

THE COLORADO RIVER TRIP

MOAB TO SPANISH BOTTOM

AUGUST, 2017



EDITOR'S NOTE: Almost everyone who went on this wonderful trip wrote a report. Some of their details overlap, but each puts a slightly different spin on their memories. You will enjoy them all!

The logistics for this paddle were very similar to last year's Green River trip. If you haven't read that account, it will give you useful background information about river paddling and Tex's Riverways' jet boat support. You can find it on the RMSKC website in issue 24-2b of the *Mountain Paddler*, Fall 2016.

GEORGE OTTENHOFF: Expect anything on a trip on the Colorado River in September. This trip was an amazing variety of experiences. The scenery on the entire stretch from the Potash put-in to Spanish Bottom was absolutely spectacular. It was very hard to stop marveling at the beauty of the red rock towers and walls against the backdrop of the deep blue sky, with green shrubs and white angel trumpets in the foreground, and it was impossible to stop taking pictures.



On the second morning, as we were packing our kayaks we looked up to see a boat carrying what appeared to be a baby grand piano wrapped in movers blankets heading downstream.

We couldn't believe that it could really be a piano, but the passengers on the boat did not respond to the questions we shouted at them.

Later in the morning, as we stopped to look at some petrified wood, a park ranger from Canyonlands National Park also stopped. He was a personable young man who checked our permits and asked how we were handling our human waste. He also informed us that there was a natural amphitheater downstream called The Grotto where there was going to be a classical music concert that afternoon sponsored by the Moab Music Festival.



Datura, a desert plant with white trumpet flowers and dark blue-green leaves

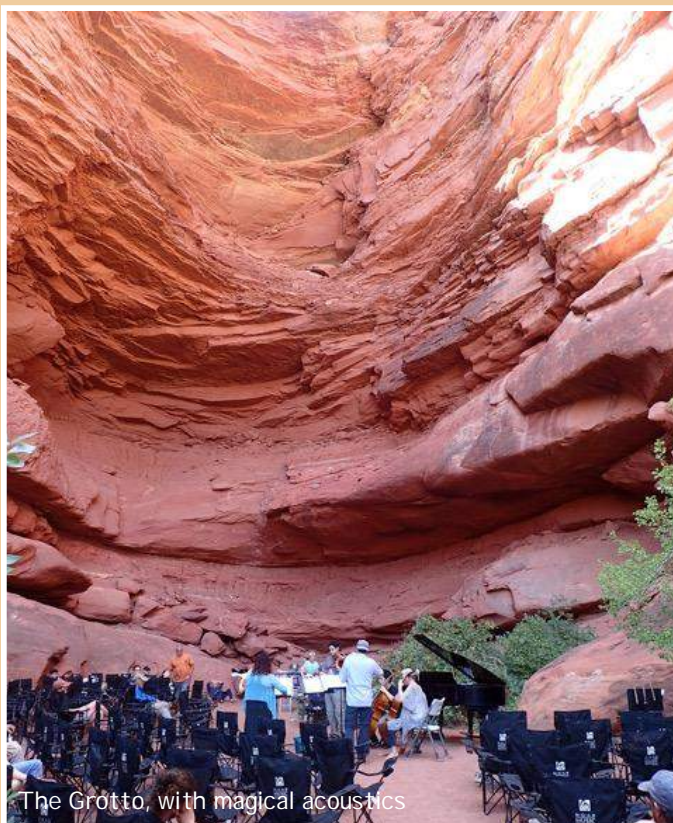


Ranger Winslow reviewing the NPS regulations

Since it was being held in the national park, he said that we would be able to attend for free. That confirmed that we had seen a piano on the river that morning, and we decided the Grotto was our destination for lunch.

When we got there, we tied our kayaks to tamarisk bushes, and slogged through the mud to shore wearing our spray skirts and PFDs. The sponsors were horrified to see these eight filthy river rats. We were quickly informed that, although we had the right to attend the concert, the portable restrooms, drinking water, chairs, food, and drinks were reserved for the patrons who were paying \$250 each to be shuttled to the concert by jet boat.

Nonetheless we enjoyed sitting on the rocks while listening to a chamber ensemble rehearse a Brahms piece, and a Venezuelan flutist and native percussion duo assessing the acoustics of the rock amphitheater. Our tuna salad on crackers lunches and granola bars never tasted better.



The Grotto, with magical acoustics

We decided, however, that by the time the concert concluded it would be too late for us to make our way downriver to our intended destination. Therefore we left and got back on the river before most of the paying guests arrived, and the concert started.

The weather for the first few days was hot — mid to upper 90s — with clear skies. Those conditions made a swim at the end of the day very welcome, and made us grateful to have Brian's large tarp for shade, until the wind got very strong.



Chatting and cooking under the tarp

The clear skies also were wonderful for lying on the sand at night to watch for meteors and satellites. The skies began to cloud over later in the week, bringing better temperatures for paddling.

On arrival at our final destination, Spanish Bottom, as we were trying to put up our tents we were hit with a storm that began with very strong wind, followed by heavy rain that was followed by hail. It was a miserable time for a while for those of us who were in the middle of setting up tents. [When the first rain stopped, some people found the site they'd chosen was cut in half by a deep gully and were glad they hadn't gotten their tent erected earlier.]



Red river water after the storm

After the storm finally passed, we were blessed to see a double rainbow over the cliff across the river: a wonderful gift for our last campsite.

On Friday morning the river was dark red and full of debris from runoff

from the storm the previous afternoon. When the jet boat arrived to take us back to the put-in, we learned that the storm had been very intense, and had covered a very large

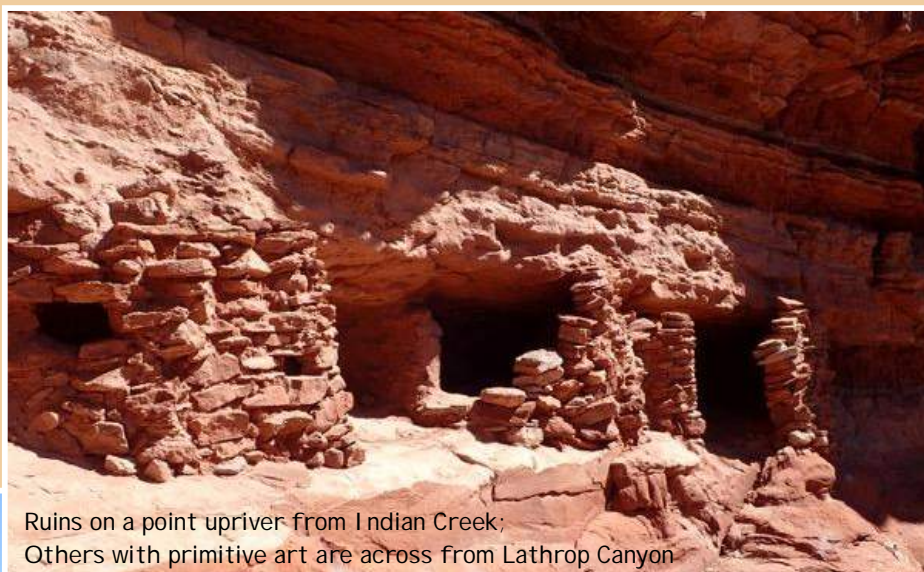


George's soaked tent

area. Creeks around Moab had washed a large amount of mud onto the city streets. The trip out by boat at 35 miles per hour was like a fast forward video of our trip, except in reverse. That ride alone was a memorable part of the trip.

TIM FLETCHER: We traveled at a relaxed pace that let us enjoy and soak in the beauty and serenity of the wonderful Canyon Lands area.

We had a couple of short hikes to Puebloan granaries that were very interesting. I always like to try to imagine how life was about 800 years ago along the river that we still enjoy so much today.



Ruins on a point upriver from Indian Creek;
Others with primitive art are across from Lathrop Canyon



I loved the sandbar and island campsites, in spite of all the sand that the wind deposited in our tents and gear.

The scenery was so beautiful and it was great at the end of the day to cool off in the river and then sit back and relax together.

The most surprising event was the morning we saw a baby grand piano traveling downriver in a raft, headed for a classical music concert in the Grotto, a natural amphitheater located in the canyon wall just inside the park boundary.



We had no trouble finding wide, flat campsites



The blowing sand got into everything

Most of the weather was great, with the exception of a couple very windy afternoons and the big storm that hit at Spanish Bottom.

At least we were fortunate to get off the river and to the campsite before it hit. And then afterwards the sun came out and let us dry things out, put up our tents and get ready for the second wave of rain.

The lightning was probably the scariest part of that experience for all of us. I think the weather really reminded us that Mother Nature is in charge and that we need to be prepared and be flexible. It also helped to be traveling with a great group of people that really work together and help each other out.

ANNETTE MASCIA: 'Twas a most unusual river experience: instead of an adrenaline pumping, high energy race to our final campsite, it was a relaxing, stress-free paddle through timeless desert canyon lands with scenic eye candy. Our leisurely pace gave ample time to discover petrified wood sites, identify named rock formations, explore Ancestral Puebloan ruins, ruminate about the lives of the Ancients who lived along the river, and to learn why they chose the sites they did to cultivate grains for survival.



Two of the most colorful pieces



On the short hike to the petrified wood

boat, journeying along an ancient river with such idyllic canyon views became an opportunity to bond with the desert, immerse myself in timelessness, and imagine how living back in the day of the Ancients must have been.

OK, so they didn't use WAG bags, baby wipes and freeze dried foods, but it's the concept that's important. When I finally overcame my reluctance to bathe in the river, and even shampooed twice (albeit with eco-safe soap), I felt akin to an Ancestral Puebloan maiden who eons ago might have done likewise on that very spot.



Double rainbow over a cliff with a white layer we saw for several days

As for bonding with nature in the desert, three moments come to mind. First, a sudden storm picked up during dinner prep one afternoon, darkening the skies, threatening to blow down our shade tarp, and sending sand whipping my skin and eyes.

I scurried to the shelter of my tent while the others bravely stood their ground beneath the tarp. After a few drops of spit from the sky, the storm passed and I opened my tent to see a beautiful double rainbow appear above the ridge. Lesson learned: weather in the desert is like weather in the mountains. If you don't like it, wait 15 minutes and it will change.

Second, on the last morning, while changing clothing in my tent, a small scorpion ran down the side of my ground pad and ducked beneath the pad. In disbelief, I squealed, scrambled out of my tent, pulled all my stuff out, and gingerly lifted the pad to uncover the critter. Grabbing my fly swatter, I lifted the scorpion, flung it out, and crushed it dead with a nearby rock. Lesson learned: survival of the fittest or, scorpions are not welcome in my tent.



Posing for a photo with their Emergency Information Cards just minutes before the storm came boiling upriver from behind them: Marsha, Annette, Von, George, Tim, Brian and Jud

Lastly and most dramatically, upon landing at our final campsite, we began to unload our boats while admiring the Doll House cliffs in the distance, unaware of nature's exclamation point about to descend upon us. Within five minutes ominous clouds blew in, the wind picked up, and Tim ordered us all to secure our boats and climb immediately to high ground.

I pulled out my rain jacket, grabbed my lunch and water bottle, and high-tailed it up the bank as the rain hit. I frantically looked for shelter, screeching with fright as thunder and lightning cracked loudly overhead.

Ducking beside a large boulder, the downpour turned to pelting hail, and I watched in disbelief as torrents of red water rushed down to the river. Chilled to the bone, I scarfed down my lunch to create some internal heat, staring at the remains of a tree which had been previously struck by lightning, and waited and waited and waited for the storm to pass, praying that lightning would not strike twice in the same vicinity.

Thankfully, it did not; I was even more thankful that we were not on the water when the storm struck. Lesson learned: respect the unpredictable forces of nature in the desert and be prepared for any eventuality.



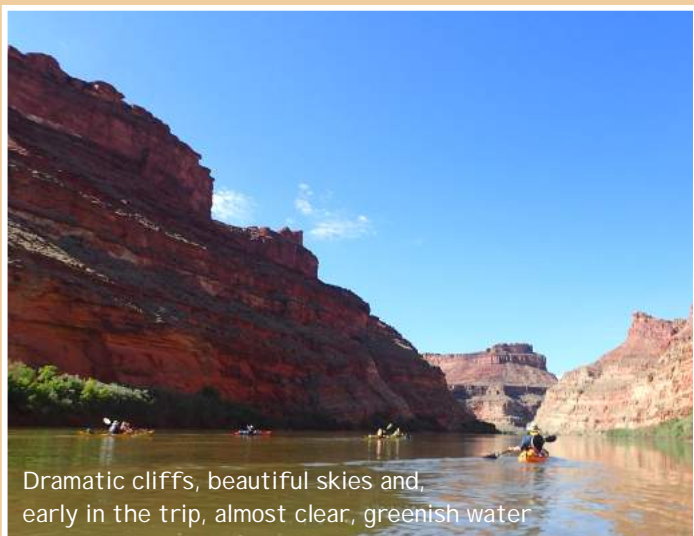
Annette in her tent, next to a rivulet of water; some of the gullies the rain cut in the campsite were almost a foot deep



JUD HURD: Tim led another wonderful river trip, with another great group of people which always enhances any expedition.

The scenery on the upper half of this trip is absolutely marvelous. The cliff walls are very red and dramatic, and as you look back up the valleys leading to the river you see so much diversity and so many different and fascinating rock formations.

I found myself somewhat mesmerized by all of this as I floated along under beautiful skies.



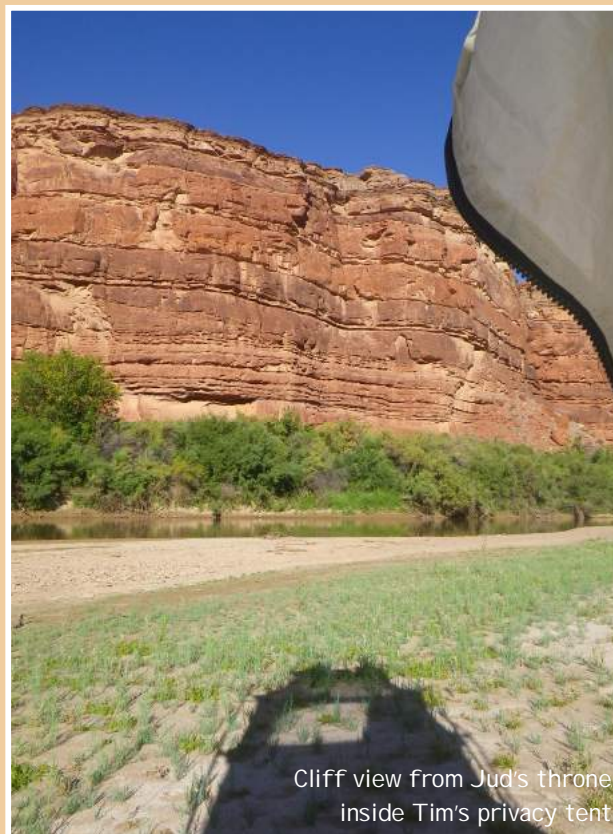
Dramatic cliffs, beautiful skies and, early in the trip, almost clear, greenish water

There are a lot of islands and sand bars along the shores so we never had any problem finding a perfect camp site every night. And speaking of perfect camp sites, the addition of Tim's potty house with my throne was a great enhancement. I think this needs to be a standard on any self-supported trip requiring WAG bags and a boom-box.

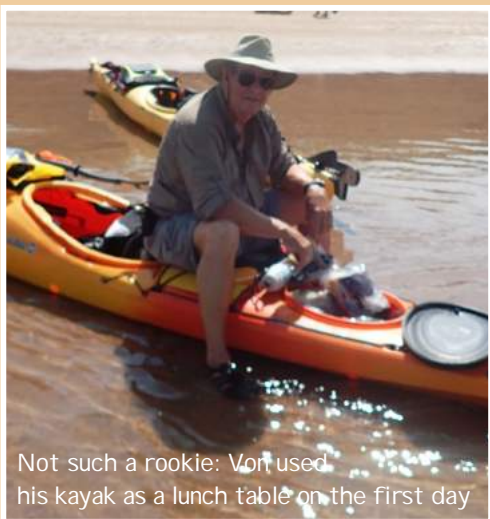
One morning we were eating breakfast and saw a raft going down river that looked like it had a piano in it. We later learned from a ranger that four times a year the Moab Music Festival hosts world-class musicians for a concert held in a grotto on the river. We found the grotto and got to listen to them practice and enjoyed their beautiful music.

We had great weather until the last afternoon when we had thunderstorms roll over us twice and drench us, the first before some of the group even got their tents set up.

The morning after the storms Tex's picked us up and took us back to Moab where we enjoyed a traditional meal and malts at Milt's. That's when Marsha discovered that she had lost her phone and billfold. She and Annette stayed over and had Tex's take them back to our last campsite to look for it. It wasn't there, but fortunately, she found it jammed into the bow of her boat a couple weeks later after the Lake Powell trip. All's well that ends well. So, with that good ending I will say goodbye and start dreaming about next summer's trips.



Cliff view from Jud's throne inside Tim's privacy tent



Not such a rookie: Von used his kayak as a lunch table on the first day

VON FRANSEN: This was my rookie multi-day river trip with the Rocky Mountain Sea Kayak Club. My goal from the start was to go on multi-day floats of some of our western rivers. Since buying my kayak two years ago I've been learning the ropes and getting outfitted for the sport.

From practicing recovery procedures at Meyers Pool during the winter months to group paddles at area reservoirs, the club has been invaluable in my learning the techniques necessary for safe kayaking.

A lot goes into preparing for your first float trip. The gear alone takes thoughtful planning. My backpacking equipment from years ago didn't measure up to the latest technology and needed updating. Menu planning was decidedly different: much better than years gone by.

The six-day Moab to Spanish Bottom paddle on the Colorado was the perfect kickoff trip for a newbie. Lucky for me it was with a group of the most seasoned kayak campers in the club. The company was enjoyable, the pace relaxed and the scenery spectacular. And thanks to the expert advice of Brian Hunter I was well prepared for all eventualities, including the dramatic climax of the trip: a desert storm of epic proportions.

I'm looking forward to future float trips with the club.



Von, Tim and Jud relaxing with a fine box of wine

BRIAN HUNTER: Thursday, the 14th of September, was the last night of our Colorado River adventure. We hauled out in Spanish Bottom just a little upriver from Cataract Canyon where we would be picked up the next day by Tex's Riverways' jet boat for a thrilling ride back up the Colorado back to civilization.

Downriver the sky was a mass of angry black and gray clouds with a distant rumble of thunder and even the occasional flash of lighting. Tim and I were hoping the storm would skirt around us, but our worst fears were soon realized. In a matter of about 15 minutes the 20-30 mph wind was blowing rain and hail sideways up the river toward us, and cloud-to-ground lightning strikes were occurring all around Spanish Bottom.

It lasted for about 20 terrifying and wondrous minutes. The Colorado rose at least a foot and a half, turning deep red from the mud, and carrying trees and other floating and submerged debris downstream toward Lake Powell.

We dispersed into the woods trying not to be either the tallest thing or next to the tallest around.



Marsha below the Doll House spires, with the clouds building downriver in front of her



Jud supervising the tarp raising

SUE HUGHES: On past camping trips we've had detailed daily reports from Marsha, and we missed them for this trip, but she was too busy organizing her life after misplacing her phone and credit cards to pull those together this year. We all send huge thanks to Annette for staying in Moab to help her with that.

Other things that didn't get mentioned: Jud made Bananas Foster the last night before our camp at Spanish Bottom; it was amazing!

He also helped set up the tarp, most of the time. That's Tim pounding in the stakes that he and Brian made. Brian's mallet, named Thor, weighed three pounds. The stakes were enormous.



Brian and Tim's super-stakes saved the tarp and the potty house when the winds started



The ski poles Ray has used on many river trips

Another big help in the winds were Ray's ski poles that he sent with Marsha. We tied the boats to them and pounded them at least half-way down every night.



Guillotine Arch

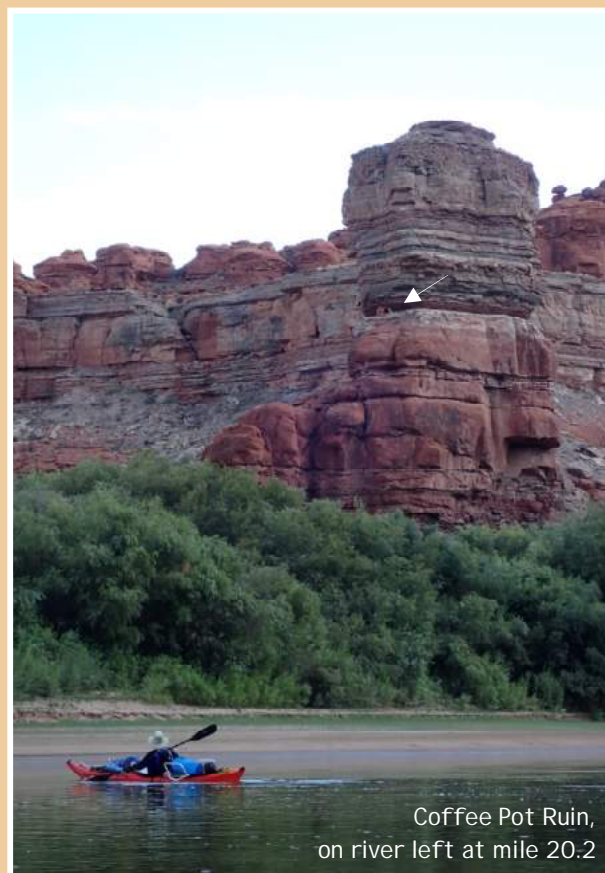
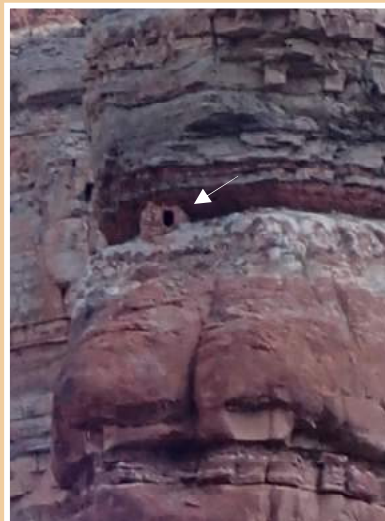
We did find several of the named formations that Annette mentioned: Guillotine Arch was confusing, because with one hole on top of the other it looked more like wrist openings on the stocks that Puritans used than a French guillotine, but the hike up the draw at its bottom was a nice break from paddling, and we saw bobcat tracks in the mud.

"Coffee Pot" ruin took us a while to locate; I guess we weren't thinking 1950's percolator.

The rock tower had a ruin on a ledge half way up the side, which made us wonder how in the world the builders had been able to do that.



1950s coffee pot



Coffee Pot Ruin, on river left at mile 20.2

If you like classical music, check out the Moab Music Festival. Getting the world-class musicians and the patrons to the grotto on Tex's jet boats

makes the tickets expensive, but for your friends or relatives who aren't into kayak camping it would be a magical experience: <http://www.moabmusicfest.org/calendar/2018-grotto-concert-1>

And finally, a shout-out to Tex's Riverways. We were as impressed with the service this year as we had been in 2016. Brian said it best, "This was my second extraction by Tex's Riverways. These guys are like a SEAL Team: well trained, dedicated to the mission, and operating with the precision of gears in a fine Swiss watch. The current owners of Tex's are selling the business and I can't imagine any other owners who are going measure up."



The cover photo and the two on this page by Annette Mascia. Other photos from Brian, Jud, Tim, George, Marsha, Von, and Sue

STARTING TIME: "Starting time" means the time that everyone in the group will be *in the water ready to paddle*. Be sure to arrive early enough to have your boat off the car, loaded and ready to go by that time.

DAY PADDLES: Non-member guests may paddle with the Club on day paddles if they sign an American Canoe Association *Waiver and Release of Liability* form and pay the \$5 ACA event fee. ACA members from other Paddle America clubs may join RMSKC day trips if they provide a current ACA card; they must also sign a paper Waiver at the put-in but do not have to pay the event fee.



MULTI-DAY PADDLES: According to RMSKC policy, overnight and extended trips are open only to RMSKC members; additional criteria for members' participation may be included in the trip description at the discretion of the trip leader.