman was among the first people on the planet to understand that the pack raft would revolutionize wilderness exploration.”

This year I joined a group of experienced pack-rafters on a two-day trip in the San Isabel National Forest. At a boat launch on the Arkansas, we sorted gear to prepare for the journey, which would cover about 25 miles of travel equally divided between land and water.

“Here’s your raft,” said Jason Magness, the trip leader, tossing me a small rubbery bundle. It weighed five pounds and fit snugly in the bottom of my backpack.

I stuffed food, a sleeping bag, a shell jacket and survival gear in as well, all cinched in waterproof sacks. With a kayak paddle strapped to the outside of the pack, I followed Mr.



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Magness and two companions, and the [hike](#) began.

Mr. Magness is a founder of a troupe of outdoors athletes, adventurers and [yoga](#) teachers known as the YogaSlackers, who embark on trips that push the limits of the body and the mind. Pack rafts have allowed Mr. Magness and his group to complete expeditions from [Canada](#) to [Costa Rica](#), including two-week journeys in remote wilderness.

Our adventure included backpacking, mountain climbing, canyoneering, camping out and then — after inflating the rafts on the second day — a long whitewater paddle back to the cars. Our route, an off-trail tour past geographic landmarks and old mines, was sketched vaguely on a topographic map Mr. Magness had printed. “We’ll figure it out as we go along,” he said.

For an hour we walked north next to the Arkansas River. Whitewater poured over rocks, the river pinching down inside canyon walls.

The group — Daniel Staudigel, Mr. Magness, Ms. Gribbon and me — shared food and gear throughout the trip. Each person carried a raft and paddle. But a small tent, first-aid items and layers of clothing, all split among us, were considered community gear.

Moving fast and light, we covered five miles of back country in a couple of hours. We squeezed up a canyon where the walls narrowed to 10 feet wide. Above 8,000 feet we reached an obscure ridge marked as “The Reef” on our map. An old mine, abandoned and forgotten, edged a dry tributary far below.

By sunset we’d hiked and climbed about 13 miles. A final descent into a canyon led to a sandy wash, where we camped within sight of the Arkansas.

Morning brought bright sun and a line of commercial rafters bobbing downstream. We inflated our pack rafts at the river’s edge, watching the six-member crews buck and drop in raging water below.

“What is that thing?” a rafter shouted, stretching to see the strange little crafts being



inflated onshore.

As an experienced kayaker, I took to a pack raft with little issue. My vessel, an Alpacka raft, looked to be not much more than an inner tube reinforced with a floor. But on the river I felt in control. The craft could ferry across the current. I paddled into an eddy for practice, bracing as the boat spun around.

Our day on the Arkansas entailed a line of rapids with big names — Graveyard, Widowmaker, Zoom Flume — and with ratings up to Class 4. (Class 6 is the hardest, considered unrunnable.) On the first major set, Pinball Rapid, I leaned forward and paddled fast.

Waves exploded over my head. Water rushed in, filling the raft. I shot out the other side soaked but upright, the craft bumping through like a tank.

Farther downstream, after running a steep chute, my raft flipped, and I went overboard. The shocking cold of the mountain river knocked out my breath. I swam in a swirling mess of whitewater, raft and paddle edging away.

But the rapid washed into a pool. I swam and grabbed my gear, flipped the raft without trouble and climbed in, my backpack still secured to the boat.

A reach and a pull with the paddle, my feet pressed inside against rubber walls, and I powered back into the waves. Once again the river fell out of sight. I held on, bracing for the wild ride downriver and beyond.

IF YOU GO

A handful of guides offer trips, including the **Backpacking Light Wilderness Trekking School** (backpackinglight.com). The [Montana](#)-based trips range in length from three days to two weeks.

YogaSlackers (yogaslackers.com) arranges occasional pack-[raft](#) trips in the Western

[United States](#). In [Anchorage](#), **Alpacka Raft Rentals** (pacraftalaska.com, 907-727-4238) rents pack rafts.

MANUFACTURERS

Boats made by **Alpacka Raft** (alpackaraft.com) are constructed of urethane-coated nylon and are made to run flat water to advanced whitewater rivers. The Yukon Yak model, which weighs a bit less than five pounds when deflated, costs \$790.

A more affordable option is the **Sevylor** Trail Boat, for \$75.99 . It weighs 3.5 pounds and comes with two paddles. Sevylor boats (sevylor.com) are not commonly used on serious whitewater.

A version of this article appeared in print on October 16, 2009, on page C34 of the New York edition with the headline: Pack Raft: It's Not Just a Toy, It's an Adventure.



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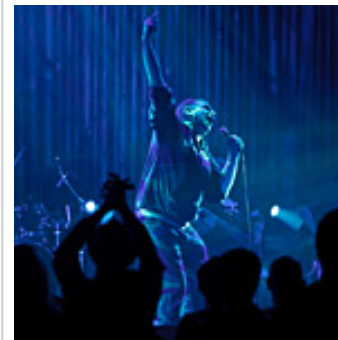


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