

# Rolling on the Salt River

## World Class Rafting in Arizona

By Anne Groebner

There is world-class whitewater rafting right in our backyard. The Salt River, located at the “Gateway to the White Mountains” at the bottom of the Salt River Canyon, is one of Arizona’s best-kept secrets. Unlike *Salt River Tubing*, which is located in Mesa, this is the real deal when it comes to class one- to class five-rated whitewater rapids. It is nestled between the White Mountain Apache Reservation and the San Carlos Apache Reservation and extends through the Salt River Canyon Wilderness, a 32,101-acre wilderness area located within the Tonto National Forest. To avid rafters, it is a destination that is high on their list of rapids to conquer and, according to Joe Greiner, owner of Wilderness Aware Rafting out of Colorado, it is the best rafting between California and Colorado.

Wilderness Aware Rafting (WA) is one of only four commercial rafting companies that own permits on the Salt River and provide raft guiding services to the public. Each year, starting in March, Greiner and his crew from Colorado load up a caravan and haul rafting gear and equipment to Arizona and set up camp along the Salt River. It begins their short season of rafting (ending around May 9th) in Arizona before their long summer season in Buena Vista, Colorado begins. “Many people don't even know this is here,” said Greiner. They ask him, ‘The waves come up over my head and the raft gets turned on edge? The big exciting stuff?’ “Yeah, that’s here,” he confirms. Greiner invited me to test the waters and I can tell you that this *is* the “real deal.”

The trip I booked was on the first weekend of their season, the first weekend in March. The weekend before, I was shooting sled-dog races at Sunrise Park Resort at over 9,000 feet elevation in Arizona. While sitting on a snow-covered meadow, I received an email from Wilderness Aware Rafting with a list of things to bring for my rafting trip down the Salt River (at 2,200 feet) — Only in Arizona can you sit on frozen snow one weekend and float on melted snow the next. I have to say, I did worry about the temperature of the water and whether the rafting trip would be hypothermic. As it turned out, however, it was a beautiful Spring day on the river and the guides at Wilderness Aware Rafting doled out wetsuits, neoprene booties and splash jackets — not once did I feel cold.

The starting point for my trip was at the bottom of the Salt River Canyon where the boundary of the White Mountain Apache Reservations meets the edge of the San Carlos Apache Reservation. Once I passed the old gas station on the left, I saw the rafting signs posted at the junction of Route 60 and the Apache 1 Road on the right. I turned west (right) toward the river and followed the road until I saw the sign for *Wilderness Aware Rafting* and pulled into their parking lot. Two trailers, one used for dressing rooms and one for an office, a couple of covered tables and port-a-johns made up their base area. The first person I met there was Glen, who had me sign liability forms (one for Wilderness Aware Rafting and one for the White Mountain Apache Tribe) and

then answered my questions about cameras and car keys. For my camera, he offered me a zip-lock baggie and the use of two of his dry bags. My car key was put in a jar with the other participants' keys and locked away until we returned from the rafting trip. "I've seen people take their keys with them on the water and end up losing them," Glen said. "It isn't fun." With his 40 years of guiding rafting trips under his belt and rated one of the top five river guides in the country by Paddler Magazine, I trusted Glen.

All the gear they handed me: the wetsuit, booties and splash jacket fit like a glove. It was like they had them custom-made just for me. Once I changed and stowed my belongings and locked my car, I handed over my key and joined the other raftees for our safety orientation. It covered things like how our PFD (personal flotation device) should fit; how to hold a paddle so the handle doesn't bounce up and hit you in the face, ...and yes, what to do if you fall out of the boat. "Never try to stand up in the water," Glen told us. "If you do, you run the risk of getting your feet wedged into the rocks and the current will push you face-first into the water." There is a swimmer's position where you lean back into the water and lift your feet up. We also learned that a person who falls out of the raft is called a "swimmer." It is pretty rare for a person to fall out of the raft but it does happen. According to Glen, he will have about 4-9 "swimmers" per season. "Most people who fall out of the raft consider it the best part of the trip," he said.

Once we finished the orientation, with paddles and helmets we headed down the road to the edge of the river where our rafts were waiting. It was a small, wave-less area of the river where we could practice our paddle strokes (forward paddles and back paddles) before we hit our first rapids, a class one called Kiss and Tell. According to Mike Rogers, WA's operations manager, class rapids are pretty universal. A *class one* rapids is moving water with current and could have whitecaps. In *class two* rapids, you start getting in the nice waves and there may be some rocks. Class three has bigger waves and this is where holes come into play — there are rocks and obstacles and it is here that the danger aspect of rapids enters in. If someone falls out and they start to swim, the chances of injury increase. "Class three is still pretty low but once you hit a class four, there are bigger waves, bigger holes and gradients so you're dropping feet," says Rogers. "Once the river narrows with a little gradient, that water is going to be contained more, which means it's going to flow faster. That's where classes four and five come in."

On my full-day trip, I experienced classes one, two and three. We cruised through Kiss and Tell, Bump and Grind, Grumman Rapid, Three Forks, Overboard, Exhibition, and Three Way, while our guide Glen talked to us about the geology and history of the Canyon and how many of the rapids got their names. It wasn't until we reached the infamous class three-plus, called "mescal" that misfortune struck. As we neared Mescal, Glen explained to us how he would steer the boat toward the edge of the hole, just close enough to create some excitement and cause some big waves. As usual, Glen would yell "forward" which meant we were all supposed to paddle forward as hard as we could. Then to turn the boat in the direction he wanted, he would yell "right back" which meant the right side would back paddle and the left side would paddle forward (and vice versa). We did our best to follow directions, although it took some concentration. As we hit Mescal rapids, the raft was lifted up on the left side by some huge rocks

and the fellow in front of me (on the right side) flipped out of the raft. It happened so fast, that although his foot lingered a few seconds on the side of the raft, as hard as I tried, I couldn't grab it to keep him from floating away. At that point, his name became "swimmer." He immediately leaned back into the floating position and Glen grabbed a paddle, handed it to him to pull himself in and he was back in the raft within minutes.

After every rapid, we would celebrate by raising and hitting our paddles together against the sky and let out a cheer which is a typical rafting tradition. And, believe me, some rapids I cheered louder than others. It was an amazing bucket-list-type trip that I will remember for a long time. From the multiple rapids we conquered to the short hike to the point, "Forked Tongue Falls," it was an incredible trip. Would I do it again? Heck, yeah! In fact, I will sign up for one of the multi-day wilderness trips that range from two-days to five-days. Rogers recommends at least a three-day trip. "If you book a two-day, you are traveling 25 miles each day and there isn't much time to enjoy the scenery," he says, "where with three, four and five-day trips, you have time to relax and enjoy the surroundings and even take in a hike or two along the way."

### **How to hire a rafting guide**

As part of my experience at Wilderness Aware, I was invited to camp out at "2nd Campground" with the rafting guides so I could witness their hiring process. After changing into dry clothes at the office area, I drove farther up Apache 1 Road to the camp, pitched my tent, rolled out my sleeping bag, ate dinner and then joined the crew down by the river. Several of the guides were sitting around a campfire talking about the day and listening to Rafting Guide Jon Vandyck play guitar and sing (joined later by another guide, Matt Brown, on harmonica). Jon has guided in Chile and the Grand Canyon, which is very impressive, but his musical talent was bar none. His songs reminded me of my college days when John Prine and Greg Brown dominated my collection. The entire scenario had a sort of gypsy feel which is pretty much the life of a rafting guide.

It was fun talking to the experienced guides who circled the campfire and listening to their stories about rafting life which included the story about their school buses. Part of the Wilderness Aware Rafting experience includes an exciting trip back from the river on an old school bus along the side of the canyon. (They say you raft through class one to class four rapids and then you take a class five ride back on the bus.) The route rotates from high above the river and then through the Cibecue Creek. It inches along the canyon at a high speed of about 20 mph, creaking and moaning as it takes blind curves around a very narrow road. I joked that I didn't hear a word that Glen said during the trip back because I was too busy helping Rafting Guide Justin drive. There were a few times that I thought he might not make the turn but he did. I kept telling myself that they drive this every day and that he knew what he was doing. At the campfire, Justin told me the story about the school buses. He said they start out at the schools but, after 11 years, they have to sell them and get new buses. So, they give the old ones to churches. When the churches get done with them, they turn them over to the prisons and then when the buses are on their last legs, they give them to river guides and these are the buses that they use to drive us back to the

office. Once the buses stop running, they turn them into homes for guides. I later found out from Joe that none of that is true except the part where they start out at the schools. “We buy them directly from the schools,” said Greiner.

At about 8:30 p.m., Greiner drove up in a van pulling a trailer and about 12 applicants piled out. After a brief orientation, they set up tents and put away their belongings and then joined us and Greiner at the campfire. These are the kids who are applying to be rafting guides for Wilderness Aware. They are the lucky ones who have passed their phone interviews and have been invited to join Joe, Mike and Lindsey (a first-year guide) on a five-day wilderness rafting trip. It is part of their applications. Greiner wants to see their work ethic, their personalities and people skills before he will hire them. “Spending five days with people, you get to know them and they forget they’re on an interview trip around day three and become themselves,” explained Greiner. “You see the guy/girl who’s lazy or forgetful or even rude...the negative stuff. But you also see the positive. The one who is always up first, the one who helps out when he/she doesn’t think anyone is watching. After the trip, we have a meeting among the three of us and we talk about what we’ve seen.” The applicants tend to be more careful around Greiner and Rogers so they take along a first-year guide. Someone who just went through the same experience the year before as applicants may feel more comfortable talking to someone more their peer and asking questions. This year, Greiner picked Lindsey, an Appalachian State University student from Charlotte, North Carolina. “My role on this trip is to be the least intimidating,” said Lindsey. “We will be alternating boats all week so if they heard something from Joe or Mike and feel silly asking them a question, they know I just did all of this so they feel more comfortable asking me. Hopefully, I will be a good middle point for everyone.”

The applicants come from all over the country. I met one from Wisconsin and some from North Carolina, Phoenix and Connecticut. Many of them don’t have experience but that’s the type of applicant they look for — someone who doesn’t know everything so they can train them the “Wilderness Aware” way. Still, some outdoor experience is helpful. Lindsey told me that on her interview trip, she was very self-conscious. “They watched everything I did,” she said. “But I remember being so in awe. I had never been out West. When we were pulling out of the airport, I saw my first saguaro cactus and thought OH, MY, GOSH! I didn’t talk very much but the trip was a blast and I still keep up with some of the people from that trip. It’s a great summer job for a college kid.

Greiner teaches these kids so many valuable lessons such as working smarter so you have more time to play. It’s important to him that they spend time with customers and make sure they have a great trip. “It’s different than car camping or backpacking. They have to take care of a lot of people AND take care of a lot of equipment,” he said. “It’s one thing -- taking care of yourself while backpacking -- it’s another when you have to watch for when someone is going to do something that is going to get them hurt, uncomfortably wet or sunburned and help them.” People expect customer service and that is what Wilderness Aware Rafting strives to deliver and I can vouch for the fact that they do.

Early the next morning, I walked into camp and watched all the interviewees hard at work leveling the ground and replacing the metal boxes for the campfire, putting together picnic tables and clearing brush around the campsite. Once they finished, they listened to Greiner instruct them on gear, what was in each container and the different pieces of equipment they would be taking on their five-day trip into the wilderness, including a container to haul out all of the human waste. Then they pulled out the rafts and were taught how to inflate them. Once the rafts were inflated, they placed metal and wood racks in the center of each raft and then carried them down to the river.

The first things loaded into the rafts were the hard goods which included rocket boxes and other metal boxes that carried food and cooking gear, coolers and some chairs. Then they draped a tarp over the racks and put the soft container on top, including the dry bags with personal belongings. The tarp was pulled over the bags forming what they call a “burrito.” Large webbed straps covered the tarps and were cinched down tight in a uniform system that insured that it didn’t pull to one side. Once everything was secured and a brief instruction on paddling was completed, they pushed the rafts into the water and practiced a few strokes in front of the camp. It didn’t take long before they turned the rafts downstream and paddled out of sight.

To book a rafting trip go to [www.inaraft.com](http://www.inaraft.com)

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