

Gorging for the First Time

by Sherry McKillop

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Not yet overcome with the burden of Christmas commerce, a band of ten experienced paddlers (I was told it would be a hard sell to call them "talented") and myself met at Salmon Falls Bridge this past Saturday morning. The early December air was practically balmy in contrast to the icy temperature of the water. I had proposed the trip via cyber space to Robert Bromer whose name I had read a week before on the GCP list. My intuitive sense suggested he and his band were just the group to lead me down the Gorge for the first time.

The Gorge. To me, a canyon of mystique that requires a level of skill not generally attributed to a first season hard shell kayaker. I have been patiently paying my dues, partly on lesser sections of water.

The original plan Saturday was to put in at Greenwood. Stimulating conversation inside the lead vehicle caused Kevin to miss the entry into the parking lot! Stopping a couple hundred yards further down the road, he hopped out, ran back to Rob's vehicle and had a few words. When he returned he advised us we would be putting in at Henningson's. This had its pros and cons. More time on the water, but possibly tired when I entered The Gorge.

We launched a little after noon, a scattered group of brightly colored jelly beans on a watery conveyor. Kevin, Rob and Ingrid took on the role of my personal angels! Imagine three amidst a band of no less than 10! I had asked not to be led down any cheater routes and they obliged. I flipped at Upper Haystacks for some unidentified reason, but rolled up without incident.

After six months of paddling on seven different class II and class III rivers, under spring floods and fish flows, I have been fortunate enough to have never swum a rapid. This only means that up to now I have been able to execute a roll. The Eskimo roll fascinates me and I take every opportunity to practice: on-side, off-side, in the pool, in the river and in the waves of the ocean where I live. Again. Again. Again.

Satan's cesspool. Rob took on the responsibility for guiding me through this one. We eddied out just above the rapid so I could see what I would be dealing with. I saw the sharp turn and the lateral wave and listened to the description. I watched Rob take off. Before he got too far away, and before my heart began pounding too fast, I entered the current. Paying attention to his line was a bit difficult as I was looking directly into the orange glow of the setting sun. What I did see was not calming. Rob was struggling for control and I was fast approaching. "OK Sherry this is Satan's, don't screw up." As if riding on a watery magic carpet I somehow navigated the rapid flawlessly. Whoo hooo!

Bouncing Rock. "The river bends to the left, the hole is at the bottom on the right, stay to the inside and miss the hole." Ok, the plan was to follow Kevin, who knows every nook and cranny of this river. As I began the descent I felt confident, turning my boat toward the inside and paddling to miss the hole. Leaning away from the hole I must have caught an edge because I was upside down so fast I barely had time to grab some air. Reach up and execute that roll – NOW! Nope. Try again. Nope. Gasping for a small breath of air I surrendered to being upside down again. I peered through the liquid window but I didn't see any boats nearby. A bow rescue was out, my air was out, it was time to bail.

Carried by the current, I hung onto my boat and paddle as my hip slammed into a rock. It felt like someone had hit me with a baseball bat! OW! I slowly became aware of Mel who was shouting at me to let go of my boat. I got my other leg out of the cockpit, pushed it away and grabbed his stern. Within seconds I was on the shore, but not before hitting my already bruised thigh on another rock! OW! Bouncing Rock – appropriately named.

Recovering on the shore while my head thawed from its ice cream headache I was surrounded by the encouraging words of my fellow paddlers. Rob had graciously drained my boat and I tried not to wince as I squeezed my bruised body into the cockpit. Assured the worst was over we set out to enjoy the rest of the ride - and enjoy it I did.

As we made our way out of the gorge I looked back longingly and was delighted to see the pale winter moon had risen, a silver insignia commemorating a momentous day.

Thank you Rob, Ingrid, Kevin, Jay, Margarite, Kevin, Jimmy, Mel, Jimmy and Gerald! I can't wait to do it again!