



RIVER THERAPY

Floating Idaho's Wild Selway

by Herbert David and Dan Burgess

"One morning, we left behind schedule,
but, as you learn quickly, time has
little meaning on the river."

One of the most prestigious and least floated rivers in the country is the Selway in Idaho's Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness. There are only 67 days of human presence permitted each summer on this wild, free-flowing river, and those are tightly regulated. Only one group of paddlers is released each day; rafters never see any other groups.

Disconnect to Reconnect

Last June I got the ultimate opportunity that took me back to the days when I was growing up in Michigan. I used to go up to the northern part of the state every summer on a canoe adventure down the Au Sable River with my dad and brothers. Back then we didn't have to turn off our cell phones, laptops or tablets, products not yet even a glimmer in our technology forefathers' eyes. On the Selway, I disconnected to re-connect.

The journey began with SOAR Northwest, one of the top guide outfitters on the Selway, led by owner Art Kotler and his three guides. As we boarded the shuttle in Missoula, Montana, to take us to the river, our leader announced, "If you don't have it, you don't need it." We all chuckled, everyone's sense of adventure aroused.



Looking around the shuttle, I wondered, *Who are these strangers I'm with for the next six days?*

By the end the first day, all of the personalities had settled in. Even our bathroom necessities became comfortable as we joked about the paddle being laid down on the path to the "groover" (portable toilet, so

named for the temporary grooves it can imprint in the user's backside) to indicate it was in use. In fact, some of the best views of the river and nature were from the groover.

Our different backgrounds, professions and personalities couldn't have combined for a better group. Eddie, a refined well-to-do

Midwesterner who was in his 80s, has been doing this same trip for 24 years and still has the deepest appreciation for the river. Lori, the consummate mother, was taking the trip to increase the already strong bonds she has with her two daughters, 20 and 23. Chuck, who was with the USFS, gave us great insight to the backcountry throughout the whole trip. Don, an environmental scientist and educator, was our virtual textbook on the river and environs. Lastly, the head guide Joe, alias Bubba Fats (his campfire story telling personality), was a proficient river guide, chef, fisherman, musical instrument maker, shoe cobbler, storyteller, groover expert and environmentalist.

Each day, we would rise around 8:30 to the aroma of hot coffee by the fire (incidentally, the ashes were packed out from each camp: low impact camping). Then we enjoyed fresh fruit and the main course, my favorite being Ari's Orange Zest Baguette French Toast (*recipe below*).



RECIPE

Ari's Orange Zest Baguette French Toast

Ari Kotler, SOAR proprietor, helps cooks add a little pizzazz to french toast with this favorite recipe from his rafting tours. Serves 6.

Ingredients

- 12 baguette slices, cut on the bias
- 6 eggs
- 1½ cups milk
- 2 pinches cinnamon
- zest of 1 orange, finely grated
- butter

Directions

Mix together eggs, milk, cinnamon and zest. Soak the bread thoroughly. Melt a few tablespoons of butter in a skillet or griddle and fry the bread on both sides until golden brown and cooked through. Serve with butter, fresh fruit, and real maple syrup.

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After breakfast we would break camp for another day of floating down the river as the sun beat down hot. But the cool air off the river kept the temperature just right.

We covered 10 to 12 miles a day, refreshing ourselves periodically by jumping off one of the four distinctly colored rafts and catching a buddy's arm to get a lift back in the boat. We went from shallow water to class 3 rapids after hitting the halfway point at Moose Creek. At the rapids you would often catch yourself grabbing onto your seat partner's arm to stay in the raft while the guides navigated through the fast, twisting white trail, trying to stay away from the boulders. One morning, we left behind schedule, but, as you learn quickly, time has little meaning on the river. Twice we chose to stay a second night at a campground to minimize set up and break down and to enjoy what the area had to offer.

Lunches were casual with cold cuts beside the river, and, after eating, we enjoyed activities such as napping or catch-and-release fishing; some of us even braved

bridge jumping. The birding was incredible along this wilderness river and displayed a variety of species.

In the evenings, the guides spoiled us with cocktail hour and appetizers. The SOAR Northwest operation is a virtual floating bistro. Dinners ranged from fresh Copper River salmon to pork tenderloin with fresh vegetables and salad. After dinner, we would sit around the campfire and catch up on the day's experiences. We talked about things like hikes, the sighting of a rattlesnake, and the nomad who joined us for a morning cup of coffee. He described his challenges thus far on his 60-plus day journey as he followed the Centennial Trail just for a challenge.



As evenings wore on, those of us who stayed up stared into the fire and howled into the night with Ari as he strummed on his guitar and "sang talked" (like Bruce Springsteen) to river songs.

Some may view this as a bucket-list trip, but I choose not to. It was just good old-fashioned appreciation for simpler times, and I can't wait to go back. — HD



A Natural Balance

Conservationist Oz Hawksley wrote in 1959, after completing the first run of the upper Selway: "No fire or saw has ever scarred these hills. No silt or organic debris tints the crystal water." Because of the unmatched beauty of the rugged mountains and superlative wildlife habitat, Congress designated the Selway River as an outstanding national resource under the Wild and Scenic River Act of 1968.

Historically, all natural fires were suppressed across the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, because fire was perceived as a destructive force without recognized benefits to the forest or human communities. For decades, forest service crews systematically removed the taller snags (four-letter word for standing dead trees) to reduce the chance of lightning strikes and forest fires.

Since Oz's time, ecologists have studied the role of fire in healthy ecosystems and have concluded that fire is absolutely essential for the survival of many plants and animals. They learned that smaller,

more frequent fires effectively reduce the fuel load in a forest. As a patchwork of unevenly aged stands develops across a landscape, an older burned patch can slow or stop the progress of a new natural fire. With the success of a pilot program, lightning-caused fires were allowed to create a mosaic across the entire Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness.

Because we allow self-sustaining fire ecology, this pristine wilderness supports one of the largest elk herds in the U.S., and the remoteness allows several grey wolf packs to thrive here. On the Selway River, it's not uncommon to spot osprey carrying fish to nestlings, diving common mergansers, elk and mink tracks, or a small, clown-bright torrent duck known as the Harlequin that nests in tree cavities on remote turbulent streams. After hatching, young Harlequins float their way downstream with the hen, all the way to the ocean where they overwinter. The Harlequin is truly a rugged, wilderness-rafting duck.

Fortunately, man remains a visitor in the vast landscape of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, which sustains its diverse flora and fauna with minimal human intervention. — DB 🐾

Other Exhilarating Rafting Trips

>> **Hell's Canyon:** Famous for its deep canyon scenery and easy to moderate run, the Hell's Canyon rafting course flows along 81 miles of the Snake River. Several rafting outfitters are licensed to guide the trip; select your guide at visitlvalley.com/things-to-do-parent/rafting.

>> **Rogue River Rafting:** A slower way to run the Rogue is on rafts with Rogue Wilderness Adventures, which guides single- and multi-day trips down the famous river. Go to wildrogue.com to learn more.

>> **Hellgate Jetboat Excursions:** Jetboats are certainly a different experience from river rafts, but just as fun without the need to camp out along the way. Hellgate Jetboat Excursions operate a scenic and safe journey down Southern Oregon's Rogue River. Find information and make reservations at hellgate.com.





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