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Canyons, caves, and Hoover Dam above it all

By Kari J. Bodnarchuk

BOULDER CITY, Nev. - We stood at the base of Hoover Dam looking up at a concave cement wall that rose 70 stories above us and was almost as thick as it was tall: 660 feet at its base by 727 feet high. Electrical towers along a ridge on either side of the dam protruded at dramatic angles out over the canyon, the turbines, and the river below. Four tunnels disappeared into the canyon's red rock walls.

"Each spillway tunnel can hold three Niagara Falls," Donny Hardin, a guide with Boulder City Outfitters, said as we loaded up our kayaks for a paddling adven-

Hoover Dam is an engineering marvel, and few people have the opportunity to view it from this angle. Only kayakers and rafters with special permits and licensed tour operators may access the boat launch at the base of the dam.

But it's the natural scenery along this stretch of the Lower Colorado River that draws paddlers, from beginners to experts, year-round to this kayaking wonderland just 35 miles from the Vegas Strip. On this daylong adventure, we would leave most man-made structures behind and make our way south along the river to Willow Beach, Ariz., 121/2 miles away. Our group of 10 would paddle through Black Canyon, with its walls that loomed 1,500 feet above us, and past deep canyons, hot springs, and thermal

It soon became apparent why this is Boulder City Outfitters' most popular trip — so popular, in fact, that it runs every day, yearround, with the exception of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's. Boulder City Outfitters is one of only four companies permitted to run kayaking trips between Hoover Dam and Willow Beach, in the Lake Mead National Recreation Area. No more than 30 boats are allowed on the water each day.

Boulder City Outfitters provided all our gear, including stable, two-person kayaks, dry bags, water, snacks, and lunch. (I would

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Donny Hardin, a guide with Boulder City Outfitters, leads a group through the Black Canyon on the Lower Colorado River.

recommend bringing paddling gloves, if you have them, and spare dry bags, since there are not always enough to go around.)

After launching, a pleasant, steady tailwind helped propel us south, as we slipped out of view of the dam and into a region where the cliff walls ranged from red, yellow, and white to black, and looked rough and chiseled like a sculptor's first draft.

Granite boulders dotted the shore, looking out of place in a landscape of limestone, sandstone, and volcanic rock. They were from the Black Mountains, 10 miles away, but had been washed down here during floods.

"The water in here can fluctuate from 3 to 10 feet in a day, depending on the rainfall or release of water [from the dam]," Hardin said. "Fifteen thousand gallons of

water flows through here per second," about the amount you would find in an average swimming pool.

What does remain stable is the water temperature, which is 54 degrees year-round because it comes from the bottom of nearby Lake Mead and doesn't have time to warm up before it gets here.

We occasionally stopped paddling and let the swift, flatwater current push us downstream. Often, an opening appeared in the canyon walls, revealing a narrow side canyon that carved away from us and disappeared out of sight. Many of these side canyons offer stunning hikes that lead to hot springs, thermal pools, and great camping spots.

Purplish, watermelon-shaped red barrel cactus clung to the cliffs and grew out at odd angles, and wispy, green bushes sprouted in

clusters along the embankments. Hardin was quick to point out that these attractive bushes, called tamarisk or saltcedar, were origi-

nally imported to prevent erosion

and are now hugely invasive

weeds that have taken over certain areas of the Southwest. "They suck up enough water to feed an acre of corn for a year," he

One of the only relics of human life along our route was the crumbled remains of several catwalks and an old gauging station, a little building attached to the side of a cliff. The station was used by engineers, or gaugers, in the 1920s to measure the water flow and silt

spot for a dam. "The Bureau of Reclamation wanted to build a series of dams to harness the snowmelt of the Colorado Rockies," said Hardin. "The engineers were trying to see what they were getting themselves in-

content, to see if this was a viable

We also spotted several rusty metal rings attached to rocks along the embankments. These were used by steamboats in the mid-1880s to help them maneuver through the rapids in this narrow canyon, where they had little control and no room for mistakes. The crew would tie rope around the rings and winch their steamboat upriver.

We hadn't the time, but normally kayakers stop every hour or two to visit places like Sauna Cave, where a hot spring runs through a man-made hole in the mountain (created by engineers doing thermal energy research) and creates a misty, steam-bath effect. They can

stop, too, at rain caves and be showered by 100-degree water from the cave's waterfalls and thermal activity, and Boy Scout Canyon, which has petroglyphs and five waterfalls one can climb using fixed ropes.

As we drifted downriver, Stephanie Lantz, another guide, pointed out Gold Strike Canyon, which quickly came into view and then slipped out of sight. For those with time, this side canyon offers a good 3½-mile, relatively technical hike - that is, requiring bouldering and scrambling skills — that leads to three hot springs with waterfalls, and ends at a large natural

Eventually, we pulled over at Arizona Hot Springs, about 31/2 miles south of Hoover Dam, and hiked through a narrow red rock canyon, occasionally scrambling up slick rocks or stopping to look at calcium deposits that created fantastic flower-burst designs on several rocks. We followed the warm, shallow stream up to a hot springs pool tucked away in a nook of the canyon.

After a quick lunch stop on a sandy beach, we continued paddling south and soon passed a second gauging hut and the only other sign of life here. At least a dozen double-crested cormorants perched on a cable that reached across the canyon, watching our group of mellow, sun-kissed kayakers paddle the final stretch to Willow Beach.

Contact Kari Bodnarchuk, a freelance writer and photographer in Somerville, at travelwriter@

If you go . . .



What to do

These companies offer kayaking trips on the Lower Colorado River vear-round.

Boulder City Outfitters

1631 Industrial Road Boulder City, Nev. 800-748-3702 www.bouldercityoutfitters.com Offers guided, half-day (\$100 per person) and full-day (\$150) trips, with pickups on the Vegas Strip, from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Price includes lunch and rentals.

Desert River Kayak

2649 Highway 95, Suite 23 Bullhead City, Ariz. 888-529-2533 www.desertriveroutfitters.com\ Self-guided day and overnight kayak trips between Hoover Dam and Willow Beach for beginner to experienced paddlers; day trips, \$55 per person; two- to three-day overnights, \$85 per person, includes rentals. Guided trips also can be arranged for an additional \$125 per group.

Desert Adventures

1557 Foothill Drive, A108 Boulder City, Nev. 702-510-4746 www.desertadventureslv.com Runs day and overnight trips between Hoover Dam and Willow Beach for \$45-\$55 per person (one day) and \$60-\$95 per person (two days), plus \$15-\$30 for each additional day; children under age 14 are half price.

Jerkwater Canoe and Kayak

PO Box 800, Topock, Ariz. 928-768-7753 www.jerkwater.com Offers self-guided one- to threeday trips between Hoover Dam and Willow Beach for \$68 per person (if launching at Hoover Dam) or \$58 per person (if launching at Willow Beach); includes rentals.

Permits Black Canyon/Willow Beach

River Adventures Hacienda Hotel and Casino Highway 93. Boulder City. Nev. 702-293-8204 (294-1414), 800-455-3490 www.blackcanvonadventures.com Each kayaker must obtain a \$13 launch permit through Black Canvon Adventures before signing up for a trip with an outfitter. Permits must be arranged at least 14 days before your trip.



