

## Learn About Rapids

The first thing you need to know about whitewater rafting is that it takes place on rivers. But not all rivers are created equal. Some rivers are big and muddy; some are calm and winding; and only some are conducive to whitewater rafting, since the sport requires a little something called rapids. Here's what you need to know about rapids:

- Rapids are the result of the vertical descent of a body of water over a given horizontal distance. Water travels downhill. As obvious as that sounds, you'd be amazed at how many live under the misconception that water travels from north to south, regardless of geography or topography, until it meets an ocean.
- While all rivers have some downhill gradient, steeper gradients result in more rapidly moving water. Rapids, or **whitewater**, arise as a result of steeply descending river channels.
- Some of the most famous river rapids in the country include the Snake River and Colorado River (through the Grand Canyon). But there are thousands of rivers in every state that offer whitewater rafting trips.
- Since these channels are still being carved by erosion, whitewater rafters have been known to encounter numerous boulders and layers of hard bedrock that sit in the river's path. You know what that means? Fun stuff like vortices of swirling or funneled water, natural ramps, and sudden drops in elevation. Real adrenaline pumpers.
- Rapids are generally classified on a scale of 1-5. The idea is to find a happy medium. **Class 1 rapids** are just a bit more exciting than a calm river (think water park tameness), while **Class 5 rapids** are likely to give you heart palpitations.

While there are rivers in the U.S. that are considered **Class 6**, you will have a very difficult time finding an outfitter that offers expeditions on them, due to the extreme danger involved.

Some outfitters list the rivers as Classes and others list them as Grades. Below you will find out what each mean.

## Classes of White Water Rapids

Anyone with an adventurous spirit can enjoy white-water rafting. But no matter what your age, you'll need to know how to choose the right **river** for your experience level. White-water rapids are rated for difficulty, and there are six levels of classification.

Class I and II rapids are best for families and beginners:

**Class I:** Class I rapids are categorized as the easiest. This is generally flat, moving **water** with few or no waves or obstructions. Very little steering is needed.

**Class II:** Class II rapids are slightly more difficult. This water may have medium-sized waves and may require some maneuvering around rocks.

For the more adventuresome novices and intermediate rafters, Class III and IV rapids provide technical challenges. Many confident beginners try Class III rapids on their first rafting trip.

**Class III:** Class III rapids have many moderate, irregular waves, fast currents and narrow passages. These rapids are less forgiving if you make a mistake. You may encounter large but easily navigable waves.

**Class IV:** Class IV rapids are very difficult and should be navigated by only those with advanced maneuvering skills. These rapids have cross-currents, fast and turbulent water and large, powerful waves.

Experts in search of a challenge will find the most challenging rapids in Classes V and VI.

**Class V:** Class V rapids are extremely difficult. These waters are intense and have powerful currents, cross-currents, large drops and holes as well as obstructed, turbulent rapids.

**Class VI:** Class VI rapids are impossible or almost impossible to navigate.

## Grades of White Water Rapids

Below are the six grades of difficulty in white water rafting. They range from simple to very dangerous and potential death or serious injuries.

**Grade 1:** Very small rough areas, might require slight maneuvering. (Skill Level: Very Basic)

**Grade 2:** Some rough water, maybe some rocks, might require some maneuvering. (Skill level: basic paddling skill)

**Grade 3:** Whitewater, small waves, maybe a small drop, but no considerable danger. May require significant maneuvering. (Skill level: experienced paddling skills)

**Grade 4:** Whitewater, medium waves, maybe rocks, maybe a considerable drop, sharp maneuvers may be needed. (Skill level: whitewater experience)

**Grade 5:** Whitewater, large waves, large volume, possibility of large rocks and hazards, possibility of a large drop, requires precise maneuvering. (Skill level: advanced whitewater)

experience)

**Grade 6:** Class 6 rapids are considered to be so dangerous as to be effectively unnavigable on a reliably safe basis. Rafters can expect to encounter substantial whitewater, huge waves, huge rocks and hazards, and/or substantial drops that will impart severe impacts beyond the structural capacities and impact ratings of almost all rafting equipment. Traversing a Class 6 rapid has a dramatically increased likelihood of ending in serious injury or death compared to lesser classes. (Skill level: successful completion of a Class 6 rapid without serious injury or death is widely considered to be a matter of great luck or extreme skill)