Desert Kayaking

I was in Las Vegas, Nevada, last week attending a Navy reunion with the crew of *USS Scamp* (SSN 588), the first submarine I served on during my Navy career. In addition to sitting around with old shipmates drinking, sharing sea stories, and generally catching up on 35 years of living, I chartered a kayak trip down the Colorado River. And what a trip that was!

My planning started about one month before the actual trip. I had already made all arrangements to attend the reunion and was thinking about things I could do while in Las Vegas besides hang out with my old shipmates drinking and sharing sea stories. Not that I have anything against hanging out, drinking, and sharing sea stories, just that I might want to do something different…

I researched kayak rentals and quickly discovered that any launch on the Colorado River starting below Hoover dam required a special pass that was tightly controlled by the US Park Service and needed to be arranged through an authorized park outfitter. A bit of searching brought me to the Desert Adventures LLC website. Their tours looked interesting and prices reasonable so I booked a reservation for their one day Black Canyon kayak trip.

Arrangements were quick and easy. On the phone, the Desert Adventures operator confirmed that security passes were still available for the one day I had free for kayaking. Due to Park Service regulations there are a limited number of passes available for any given day, so planning a month ahead was a good thing.

A few days before the event Desert Adventures contacted me to confirm reservations, explained what to expect during the trip, and advised me on what to bring. They provided the Kayak, an experienced guide, water, lunch, and snacks. I was
advised to wear clothes that could get wet, either water shoes or sandals with a strap that I could hike in, a hat, lots of sun screen, and to bring a photo ID. They also confirmed the morning start time I needed to be at their Boulder City shop, about 30 minutes outside of Las Vegas (They do offer hotel pickups along the Las Vegas strip, but my hotel was outside their pickup area).

On the morning of my adventure I showed up at their shop, met up with the rest of my group, and we headed out on schedule about 7:20AM down highway 93. There were a total of eight people in our group plus our guide Moshe and the driver and co-driver, riding in a large van towing a trailer with the kayaks and gear. We drove a few miles to Hoover Dam Lodge and pulled into the parking lot. There we were met by a Park Service agent who checked our IDs against his list of reservations and chatted briefly with our drivers and guide.

Moshe got us all in a group and told us what to expect once we arrived at the river launch site. We were limited to 15 minutes during which we needed to unload all the gear and get our boats into the water. Access time was controlled by the park and based upon very tight road restrictions and scheduled release of water from the dam. Moshe requested we all pitch in and get our gear off the trailer and into the water as quickly as possible, and that we would have a chance to properly organize our gear further downriver. He also took a poll of who in our group had previous kayak experience; I was one of
three people who raised their hands. Then we all piled back into the van and headed off down the highway to a turn-off where we received another security check by another Park Service ranger before we were allowed to continue. Then we continued down to the launch point on a steep, seemingly one lane road with multiple sharp switchbacks.

On the way down, Moshe explained that the road we were on was originally built to support dam construction. Today, the narrow road was officially designated a highway, on the register of national historical sites, and had the second steepest pitch of any highway in America with Pike’s Peak Highway being the steepest. I was impressed with the driver; the steep road was barely wider than the van and the sharp switchbacks must have made pulling the large equipment trailer a real challenge. We finally arrived at the base of the road, about one hundred feet from the water. The Park Service ranger who inspected us at the Hoover Dam Lodge met us at the launch point and kindly, but firmly, said “you have 15 minutes.”

The Launch Site

Moshe and the drivers untied the kayaks from the trailer and we scrambled to pull them off, two people per boat, and carry them down to the water’s edge. I discovered that some boats were pre-packed with water and other supplies, making them rather heavy. On the trail down to the water we navigated a switchback so sharp we had to lift the kayaks over our heads and swing them around to clear the railing and high side of the cliff. I helped carry several kayaks down and then set them up with paddles and Personal Flotation Devices (PFD).
Once all the gear was off the trailer and the boats were setup I decided to get out-of-the-way and make room on the launch site for other people. I selected a green 14 foot Johnson-brand “Journey” kayak, stuffed my personal gear in the rear cargo hold, donned my PFD, grabbed the paddle and pushed out into the river. As I drifted out I heard the Park Ranger announce to the group “you’re now on overtime” just as I was caught in an incredibly strong current. I had to paddle as hard as I could just to stay by the launch site.

After several more minutes our entire group was in the water, more or less together, and paddling downriver with some semblance of order. Moshe announced that we could now relax and enjoy the rest of the trip. He also commented on the strong current and how abnormally high the water level was. Moshe explained that the river flow was controlled entirely by the dam’s power plant operators; as they needed more power they increased flow, less power less flow. He also gave what was to be the first of several basic kayak lessons during the day; how to paddle.
After a few minutes of paddling and drifting downriver Moshe had us pull onto a small sand beach on the right (Nevada) side of the river. We all piled out, properly organized our gear in the boats, then Moshe explained we’d be taking a short hike up Gold Strike Canyon. First, we had to wade through waist-deep 54 degree river water to get to a rock ledge, and after a short walk up the trail came to a natural hot springs. Sand bags had been used to form a small pool, and we had a few minutes to soak in natural 104 degree mineral water.

After a nice soak, we hiked back down the canyon trail and once again braved 54 degree river water to get to our boats. Before we pulled out Moshe passed around hand bailing pumps for each kayak. Later on that day, some folks in our group discovered those hand pumps made excellent water guns. We also had another kayak lesson from Moshe, this time on guide signals.

Back out on the river, we were joined by two local ducks who apparently found our group interesting. They hung out with us the rest of the day as we traveled downriver.
Colorado River

We spent the next couple of hours paddling and drifting downriver. This was my first time kayaking with a group, and given the lack of experience of most of the people we played “bumper boats” on occasion. Nothing bad; the weather was beautiful and the scenery along the river was spectacular.

Our next pull-out was on the left (Arizona) side of the river at Arizona Hot Springs Canyon. We pulled onto a large natural beach populated by other kayak groups and power boaters who had come up from the south. This was another natural hot springs site but here the water was 108 degrees, and the spring had been formed into three pools of progressively cooler water, again with the use of sand bags. This hike was a bit longer than Gold Strike Canyon and included climbing a somewhat dubious-looking ladder, but we all made it. No one stayed in the hottest 108 degree pool very long, but we did take a few minutes to enjoy the cooler 104 degree pool.
We made our way back down to the kayaks and headed downstream for about another hour. Among other sights during this stretch Moshe pointed out some Big Horn Sheep up on the canyon ridge line, silhouetted against the clear blue sky. About 1:00 we pulled out for lunch onto a small sand beach tucked in a cove. We had made lunch menu selections when we booked our trip, and Moshe did have the selections we reserved. Our lunches were large hearty sandwiches with a pack of carrot sticks, a large cookie, and an apple. A really nice picnic lunch and by now everyone was pretty hungry.

After we ate we piled back into our boats. On our way out of the cove Moshe gave another kayaking lesson, this time on how to use the foot pedal-operated rudder each kayak was equipped with. I’d never used a kayak equipped with a rudder, and I really enjoyed this lesson and the chance to pick up a new kayaking skill.

We paddled and drifted about another hour, then came to the “Emerald Cave.” This was a natural cave tucked into the canyon wall at river level, large enough to accommodate three kayaks at a time. Once inside, I saw that the water glowed bright emerald-green from the sunlight filtering in. A truly beautiful sight.
Gauging Station

Another hour downriver and we pulled off for the final hiking excursion of the trip; this time to view the remains of the “Gauging House,” a registered national historical site along the river.

Moshe explained that before the dam was built, the government engineers spent several years in research to determine the best location. The way they did this was to build “Gauging Stations” in key canyon passes and had operators measure water flow on a daily basis for several years. At this particular location, the Gauger’s lived in an isolated shelter for one month at a time and had to commute about one mile each day along a series of cliff-hugging catwalks and hand-powered cable cars over the river to get to the gauging station.

The house itself had burned down in 1975 and only the foundation remained. But the view from the site was spectacular, and I got a really good appreciation of the dedication those Gauger’s had for their work.
Once back in our boats it was only about thirty more minutes to the pick-up point at Willow Beach Marina, on the Arizona side of the river. Once again I experienced the strength of the river’s current. As I approached the marina I saw I was on the left side of a mid-channel buoy several hundred yards downstream from me. I decided to pass the buoy on the right as the most direct path to the marina landing. But I misjudged the current and I was on top of the buoy before I realized what was happening. I estimate at that point in the river the current was running close to nine knots (10.4 MPH). If so, it was the fastest I’ve ever traveled in a kayak.

The Desert Adventure van with trailer was waiting for us at the marina as scheduled. Once our group was all up on the beach we quickly loaded up our gear and pulled out, heading back to the Boulder city shop. We left the marina right at 4:00PM, as promised in the trip schedule. Frozen juices were served in the van, and after a twenty-minute drive we were back at the Desert Adventure shop where our group dispersed back to hotels and homes.
The professionalism of our Desert Adventures guide Moshe really added to the enjoyment of this outing. Some examples:

- At the beginning of the trip he explained he carried a satellite phone for possible emergencies. I didn’t understand the significance until I discovered that for the entire duration of our river trip we had no cellphone coverage (yeah, I’m a native New Yorker).
- He carried a complete first aid kit and during the trip expertly patched up one woman in our group who developed a serious blister from her new hiking shoes.
- Instead of packing bottled water, at the beginning of the trip he passed out reusable water bottles for us to keep and during the day kept our bottles refilled from a large, chilled, water bladder. He also checked on us throughout the day to ensure we were drinking enough water. Even for the relatively mild weather that day, it was still hot and dry enough to easily become dehydrated.
- During the day Moshe provided us a lot of information on the river ecology and changes that had occurred as a result of building the dam.
- Moshe was also conscientious about collecting litter we discovered along the canyon trails we hiked and packed it out; a seemingly minor trait, but a big deal for me.

All-in-all, this was a wonderful outing, and I would happily charter another one with Desert Adventures whenever I’m back in Las Vegas.