

Wild by Nature-San Juan River Retreat

By Monique Beeley

I'm standing on the shore of the lower San Juan, witnessing the ladies of the river one by one challenging mind, body and soul as they made their way through the angry swells of the churning river. I'm watching boats being forced to the far side of the angry water, the ladies having to use every ounce of strength to paddle through the rushing madness that can only be found on a wild river. Taking pause to bring myself back to reality and the incredible scene I am witnessing, I cannot help but shout, "Damn! I hope I'm doing that when I'm seventy!"

Our retreat on the river was a unique mix of shared wisdom, education and adventure. Our crew consisted of ten ladies ranging in ages between thirty-two and seventy and we met for the first time on the eve of our departure. Sitting in a circle, we all listened intently as everyone introduced herself, placing names with faces. This was my first "Women's Retreat" and, at the time, I had no idea what the week ahead would bring. I was looking for a little adventure, companionship and to just be out in nature. Three things that I believe are the best for me to retreat a few steps from my busy day-to-day life and just be.

We arrived at the lower San Juan boat launch early Monday morning. The air was filled with anxious anticipation as we loaded our provisions on the boats. Once we were ready to launch Karla, Director of Canyonlands Field Institute (CFI), asked for quiet so she might share a quote for the day. We all listened and watched intently as she read from the pages of "Waterlines" by southwestern local writer/river guide Ann Wielder Walka. The passage Karla quoted would become a daily mantra for our souls.

The San Juan is a fast-flowing river but the day was a fairly mellow float. We eddied out for lunch on a sandy beach that was followed by a greatly needed hike to an historic gold miner's cabin. The day ended with a wonderful dinner accompanied by a little wine and friendly conversation. Aided by the sounds of the river lapping softly at its banks a restful night's sleep followed.

After the first night on the river, waking the next morning is always a treat. The smell of coffee and the early morning chatter filled the air and soothed my soul. I felt very pleased that I was away from it all. Karla led the morning ritual of the trip. This consisted of a stretching circle, a hearty breakfast, packing up camp and, of course, our daily quote, which seemed to set the tone for each day's adventure.

The group was beginning to feel a little more comfortable with each other and the conversations were becoming more and more personal as the hours flew by. Complete strangers just a few days ago, we were now becoming friends. As we floated through the Goosenecks of the San Juan, the river was a rich chocolate brown from the previous night's rain shower and brought back childhood memories of Willy Wonka's chocolate river. No sightings of Umpa Lumpas here, just many big horn sheep, Great Blue Herons and the ever-present mighty river beavers. The many creatures kept our eyes actively searching the river corridor.

With each passing hour and day, I felt more and more removed from the fast pace of my life and more in touch with the natural world and my inner thoughts. How wonderful it is to just relax and float in this beautiful place watching all the wonders of nature as they slowly pass by.

Day four we experienced Government Rapids, the largest and most intense on the trip. Here our venture took a turn to the wild side. Our fleet consisted of two oar boats and four inflatable kayaks, better known as duckies. We stopped at the top of the rapids to scout, check it out and have a little safety talk. Standing on the rocky shore, Karla pointed out over the rushing water and gave us direction as to the best line to run, what to avoid and what to do if you were to get flipped. Since I was the photographer, it was my job to stand on the shore and record the adventure.

Standing on a large rock, I watched in nervous anticipation as my companions settled into their duckies and prepared for the run. At the top of the rapid, they seemed to be moving in slow motion. Kathy was first to go. She made it through the initial difficult section and then got stuck on a rock. The rapid was rushing from behind forcing water into her tiny boat. The huge hydraulics pushed her off the side of the rock and I was certain she was going in, but somehow she paddled hard and made it through. "Hurrah!" I cheered, thinking that's pretty impressive for one of the more senior ladies. Next up was Diane followed by Betty, both of whom had been on many CFI ladies' trips over the past several years. Both went for an unplanned swim during their attempts at mastering the Class III rapids. Betty gave me more than just a little bit of a scare when she dumped out of her ducky. I could see that she was bumping into protruding rocks as the rushing water carried her down-river. A couple seconds later she surfaced and gave us a tap on her head, the universal river sign that she was all right. Melissa, my fellow traveler, was next. She almost made it to

the bottom of the rapid before dumping into the rushing wild water. Way to go ladies! Young ladies all, regardless of age!

Later that evening, the buzz of excitement and the stories of the day's adventure filled the campfire circle well into the late hours of the night. As we floated the last few miles of the San Juan to Clay Hills, my thoughts reflected back on the week. This ladies retreat was filled with so many experiences. I would carry them with me for some time to come. Adventure. Laughter. Wisdom. Camaraderie.

For more information on adventures on the San Juan River:

www.canyonlandsfieldinst.org

www.riverandruins.com