




# *A First-Timer's Guide to Rafting the SNAKE RIVER*

RIDE ALONG ON A MULTIDAY WHITEWATER  
TRIP IN HELLS CANYON

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RAFTING ON THE SNAKE RIVER IN HELLS CANYON.





I embarked on my first-ever multiday whitewater rafting trip on the Snake River, and my only regret was not doing it sooner. I booked a four-night guided trip in Hells Canyon with ROW Adventures, and our group consisted of 17 guests and six guides. Exploring the deepest river gorge in North America with two dozen strangers may sound overwhelming, but by the second day, it felt like an epic family adventure.

## PREPARING FOR THE RIVER

From detailed packing checklists to arranging vehicle shuttles between the launch and take-out sites, ROW made planning and travel logistics a breeze. During orientation at our hotel in Cambridge, guests were provided with a set of dry bags—airtight pouches designed to keep our belongings safe from water damage. Our lead guide gave us a rundown of the four-day itinerary and allowed us plenty of time to organize our clothes and gear before embarking on our journey the following day.

My daily outfit consisted of a long-sleeved sun hoodie and swim shorts layered over a bikini, and I opted for cotton garments to keep me comfy at camp. Durable water sandals were suitable for both rafting and our short daily hikes.

Before we set out on the river, we received a safety briefing at the put-in site, and each day we were given the choice to ride in an oar raft or a paddle raft. Guides take care of paddling the oar rafts, while everyone pitches in to steer the latter—a far more exciting adventure as you rip through the rapids. Multiday river trips are designed to be the perfect combination of action and relaxation, and our guides went above and beyond to ensure this trip was the highlight of everyone's summer.



## DAY 1:

### RIDING THE RAPIDS

Less than an hour after we put in at Hells Canyon Creek Boat Launch, we spotted a black bear peacefully munching on vegetation just 25 feet from the water. The morning light was still low and golden, and everyone got a peek at the bear before it sauntered deeper into the bushes. We hopped out of the rafts a few times to scout the rapids, which involved a short trek to higher ground so our guides could determine the safest route. Before scouting Wild Sheep Rapids, we drifted past another black bear cooling off in a shallow pool along the riverbank. We envied the bear, as midday temps hovered close to a scorching 100° F. However, as soon as we charged through our first Class IV rapid of the trip, everyone was soaked from head to toe—and grinning from ear to ear.

We made another stop to scout Granite Rapids, our second Class IV of the day, and we also made a quick detour to view a rock wall containing beautifully preserved pictographs—believed to be several thousand years old.

VISIT IDAHO

A BLACK BEAR WALKING ALONG THE RIVER'S EDGE.



Feel the rush of the Snake River and get a sneak peek of the adventures that await on a rafting trip in Hells Canyon.



## DAY 2:

### CULINARY WIZARDRY ON THE RIVER

The next day, we awoke to the aroma of bacon and coffee, and after breaking down camp and sending off the gear boat, the morning moved at a leisurely pace. As we enjoyed a sumptuous breakfast of huckleberry French toast with berry compote and whipped cream, we chatted with our guides about the day's activities. I marveled at the sweet song of nearby canyon wrens while sipping my second cup of coffee, wishing that every morning could begin like this.

One of our guides described the camp cooking as “culinary wizardry,” which perfectly sums up both the quality and variety of food we had each day while camping along the river. Food was stored in hard-sided coolers, and the elaborate camp kitchen setup included a gas stove, a charcoal grill and a Dutch oven. Coffee and light fare were available daily around 6:30 a.m., and a hot breakfast was generally served around 7:30 a.m. Snacks were available any time we took a break, along with ice-cold water. We stopped for lunch around noon, appetizers and drinks were available around 6 p.m. and dinner was served by 7 p.m. From lasagna to chocolate cake, everything was made from scratch, with gluten-free and vegan options also available. Simply put, if Michelin could rate backcountry dining experiences, ROW would have earned high marks for its skills and creativity.



### DAY 3:

## MORE THAN JUST WHITEWATER

After powering through Waterspout Rapids the previous day, the river mellowed significantly, which allowed us to take turns in inflatable kayaks. In addition to a brief stop for swimming, we explored historical sites and trails only accessible by boat. We went on a short hike nearly every day, and one of my favorite trails was a one-mile trek that featured incredible panoramic views of the river. We also visited the Kirkwood Historic Ranch, a former sheep ranch tucked in the heart of Hells Canyon, and another collection of Native American pictographs near Pittsburgh Landing.


For this leg of the journey, I opted to ride in an oar boat, partially because I wanted to take photos but also because I wanted to chat with our lead guide. He had encyclopedic knowledge about everything Snake River-related—from the dam-controlled water flow to native flora and fauna—and his passion for guiding (and the wilderness) was contagious. When you spend time with people who dedicate their lives to helping others experience the outdoors, it helps shape your perspective on the landscape—and local communities.

A person wearing a plaid shirt and a blue cap is cooking at a campsite on a boat. The campsite is set up on a sandy shore with a blue and white umbrella providing shade. Various cooking items like pots, pans, and a green water bottle are visible on the table. The background shows a river and mountains.

ROW GUIDES COOKING AT CAMP.

A group of people are rafting down the Snake River. They are wearing life jackets and helmets, and are using paddles to navigate the rapids. The water is splashing around them, and the background shows rocky cliffs and greenery.

RIDING THE RAPIDS ON THE SNAKE RIVER.

A bald eagle is perched on a pine tree branch. The eagle has a white head and neck, and a dark brown body. It is looking towards the right. The background shows a blurred view of a river and mountains.

A BALD EAGLE PERCHED IN A TREE.





CAMPING ALONG THE SNAKE RIVER.

#### DAY 4:

### SCORING THE DREAM CAMPSITE

Our gear boat departed at the crack of dawn, and later that afternoon, we were delighted to see that our group had snagged the highly coveted campsite at China Bar. With its soft white sand and crystal-clear shallows, China Bar felt like a tropical island on the river.

While guides were tasked with setting up tents, guests were responsible for breaking down camp every morning. Each afternoon, all we had to do was grab a sleeping pad and claim a tent. ROW provided all the camp gear, and in addition to a primitive outhouse, we also had access to a gravity shower. Of course, jumping in the river was a far more efficient (and fun) way to clean up.

On our final night, we had a delicious steak dinner and washed it down with cold, sparkling water and red wine. This made the costume party later that evening a bit more entertaining, especially when we attempted to assemble our group into a human pyramid and snap a photo.



#### KEEP IDAHO BEAUTIFUL

*Immersing yourself in Idaho's natural beauty alongside thrill-seeking, like-minded folks is one of the many reasons why these multiday excursions are so special. Caring for Idaho's wild and scenic lands is a large part of the experience as well. Being mindful of your impact as a traveler is key to preserving and protecting this pristine stretch of Hells Canyon Wilderness, with simple actions like camping in established sites and packing out all human waste and food garbage.*



## DAY 5:

### FAREWELL TO THE WILD & SCENIC

On our last morning, we devoured eggs Benedict and enjoyed a lazy morning at camp, savoring every bite—and birdsong—before hopping aboard our rafts. We passed the confluence between the Snake and Salmon rivers, and a few miles later, our adventure ended just below where the Snake and Grande Ronde rivers meet near Lewiston.

Even after 82 miles on the Snake, our group still wasn't ready to part ways. I had a quick refresh at the hotel, and then our group joined up for a second farewell dinner in Lewiston. We discussed upcoming summer plans and, of course, future river trips. Half of our group were first-timers like me, and most everyone agreed that they were ready for another rafting adventure.

From the blissful sensation of cool water on my skin to the thrill of going through a Class IV rapid for the first time, I felt right at home on the river, and I can't wait to do it again.

#### RAPIDS KEY



**Class I:** Fast-moving water with occasional light surface movement. Few obstructions.



**Class II:** Rapids with small waves; mostly clear and open passages but some maneuvering may be required.



**Class III:** Numerous and irregular waves; maneuvering required through clear but sometimes narrow passages.



**Class IV:** Turbulent water. Strong, long rapids and high waves. Skilled and persistent maneuvering is required.



**Class V:** Long stretches of powerful and tumultuous rapids; obstructions require skilled maneuvering; steep gradients, big drops and violent currents.



**Class VI:** Can be extremely dangerous; require great skill and stamina; navigable only when conditions allow.



RAFTING ON THE SNAKE RIVER.



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Brentano is a writer and photographer based in California, but her wanderlust takes her all over the world to capture travel and environmental stories. Brentano lives in her truck camper from March to November, and she spends most of this time road-tripping across the Wild West.