

WV WHITEWATER RAFTING

BY DOUG GROSJEAN #53786

One of the many things West Virginia is known for is whitewater rafting and kayaking. In July, that means the New River Gorge due to its great scenery, its proximity to Charleston (and our rally!) and its reliable summertime flows.

Let's start with a little background on the New River itself. The New is actually a very old river, predating the last Ice Age. In modern times, the New River Gorge has been exploited for its coal deposits. Two railroads ran through the gorge during the heyday of coal; the railroad on the east side of the river is still in use. Abandoned coal mining towns and coke ovens are scattered up and down the gorge. As coal mining ended in the late 1960s, commercial whitewater boating had begun. The forest reclaimed the walls of the gorge, covering the former towns and coke ovens. Now only the most observant visitor will see much evidence of man in the gorge.

There are extensive displays of local history in the New River Gorge Visitor Center on US-19, just north of the bridge. There's also a great ride down into the gorge from the Visitor Center's parking lot; it's a narrow road with lots of extremely tight curves and vegetation forming green tunnels. Think cool, damp and green.

As for the boating – the New is a drop-pool river, meaning each rapid is followed by a large pool of flatwater for rest or recovery. The New is also a high-volume river, resulting in large rapids even at low levels. Generally, very little maneuvering is required in the rapids of the New – you enter the rapid at a particular point at top, paddle hard when the guide says to and hang on.

So what is a New River raft trip like? In July, the water will be “refreshing.” Swim trunks, water sandals and sunscreen are strongly recommended. Mornings will be cool and often the gorge is filled with fog early in the morning. This burns off pretty quickly as the sun comes out, but looks beautiful from the US-19 bridge over the New. Note that your return ride in the evening will probably be cool as well.

Since whitewater rafting is a large industry in West Virginia, the rafting companies are certified and regulated by the state. The raft companies typically give an orientation at their place, explaining rules and regulations and stressing that the raft guide is something just short of a Supreme Being on the river, as it should be. Vehicles are left at the raft company while people and gear are bussed to and from the river via narrow winding roads that will have you wishing you were on your BMW. You start at the “put-in,” paddle down the river and end your trip at the “take-out.” There's usually more instruction once the group is under way on the river.

On river, each rapid is named, usually for an odd-shaped rock, nearby landmark, former townsite or a kayaker that had a rough time there...It's a way of keeping track of where you are, a method for whitewater boaters to memorize river maps and routes through the rapids.

Often there's a photographer stationed at the most difficult or most spectacular rapid on the river to take photos of the boaters passing by. As a kayaker, seeing a photographer is often a clue that things are going to get interesting, very shortly. Glance at your watch so you know what time you passed the photographer, so you

can look up proofs easily after the trip. Proofs are available for viewing normally by the time guests get off the river.

The upper section contains mild whitewater, the lower section contains wild whitewater. If you've rafted before, and are looking for a thrill; go for the lower section. For a more mellow experience with all the scenery and less adrenaline, go for the upper section. Like ice cream, there are many flavors but it's all good. You will get wet, your heart will beat a lot faster, the adrenaline will flow and you'll probably be grinning ear to ear when it's over. And the view of the US-19 bridge over the New, from underneath, is incredible!

BMW Owners News

June 2003

www.bmwmoa.org