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Travel

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Braving the rapids

Girlfriends'
getaways



By Theresa Gawlas Medoff
FOR THE INQUIRER

LANSING, W.Va. — Our 10-hour gabfest made the drive from Delaware to the mountains of West Virginia for a girlfriends' getaway weekend whiz by. After all, three friends who hadn't seen one another in months have plenty to talk about.

But I slept restlessly that night.

The next morning, when the guide handed me the standard release form — the one in which I acknowledged my understanding of the “substan-

tial risks of injury or death” — I wondered how I had let my friends talk me into this trip. I had never been whitewater rafting, and here I was about to take on the Upper Gauley River, a legendary 10-mile stretch of Class IV and V rapids.

These are not rapids for beginners — Class IV and V are the most challenging levels considered safely navigable, and they attract adventure-seekers from all over the country.

And this was not a typical girlfriends' getaway filled with shopping, spas and winery

See **RAFTING** on N5

The Upper Gauley River is a rough stretch of whitewater — definitely not for the timid.

Novices test themselves against W.Va.'s rough rapids

RAFTING from N1 tours. My friends and I have taken those kinds of trips, but we have also gone hiking, horseback riding, snorkeling, kayaking and parasailing. Along the way, we've met many other women with the same taste for adventure, including a group of sorority sisters on this rafting excursion.

For this adventure, Heather — my best friend since we were freshman roommates in college, and whom I trust implicitly — assured me that my novice status was no barrier. Her own rafting experience was limited to a summer trip on the Lehigh River, where the "white" is often absent from the water.

Heather's friend Cheryl, who rafted the Gauley the previous year, also urged me on. Only later did I find out that Cheryl also had rafted on the Colorado River, so of course she wasn't intimidated.

But my neighbor Lisa chickened out when she learned that if she changed her mind mid-river, she would have to be airlifted out at her expense.

I decided that I had to live up to my reputation for being game for anything — well, almost anything.

The Gauley River is most famous (or notorious, depending on your perspective) for the six weekends in early fall when water is released from the dam at Summersville Lake, swelling the river with raging waters that have earned it the nickname "The Beast of the East." Most people ride the rapids with one of the licensed outfitters, which provide the proper equipment and trained guides who know how to steer the raft safely down the river.

We chose Class VI River Runners, a well-regarded outfitter that has been running West Virginia rafting trips for more than 35 years. We geared up in wet suits, booties, gloves, helmets and life jackets, then climbed aboard an old school bus for the short drive to the river.

Before disembarking, we received one final warning: "If you have any doubts whatsoever about rafting down this river, remain on the bus, because once you are on the water, there's no way to get you out."

Heather and I looked at each other. She had held my hand when I finally found the courage to get my ears pierced. I had encouraged



The author (left) and her friend Cheryl Bliss celebrate with Paul, their guide, after successfully navigating the last rapid.

her the first time she asked out a guy. Together, we could do this, too.

The sun had risen barely an hour before, and although this was mid-October, temperatures still hovered around freezing. The sloping riverbanks were lined thickly with trees. Wisps of fog floated above the steely-blue river, partially obscuring the bright yellow rafts of another outfitter that had already hit the water.

Paul, a tall, lean guy in his late 20s with a mountain-man beard and a wad of chewing tobacco in his cheek, was our guide. He spends every spring and summer rafting out West and returns to the Gauley every fall for "some of the best whitewater in the country." Paul gave us a few last-minute instructions, including the proper way to retrieve someone who "goes swimming," the euphemism for falling out of the raft.

Our crew of six lugged the heavy rubber raft to the water's edge and waded into the icy river, pulling the raft with us. Then we were on the water, and there was no turning back.

The current was strong, and in no time we were at our first major rapid, the Class IV-rated Initiation. With Paul's help, we made it through safely and fairly easily. This won't be so bad after all, I thought as the raft moved gently along. We chatted and snapped photos with waterproof, disposable cameras.

Paul maneuvered the raft skillfully, calmly giving us precise paddling instructions: "Right, forward two," and those of us on the right side of the raft would stroke twice, long and deep, bending forward at the waist for maximum leverage.

We passed through an easy

drop called the Funnel, and then Insignificant loomed ahead. Our small talk ceased.

"Paddle, paddle, paddle, paddle," Paul shouted over the roaring waves. Despite the name, Insignificant is anything but — it's a long, Class V rapid with large waves, multiple rock hazards and a big drop.

"I just kept staring at the paddle — I didn't want to look up and see what was coming," Heather confessed later.

Once again, we made it through unscathed.

It was the innocently named Pillow Rock that nearly did us in. Just when we thought we'd made it through safely, the front of the raft lurched into the air, tossing out two people, then a third. Heather, Cheryl and I leaned hard into the center of the raft and held on tightly. Actually, it was quite fun.

Once we pulled our crewmates back to safety and steered out of the eddies, the three of us hooted with relief and a bit of braggadocio. We'd stayed in, while the more experienced rafters went for a swim. Pure luck, undoubtedly, but it buoyed our confidence for the whitewater still to come. Iron Curtain, Hungry Mother, Shipwreck Rock, Tumblehome — we mastered them all.

By the time we made it to the take-out spot near Mason Branch, we were soaked through, freezing, exhausted

and exhilarated. We rode the bus back to the Class VI base camp, a wooded, 160-acre complex that includes showers and dressing areas (a must after rafting), Chetty's Pub (another must), a store, and a large buffet restaurant, Smokey's on the Gorge, where we and most of the other rafters would have dinner that evening.

First, though, we got out of our wet clothes, warmed up by the campfire, and toasted our success with frosty mugs of beer. Most rafters gathered at Chetty's Pub to rehash every moment on the river and watch professional videos of the day's rafting (for sale, of course, and everyone wanted a copy). The party there and at Smokey's went on for hours.

As the adrenaline rush wore off and fatigue set in, Heather, Cheryl and I headed back to our motel a few miles away. We were ready for a massage.

Girls Gone Whitewater

The whitewater-rafting season in West Virginia runs from March through October. The level of challenge ranges from mild to wild, depending on the river, the season and the water levels.

Class VI River Runners

(www.class-vi.com, 1-800-252-7784), in Lansing, offers guided whitewater rafting on the **New and Gauley Rivers** for all ages (children must be at least 6).

A Saturday rafting trip on the Gauley River (four to six hours), including lunch, costs \$130 in the spring; \$145, summer; and \$175, fall. Use of rafting equipment is included, but wetsuit rental costs \$21. Multi-day trips are also available.

A \$30 meal package includes buffet breakfast and dinner on rafting day at Class VI's onsite restaurant, Smokey's on the Gorge.

Places to stay

Class VI offers cabins and camping for an extra fee. Information on other accommodations in the area can be found at www.WVtourism.com or by calling 1-800-225-5982.

More information

For more information on West Virginia whitewater rafting, including a list of other excursion operators, go to www.WVriversports.com.

— Theresa Gawlas Medoff