

TRAVEL

Summer cool-down: Canoeing the Gunnison River with the family

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A young passenger paddles during a canoe trip on the Gunnison River between Delta and Grand Junction.

GRAND JUNCTION — In western Colorado, where red earth pushes up into great, flat mesas and splits down into rugged canyon walls, signs of life take some looking for.

The deepest green in these vast open spaces is the dusty, faded hue of the tenacious juniper tree or the grayish leaves of pungent sagebrush. There is no movement, save the occasional soaring bird or scampering lizard.

Yet cutting through these desolate deserts are ribbons of bright green cottonwoods, growing along the area's great waterways and attracting life in its many forms. Grasses and flowers thrive here, as do the animals and birds they sustain and their predators in turn.

I know the river is where I wanted to be in mid-June when temperatures were pushing triple digits and cloud cover wasn't even on the distant horizon.

Few things in nature are a guarantee, but thankfully being able to cool off during a canoe trip is one of them.

For three days my husband, two daughters and I floated 31 miles of the Gunnison River between Delta and Grand Junction with [Centennial Canoe Outfitters](#). I would estimate we spent two of those three days wet.

We hung our feet in the water, splashed ourselves or got into water fights with some of the other 23 paddlers as we floated down the gentle river.

The splashing, soaking and spraying only stopped when the cameras came out to capture the beauty of the towering sandstone cliffs. The river has carved out smooth, interestingly shaped shelves, windows and caves in the soft stone. Swallow nests congregate on rocks that overhang the river, and the green of grasses contrasts with the red cliffs at their base.

After parking our canoes for lunch, we would wade into the river, settling in the shallows or finding deeper holes to sink into. Some spots in the river are as deep as 10 feet, but depths average 4 or 5 feet.

Where we set up camp the river was about 80 feet wide and running at about 2,000 cubic feet per second. A cubic foot of water is roughly enough to fill a basketball. (To get an idea of how quickly the river was flowing, visualize 2,000 basketballs flowing past a specific point on the river in a second.) During big runoff years, the flow in the Gunnison can reach 10 times that level, or 20,000 cfs.

Although it sounds pretty rowdy, my 9- and 11-year-old daughters were able to ride the rapids floating feet first in their life jackets and then swim out of the current to the still eddy where our canoes were parked.

We stayed in the same campsite for two days, allowing us to get off the river and explore the scenery we had been paddling by.

We headed up Dominguez Canyon from a trail at the edge of our campsite. After little more than a mile of hiking through the sandstone canyon we reached several panels of petroglyphs that are 750 to 1,200 years old. The trail follows a tributary that has carved slides and pools into the granite. There's even a 70-foot waterfall to peer over or swim below.

Playing in the clear-water pools with the family made it my favorite part of the trip. I could have stayed all afternoon, but the water bottles were running low and lunch back at the camp beckoned.

You know how good food tastes when you're camping? Well, it tastes even better when someone is preparing that food for you. The guides would slave over a hot cook stove, lay out a spread on the upside-down canoe that served as our buffet and holler to let us know our meal was ready.

There are typically three guides per trip, but we had 3 1/2 because one was a guide in training.

In addition to cooking, the guides do everything they can to make life convenient in an environment where the only running water is in the river. They set up a hand-washing station, keep drinking water available and deal with the portable potty that is required when camping in the desert.

That said, canoe camping can be challenging for younger kids. Centennial recommends children be at least 6 and/or have experience with other types of camping, because there is no turning around if the smaller set isn't having fun.

With this in mind, the outfitter provided games, such as a scavenger hunt and the opportunity to learn how to juggle. They even brought along a magician. Really.

While my daughters liked the extra activities, they were even more intrigued with what the natural world had to offer; like a blinking contest with a lizard and scrambling on the rocks just steps from our tent door.

The river remained the greatest attraction of all. Even after three days immersed in it, the girls lingered under the bridge where we pulled out the canoes. They made sandy mud cakes, waded and just generally enjoyed the water before returning to the dry, hot world away from its banks.

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