

A bikerafting adventure packed with supplies, hard work, and life lessons

By Kari Bodnarchuk

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

MANCOS, Colo. — My 9-year-old son and I paddled in sync along the McPhee Reservoir in southern Colorado, our packraft gliding alongside a wall of rock that resembled elephant skin with its wrinkled appearance. We chatted about the lone trees fighting to grow in cracks on the cliff and watched an occasional fish break the water's surface, then drifted for a moment taking in the silence. The peacefulness of the scene belied the effort it took to get there and the struggles we had faced along the way.

Our rafts carried our guides, our camping gear, three days' worth of food, and our mountain bikes. Bikes and rafts? Make no mistake, this wasn't a rescue mission or a trip gone awry. We had set out on this trip with the intention of biking and rafting our way through the Colorado wilderness, an adventure that would let us cover all types of terrain with no outside support.

The guides included former ultra-endurance mountain bike racer Steve "Doom" Fassbinder and his partner Lizzy Scully, a renowned rock climber,



During a bikerafting adventure in southern Colorado, the author and her 9-year-old son Sam Wright (pictured here) of Ferndale, Wash., paddle an Alpacka packraft by “elephant skin” sandstone cliffs on McPhee Reservoir.

who run Four Corners Guides from their ranch in Mancos, about an hour west of Durango. They launched their business two years ago and just released a comprehensive book called “The Bikeraft Guide” this summer.

Fassbinder and Scully run introductory-to-bikerafting adventures in

southern Colorado and southern Utah on a variety of waterways, from Durango’s Animas River to the McPhee Reservoir (Colorado’s second-largest lake) and whitewater sections of the Dolores River. These alternating “surf and turf” adventures include cycling

BIKERAFTING, Page N14

Learning how to navigate life while bikerrafting

►BIKERAFTING

Continued from Page N11

sections (on remote roads and gravel or dirt paths) with camping gear and inflatable rafts loaded onto mountain bikes, and paddling legs with camping gear and disassembled bikes packed on to the rafts.

Bikerrafting developed from people's desire to access the wilderness. Bikerafting pioneer Roman Dial first strapped his mountain bike on an inflatable boat while exploring and hunting in Alaska during the late 1980s. Later, mountain bikers used rafts for ferrying their bikes during adventure races or long-distance wilderness bikepacking trips. Fassbinder, a multisport adventurer, got into it because of the wild places it could take him, letting him link bigger landscapes together.

While road tripping last summer, Sam and I signed up for a three-day trip that included 35 miles of biking and 5 miles of rafting, a distance that seemed challenging yet doable for an athletic 9-year-old. Sam has a genetic dose of grit, determination, and stubbornness, and our mirrored traits had led to some head-butting that year. This trip would hopefully help us bond — or at least teach us how to better deal with each other.

Since we live near the ocean, we spent a few days in southern Colorado getting used to the heat (temps had already hit the 90s by mid-June) and the altitude, which reaches about 7,000 feet in Mancos, the jumping-off point for our trip. We spent a day mountain biking on steep, intermediate trails in Durango and a day fly fishing on the Dolores River.

Our bikerrafting trip began with a night at Scullbinder Ranch, a magical 35-acre property located about 30 minutes from Mancos down a dusty, bumpy road (my Mini Cooper made it fine). It borders Mesa Verde National Park, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Park, and federally protected land. Here, Fassbinder and Scully have built a rustic cabin, glamping yurts, and a stunning lodge using one-of-a-kind materials, from repurposed shipping containers to the flooring from Mama Cash's home — the same lakefront property in Hendersonville, Tenn., where Johnny Cash recorded his last five albums.

We spread our gear on a tarp and spent hours figuring out what to bring and how to pack it onto our bikes — no small feat. Little by little we pared down our selection until we could fit our supplies — meaning food, a water filter, a mini stove and cookset, sleeping bags, camping mattresses, a raft, one change of clothes each, and a tent — onto our bikes' handlebars, in bags that attached to our bike frames and saddle posts, and in small daypacks that we would wear while riding. We probably had 60 pounds between us, though I carried more of the load to ease up on Sam.

Fassbinder and Scully's friend Thad Ferrell, also a guide, and his 14-year-old son Wally joined us on the trip so Sam



Steve Fassbinder, co-owner of Four Corners Guides (left), Thad Ferrell, a fly fishing and wilderness guide (middle), and the author's 9-year-old son Sam Wright bike up a hill in southern Colorado. Right: a rustic camping spot off the grid in the San Juan National Forest.



would have a buddy. We set off and biked 16 miles along quiet county roads, listening to the clicking of cicadas in fields where chicory wildflowers grew and enjoying the spicy scent of scrub oak. Mountains came in and out of view, including Hesperus, the tallest mountain in the La Plata range and considered one of four sacred mountains to the Navajo people, according to Fassbinder.

Pavement soon turned to dusty, gravelly roads fully exposed to the sun, and the terrain grew hillier. We found shade under a bridge and occasional patches of trees. Our journey nearly unraveled after one big climb, miles into the trip, when Sam refused to snack even though he was clearly hitting the wall.

We pulled over, sat in the shade of a scrub oak, and watched cattle crossing the road. Fassbinder and Ferrell matter-of-factly talked to Sam about the need to take in calories and water on such an ambitious ride — for the benefit of oneself and the group — and the importance of conserving energy.

Think of a balloon full of energy, Fassbinder explained. "You just have to sip off that energy balloon — don't take big gulps or it will be empty."

The chat prompted Sam to finally eat and stop hammering the hills. Sometimes these points resonate better when they don't come from Mom.

We ended the day at a small watering hole in the San Juan National Forest, where we filtered water while the

boys skipped pieces of dry earth across the pond's surface. Then we pitched our tents in grassy fields beneath aspen and ponderosa pines. Wally identified all the birds we could see and hear around us — among them the Mountain Bluebird and Brewer's Blackbird — while Sam learned how to light the camp stove for our packaged dinners and whittled an arrow for Wally's homemade bow.

The next morning, we rode 10 miles through forests along Dry Canyon Road, ending with a high-speed winding descent to McPhee Reservoir. Fassbinder showed us how to inflate our durable nylon raft and securely load bikes and packs onto its bow.

Transitioning from raft to bike proved no big deal — just attach your wheels, secure the folded-up raft to the handlebars, throw on your backpack, and go. The bike-to-raft transition proved a little trickier. Blowing up the raft using an inflation bag (essentially a large stuff sack with a nozzle that attached to the raft) took time and patience — something hard to come by in

the 100-degree heat.

"Can you do it, Mom?" Sam asked, while I prepped our bikes and other gear.

"You gotta saddle your own bronco," Fassbinder interjected. "It's called the price of admission."

Sam took the inflation bag and squeezed it hard to try to speed up the process. It didn't take long to inflate — the sporty little streamlined boat only measured about 9 feet long by 3 feet wide.

Once the raft was inflated, we had to splash cool water all over it — causing the air pressure to decrease — and then blow it up a bit more to so it was rigid enough to support our load. We used rubber alligator straps — the same ones that hold skis together — to fasten the bikes to the raft's handy grab loops, and then secured our backpacks to the bikes. We hardly noticed the stack of gear once we got underway.

With Sam up front, we paddled the nimble boat into a stiff breeze and then hugged the shore as we made our way southeast along sandstone cliffs. The

boat turned easily and proved effortless to paddle despite the weight — as long as Sam and I worked together.

After a short stop at Pirates Cove, where we jumped in the water to cool off, I could tell Sam had lost his usual spark. We each had our own oar and paddled on opposite sides of the raft — canoe-style — but we also had the option of using a kayak paddle, which meant one person at the helm. Sam didn't have the strength to propel the raft on his own for long and when I offered to take over the paddling, he wouldn't have it.

"I want to paddle, too," he insisted.

We continued paddling together, zig-zagging down the reservoir at a creeping pace, my strokes overpowering Sam's. Frustrating, yes, but I understood his desire to pitch in and be a part of our journey.

After 3.5 miles, we pulled up to a small clearing where we unloaded the rafts. We scrambled up a hillside and pitched our tents on flat spots among the trees with clear views of the reservoir, not a soul around for miles. We snuggled in the tent and chatted about the day, and Sam marveled at the idea of sleeping without a rainfly — something we don't normally do in the Northwest. We fell asleep counting shooting stars.

The final day, we continued paddling down the reservoir, watching the steep embankments transform into rounded hills with a shoreline blanketed in sandstone boulders and logs. We pulled the rafts onto shore next to House Creek Campground and, after a cooling plunge in the reservoir, packed up our supplies onto our reassembled bikes.

We pedaled another hot and dusty 7.5 miles up and down steep hillsides and along singletrack overlooking the reservoir. At the top of one hill, Sam stopped and said, "I'm almost wishing for rain, and you may only ever hear me say that once or twice."

"Grab your water bottle and chug it or when you stand up you'll get a headrush," said Wally, who clearly grew up in a place that only gets 12 inches of rain a year.

The trail climbed up onto a ridge and eventually took us through tall grassy fields before dropping us into the town of Dolores (population 825), our ending point.

We finished the trip with a peaceful night back at Scullbinder Ranch. I can't say that Sam sat back and reflected on the trip — he was too busy urging Fassbinder to take him mountain biking around the property — but maybe the struggles my mini adventurer faced will help him as he grows and learns to survive tough situations without falling into the cracks. As a parent, I'll remember not to pressure him to give up his oar so we can share more moments together — in perfect sync or not. Or maybe next time I'll let him take the helm.

Kari Bodnarchuk can be reached at travelwriter@karib.us.