

Safety

White water rafting can be a dangerous sport, especially if basic safety precautions are not observed. Both commercial and private trips have seen their share of injuries and fatalities, though private travel has typically been associated with greater risk. Depending on the area, safety regulations covering raft operators may exist in legislation. These range from certification of outfitters, rafts, and raft leaders, to more stringent regulations about equipment and procedures. It is generally advisable to discuss safety measures with a rafting operator before signing on for a trip. The equipment used and the qualifications of the company and raft guides are essential information to be considered.

Like most outdoor sports, rafting in general has become safer over the years. Expertise in the sport has increased, and equipment has become more specialized and increased in quality. As a result the difficulty rating of most river runs has changed. A classic example would be the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon or Jalcomulco River in Mexico, which has swallowed whole expeditions in the past, leaving only fragments of boats. In contrast, it is now run safely by commercial outfitters hundreds of times each year with relatively untrained passengers.

Risks in white water rafting stem from both environmental dangers and from improper behavior. Certain features on rivers are inherently unsafe and have remained consistently so despite the passage of time. These would include "keeper hydraulics", "strainers" (e.g. fallen trees), dams (especially low-head dams, which tend to produce river-wide keeper hydraulics), undercut rocks, and of course dangerously high waterfalls. Rafting with experienced guides is the safest way to avoid such features. Even in safe areas, however, moving water can always present risks—such as when a swimmer attempts to stand up on a rocky riverbed in strong current, risking foot entrapment. Irresponsible behavior related to rafting while intoxicated has also contributed to many accidents.

One of the simplest ways to avoid injury while out of a raft, is to swim to an Eddy (a calm spot behind a rock in the water which the current disperses around) to avoid being taken downstream.

To combat the illusion that rafting is akin to an amusement park ride, and to underscore the personal responsibility each rafter faces on a trip, rafting outfitters generally require customers to sign waiver forms indicating understanding and acceptance of potential serious risks. Rafting trips often begin with safety presentations to educate customers about problems that may arise.

White water rafting is often played for the adrenaline rush and this often becomes a problem for people and their own safety. White water rafting accidents have occurred but are not common.

Due to this the overall risk level on a rafting trip with experienced guides using proper precautions is low. Thousands of people safely enjoy raft trips every year.