

Misconceptions What kayaking is—and isn't *Doug Ammons*

I am a kayaker, not a rafter. It is impossible to tell you

the number of times people have called my kayak a raft. While I respect any kind of watercraft, and I own four inflatables, mistaking the former for the latter is like mistaking a vintage Sauvignon as a Boone's Farm special. In sum, it is an insult. So watch it!

A similar problem is shown by the comment that kayakers are "looking for trouble." That might be perfectly reasonable from a landlocked person's perspective. When hearing about somebody getting pinned against a log or breaking a leg going over a waterfall, a person who leads a quiet life might ask: "Why do you kayak? What is the attraction of going out of your way to get killed?"

I've probably been asked those questions a thousand times, and I wrote a book that delves into the fun, excitement, thoughtfulness, and beauty of rivers. Every one of the stories is an answer to the questions. The fact is, no one goes out to look for trouble or to get killed, and a single accident with one frightening miscalculation says very little about the other 99.99 percent of what we experience on rivers.

So you ask, what are those experiences? Well, kayaking has everything I've ever found enjoyable in music, sports, problem-solving, exploring, nature loving, athletic challenge, and pure fun—all in a single activity. It's the best damn sport in the world.

Flowing water has all the qualities of music—infinite playfulness, subtlety of emotion, laughter, power, romping fun, mystery, and depth. A kayaker uses his kayak, paddle, technique, and his understanding of the current to weave himself into a river. It is a graceful art and a hugely challenging sport. It's possible to find the entire range of human emotions in a trip down a river.

Water in any form, but especially moving water with all its force and intricacy, asks sharp questions and presents simple facts. A kayaker can readily find the river he is on to be both the master of Zen paradox and the clear eye of God. At its simplest and easiest, a river provides fun recreation and beautiful scenery—delightful experiences in a natural amusement park. At its most difficult, it demands you attain the highest levels of skill, ask life-and-death questions, and perform with complete commitment. If someone wants to address the physical manifestation of honesty, then they should kayak a difficult river. In 10 minutes on a river I can learn more about what makes a person tick than in years of discussions. The pressure quickly brings out people's deepest feelings—whether they are confident, adaptable, brittle, or fearful. I enjoy cutting to the quick. I don't like bulls---. Kayaking suits me as a recreation and sympathetic life pursuit.

If you then add the exploration of new places, such as a first descent of a hard and remote river in a foreign country, then you open the doors even wider to physical hardship, cultural understanding, psychological and social stresses of all kinds—all with the simple and clear goal of getting down a river. In the end, this can become life itself within a beautiful and simplified purpose. Imagine physically moving through Beethoven's 9th symphony, or Bach's Passion, Handel's Messiah, or the best Rolling Stones' or Red Hot Chilli Peppers' concert—improvising with the force of the sound and emotion, immersing yourself in the power, aware of the tiniest nuances of structure and depth. That's the experience I get every time I do a trip down a challenging river. It is why 25 years ago I stopped playing concert-level classical guitar and became a kayaker. When the kayaking bug really hit, as wonderful as Bach's music was, it wasn't a match for the crystal-clear water cascading out of the mountains.

Rivers are unbelievably rich pathways. They traverse altitude, time, culture, ecology, and geology. A trip in Nepal on the Thule Bheri took us from 14,000 feet near the Tibetan border, 150 miles to the Nepalese lowlands. We descended more than 10,000 feet of whitewater, and progressed rapid-by-rapid from the high-alpine valleys surrounded by 22,000-foot mountains and through every climatic zone down into the jungle. In 20 days, we paddled through a thousand years of civilization—from a medieval society of subsistence farming and herding, with no electricity, no phones, and no roads, to a roadhead with all of those human inventions, plus all the refuse brought by the clash between medieval society and the 20th century. We went from a festival of shamanistic B'on Buddhism through a long cultural mixing zone, down into the heart of Hindu culture. If treated with the proper respect, these are journeys with mind-shaking dimensions.

For most people, normal life is routine and predictable. Expeditions to hard rivers, particularly those in Third World countries, are full of open-ended questions and problem solving, often in places where you don't even know the ground rules. Usually people live in the most comfortable cocoon they can construct. But that's not something I'm interested in. Stress is a great mirror. In my experience, people have all kinds of self-serving myths about themselves, but given enough stress it's possible to find the reality behind the myth. Personally, I find that process exciting, exhilarating—even if annoying, frustrating, and sometimes really embarrassing.

Hard expeditions stretch people to their limits, physically and in their tolerance to cultural clash. Even the most energetic 25-year-old can only miss so much sleep, get sick so many times, struggle through so many portages, eat so much freeze-dried food, run so many rapids, before he reaches his limits. The unfamiliar bizarreness of other cultures wears you down bit by bit. Maybe the breaking point comes when you're trying to go to the bathroom with 20 villagers watching you. Maybe it happens when you're just trying to find a little privacy after a long and difficult day, but instead you have to change while surrounded by a few dozen curious people staring silently at you struggling out of wet gear, approaching hypothermia. Maybe you'll finish up by taking an exquisitely obnoxious 30-hour bus ride back to Kathmandu. You're greeted by a nonstop assault on every sense—30 hours of fingernails on chalkboards, shrill Hindu pop music wailing at 120 decibels, chickens crapping on your feet, screaming, exhaust, dust, rattling, checkpoints, and a raving psychotic drunk in the seat behind you. Maybe you end up knocking out the raving psychotic drunk.

In some form, there are wild stresses on every trip in the Third World and even on some domestic trips with close friends. As obnoxious as they are at the time, after some rest and reflection you'll find they are touchstones of who we are. Over the years, weathering and then understanding each weird incident has made me more effective in dealing with people and situations of all sorts. Plus I know how to clock a raving psychotic.

Rivers are entertaining and educational in every sense. I usually spend a lot of time finding out about culture, religion, music, and everything else about where I'm going. I've had the fortune of meeting great people and making extremely good friends. These include my kayaking partners, who are among the very best people I've had the pleasure to know in this world. But others include one of the world's foremost experts on Mayan hieroglyphs, B'on Buddhist monks, Hindu noblemen, Dutch ethnomusicologists, truck drivers, guitar makers, shamans, photographers, adventurers, and just plain good people of all sorts.

Maybe more than everything else, I'm a kayaker because flowing water is soothing and comforting, and always resolves itself with the finality that only simple reality can. When you feel overwhelmed by the world, go to the nearest river. Find a quiet place and listen to the water. I have listened many times, and rivers have made my life much richer for that.

It is possible to get these experiences in other ways, but for me, kayaking and flowing water has it all. So please don't call me a rafter, and don't say I must be out there looking for trouble. Just let me tell you about the grandeur of rivers and why kayaking is the greatest sport in the world.

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