

## White-water Guides, Gear and Safety

Guides are trained professionals that make sure your white-water rafting experience safe and fun. Guides are trained in white-water rescue, CPR, first aid and many are wilderness experts.

Your guide will make sure you know how to paddle and will instruct you on ways to stay safe on the river. Some guides join you in the raft while others stay alongside in kayaks. Whether your guide is in-raft or not depends on the company you choose. Many guided trips last about 3 to 4 hours on the river, although some services offer full-day, multi-day and multi-sport packages.

At the start of your trip, you'll meet with your guide. You will be required to sign a release form and listen to a safety talk before heading to your boat. U.S. Coast Guard-approved life vests - PFDs, or personal floatation devices - are provided and required. Some services also require you wear a helmet.

Once your group is onboard and afloat, your guide will instruct you on basic paddling techniques and give you a little time to practice before heading out on the river. While you shouldn't expect to be a master rower your first time out, you should be aware of some basic moves: the forward stroke, stern draw, and the forward and reverse sweeps.

The **forward stroke** allows you to pilot your raft or boat by going faster or slower than the river current. If you were to execute this stroke on one side of the boat only, your adventure would simply take you in a circle. But do this stroke on both sides of the boat, and away you go.

You're at the mercy of the river current, so to avoid turning, use a stroke called a **stern draw**. This pulls the **stern** (the back of the boat) in line with the **bow** (the front of the boat), keeping you in a (relatively) straight path. If you want to make a turn, though, the **forward sweep** allows you to turn without slowing down.

And what do you do if you find yourself going backward? Don't panic -- try the **reverse sweep**. This stroke will slow you down and help get the boat headed in the correct direction again.

While many of these strokes are intended for solo or two-person rafters, not guided trips, the more you know about paddling, the safer you'll be on the river.

While the majority of injuries and fatalities happen on self-guided river runs rather than guided tours, it's important to keep in mind that rafting, while fun, is an adventure that comes with risks. To participate in white-water rafting, you don't need to be an athlete or swimmer but the better physical condition you're in, the easier it will be for you to paddle and pull yourself to safety if you fall overboard.

Rafting guides are frequently surprised to find guests that have no idea what is expected of them, including those who assume that, having paid a good \$45 for the trip, they should not have to paddle. Guess what, though: no matter what, **you WILL have to paddle**. Hey, that's part of the

allure of river rafting. The whole "take-charge" attitude is what makes river rafting an exciting sport.

So what exactly is expected of you on the river? Here goes:

- **You must show up sober and stay sober.** Rafting outfitters will not allow (or at least should not allow) you on the water if you show up drunk or high.
- **There really isn't any need for special training at home** prior to your expedition. Make note of the skills recommended after the Grade listing above for expected skills. At the end of a long day of running rapids, you will very likely be sore, so expect this if you are not in shape. One note: though many outfitters may not require that you know how to swim, it sure is a lot safer. It IS a river.
- You should advise your guides (in private, of course) of **any pre-existing medical conditions** or injuries that may affect your performance. These include heart conditions, back and neck (spinal) injuries, diabetes, and epilepsy. Although such a condition may never play out during the expedition, it's always a good idea to make your guides aware of it.
- **You are expected to be a good team player**; conversely, this means you want to pick adequate team players to accompany you. Most rafts are designed to accommodate four or five passengers, so choose three or four friends whom you deem capable, competent and level-headed.
- **Pay close attention during the tutorial** prior to your expedition. The most common error most rafters encounter is the counter-intuitive nature of paddling: **to turn right, you paddle with the left oar**, and vice versa. Often, it helps to elect a leader, either someone with prior experience or else a natural born leader.
- **Your attire is important.** If you are going in the spring or fall, make sure to have wool socks and possibly a wool pullover sweater. Wool pulls water away from your skin to the surface of your clothing and prevents excessive loss of body heat. A windbreaker and wool cap may also help retain body heat. In the spring, you will most likely be provided a mandatory wet suit like those worn by surfers. Spring rains and melting winter snow combine to make very cold water in March, April and even May. In the summer time, shorts, cut-offs, bathing suits or swim trunks are all acceptable, as are T-shirts and tank tops. Bear in mind, however, that in summer time the rapids are also much lower and therefore less exciting. Also, summer sun means a need for a waterproof sunscreen.

And in any season, wear shoes that you don't mind getting wet.