



A guide sports a broad-brimmed hat and keeps his cool, Troublemaker, South Fork American

Caught in the Raft Trap

A GUIDE'S GUIDE TO GUIDE SCHOOLS FOR WANNABE RIVER RATS

Story and Photos by Tim Shisler



Pumping up is part of the guide's workout plan

My head was spinning with commands. As I tried to bark them out, all that escaped was a jumbled mess of grunts and second-guessed words. "Forward two! Stop! Right turn! Right-back-left-forward! Right-back-left-forward! Hold on!" It was a white-knuckle moment, yet my palms were sweating, slipping on the paddle shaft. What had appeared to be a calculated throughway through the rapid was transformed into a chaotic, frothing whitewater nightmare.

It was only the second day of guide school and just moments before I had won (or lost?) a marathon contest of rock-paper-scissors to determine which of us greenhorns would guide the challenging Troublemaker rapid on the South Fork of the American. Balancing atop a rock next to the rushing water, I scouted my line and hypothesized what could go wrong. In 15

seconds it would all be over, I told myself. Those 15 seconds, now felt like an eternity.

Guide school, in retrospect, is more of a job interview than a gut-busting boot camp, but when it ultimately comes down to dodging rocks, hitting waves and not falling out, nerves, anxiety and frustration can sabotage your confidence.

After four years of commercial guiding, I've reached the conclusion that just about anyone can guide a boat down a class III rapid. It might not always be the cleanest of runs, they might not always stay on the current and, from time to time, people will swim. But the beauty of it all is with a little training, and your share of personal-growth inducing "Oh Shit!" moments, rafting can become a lifetime addiction.

If you've been on a few river trips, you probably know that river guides are prone to diagramming upcoming rapids with whatever is in reach, like say at the picnic table. Saltshakers become house-size boulders, napkins river-wide holes, and forks strainers tempting death. The picnic table is suddenly transformed into a liquid swirl of movement as the guide's instructions unfold. New guides often carry their new found river-reading skills wherever they go. Walking down the street they may be subconsciously thinking about

where the "downstream V" is and how to avoid the next obstacle.

Spending time in any river community is an opportunity to absorb the river lifestyle, for boating is not just something that happens on the water, it transcends into daily life. It's no secret to boaters why the Water Rat's famous words from Wind in the Willows became the paddlers' mantra: "There is nothing – absolutely nothing – half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats."

families while parked next to rusted-out Toyota pickups that refuse to die, much to the relief of their dirt-bag owners, a.k.a. raft guides. Sun-bleached life vests, Farmer John wetsuits and paddle tops are strewn around parking lots and campgrounds. For new guides, Coloma can be the perfect place to contract the life-altering rafter's bug, and being the hub of California's most rafted river, it often is.

Traditionally, outfitters hold guide schools in May and the first few weeks in June.

Since the main point of the school is to recruit and train the season's new rookies, outfitters like to have them locked and loaded before Memorial Day weekend. Some schools send students zigzagging up and down California



... as is loading boats

Coloma is such a place. Situated along Highway 49, this river community is for most of the year small enough to drive by if you happen to sneeze at just the right time. But during the spring and summer months, it swells with seasonal river folk and swarms of cattle, a.k.a. rafters. New SUV's spill out sunburned



Clean up: A guide's work is never done

to various rivers in order to broaden their horizons and prove to them that a "downstream V" is the same no matter if you're in class III on the South Fork or class IV-plus on the Upper Sac. Other companies focus primarily on one river and focus on the ins and outs of commercial guiding and the multitude of prep work that takes place off the water.

Having long since put my troubling experience through Troublemaker behind me, for the last two years I have been worked with Whitewater Excitement to help train new guides. By far the hardest thing as an instructor to do is sit back and watch trainees screw up, like I once did. But mistakes are the best teachers and so I try to force myself to let the students make them whenever they can. Sitting in the boat, you could say I error on the side of errors: If we flip, we flip; if we wrap we wrap; and if I go swimming, well hopefully they can pluck my ass out.

Over the years, we have taught firemen, teachers, previous guests and even kids too young to guide but adventurous enough to learn. It's not uncommon as the sun sets on another 100-degree day in Coloma to have boaters float by camp and say hello, proclaiming that they learned how to raft in our guide school ten years ago. Most laugh about how they still seem to ping-pong down rapids, scaring the daylights out of their family and friends, which of course is acceptable on the relatively forgiving South Fork.

Those interested in guide schools are recommended to research the programs online and contact the outfitter directly. Some schools are more expensive than others, but if you break down the amount of rafting, food, transportation and resources the price is usually relatively cheap. College students wondering what to do with their summer are perfect applicants, as are teachers, post-college grads and ski bums looking to make use of all that snowmelt.

Spend a summer in Coloma eating at Marcos, partying at the River Shack and introducing wide-eyed first-time rafters to Troublemaker, and it's easy to see why one summer can quickly turn into three or four before you realize it. While river rats may dry out, they're never completely cured.

ASJ



An idle moment among peers.

GET YOUR GUIDE CHOPS

River outfitters in Northern California that run guide schools after May 1.

Friends of the River

June 10-11 and 17-25
\$425 (plus membership)
South Fork American River
www.friendsoftheriver.org

American Whitewater Expeditions

May 28 – June 2
\$680 general, \$630 students
South Fork American
1-800-825-3025
www.americanwhitewater.com

Tributary Whitewater Tours

May 21 - 26 and June 11 - 16
South Fork of the American River
\$595
1-800-672-3846
www.whitewatertours.com

Whitewater Voyages

June 25 – 30
South Fork American
\$495
1-800-400-7238
www.whitewatervoyages.com

Whitewater Excitement

May 28 – June 2 and June 12 – 16
South Fork American
\$400 general, \$300 students
1-800-750-2386
www.whitewaterexcitement.com

Whitewater Connection

Five days in May.
Call for exact dates
Three Weekends in June
Call for dates.
\$495
1-800-336-7238
www.whitewaterconnection.com

Sierra Mac

Guideschool by arrangement
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www.sierramac.com



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