

Rogue River, Oregon

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How can a river named Rogue have such an agreeable personality? Though it dishes out plenty of whitewater excitement, the Rogue's craggy banks are sweetened by the blossoms of wild azaleas. Its evergreen forests open to sun-dappled meadows and golden sandbars. Otters caper in velvety rappid; killdeer and water ouzels parade gravel bars; and steelhead trout flash like strands of silver in its emerald pools. The place is as amenable as it is dramatic.

The explanation for the Rogue's unusual charm is simple. After tumbling from the mile-high southern Oregon Cascades into pastoral softness around Grants Pass, the river awakens for one last brawny task: to cut its way straight through the Coast Range to the Pacific Ocean. The result is a canyon blessed with the low-elevation lushness of a coastal ecosystem but the whitewater and rugged setting of a mountain stream, not to mention a community of wildlife to rivals Noah's.

Already rich in history, the Rogue River Canyon became known to Americans everywhere through the writing of famed author Zane Grey. Then in 1968, the isolated, 34 mile stretch from Grave Creek landing to Foster Bar became one of the eight original wild and scenic rivers designated by Congress, providing even more enticement for the thousands of rafters and kayakers who now vie for permits to run its Class II and IV rapids.

The three or four-day trip begins where the road ends, not far from the hamlet of Galice, Oregon. The usual launch-site chaos prevails, with dry bags, oars, driftboats, rafts, coolers, and kayakers strewn around like an oversized yard sale. Sometimes a contingent from a kayak school arrives, ready to combine four days of whitewater instruction with one of the West's finest multi-day river trips. Other groups are led by commercial outfitters, professional fishing guides, or self-guided rafters and kayakers.

And some people look as if they just don't have enough gear. Where are their tents, sleeping bags, cooking equipment? The answer reveals one of the Rogue's most attractive features: the best lodge-to-lodge paddling in the western United States.

Six lodges—the legacy of mining, ranching, and trapping camps—offer a rare opportunity to run a remote river with all the amenities. Black Bar Lodge, a 1930s log ranch house surrounded by flower beds and an inviting lawn, is nine miles from the put-in. Marial Lodge at Mile 20 is the last vestige of a mining town where 250 people once received mail. Paradise Lodge, around Mile 24, is the biggest operation on the river and attracts tourists motoring upstream as well as river runners heading down. Half Moon Br Lodge is just below Paradise, Clay Hill is around Mile 30, and Illahee Lodge is less than a mile from the take-out at Foster Bar.

Whether loaded with full camping gear or packing only a credit card and a toothbrush, everyone gets an immediate taste of the canyon's roguish character. Class III Grave Creek Falls, a few yards from the launch, provides a welcome transition from the bustle of the put-in to the rhythm of a multiday wilderness trip. After Grave Creek, the cars disappear from view and all eyes turn downstream.

Down the "Fish Ladder"

Within two miles, paddlers begin to hear a gut-tightening roar coming from downstream. An unmistakable mist rises from the river, and idle conversation peters out. Dead ahead lies Rainie Falls. “In one clean, quick leap the Rogue plunges 15 vertical feet over a ledge,” writes Roderick Nash in *The Big Drops*. “At the bottom is a frightening spectacle: a chaos of white, churning water that on first glance appears destined to swallow and hold any boat exposed to it.”

Lest a first timer panic, only a few experts actually run Rainie Falls. Everyone else lines or bumps boats down the rocky “fish ladder” along the right bank or runs the narrow dory chute in midriver. But Rainie still leaves an indelible impression on the mind of anyone who has contemplated it firsthand.

After Rainie, the Rogue “regains its composure, as Nash says, at least temporarily. If the afternoon is hot, a dip in the clear river feels great after the hard work of lining around Rainie. The valley grows deeper, and low cliffs frame the river channel. Daggers of sunlight glint off the water ahead and colors intensify as afternoon shadows lengthen. Unless you’re staying at Black Bar Lodge, camp will be at the mouth of one of the clear creeks like Whiskey, Russian, or Missouri.

Rogue place names, along with the many abandoned cabins, graves, and mines on its banks, remind visitors of the canyon’s history. Tye Bar, site of the next significant rapid, was once the workplace for hundreds of Chinese miners who took an estimated \$5 million worth of gold from the area. A 19th-century cabin stands a few yards up Whiskey Creek, and many more lie in ruins in meadows along the river.

“This is My Country”

The demise of the region’s Native Americans is perhaps the most poignant of the stories. Takelma Indians, whom European arrivals called the Rogues, lived on the river’s sun-dappled “bars” such as Winkle, Blossom, and Half Moon. They flourished until a tide of trappers and gold miners began creeping upstream from the Pacific, and inevitable conflicts broke out. By the 1850s, hostilities had escalated into a series of battles called the Rogue River Wars.

In May 1856, a Rogue chieftain named John led his people in a final attempt to remain in their beloved canyon. He refused to leave for a reservation in northern Oregon, telling U.S. military authorities, “This is my country; I was in it when those large trees were very small, not higher than my head. My heart is sick with fighting, but I want to live in my country.” On May 27, he and his warriors held the troops at bay during the daylong Battle of Big Bend, just downstream of the take-out at Foster Bar. The Indians were eventually overwhelmed when Army reinforcements arrived. Chief John was the last to surrender.

In the big pool at Mile 15, boaters pull out to make a pilgrimage to the neat little cabin at Winkle bar. In 1926, Zane Grey, a onetime semiprofessional baseball player turned popular Western writer, bought this place. An ardent angler, Grey fell in love with the Rogue for its beauty as well as its splendid steelheads. He returned often until his death in 1939 and immortalized the river in *Rogue River Feud*.

Attention soon turns back to whitewater as Mule Creek Canyon approaches at Mile 21 just past Marial Lodge. A stark, dramatic cleft several hundred yards long, Mule Creek is not so much a rapid as a funnel where turbulence churns so unpredictably that one spot is called the Coffeepot. River guides are careful not to get their boats wedged sideways between Mule Creek’s narrow walls.

The trip is more than half over at this point, and by now everyone has a wildlife story – of a she-bear and her cub spotted along the bank, a deer swimming across the river right in front of a raft. One lucky boater caught a rare glimpse of a mountain lion as it lapped a drink from the river, and *everyone* heard those coyotes last

night. Blue and ruffed grouse roam the surrounding forests, and wild turkeys have been seen. And the otters! No creature ever seemed to be having so much fun.

The Pinball Machine at Blossom Bar

A few short miles downstream of Mule Creek Canyon, all boaters wordlessly pull in to the right bank to scout ahead. A line of boulders guards what appears to be the end of the river. This is Blossom bar, the most challenging rapid run on the trip; indeed, Blossom Bar was unrunnable until legendary river guide Glen Wooldridge literally blew it apart with dynamite to make a clear passage. Even so, the rapid resembles a pinball machine. Enter far left. Pull *hard* right. Cross fingers, clear nasty rock. Reverse direction and head left. Do a few more quick maneuvers, then exhale. And cheer.

Blossom Bar is the last big rapid. Just downstream, paradise Lodge, the busiest on the river, slips by high on the right bank. Big, shallow-draft powerboats loaded with tourists pass by on their way upstream to Paradise for the lodge's famous fried-chicken lunch buffet.

It's still another 12 miles to the take-out, and though the spell of wilderness has faded ever so slightly, the Rogue's charm has not. There is Huggins Canyon, steep walled and dramatic like Mule Creek. Fall Creek Falls spills into the river down a series of mossy ledges. Staircases lead up the dark banks to the four other lodges, and steelhead fisherman nod to passing paddlers between casts.

All too soon the incongruous sight of sun glaring off parked cars heralds the Foster Bar take-out. When everything is packed for the trip home, the visitor returns to the river's edge for one last look. A friend's words to Keven, the fictitious hero of Zane Grey's *Rogue River Feud*, sum up the inescapable conclusion: "Who would ever tire of the music and the beauty of a running river? Especially the Rogue! It's the best in the world, Kev."