

River News & Views

Feeding the Rat

I'd wondered about Linville Gorge off and on since I was 16 or 17 and had heard about the McEwan brothers, Tom and Jamie, running this stretch of nastiness. There were rumors of broken boats (this being the pre-plastic era), mega-portages, and a night or two spent in the Gorge enroute to the end of the run. I had gone to high school in Morgantown and was familiar with the Gorge through backpacking and climbing trips. I had started paddling whitewater at age 11 and knew enough to wonder why two of the best paddlers in the world would even undertake such a task.

The Linville River Gorge, from the put-in directly below Linville Falls to the take-out at NC 126, is 17 miles long. The total drop on this section is 1,880 feet—an average gradient of 110 feet per mile. This gradient is not skewed by any large waterfalls; it is steep but steady with no single drop over 20 feet. The first 5.5 miles from the put-in to Babel Tower Trail averages 95 feet per mile drop—a mere warm-up for the next section. Mr. Gravity owns the five miles from Babel Tower to Chimney Branch, which falls at a rate of 208 feet per mile. The lower section down to NC 126 has a few head bangers at the beginning, but quickly cools down to less than 60 feet per mile as it flows out of the Gorge. A half mile below 126 the river runs into Lake James.

The river's headwaters are within the Grandfather Mountain watershed. From there it runs quietly for several miles. Before reaching Linville Falls it is dammed twice by the developmental types. The run is almost entirely within the Linville Gorge Wilderness Area, an 11,000-acre corridor encompassing both sides of the river. This protected, pristine country is

surrounded by Pisgah National Forest.

The river gets its name from an explorer who, along with his son, was killed beside it in 1766. The Gorge is formed by Jonas Ridge on the east and Linville Mountain on the west. In many places the gorge rims are 2,000 feet above the river. Tablerock, Hawksbill, and Shortoff mountains, popular climbing areas, are all visible from the river. The Cherokee name for the river was Eeseeh, "a river of many cliffs." Between Linville Falls and Hwy. 126 there are several trails entering the Gorge. These trails originate on NC 105, a dirt road on the western rim running the length of the Gorge, and on SR 1230, which runs along part of the eastern rim. Most of the

possibility of a one-day blitz down the river. Toward that end, R.B., Dennis Huntley, Alex Harvey, and I began to bite off chunks of the lower Gorge last spring. After becoming somewhat familiar with the lower 10 miles, we decided to give it a go. On June 18, R.B., Alex, and I set out and found ourselves at the base of Linville Falls. The sun was breaking over the mountains and through the mists as we headed downriver. Twelve and a half hours, 17 miles, and 13 portages later we completed the run. We were, to quote Leonard Cohen, "aching in the places where we used to play."

The trip was exhausting mentally and physically. The Class IV+ and V+ rapids are far too numerable to count. Most of the trip was a blur.

We agreed that none of us had ever been on more intense water. (This comes from a group with more than 50 years of combined paddling experience all over the country.) The river is boulder strewn with limited downstream vision for mile after mile. Undercut rocks rule on the Linville. It seemed that most of the serious drops (read 40-50) were undercut, some in critical places. The potential for vertical pins is huge, though luckily we had none. Squirt boating is not spoken in Linville Gorge.

Of the 13 drops we portaged, a few were 100 yards long, but the majority were single-drop carries of 10-20 yards. The mental strain of concentrating so long on hitting good lines in water of this caliber proved extremely stressful, and compounded the physical wear and tear.

Aside from the obvious experience and boat handling skills necessary, I would recommend the following conditions for any one-day trip through the Gorge. Warm weather: You're in and out of your boat so often scouting, portaging,



DAVID BENNER

The stuff of legends.

trails climb steeply, ascending 1,500 to 2,000 feet in only one or two miles. Once you're well into the Gorge a picture-perfect evacuation to the nearest hospital is probably three to five hours away.

Sixteen or 17 years have passed since the McEwan's trip through the Gorge. In that span, approximately two to four groups have completed the run. All of these were multi-day trips, with one group carrying 18 rapids and another portaging two or three miles of the steepest water. Over the past two years R.B. Binegar and I had talked of the

and pondering your sanity that you are bound to be chilled in cooler weather. Daylight: A minimum of 15 hours is mandatory. Prior knowledge of the river: This saves scouting time, eliminates some scouting, decreases portage time, and generally increases your confidence. Know your partners: On innumerable drops only one of us scouted, as it saved time. You must know and trust your companions to blindly jump (albeit with explicit if not hysterical instructions) into a Class IV+ fray with only verbal cues. Know the trail system: This is mandatory for evacuation, aborted trips, or camping. Proper conditioning: Your strength and endurance (both CV and muscular) levels should be well above average; if not, you're guaranteed to cause problems for yourself and your partners.

If the lower Meadow is a yawner, and Overflow and North Chickamauga creeks no longer provide serious gut checks, try Linville Gorge. We all agreed the adrenaline rat was well fed at the end of this day. —David Benner

Service Profiles

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Unicorn Rafting Expeditions, Brunswick, Maine, offers a variety of kayak trips to Europe, as well as rafting on Maine's Penobscot, Dead, and Kennebec rivers, and New York's Moose and Hudson. Canoe expeditions in Maine's north woods are also offered. Unicorn's European trips are on Austria and Switzerland's Inn River, the Verdon in France, on the island of Corsica, and other rivers in Europe. For additional information, contact Unicorn Rafting Expeditions, P.O. Box 1, Brunswick, ME 04011; or circle number 383 on the *River Runner* reader service card.

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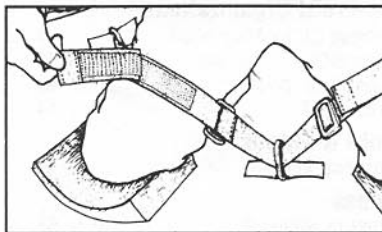
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