

The Stan

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The large stake-side truck I'm riding in hits a pothole and I'm jolted off the military metal box I'm sitting on in the back and fall on it with a crash that tests the resiliency of what little padding I have on my 21-year-old backside.

"Damn!" I swear. I guess the other guides are either more accustomed to it, or have more intelligently placed themselves on our lifejackets—officially called personal flotation devices or PFDs, since they say nothing. Clearly, I have much to learn.

This is my least favorite part of being a commercial whitewater river guide in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in 1978 for Outdoor Adventure River Specialists, or O.A.R.S (or simply OARS). Thankfully, the ride on this road isn't long.

We're on our way, as we are most weekend mornings, to our river put-in at Camp 9 on the Stanislaus River in California. "The Stan" as we affectionately call it, is the premier Class III (fun for families) whitewater run in California. Most trips are one-day trips down a nine-mile stretch of river that flows through an astonishing 800-foot deep remote limestone canyon. My trip today, however, is a coveted two-day trip that will extend another six miles and afford more of an opportunity to get to know our guests and for them to get more acquainted with this amazing river canyon.

The truck is piled with rolled-up hypalon (a form of rubber) rafts, oars, paddles, PFDs, rowing frames, secondhand military waterproof rocket boxes, ammo cans, drybags, and coolers full of food and beer. I marvel at how much gear we have but the great thing about rafting is that the river floats it all with ease—all you need to do is guide it between the rocks. Of course, "all you need to do" hides a great deal of experience, strength, and skill, but still.

"Hey JT!" I yell, "Are you finally going to get the run right at Death Rock?"

“Don’t be an asshole, Roy!” he shoots back. He knows me too well.

Death Rock rapid in low water takes a really strange river move—essentially it requires you to work the boat directly across the river from left to right, in a move that in over 40 years of river running all over the western United States I don’t recall having to perform anywhere else in the same way.

One day I even had a guide from another river company on shore watching how we did it. It requires a severe upstream ferry (where your passengers are paddling upriver to slow the boat down), while you ever so gently change the boat’s angle to slowly ferry straight across the river behind some rocks. Once I saw someone else do it I was immediately enchanted, and I always ran the rapid at low water this way. It was magic, and the guide on shore watching me that day totally got it as well. Later she told me about it, as I hadn’t even noticed her on shore watching.

Plenty of other times I learned from my female colleagues. Some of the best guides on the river are slightly built women, as they understand better how to use the river to their advantage when some of us larger and more muscled men may default to busting our way through when nuance and working with the river’s flow would work better. Some of us can’t be bothered to notice.

The truck pulls into our put-in spot and we clamber out.

Although the sun is only just coming up, the heat is already beginning to rise. We know that soon it will have us sweating as we wield the mechanical pumps to put air into the rafts before our passengers arrive. It’s all part of the drill. By the time our passengers arrive we’ll have already put in what many people will have considered a full day’s physical labor, from loading the gear into the truck at headquarters, unloading the same gear at put-in, blowing up the rafts, carrying them down to the river, rigging the oar frames, oars, and decks, tying down gear, etc. And only then would the real trip start. But we love it. We never stop loving it.

“What’s the level, do you think?” I ask everyone.

Craig responds, “Looks like about 1,500.”

1,500 cubic feet per second (CFS) is a low flow, but not very low. Essentially, it’s an easy river with not much danger, just the way we like it with paying passengers.

We start unloading the gear, starting with the boats so we can begin blowing up our 16’ Avon Professional boats. In the late 70s we’re mostly blowing up the boats with manual high-volume boat pumps that you must hop up and down on to drive a plunger that inflates the hypalon boats. It’s a real workout, especially as the hot sun begins to make its presence known. But it’s just part of the job. Later we’ll have electric pumps powered by our truck battery, but not yet.

Once we have a boat inflated, four of us carry it down to the water. Once it’s in the river we can either rig it as an oar boat, with a frame and oars, where the guide does all the work, or leave it as it is to be a paddle boat (where the passengers paddle and the guide at the back steers with a paddle).

Before long we have all the boats in the water and can chill until the bus arrives with our passengers. It won’t be long.

“How many peeps do we have on this trip?” Julie asks. “Peeps” is our shorthand for “people” or “passengers.”

“21,” I reply. Three 16’ Avon Professional paddle boats and two rigged oar boats to carry the baggage and gear. It will be piled high, but we’ll make it work.

When the bus arrives, our head guide greets the passengers and assembles them for the required safety talk, where we try to impress upon them the real danger they could face. This is standard procedure, but it’s also very important because they sometimes arrive at the put-in completely drunk. Apparently, some people begin

drinking when they get on the bus to come to the river trip. Our passengers don't usually know that they're doing something moderately dangerous, so it's our responsibility to make the trip as safe as we can.

At this point none of us realize we have no more than three or four years, tops, to run the amazing Stanislaus River. The river we have fallen in love with is going to be destroyed in front of our eyes by a dam. But that isn't today, and we are blissfully unaware of what the future holds. Currently we're focused on making this an awesome trip *now*.



As our head guide is giving the safety talk to the passengers (Scotty Stevens in the picture, using his unique drawl), we relax on our boats and slyly check out the people who will soon be our crew. Can they paddle, we wonder? How strong are they? Do they look like they will be fun? Will the next two days be challenging or interesting? Of course, none of this can be determined just by looking, but we still try.

"What do you think, Ann?" I ask. "Can they paddle worth a damn?"

“Hard to tell,” she replies, “but we’ll soon see!”

Then it’s time to get people into boats, so we figure out which parties need to stay together and divide up folks into six or so people per paddle raft and one to three in an oar raft. Then we give them the rudimentary things they need to know to start paddling and we take it from there. They’ll learn as they go and we’ll correct them as we need to.

Thankfully, this is a very forgiving river. At a fairly uniform Class 3, this is the premier river rafting experience for families in California. No other river is this fun with relatively less danger, while combining what is essentially a wilderness experience (you see no roads or houses for 9 miles). It’s rare for someone to be injured or die on this river, and that’s usually in much higher flows than we typically see.

Soon we’re ready to go, with everyone suited up in PFDs, situated in boats, and with paddles in hand. Head guide Scotty has already set up the boat order. He’ll lead and one of the oar boats will sweep (come last).

“OK,” yells Scotty, “let’s go!”

He points his boat out of the eddy into the current as we follow along. Finally, we’re on the river.

The thing to know about the Stanislaus River canyon is that it’s *so* much more than simply a river. It has caves, mining history, astonishing limestone cliffs, the largest fig tree you’ve ever seen in your life, and a creek that provides wonderful swimming and water slides. It is, in other words, a natural wonderland. And passengers will experience it all with all the love and care that we bring to this trip.

Part of our “love and care” is awesome food. We pride ourselves on providing great lunches and dinners, from such things as gazpacho and guacamole at lunch to steaks and stir fries for dinner. When I was a guide I ate exclusively with chopsticks, but I’d

already removed red meat out of my diet, so I didn't have to worry about cutting steak.

Shortly after we set off, we're soon in Rock Garden Rapid. As you may imagine, it's a lot of dodging rocks as you head off downstream, which is good practice for what lies ahead. By the time you've made it through Rock Garden you've pretty much whipped your paddle crew into shape.

This is a good thing, since Death Rock Rapid is coming up soon. Although the name is daunting, it was named that in high water, when someone did sadly die there. But at our present low flow, we're more worried about getting lodged on a rock than we are about something more serious. However, at this water level, it takes some strenuous maneuvering to make our way around all the rocks to continue downstream, but we make it since we've done it many times before.

Next up is one of my favorites: Devil's Staircase. At this level it's just a fun drop. Perhaps now is the time to let you know that the names we give rapids are (mostly) way more violent than they really are—at least at the water levels we typically run them at. Of course, at higher water levels they can be much more difficult, but at some point we don't run commercial trips due to the danger.

Before long we reach Bailey's Staircase, where all the water smashes up against the right shore and you punch through a hole (a steep drop) at the bottom. But just beyond this is my nemesis on this river.

Widowmaker Rapid is where the river drops straight into a rock that splits the current—most of the water goes left, but some goes right. The problem is that at certain water levels the run to the right is a sweet and impressive maneuver that delights our passengers, since you pass between the river-splitting boulder on the left and a small cliff on the right shore. So essentially, we all want to do it. But you can only do it successfully if there's enough water. This means you must judge it as you drop in.

Once I hesitated to decide too long and my boat came up against the large boulder sidewise. The downstream tube of the boat rode up on the rock and the river poured over the upstream tube. Before I knew it, we were literally “wrapped” around the rock. My passengers (a woman and child) climbed up on the high side of the boat while I contemplated this new situation. I’d never experienced this, and thankfully so far haven’t ever again. It was a complete dumpster fire. No one could go down the river until my raft had been peeled off the boulder that, frankly, few people thought you could wrap a boat around it given its size. You had to hit it *just right*. Call me talented.



My colleague Richard Haratini (seen in the photo on the far right, photographer unknown) led the rescue operation. Eventually the passengers jumped off the back of the rock and were rescued by guides below while the boat was pulled off by a standard Z-rig of ropes, pulleys, and carabiners that provided the required mechanical advantage. Of course, I was seriously embarrassed, but it was my first year as a rafter,

so I learned a valuable lesson: sometimes it doesn't matter which path you take, *you just need to decide.*

Soon we arrive at one of the best spots on the river—Rose Creek. Rose Creek is a joyful place. Water sluices down over rocks that offer a water slide into pools, which our customers love to experience (as do we). It's essentially a must-stop location for all river trips, so it's often quite crowded on a weekend day. But it's worth putting up with the crowd to enjoy sunning yourself on the rocks and taking a cooling dip. But before long we're off to our next stop, which has yet more wonders to experience.



One of those wonders is history. Soon we tie up to check out some old mining equipment used during the 1849 California Gold Rush that was left behind. There is a “steam donkey” that was used to provide serious leverage in mining gold from the river. Essentially, a boiler created steam to turn a spool with cable on it to haul heavy

equipment and transport mining ore (photo below by Ty Childress). This is also our lunch spot.



We open a cooler and fill one of our five-gallon bailing buckets (this was back when we had to bail out any water that fell into the boat in the rapids) with the makings of lunch. Craig carries it up to our lunch spot and the guides gather around to put together lunch.

“What’s on the menu?” I ask. I could have looked it up back at headquarters, but hadn’t bothered. Lunch is provided by our excellent OARS food planning, buying, and packing crew. We love them given the awesome job they do.

“Gazpacho and sandwiches,” Scotty replies.

Most of the guides love gazpacho on a hot summer day like this, since the cold soup is refreshing. We all dig in, doing a task that needs doing, either laying out the cold cuts, cheeses, condiments, etc. or working on putting the gazpacho together. We all have knives on our hips. Meanwhile, one of our team is leading a short saunter to the mining equipment and talking to our passengers about the Gold Rush and its impact on the foothills of the Sierra, as well as the specific uses of the steam donkey.

Guests on our trip (and those of other commercial companies on the river) get much more than just the fun of running rapids. They receive a variety of experiences that they may never have had before and learn about both the natural world around them and the human history of the area, from Native Americans to the present day.

The passengers return as we finish up our preparations and Scotty yells "Lunch!"

Our passengers crowd around the spread and once they've eaten, move off to a rock to sit on or perhaps the boats or beach. Only after our guests have all gathered their lunch do the guides begin to eat. *Guides always eat last.* One trip I remember we had a trip of all super-buff gay guys who all worked out at the same gym, and after they had their way with the dinner spread, we came out from the kitchen setup to see that absolutely nothing was left. We dined on beer that night, but it was the only time when we ran out of food on a trip I was on.

On a two-day trip like this one we're in no hurry, as it isn't difficult to make the miles we need to get to camp, so lunch is a leisurely affair and we let people lounge and digest their lunch while we put the perishables back in the cooler and then join our guests in taking a break.

After a while Scotty lets us know it's time to get moving, so we leisurely gather our boat passengers, put on our lifejackets, and climb into the boats to get back on the river. The sun is at its zenith and is beating down on us with sufficient heat that the idea of getting splashed by cold water sounds appealing.

This is a good thing, since not far down the river is a rock cliff that we've named the "Jumping Rock," since you can jump off the roughly 15-foot rock cliff into the river. I remember a trip with Arnold Schwarzenegger and his wife Maria Shriver, where Arnold was up on the cliff for a while contemplating the jump. We waited...and waited...until finally he did it. My other memory from that trip was that to eat his sandwich he had to stick his elbows out so his arms could get the sandwich to his

mouth without his muscles getting in the way. I guided other famous people down the river for OARS and I treated them just like I did anyone else. I instinctively knew they didn't want me to get all fanboy on them.

Razorback Rapid is up next. This is named for a large limestone rock that sits mostly in the middle of the river, but much of the water runs to the left of it. Since it's limestone, the river water has eroded it into a spiny, sharp rock, thus "Razorback." When I started training to be a guide, I unfortunately joined a boat of trainees midway in their training, so when they were guiding (badly), all I saw was what *not* to do. Later during my training, our boat came up sideways against Razorback rock and our instructor instinctively put his hand out to push off the rock. Bad call. He cut his hand on the sharp rock. He wrapped his hand in a handkerchief, and in his anger at our poor performance told us all to put our paddles down as he took us down *alone* the rest of the trip. This was a godsend, as I learned *a lot more* from seeing how he did that than all the preceding carnage.

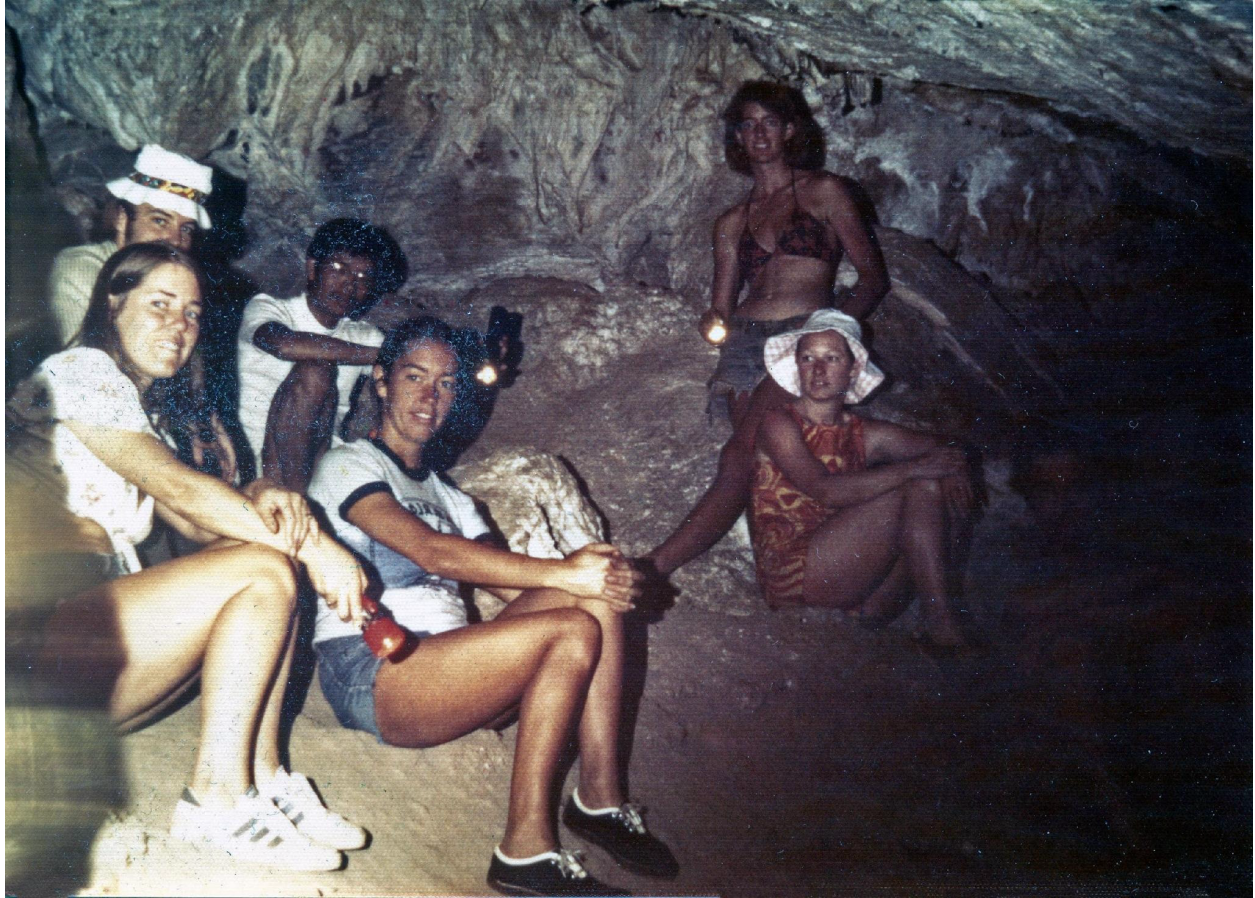


Right below Razorback is a spring that drips down through maidenhair ferns, so in low water we always try to get our boats over there under the dripping water (photo by Ty Childress).

Below there is the rope swing. We don't always stop at it, but on a two-day trip we're more leisurely, so we pull over in case anyone wants to swing out over the river and drop in. On this trip a few people take the challenge, then we move on.

From there, we soon stop at a large rocky flat area on river right. We're here to see a tree, but not just any

tree. This fig tree likely started life sometime around the Gold Rush and is now as big as a house. Its limbs spread out far and low to the ground and provide a large, shaded area under its expansive canopy. We pay homage to it and climb back into the boats.



We don't go far before we stop again to check out Coral Cave (photo by Sue Bassett). The hike is essentially straight up a hill to an unassuming entrance. We enter and creep back into the darkness. Of course, we have flashlights, which illuminate small swathes of the cave. Our intent is to get everyone far enough back so they can experience total darkness, which we soon achieve.

"We'd like for you to experience utter darkness," Scotty says, "so we're going to turn off our flashlights for a short while." And we do.

"Wow," someone says, "I don't think I've ever been in pure darkness before!" We doubt she's the only one.

After a suitable interval we turn our flashlights back on and lead everyone out and back to the boats for the next wonder.

After another couple bends of the river, we approach the gigantic limestone cliff that rises above the river 800 feet. This is one of the most dramatic views on the river and awes the passengers as we float by underneath it. There is nothing quite like it on any other river commercial companies float in California.

Soon we're at our assigned camp on river left. We pull into the eddy, tie up our boats and climb to a wide flat area that provides a spot for our kitchen setup while our guests find their own camping spots both up and down the river. All river companies who raft the Stanislaus have their own assigned camp. Ours doesn't have a beach, but it's still a nice spot.

While our guests disperse and decide where to erect their tents or lay out their sleeping bags, we guides get the kitchen set up for dinner. Only after all the guests have their spots picked out do we take our personal gear to find our own camp spots.

Much later after I'm retired and have the time to join some private Grand Canyon trips, I find I still have this habit. Since I'm alone (my wife no longer wants to camp for multiple days), I let everyone else pick out their sleeping spot and often end up picking a spot close to the kitchen and river, where I'll hear when anyone else is up and can get up to get the coffee on. Some habits are hard to break.

The next morning, we get up, pack up our personal gear, deposit it near the gear boat, and make our way to the kitchen. We're up early to brew coffee and prepare breakfast for our passengers. Coffee is Job One, and one of us takes that on. Another guide fries up a batch of bacon while someone else scrambles some eggs. Breakfast is generally easier than dinner, but all the guides pitch in and soon we're ready to yell "Breakfast!"

While some passengers have already been drinking coffee, others are still in their tents. But the promise of a hot breakfast soon has them showing up. Before long we turn to cleaning up and packing the boats.

Once we're on the river, the first rapid we hit is Chicken Falls. It's called this because there is a "cheat line" on the right, and a ledge hole on the left. But the ledge hole has a sweet little ramp that if you hit it right, you're good, but if you don't you could be in trouble. So, therefore, the "chicken out" run is to run right of the ledge hole. Most guides take the ledge hole because consequences aren't typically all that bad, and after a fair amount of experience you can usually hit it. When you do, customers like it, so there's an incentive to do it.

At this point, we've arrived at the take-out location for our one-day trips—Parrott's Ferry. This is where a bridge replaced a ferry and it's the only place for 9 miles where a road comes down to the river. The ferry was established by Thomas H. Parrott in 1860 to connect the towns of Columbia and Vallecito. The bridge was built in 1903. But since we're on a 2-day trip, we float under the bridge and continue downriver.

Very soon after we float beneath another bridge, far, far above us. This one has been built because the mega dam will back up a reservoir much higher than the bridge we just passed under. It's a brutal reminder of what might yet be—the utter destruction of everything we've experienced on this trip so far. We know it's inevitable unless we can find a way to stop it.

Soon we arrive at the Native American petroglyphs, which are drawings that are pecked into rocks, and thus survive for thousands of years (the picture below by Don Briggs shows David Brower of Friends of the Earth in the background and Mark Dubois of Friends of the River in the foreground). Before long, these will be inundated by the reservoir.

We spend some time here talking about the people who came before us thousands of years before. What their lives may have been like, what this river canyon may have meant to them, and how many thousands of humans had experienced the grandeur of it all that we are only now experiencing. It's a legacy that we have been gifted, but

we're only skating along on its surface, barely perceiving what they did by living here day in and day out. How we treat it will be how we can be judged. In the end, we will not be judged well.



After a while of slow floating, with not any rapids of note, we arrive at our take-out at Highway 49, what has been called the “Golden Chain Highway” since it follows along the Sierra Nevada foothills where the 49ers mined gold. Towns like Mariposa, Jamestown, Sonora, Columbia, Angels Camp, San Andreas, Sutter Hill, and others all the way up to Downieville encompass the gold towns from south to north. Oddly enough, California joined the United States due to the Mexican-American war just days before gold was discovered. The gold rush then ushered California into US statehood just a few years later, well before other western states.

We take our passengers to the waiting bus and say goodbye to our new-found friends who we'll likely never see again. We wish them well and wave as the bus pulls away to take them back to their vehicles. Then we turn back to the work of untying the gear, carrying it to shore, washing out and drying the boats, deflating and rolling the boats, and loading all the gear into our truck. We then climb up into the truck on top of the gear and head back to headquarters, ready to catch some sleep and do it all again soon. We pop cans of any leftover beer and slide down into the gear, exhausted, but

knowing that a shower awaits us back at headquarters. This time I'm careful to find a more cushioned spot. See? I can learn after all.

Perhaps it's obvious by now that one of the best things about this river trip is the variety of experiences offered. From the rapids, to drifting through quiet pools, swimming in a creek with water slides, enjoying a panoply of wildflowers, visiting a cave, seeing mining equipment left by 49ers, jumping off a cliff into the river, it's a wonderland of experiences that focuses in turn on the plants, animals, human history, caves, whitewater, and most importantly, human interaction. It is, in other words, a perfect adventure.

And this all disappeared just four years later in 1982, behind a dam that never needed to be built, as it was an even bigger dam that inundated an *already existing dam*. That's the scale of this disaster. The non-profit organization Restoring the Stanislaus, restoringthestanislaus.org, is trying to recover it, decades after this disaster. *Join us to restore The Stan and all that it meant to so many*. Perhaps one day in the future, you too could experience the magic that was the Stanislaus River canyon between Camp 9 and Highway 49.