

NOT A TOTAL DRAG: THE SAN JUAN RIVER AT LOW WATER

BY ASHLEY LODATO

IF YOU ARE lucky enough to score a permit on Utah's San Juan River, you shouldn't, we decided, cancel the trip simply because the flow is minimal. No, we realized later—despite countless disembarkments to push or pull watercraft off sand heaves, cobble strands, and rock bars—when you win that San Juan permit, you go. You sort and pack your gear in northern Washington, snowbanks flanking the truck you load with raft and rigging, and you drive southeast, through rain and Ponderosa Pine to red dirt and slot canyons. When you get that permit, you go.

When we'd tried to float the San Juan River five years ago, permits had been available four days before the launch date. This year, with increased demand for river time and a seemingly endless

number of parties encumbered by neither employment nor the constraints of a traditional school year, permits were scarce. We acquired ours by chance—a serendipitously timed look at the availability web page; the 11th and final member of our trip was added only by an additional cancellation the Thursday prior to our Monday launch. He got in his truck and began the drive to southeastern Utah the next day.

Moan all you want about the lack of available permits—and believe me, we did—but once you're on the river you're thankful for the permitting crucible that gives your party an experience increasingly rare in the Lower 48: a trip that feels intimate and even somewhat remote.



No tent fly required—ever, as it turned out on this rainless trip.
PHOTO BY ASHLEY LODATO

WILDERNESS



As sunset approaches, the walls surrounding the river seem to glow.
PHOTO BY ASHLEY LODATO



Rafting with friends during a pandemic is a surreal experience, if only because everything seems so—well—normal. After a drive through the gorgeous, wild, and fiercely independent states that landlock the San Juan; after being, quite often, the only people in roadside rest areas and service stations wearing masks or acknowledging the existence of COVID, launching on the San Juan was an astonishingly clean break between pandemic life and the period of suspended reality that our week on the river ended up being.

We've been warned that running the river below 500 cfs can be frustrating, and it is. But many of us cut our expedition teeth on the dubious wisdom of a fellow former Outward Bound instructor, who unfailingly advised us to "smoke 'em if you've got 'em"—a reference to running out that last pack of cigarettes, and a nugget that we employ liberally with great success to a multitude of life situations. We had the San Juan permit; we were going to smoke it, by gum.

The moment we launch, our concerns about water level seem inconsequential. Canyon walls lacquered with desert varnish tower over us at our first lunch site. Somehow it is this, these rough canyon walls spackled with black crust, that allow us to surrender to river time. We gather around the table, the first of many feasts spread out before us, and take our first full breaths as a group.

No matter how well you know the other members of your river party, there is always an adjustment period, a threshold that must be crossed before you coalesce as a unit. The sooner it happens, the better, but it must happen organically; it can't be forced. Fortunately for us, that elusive threshold is crossed at that first lunch stop, although no one can explain later how or why that happens. It's tricky to articulate. All we know is that we stepped onto that sandbar as clusters of disparate family units and stepped off that sandbar as a group.

I'm the last to paddle away from our lunch site, stepping onto my stand up paddleboard (SUP) with black mud-caked feet, which I try to rinse off with water scooped by my paddle blade. I glance behind me and see only our footprints on the sand bar. These too, will disappear, with wind, water, and time. Looking ahead I see a raft rowing as close to the walls as the oar blades will allow, as if the sandstone itself radiates a magnetic pull. As the current—minimal as it is—draws us downstream, the walls draw us in, as if the river and the buff overhangs above are wrapping us in their embrace.

Although it is late afternoon when we reach River House Ruin campsite, we're not anxious to camp yet, still curious to see what is around the next bend. But once we look at the camp itself there's no chance we're going to leave it unexplored.



Even high above it, the river still beckons.
PHOTO BY ASHLEY LODATO

Those of us in kayaks, packrafts, and SUPs reach the beach first and return on foot to help drag the rafts across the cobbles just below the river’s surface, each one slick with biofilm.

After we unload the boats, we look up at the sandstone walls glowing with the sun’s last rays. A short walk out the back of our campsite leads us to River House Ruin, an Ancestral Puebloan multi-room dwelling built into a natural overhang in the cliff. Sandstone and red clay rooms with pictographs and petroglyphs, pottery, and stone tools still remain, echoes of the agrarian communities that lived here a thousand years ago. Looking across the river we see another cliff dwelling, far higher than the one we’re exploring, and we wave to the clan that in our imagination still resides in that sun-soaked overhang.

As I take a picture of our group seated near the ruin, I’m struck by déjà vu. “I’ve seen these places,” I think to myself. But I’m unable to recall whether I hold a memory of Internet or guidebook images, or if my sense of familiarity comes from seeing my parents’ photos of their time in this place.

Years ago, when their activities were eclipsed by my own preoccupation with career and early motherhood, my parents spent six weeks each spring volunteering at the San Juan River’s Sand Island boat launch. The San Juan is my parents’ river more than mine, and I felt their deep knowledge of and appreciation for the river as we planned our trip.

We are headed into an area my parents know well, and where they are still—remarkably—known. When the ranger calls me for the COVID-era pre-trip phone call that has replaced the launch day check-in, at the end of the call he casually drops my parents’ names and asked if I’m related to them—these BLM volunteers who he last saw nearly a decade ago. “Yes, I am,” I say. Later I realize that since I’m related to my parents, I am, by association, also related to this river they know so intimately. When we launch I feel them with us in spirit.

On any raft trip—or any trip, for that matter—it’s useful to have something to complain about, something that mars the perfection of the trip. Otherwise, returning home is too painful. On an April San Juan trip, the low water often provides a legitimate reason to whine a bit. Add that to pandemic closures of the Navajo Reservation, rendering the entire left side of the river off limits, and you’ve got yourself a shred of disappointment to cling to once you are forced to end the trip and head home.

Thanks to our obsessive checking of the river gauge in the days leading up to the trip, we know that the San Juan will be low. When we arrive at Sand Island the knowledge is visually confirmed: the river is seasonably, unsurprisingly, shallow. It is so low that I remove two of the three skegs in my SUP, replacing the center fin with the smallest possible size—a scant 3” dangling into the water to give me some directional control. Still, I scrape the river bottom

dozens, hundreds, seemingly thousands of times throughout the 84-mile trip, half of it on the final day, where accumulating Lake Powell silt makes the river channel nearly impassible at these flows.

Still, navigating a SUP in low water is easy: dismount, walk the board through the shallows, reload. Navigating a raft down a bony river, however, is exhausting and, eventually, demoralizing. The kids quickly tire of jumping out to pull the raft off rocks and sandbars, and take to dozing—or pretending to doze—in the hope that someone else will jump off first and do the dirty work.

And dirty work it is, in this San Juan River sediment. There’s the red-brown dust that mixes to a ruddy paste, the fine buff dust that leaves watermarks on your shins when you step into the water, and the gummy black sludge at the mouths of side canyons. It sifts into your tent zipper, coats the bottom of boats, packs into camp table legs. Wet PFDs piled in the dirt at the Clay Hills take-out require a scrub brushing at home after the trip, and mud-filled grooves in soles of booties must be reamed out with a screwdriver.

rendezvous
River Sports * jacksonholekayak.com

Jackson Hole Kayak School

- Kayak
- SUP
- Canoe
- Raft
- Lessons
- Tours
- Sales
- Rentals

Jackson, Wyoming
307-733-2471

Ben Dann @ The Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone



A patina of wind-blown clay particles creates the iconic desert varnish so distinctive in the Southwest.
PHOTO BY ASHLEY LODATO

Still, it's worth it, and we don't even have to remind ourselves of it all that often. Our toes in the sand at lunch sites, a glimpse of ancient steps cut into a wall, the polished floors of side canyons, bighorn sheep grazing on sparse vegetation, the gloriously endless spray of stars on an inky sky—these are things we do not take for granted.

Early one morning we hike up to the canyon rim on the historic Honaker Trail, reaching the welcome warmth of the sun only when we attain the lip of the gorge. From a high point just beyond the trail we can see into Monument Valley and to snowcapped distant peaks. But the river calls us back, as it does from every side hike we've ever done on any river trip. "Come back down," it beckons. "This is where you belong."

At low water, Government Rapid is our only formidable obstacle, but it's an appalling one. At first glance we can't even find a line, so boulder-strewn is it. But in the same way that one's eyes inevitably find a line through a raging rapid, no matter how plausible, we eventually determine a line through the pinball machine of Government Rapid.

It's so low that we decide to offload ballast—everyone other than the oarsmen—in order to ride a bit higher. The first raft runs through, hits the exposed boulder in the center of the rapid, but pivots off and floats through successfully, if not gracefully. The second raft follows the line of the first but instead of swiveling off the boulder comes to a lurching stop squarely on top of it. No amount of bouncing and weight shifting dislodges him, so we

finally catch a throw bag the oarsman lobs at us and with five of us pulling on it, tug him free and swing him into an eddy below.

As we're stuffing the throw bag back in its sack we see another party approach the rapid, and decide to watch their lines. Like us, they offload all passengers, as well as new oarsmen. Two members of their party (one of whom is, inexplicably, completely nude from the waist down, save for a sprayskirt) run all the rafts through the rapid, temporarily pinning a few of their boats just like we did. It's no surprise that the Government gives no one an easy ride.

The afternoon of the final night on the river, we wander alone or in pairs up Slickhorn Canyon, disappointed to see that the clear pools featured so prominently in the river guide are slimy stagnant puddles. The canyon alternately expands and contracts, as shining wide fields of slickrock give way to thickets of hackberry and scrubby oak. The kids retreat to the campsite's limited shade to play a card game, and as we explorers return to camp we can hear their laughter echoing off the rocks.

When we reconvene for dinner, we are subdued in the way groups often are on the last night of a trip, content to absorb the visual feast the river offers as the last rays of sun slip off rosy canyon walls and the evening sky fades to pastel.

Later, we sit by the river, listening to silty water whispering over cobble. We aren't yet aware that 18 miles of near-constant hauling rafts off sandbars awaits us the next day, but it wouldn't matter. Even if we have to walk the last section of it, the trip itself has been anything but a drag.