

**PADDLERS GATHER BELOW** the overhead car near the gauging station on the Colorado River at Willow Beach. **AT TOP:** A bighorn sheep is spotted along the banks of the Colorado River below Hoover Dam. (Photos courtesy of Rob Jones)

By **ROB JONES**

Special to the Daily Sun

**L**ooking for a unique outdoor excursion during the cold months in Flagstaff? It's a bit of an irony, yet there is a crisp water paddle and camping adventure awaiting out there in the Arizona/Nevada desert below Hoover Dam.

The 12-mile, smooth-water paddle through the Black Canyon of the Colorado River from Hoover Dam to Willow Beach can be done in one long

day. But I believe three days and two nights is more enjoyable, and you will probably want to explore the side canyons and relax alongside the river.

It's a fine excursion when other areas are a bit chilly. There are an astounding number of thermal (hot springs) areas along this short stretch of the river. Many have been modified (dammed with sand bags, rocks, etc.) to form pools for soaking. Delightful, especially during a cool morning or after a dip in the beyond cool river. Bighorn sheep are often seen, as are a variety of water-

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birds. And, of course, there's the Black Canyon of the Colorado.

A group of us paddled Black Canyon last March. Here's a brief report of our trip.

### TURNING TURTLE

Starting the trip in the Hacienda parking lot in Boulder City, we load the outfitter's trailer for the short shuttle to the foot of the dam on the Nevada side of the river, fill canoes with provisions and goodies, and lilt

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downriver to the Sauna Cave on the Nevada shore, where a bored tunnel has a floor of hot water, instantly steaming over glasses and lights and camera lenses.

Gurgle, bonk, clunk, glug — Connie's and Cathy's canoe slowly rolls turtle into the frigid Colorado.

Yikes! Rescue?

No, Dave and I grab the drowned canoe and help the women guide the swamped vessel to the rocky shore, unload all the strapped-in bags, drain, flip the canoe upright, reload and continue downriver. The river looks passive, yet reveals a different nature with sheer forces around rocks and upstream eddies, as in this example. A little excitement to spice the day.

The National Park Service notes that from Hoover Dam to midway between Willow Beach and Eldorado Canyon, the current ranges from 3 to 12 mph. This current is variable, depending on the volume of water released from Hoover Dam and the water level in Lake Mohave. At Ringbolt Rapids, the speed of the water may reach 16 mph on weekdays.

## A RISING RIVER

At Gold Strike Canyon less than two miles from the put-in, we hunt for hot springs, finding and enjoying several. In another mile, we are at Boy Scout Canyon to lunch and camp and scale slippery obstacles, sloshing through hot springs and hot water along the way. The obstacles get progressively more difficult up the side of the canyon, and hikers turn around just beyond their comfort point.

After dark, the Las Vegas lights and casinos are switched on full and the river level rises and rises some more. Our

# IF YOU GO ...

## CANOEING THE BLACK CANYON OF THE COLORADO RIVER

**GETTING THERE:** Cross the new bridge over the Colorado at Hoover Dam and proceed to the Hacienda Hotel in Boulder City, a good place to meet the outfitter to take you to the river put-in near the base of Hoover Dam. (For a link to a list of outfitters, see the Bureau of Reclamation web address below). When I visited, one could get an advance reservation (Internet only) room in the Hacienda for \$29 for two people. Alternatively, you can camp at Willow Beach or another local campground.

You'll need a shuttle to the base of Hoover Dam (no private vehicles are allowed) and a permit to float the river. Obtain the permit from the outfitter who transports you and your canoe/kayak to the base of the dam. You will need a list of all participants, IDs for everyone. Also note that you will need a shuttle back to your starting point (again, contact an outfitter if needed). Have everything arranged before you drive. Your outfitter/shuttle service should provide you with a map, including points of interest.

To get on the shuttle to the put-in, all adults must have a photo ID (that is, a driver's license or a passport), and children need to show a school ID, or a copy of a Social Security card or a birth certificate. This is required because you'll be entering a high-security area at the base of Hoover Dam.

The Hacienda Hotel and Casino usually offers off-season rates. You can meet the shuttle driver in the hotel lot and leave your vehicle there while on the river.

There are mile markers along this section of the Colorado River. Hoover Dam is at mile marker 64 and Willow Beach is at 52.5.

### ON THE WEB:

Bureau of Reclamation website:

<http://www.usbr.gov/lc/hooverdam/paddlecraft/canoenew.html>

short jaunt from the river. Beware, you'll be fortunate if there is not a throng of visitors swirling like a toity bowl in the tiers of hot springs that grace an adorable narrow canyon. Scenic toilets, too. Wondrous. Photogenic.

## AVOID THE POWER BOATS

After beach camping beyond the White Rock area crowds, we continue to Willow Beach the next day. Time your travel to allow a visit on the Arizona side to Emerald Cave and the historic catwalk for the gauging station, and for a walking tour of the 1920s homesite of the station operator. You pass one of the largest fish hatcheries in the U.S. just before the take-out at Willow Beach, site of a Native American trading camp for more than a millennium.

This boat trip was made by many of the workers who built Hoover Dam. Until an access road was built, workers had to be transported through Black Canyon 1 1/2 miles upriver from Willow Beach. Construction continued for several years, with the final bucket of concrete poured in 1935.

Time your adventure to avoid power boats. To see more wildlife and experience a bit of solitude, paddle on Sundays and Mondays year-round, when the National Park Service doesn't allow power boats above Willow Beach. From Memorial Day to Labor Day, any-sized power boats are allowed from Tuesday through Saturday. It's a bit quieter after Labor Day and before Memorial Day, when only boats with 65 horsepower engines or less are allowed above Willow Beach.

Beware of ringtail cats and other creatures in camp — secure all your food in chew-proof containers. And, pack all equipment in waterproof bags and containers and strap everything securely into your craft. Paddle early in the day because afternoon winds can make travel difficult.

Lifeworlds are required and respect and plan for windy and/or cold weather.

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After dark, the Las Vegas lights and casinos are switched on full and the river level rises and rises some more. Our well-beached canoes, once completely out of the water, are floating free (yet tethered) during the night. The pathway to the portable scenic toilet is submerged, yet only Bob, prowling the night, notices.

The morning finds us paddling to Moonscape Canyon on the Nevada side, where the stream is warm and up a side canyon are hot springs and pools, one pool around 105F. Lovely. A coursing slither of warm water forms a 10-foot falls and marks our turn-around spot for today. Three bighorn sheep dash down seemingly vertical rock and perilously ply the path up the other side of the canyon.

Another stop includes a visit to Arizona Hot Springs on the Arizona side (see related story). One can hike down White Rock Canyon from the highway, and continue downriver to the springs. However, it's a

# Hiking to hot springs

Instead of a canoe trip to Arizona Hot Springs, consider hiking in from Highway 93, a round trip of about 6 1/2 miles.

The hot springs are on the Arizona side of the Colorado River near Ringbolt Rapids, about 4 miles down river from Hoover Dam.

The route winds down White Rock Canyon to the Colorado River within the Black Canyon section of Lake Mead National Recreation Area. Elevation loss is minimal, and to make it close to a 10-mile hike, add a side trip to aptly named Liberty Bell Arch.

This hike would make a nice overnight outing. There are places to camp at the river and in the canyon just below where one turns up-canyon to the hot springs.

## IF YOU GO ...

Take Highway 93 north of Kingman to Exit 4. You will soon reach a parking area and kiosk for Liberty Bell Arch and White Rock Canyon

Hike under both lanes of Highway 93 to Lake Mead NRA information signs that proclaim it's 2.9 miles to Arizona Hot Springs.

For ambitious hikers, the route to Liberty Bell Arch leaves the main wash here and runs up a side canyon to the north, while the main route drops into the deep narrows. The Liberty Arch Junction is not marked, yet is one mile from the trailhead

The color of the pyroclastic (volcanic) rock changes to purple from brown and black along the way. White Rock Canyon gets its name from the light-colored (they look white against the darker volcanics) granite boulders that have washed down

from the very distant mountains. The contrast among the colors is very pleasing.

From the left turn out of White Rock Canyon, it's about 15 minutes of hiking on the use trail to the hot springs. The route contours around small coves and along cliffs overlooking the river and in places the trail is narrow with drop-offs into the river.

From the saddle atop a low ridge, the trail descends steeply into Hot Springs Canyon, dropping 60 feet or so down a rock cleft. The route to the hot springs turns up the deep, narrow canyon for a couple of minutes, climbing up some warmwater chutes to a 20-ft waterfall that can be climbed using a metal ladder. The ladder is anchored securely, but wet and high, so climb carefully.

At the top of the ladder, you encounter the first of tiered hot springs, with water temperature ranging from a relatively cool 85 degrees F to about 110 degrees of highly mineralized water at the spring source. The lips of the tiers have a natural base, and sandbags have been piled on these lips to form knee-deep pools in the now very narrow canyon.

Take care to keep the water out of your nose and mouth. According to warning signs posted by the National Park Service, "*Naegleria fowleria*, an amoeba common to thermal pools, may be present and could enter through the nose causing a rare infection and death. Do not dive into pools, splash water, or submerge your head"

Enjoy.

— Rob Jones, <http://wildernessvagabond.com>