

Pikes Peak River Runners

Big Bend Y2K

Jan 2000

Rio Grande River in Big Bend National Park (Texas)



By Dave Sample

Summary of Observations:

- We floated Colorado Canyon through Santa Elena Canyon
- December 31, 1999 – January 2, 2000 ([Y2K not a big deal](#))
- We had to row continuously to average 2 MPH. Wendy showed us her rowing blisters.
- Scenery generally superb
- Rapids overrated for this flow.
- Great fun camping with friends on ANY river
- Easily canoeable by experienced canoe captain
- ~13 hour drive time if you observe the posted speed limits and conditions are good.
 - Krysanne could complete the drive in 7 hours and stop for meals
- Closed Canyon near the put-in is a cool hike while you are waiting for the rest of the crew.
- Check out the [NPS](#) or [River flow recommendations](#) and [current flows including local shuttler](#)
- 6 rafts and 3 Inflatable Kayaks (IK's)
- 12 people:
 - Jack Schneider (4 people): Jack, Wendy, David Schneider, and Vinny
 - King's (2): Pete and Christina
 - Henry family (3): Tim, Chris and Krysanne
 - Dave Sample (2): Dave and Dale
 - Keith Fuqua (1)
- Colorado Canyon (the only igneous rock canyon in Big Bend), winds through numerous small rapids.
- Santa Elena Canyon through Big Bend National Park - one of the most popular sections of river in the national park. Many side canyons to explore if time permitted. Spectacular limestone in Santa Elena Canyon. The trip descends into the depths of its 1500 ft canyon walls and through the notorious Rock Slide Rapid.
- The canyon ends as abruptly as it begins during our float to the take-out near Castolon. Big Bend 2000



- Lots of ducks, turtles, blue herons, cows, horses, coyote and an occasional javelina or road runner.
- Our daily motto kept changing. Day 1 was 3 miles by noon. Day 2 was 3 miles by lunch - we ate lunch at 3:00? Day 3 was Rock Slide by lunch



The Story Begins:

This was my first club trip. I was surprised at how people rolled into the put-in minutes before the shuttle drivers. I got there 24 hours in advance and had time to scout the area and do some hiking.

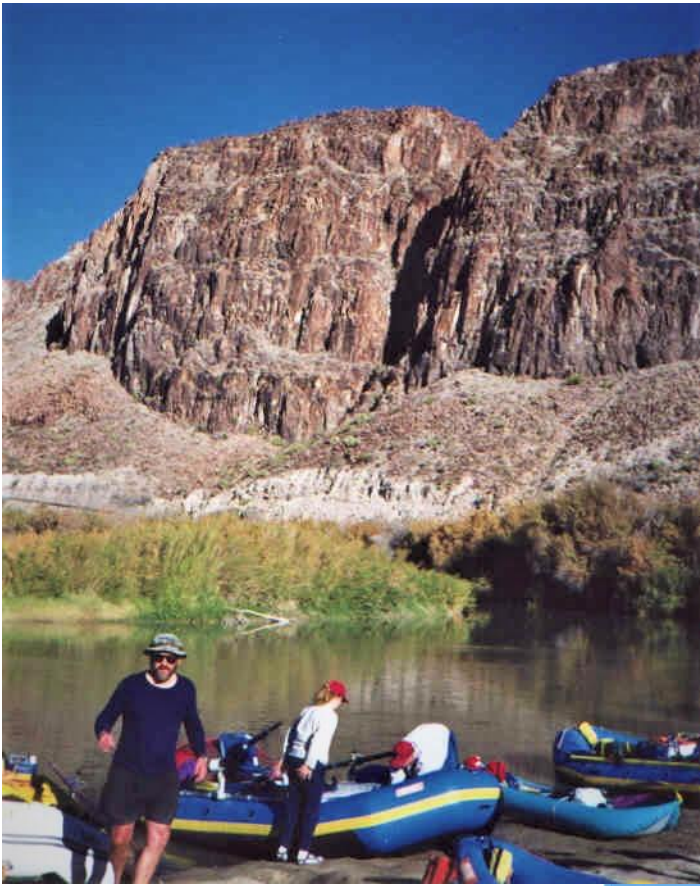
Keith was next after dark at 6:30 PM (14.5 hours before the shuttlers). Tim arrived minutes after Keith and Chris & Krysanne arrived an hour later. We got the boats inflated and ready to hit the river. I decided at the put-in that we probably had enough gear for 40 people for a week. This guess was confirmed later (story continues...). We pushed off at 10:00 AM after paying the shuttle drivers and explaining that our vehicles shimmy at about 85 MPH on gravel roads. Drivers seemed professional (Big Bend Shuttle Company). About 3 hours later (on the river) we saw at least 3 cars that had rolled off the road, none of them looked like ours so we did not worry too much.

Colorado Canyon (12/31/99 Day 1):

We ate lunch at 12:30. Two and a half leisurely hours on the river and we had floated 3 miles. This was when I started worrying about floating 41 miles in 3 days. The river was much slower and much warmer than the Arkansas this time of year. Daytime temperatures must have been about 75°F most days. It cooled quickly after the sun dropped behind the canyon walls. My guess is that the nighttime lows were anywhere between 30-50°F depending on the quantity of alcohol consumed in the previous 24 hours. Many class II+ rapids were canoeable at our low flows. It was nice to be able to get on a relatively comfortable river in Dec/Jan. The Arkansas river has ice on its banks this time of year. New Year's Eve had the



Champagne and beer flowing. David (not me) ate his steak and hit the sack at 7:30 - but he had a head start on celebrating during the day. David and Vinny consumed almost a case of beer on the river. After the liquor started flowing, we heard from Coach Krysanne why the Broncos are losing this year. Quite the tirade. A little alcohol sure brought her out of her shell :-). Ask Jack to see the videotape.



We camped at Grassy Banks - complete with pit toilet - 12.5 miles on day 1 - only 28.5 to go in 2 days...Side note: We found out that Kansas City has more fountains than any other city.

Lajitas (1/1/2000 Day 2):

All rafts and IK's (duckies) seem to be Y2K compliant. We shoved off at the crack of dawn (okay it was 10:50 am). It looks like another LONG day. Great food, these guys are putting pressure on Dale and I to prepare a good meal tonight. I genuinely believe these have been the fabled 4500 calorie days.

The duckie jockies have amazed me with stamina. Made it to Lajitas by 2:30 PM. Lunch was 3:00 that day. A contingent of the group went to Lajitas to find the beer guzzling goats and watch some college football bowl games. They commandeered a pick-up truck driver to bring them back to the boats. Many

have not had the fact that we only make 2 MPH if we row hard, sink in yet. Day 3 will be LONG. The rumor is getting stronger that we will try to leave tomorrow by 9:00. A Mexican national was ferrying people across the river to Mexico for \$1/person, roundtrip. He did a booming lunchtime business. We saw him drinking the water directly from the Rio Grande (not something



any of us wanted to do). On the Mexico side he had a 12-year-old taxi driver drive people to the little town for tacos.

The rest of the group hiked up for lunch in Lajitas and Jack fed the beer drinking goats. Tonight, was not as cool as last night. Maybe global warming was waiting for Y2K. No news from the outside world, maybe we have had the Y2K meltdown and we are warmer because Houston burned during the night. Time will tell when we break out of the canyon Sunday.

Quantity of gear: We have 12 people with 6 rafts ranging from a 12' CAT to 14' rafts. All loaded heavily with "essential" items plus 3 people are paddling duckies, so we have not needed much passenger room. I think private rafters are very well prepared for emergencies. Multiply that by 6 rafts and we probably had a large duplication of gear. Nine people in 4 canoes passed us one day with all of their gear. I bet they did not eat steak... This was the night of "small town stories". It is a wonder the Tarkio, Missouri (Schneider) boys are not all in jail. The later it gets and the more of our liquid "gear" is consumed, the wilder the stories get. The camping has been great – good people, good food and no phones.

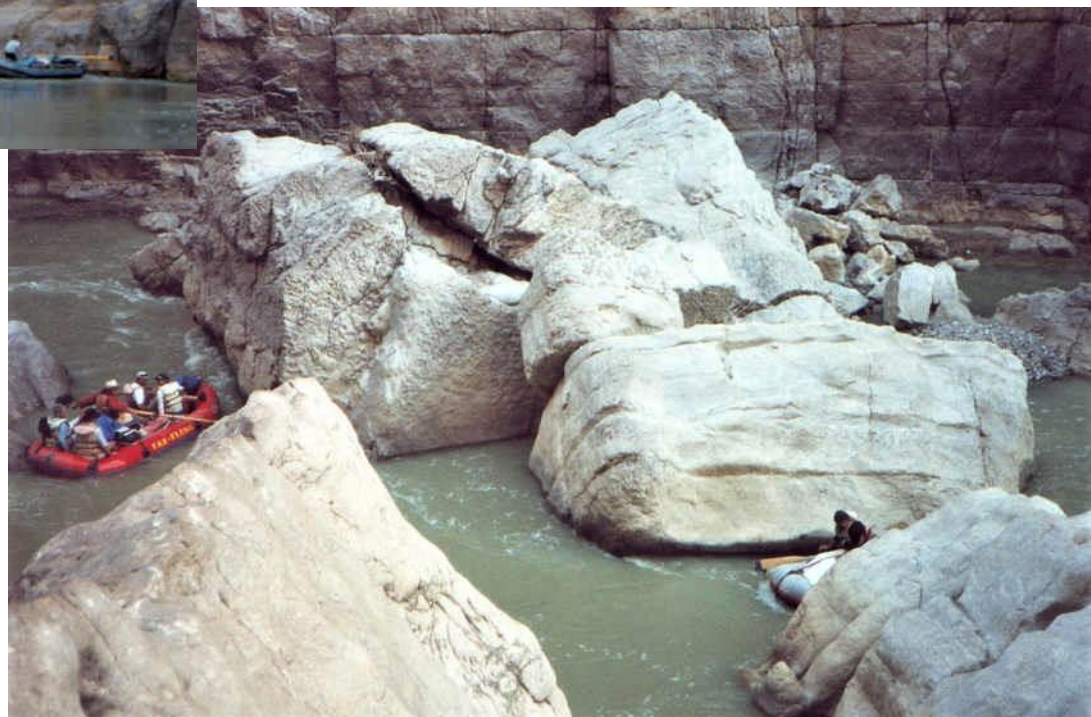
Santa Elena Canyon (1/2/2000 Day 3):



Remember the 9:00 departure plan. We left at 9:10, pretty darn good... I think everyone now understands that 2MPH is slow. So, after 6 miles of rowing, we get to the mouth of Santa Elena Canyon. Very pretty canyon. The walls sloped, giving the optical illusion that it is very much a downhill float. The current was perceptible in the canyon but slow compared to most rivers.

A couple of miles later we get to the [class IV "Rock Slide" rapid](#). Class IV seems over-rated because the rapid is not difficult due to fast moving water but because of the narrow slots that can be missed or plugged by a boat. Deflating or de-rigging the boats to get through the rapids seemed to be the only options during our first look at the rapid. Rockslide was technical but not difficult. You could not just follow the person in front of you because of the house-sized rocks you could easily and quickly lose sight of them. While we are scouting Rock Slide, a group of "professional" commercial

rafters ([Far Flung Adventures](#)) showed up to show us how to do the run. There really is ONLY one path through the rocks for rafts at this flow. The first of their boats goes through the first two slots then waits to help the rest of his group make the correct turns. Most slots require lots of rock bumping. Raft width and length are the problems in Rock Slide.





One of Far Flung Adventures boats made a wrong turn and blocked a slot big enough for a canoe but too small for their 15' raft. Meanwhile, a canoe followed him the wrong way and flipped so the canoeist floated UNDER the raft to the other side where he stood waist deep cold water getting hypothermic. The canoe partially

jammed under the raft and both boats were stuck in the slot tighter than ever. It took them about 2 hours to get both boats de-rigged enough to get it through. Another raft went the wrong way but got stopped soon enough that they were able to pull it back with a rope. Now that the wrong way was pretty well blocked the rest of their boats made the correct turn here and then 1/2 of them got caught on the next obstacle.



After watching much of this we all went the right way and with the normal bumping of rocks were merrily on our way down river. After retrieving some of their paddles we stopped on the next sand bar and had a delightful lunch bad-mouthing the "professionals". Hindsight is 20/20. We later saw a couple of their boats rescuing a kayaker who kept swimming at every eddyline. Santa Elena canyon abruptly ends, and we have another mile of floating to one of the worst take-outs I have ever seen.

Slippery mud, outfitters blocking the small loading area. The outfitters moved one truck so we could get one vehicle down at a time. We got off of the river around 5 pm and started the drive home. Some stopping for the night, others grinding through the night.

So ends another raft trip. Remember "A bad day on the river is better than a good day in the office". On the way home we heard on the radio that the Kansas City Chiefs blew a 17 - 0 lead, losing to the Oakland Raiders and were knocked out of the playoffs. I am sure everyone felt sorry for Pete and the KC boys. GO CHIEFS!!

