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the rich coast Costa Rica kite-boarding

BIGWEDNESDAY (revisited)
CALIFORNIA'S MONSTER DECEMBER SWELL

CLOUDBREAK TAVARUA

COLORADO RIVER
CANOE ADVENTURE

take me to the RIVER

**A rock hound turns river rat on the
mind-blowing waters of the Colorado**

**By Laura Bylund
Photos by Rod Tucknott**

I run the rock-climbing portion of an outdoor program, which means that when I head into the backcountry I travel light and don't get a lot of time out on the water. This past November, though, I was given the opportunity to leave my comfort zone to take part in about as watery of a trip as you can imagine — a canoe trip down the Colorado River.

It was a great opportunity and I was really excited until at a pre-trip meeting my boss said, "There's no real such thing as 'dry' on the Colorado River Canoe Trip, just varying degrees of dampness." Three days of varying degrees of dampness? This might suck.

Canoeing down the Colorado River is best described as a car camping and backpacking trip combined, which has its benefits, none better than the advantage of a boat over a backpack. You can pack a canoe full of interminable amounts of gear and equipment and no matter the weight, only two people are needed to forward them considerable distances.

On this particular trip through Black Canyon in the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, we put in at Willow Beach Marina and prepared for an eight-

mile "trek" upstream to the bast campsite. Hiking this distance normally limits your gear to a small handheld stove, freeze-dried food, a lightweight tent, rain gear and the clothes on your back. A 3x17' canoe, however, allows you to take coolers, two-burner stoves, big dome tents, EZ ups, tables and chairs — a truly luxurious camping experience in my opinion. Boats are awesome!

We were all little intimidated by the long paddle upstream as in our pre-trip meeting back in Santa Barbara, we were warned that, "You may start to hate your partner by the end of it." It didn't help that as we stood riverside with paddles in hand another party took off from Willow Beach getting towed in a canoe-train by a motorboat. Where was our motorboat?

Fortunately, the wind, water and weather gods were on our side that first day and throughout. It was a mellow morning spent mostly figuring out the communication between front paddlers and back drivers and getting to know the maneuverings of the canoe itself. We all had it down by early afternoon and reached the lunch stop before we



Spread: Glassy conditions on the water in Black Canyon.
Inset: Canoeing on the Colorado River can be a communal or quiet experience.

were even hungry.

Our campsite, though, wasn't love at first site. We beached the boats and beheld a bustling tent metropolis of people, pit toilets, fire rings, canopied kitchens and, even an American flag. This is the best campsite?

We found space for our group of 20, dropped our dry bags and trekked back to the boats to unload. Big Rubbermaid bins of food, kitchen equipment, water jugs and coolers, coolers, coolers ... teamwork everyone!

Once we laid out our sleeping quarters and the kitchen area, we had just enough time for a big pre-dinner surprise. A few dozen feet from our campsite was a trailhead leading to an absolutely enchanting hike through a slot canyon. There were bursts of warm air around every corner and the stream at our feet was noticeably warmer than the river water. Soon we came to a rusty cable ladder up a small waterfall. I didn't stop to question its integrity, way too invested and curious at this point. I just scaled it and rejoiced in finding steaming sulfurous pools. I had found hot spring heaven!

There were three pools varying in degrees of hotness. Our group filled the middle pool and I was delighted to not be outnumbered by naked old men, a creature I find most hot springs to contain. It was glorious in the water but unfortunately I was on the first dinner crew and had to leave earlier than every one else. I resolved to come back later that night, a decision that turned out to be one of the best experiences of the trip.

After a hearty pasta dinner I returned to a now empty hot spring haven. With no conversation to overpower the sensation, the water seemed a little softer, a little warmer, the trickle louder, and the canyon walls closed in overhead to create a crescent view of the night sky.

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Spread: This clean, clear water flows through the Hoover Dam from the bottom of Lake Mead.
Top: A kayaker and friend enjoy a day of paddling on the Colorado River.
Middle: Fishermen rejoice on Sundays and Mondays when no motorboats are allowed in the area.
Bottom: The author shares one of many good laughs with a fellow paddler.



It was as if the constellations were smiling at me.

I returned to my tent quite literally a happy camper and, despite the loud group of the beer drinkers in the camp adjacent ours, slept like a baby. They couldn't possibly penetrate peaceful dreams of floating down the Colorado River with birds chirping and fish surfacing to feed, together with the trickling of the hot springs. As I drifted off to sleep, I had no idea there would be more surprises in store. Many more.

We woke early the next morning to prepare for a long day of upstream paddling. Our destination: the Hoover Dam. I had never seen the great dam from a water view before and was pretty excited. It was another calm morning of paddling, singing, and observing wildlife and historical structures. Once, as we stopped to look at an old cliff-side lookout station built for the dam workers, someone spotted something on the opposite side of the river. We all scooted across and fell silent. It's a rare opportunity to see a family of Big Horn Sheep feeding right near the shore.

We floated quietly by and continued on to the dam. The 730' x 1250' concrete slab is a force to be reckoned with and a site to behold from the water. It is composed of 4.36 million cubic yards of concrete, which would have taken 125 years to cool if it had been constructed in one continuous pour. Instead, blocking it together in separate trapezoidal columns and running steel cooling pipes throughout allowed it to cool in just 20 months.

Apparently, it is still curing and gaining strength as time goes on.

We sat there marveling at the engineering feat until a powerful voice announced, "Back AWAY from the blockade." Apparently, in our awestruck state, we let the bow of one of our boats slip a smidge past the floating barrier. Evidently, a big no-no. We paddled on.

Another great surprise was Gold Strike Canyon. The beach there isn't much to look at and you probably wouldn't stop if you didn't know what it had to offer. Luckily, those in the know were guiding us. A short hike from the beach, this canyon boasts a beautiful array of colors you wouldn't think possible in a riparian environment. And I suggest finishing your visit to Gold Strike with a hot spring shower under a green-hued waterfall.

But there's more. Because just when you think there is nothing left to do in Black Canyon on the Colorado River, our guides lead us to another stop on the opposite bank. I remembered my boss saying something about a sauna cave and almost jumped for joy out of my boat. We waded through a small cove that parallels the river and walked up to an inconspicuous hole in the side of the cliff.

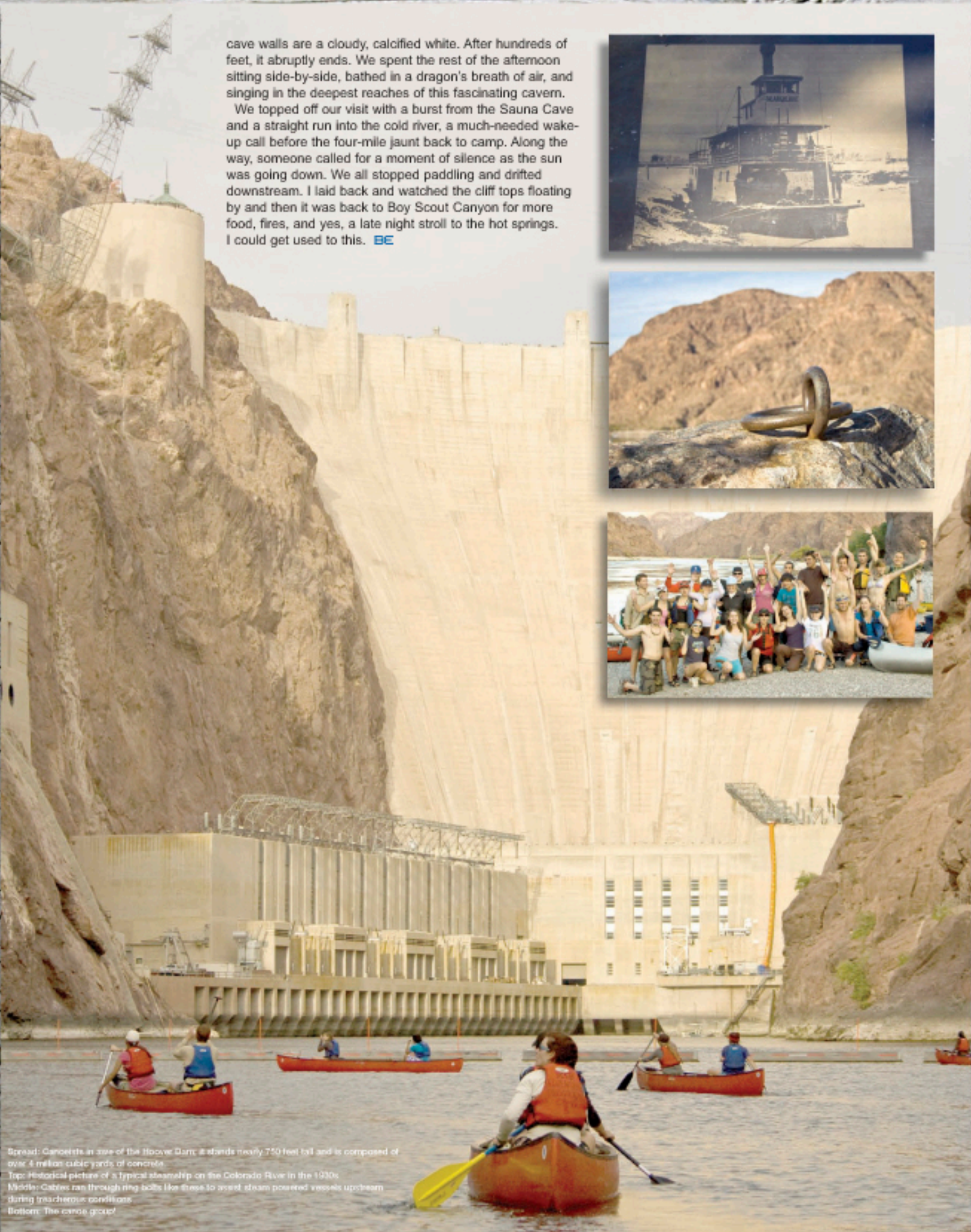
The cave was originally drilled during the building of the dam but was declared unusable for what became obvious reasons. The first step in greets you with an almost suffocating burst of hot air. As you plunge deeper, the heat thickens and the oxygen thins. You find yourself shedding clothing and pouring precious drinking water over your sweat-covered body. The



Top: A special view of Big Horn Sheep on the riverbank.
Middle: Desert wildlife is sometimes right under your nose.
Bottom: A palate of colors in the hot spring waters of Gold Strike Canyon.
Spread: Canoes stacked on the beach at camp for the night.



cave walls are a cloudy, calcified white. After hundreds of feet, it abruptly ends. We spent the rest of the afternoon sitting side-by-side, bathed in a dragon's breath of air, and singing in the deepest reaches of this fascinating cavern. We topped off our visit with a burst from the Sauna Cave and a straight run into the cold river, a much-needed wake-up call before the four-mile jaunt back to camp. Along the way, someone called for a moment of silence as the sun was going down. We all stopped paddling and drifted downstream. I laid back and watched the cliff tops floating by and then it was back to Boy Scout Canyon for more food, fires, and yes, a late night stroll to the hot springs. I could get used to this. [BE](#)



Spread: Canoers in zone of the Hoover Dam; it stands nearly 750 feet tall and is composed of over 4 million cubic yards of concrete.
Top: Historical picture of a typical steamship on the Colorado River in the 1930s.
Middle: Cables run through ring bolts like these to assist steam-powered vessels upstream during treacherous conditions.
Bottom: The canoe group!