

San Juan River Archeology & Natural History Invitational

Rich with scenery and history, southeastern Utah can take your breath away. Blend river rafting through deep, Precambrian canyons with hiking up hidden washes perimetered with Anasazi ruins, add fine food, talented guides, engaging scholars and sleeping under a canopy of stars – and you have the recipe for a perfect adventure in a fascinating, remote region so close to home.

Sixteen Vail Valley and Front Range colleagues of Gore Range Natural Science School recently set off from the beaten track to discover the unexpected on a five night, five day rafting and hiking Invitational along the San Juan River. Invitationals are unique multi-day adventures that offer natural and cultural history explorations in a small group format. Each Invitational is led by Science School staff and engages local scholars, outfitters and experts to enhance the educational and outdoor experience of participants.

Trip participants included Tom Byrnes, Alan Danson, Sherry Dorward, Bob Louthan, Mary Lamb Lucas, Lynne & Peter Mackechnie, Mary Ann McCarter, Diane Tope & Dick Patriacca, Dona Stever & Jim Dye, Connie & Miles Carson and Natalia & Clyde Hanks.

The Science School contracted Wild Rivers Expeditions in Bluff, Utah (www.wildriversexpeditions.com), to organize the trip. Guides included archeologist and geologist Tom Rice, archeologist and botanist Greg Woodall, environmental science interpreter Aleph Pippin, and native Navaho and doctoral student Nikki Cooley. This charismatic foursome guided us safely downstream with humor and exuberance and a wealth of knowledge. Guides shared the secrets of ancient Anasazi rock art, uncovered hidden cliff dwellings, and identified geological formations as we descended 26 miles of the San Juan River from Bluff to Mexican Hat. Nikki Cooley also shared with us a wealth of information about Navaho culture, interpretation, religion, history and contemporary political issues.

We meandered on comfortable rafts (while Diane Tope and Dick Patriacca chose to navigate the river in a two person kayak) through a quarter of a billion years' worth of colorful rock formations, making camps in spectacular corners of the canyon. Daily hikes up washes, most only approachable from the river, led us to spectacular Anasazi rock art and cliff dwellings.

The Invitational began with check in at the Recapture Lodge in Bluff, Utah, population 250. Located some 5 hour's drive from the Vail Valley, Bluff is nestled between 300-foot red sandstone cliffs along the San Juan River. It was settled in 1880 by Mormons and was home to prehistoric people, the Anasazi, 1,200 years ago.

On our first evening, we enjoyed a casual buffet dinner and an overview of the geology and cultural history of this region by noted author and guide Vaughn Hadenfeldt. Owner and guide of award-winning [Far Out Expeditions](#), Hadenfeldt has spent over 20 years exploring and guiding in the Four Corners.

Following the presentation, we strolled next door to the Wild Rivers Expeditions hogan for prelaunch orientation and distribution of waterproof bags and boxes. Drinks and continued conversation with Vaughn, as well as a slide show followed.

After breakfast at the Recapture Lodge, we departed in Wild Rivers vans for the Sand Island launch ramp four miles west of town. The float began as the river meanders past orange and black streaked sandstone outcroppings. Soon the boats pulled into shore and we walked to a site once inhabited by ancient desert farmers. Large oval steps are carved into the cliff wall and petroglyphs appear around every corner. Down river a short distance, we ate lunch under cottonwood trees at the famous Butler Wash petroglyph panel and examined this extensive group of mysterious images.

While three feet of snow fell on the Vail Valley, we were confronted that first day with blustery winds and, unexpectedly, raining mud which Jim Dyer, a cloud scientist, found particularly fascinating. Following the blustery trip, we were pleased to make camp in the late afternoon on a sandy beach among the cottonwoods and giant sagebrush. Our guides prepared dinner while we enjoyed wine and appetizers and a welcoming, crackling campfire. Conversation around the fire followed dinner, as did (what was to become an evening ritual) singing a full complement of 60's songs as best we could remember before we retreating to our tents.

First light the next morning found brilliant sunshine and the guides in the kitchen brewing coffee and creating a bountiful breakfast. We floated further downstream and then followed our guides for a walk to River House, an 800-year-old cliff dwelling. Spending time amid the round walls of a kiva where dried corn cobs remain with bits of pottery, we learned about these ancient Anasazi and well as Navaho beliefs.

We then hiked downstream and up San Juan Hill. This steep route was chiseled along a diagonal opening in the cliff by the famous Mormon "Hole-In-The-Rock" expedition in 1880. The views from its top and also the top of Comb Ridge are breathtaking.

We floated to Chinle Wash, where painted rock art and cliff dwellings hide among the rock alcoves. Author Tony Hillerman calls Chinle Wash "Many Ruins Canyon" in the mystery novel *Thief of Time*. That night we camped deep within the canyon where the limestone walls are full of fossils and the river current murmurs against the rocks. More discussions with our knowledgeable guides helped answer questions and painted a clearer picture of both the classic Precambrian geology of the region and the Anasazi who called this river and deep canyon their home.

After breakfast and a float downstream, we enjoyed a fascinating geology lesson and the chance for fossil hunting. An undulating pattern to the rocks under our feet revealed the presence of "bioherms." Porous mounds in an ancient shallow sea, they act as a reservoir rock to capture oil.

Further downstream, desert bighorn sheep appeared along the shore, as well as great blue heron. Rocks tilted and canyon walls diminished as Mexican Hat Rock, a large red slab balanced on a small pedestal, came into view. The vivid reds and grays of the geologically fascinating "anticline" zig-zag across the eastern horizon appeared like a Navajo blanket of stone.

The adventure ended in the afternoon at the boat launch in the town of Mexican Hat, where Wild River's vans transported us back to Bluff for a greatly appreciated shower at the Recapture Lodge and a delightful dinner at Cow Canyon Restaurant and discussions with owner and longtime Bluff resident, Lisa Duran.

The Science School organizes Invitational twice each year and is planning its fall Invitational to Yellowstone, September 15 – 19. Past Invitationals have included watching the crane migration in southern Colorado, elk bugling in Rocky Mountain National Park, exploring Anasazi culture in Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon and a longer excursion to Alaska.

For more information about Invitationals and how to join our upcoming trips, please contact Natalia Hanks, at natalaih@gorerange.org, or by phone at 970.827.9725 ext 30.