

San Juan River from Sand Island to Mexican Hat - October 13-16, 2022

as reported by Karen A.

Pre-Paddle:

In looking for camping at Sand Island, we found all single sites already taken - perhaps due to an Art Fair in Bluff, but we were able to grab Group Site B and that was a good solution. It may be worth reserving it ahead next time we start at Sand Island. The 4 ladies drove back into Bluff to have dinner at Comb Ridge Eat and Drink as it was my birthday. We woke up to heavy frost, dried our tents and bags some, deposited all gear at the put-in, and ran our own shuttle.

It is only an hour round trip, so not worth the high price to hire someone. We did pay Valle's RV Park (3 blocks from the take-out) \$5/car/day, returned in Vit's van to the put-in and prepared to launch. We had 2 U.S. citizens with charming-or-thick accents on the trip. Hugh was originally from Ireland, and Vit grew up in the Ukraine with recent years in Minnesota.

Day 1:

Currently the BLM checks us in a week ahead by phone, so there were no delays at the put-in. Karen had a set of bad things coming in 3's, and the 1st 1 was leaving the gorgeous RiverMaps map in my car as well as the Navajo Permit. We paid \$15/day/person for that so we could camp and hike on the left bank. Luckily others had 3 copies of an older, very basic map book and that sufficed.

We paddled the 4.5 miles to the Butler Wash Petroglyph Panel, landed, viewed the stunning rock work and had lunch. This is the best Indian rock art accessible by river that I know of. 3 of the 8 people had never done this river. Our group was comprised of Roger and Blair in a tandem canoe, Lin and me also in a tandem, Hugh and Vit in solo canoes, Karla in an inflatable (duckie), and Janet in her orange kayak.

We wanted to find the Desecration panels but had no luck. While there are several sources talking about how a nearby Medicine Man decided to cure the local Navajos' set of numerous migraine headaches by taking an ax to the offending petroglyph(s) that were causing this ailment, they do not do a good job of pinpointing the location of this Desecration Panel. Water ranged from 670 to 810cfs during our trip, and this fairly low water kept us away from the left bank. We finally were able to land there and explore briefly, but did not find the panel. Maybe a future trip will focus more on that.

So we continued down the river, looking for an access to the River House on river right at about mile 6. We cut through a camp and down a trail for 1.25 miles round trip to locate the major ruin. There is shorter access somewhere below this, but it is hard to identify. The ruins were very impressive, and can also be accessed via car/hike.

We wanted to camp near Chinle Wash, but the upriver camp was already taken. We took the Big Stick camp on River Right as it is probably the nicest camp on the river and we did not know if the downriver camp would be available or not. Our camp had 6 or 8 almost-secluded tent sites as well as a good beach landing; those are rare. Soon we were serenaded by many burros braying from across the river and 1 that was on our side. Then a dozen plus wild turkeys flew across the river to avoid being near us. Roger serenaded us on his guitar by the campfire and Blair also took a turn at this.

Day 2:

We broke camp quite late (11:00!) due to Fall sun, cool mornings, and a tiring Day 1. Soon we landed at the river left camp just below Chinle Wash (not nearly as nice as Big Stick camp) and all but Janet marched up-creek to find the baseball pictograph. Karla and I had seen it on prior trips and we were close, but went by it on the 1st try. Coming back we were able to find it, several cool granaries, and some structures higher on the cliff. It is about 2 miles (1 way) from the downriver Chinle camp.

See the photos later in this report. It is possible that the baseball pictograph was superimposed on top of an earlier human figure pictograph to remove the earlier item's power. Post-trip research on this site did not give any clues as to its meaning. We ate lunch and continued down the river. 4 Foot Rapid was more challenging than I had remembered, but we all stayed upright. We started looking for a camp site earlier in the day as I did not want to run 8 Foot Rapid late in the day. 2 sites had terrible landings and finally we found a nice long beach that was labeled as a "low water camp" and we took it even though space was a bit tight for 8 tents.

We had our third campfire as we were able to use wood brought from home and supplement it with driftwood and dead branches. More music was provided by Roger, but this time he had us filling in with coyote howls.

Day 3:

We awoke to loud noises that turned out to be 3 people in drone-like flying machines zooming down the river pretty close to the water. Just a mile downriver was the 8 Foot Rapid, and after rock hopping to scout it I had my 2nd mishap while cutting through some tamarisk looking to lead a short hike into the nearby canyon. I took a bad step which caused a sharp stick to stab me 2.5" into my calf. Hugh retrieved his first aid kit from the boat and doctored 2 puncture wounds after Vit pulled the stick out. All boats ran the rapid successfully, but Lin and I bailed water that was 2 or 3" deep.

Now it turned out that everyone was able to do the named rapids - 4 Foot, 8 Foot, and Ledge - successfully but this "siltiest river on earth" would do its revenge by hiding rocks under the surface where they could not be seen. Hugh was playing around at the put-in on Day 3 and a hidden rock flipped him. Janet leaped into rescue mode and helped tow him to shore. And the male tandem was basking in their 8 Foot Rapid success for a mile or 2 when an unseen rock tipped them over. Lin and I managed to mostly avoid several Ledge Rapid rocks, but then the eddy below it grabbed us and we did a balancing act to keep from being thrown over. Karla (duckie) and Janet seemed to have the best boats for the low, dirty water. Vit paddled conservatively.

We had wonderful weather on this trip if you can ignore the initial freeze. The Desert Bighorns were not showing up, but we did see about 20 burros including 4 youngsters on our hike back from Chinle Wash on Day 2. While we wanted to do the River Left camp at 4 miles before the take-out, it was already taken and so we claimed a backup camp on River Right that also had a view of the Mexican Hat Rock. Hugh's landing stuck him in mud so deep that he threw his back out while extricating himself and retired early. Lin and Janet forced me to rest my wounded leg in a chair while they set up my

tent. We saw a few clouds for the first time, and had our final campfire.

Day 4:

The paddle out was easy, and we lined up the boats in front of the Hat Rock several times for pictures. It really does look like a Mexican sombrero on a person. We are told that it has been climbed by people, though it really looks impossible.

I had my 3rd bad thing occur at the take-out when I could not find the car keys. Finally I threw about 6 bags into the back of Janet's car and we parked next to my locked car. I was totally relieved when 1 of the bags held near the door caused it to unlock. An odd pants pocket from the first day still had my key in it. I am told that with these newer models you must find an open car dealer in order to get out of this mess, and that would have been about 240 miles away from us. A spare key may be worth carrying in the future.

Post-Paddle:

We scattered, with Hugh taking Vit and his gear back to Sand Island. Lin and I had lunch at the Twin Rocks Cafe in Bluff, and then who should show up but Vit, Hugh, and Janet. So we relived the trip again and were awed by the beauty of the RiverMap that did not go down the river. Janet and Hugh gave Vit information on what places to visit on his 2 days around Moab before returning to Denver, so I have included his photo of the confluence of the Green and Colorado Rivers from high above. We were all pleased to have done a memorable river trip to close the boating season, and found new friends for future trips.

Photos:

Here we are at the put-in on Sand Island:



6 of us with the main Butler Wash Panel in the background; main panel details:



The River House in Lin's selfie; 2 more River House shots:



Chinle Wash hike with the baseball pictograph, cliff dwellings, and 5 burros:





Blair, Vit, and Roger found a nice lunch bench:



Happy people at camp #2: Roger; Blair and Karla; Hugh and his kitchen; Lin and Hugh:







On the river - - Lin then Vit:





Landing at our camp #3 - Janet then cool geologic formations:





Janet with tent and Mexican Hat Rock followed by 2 more Hat Rock shots:





Vit high above the confluence of the Green and Colorado Rivers post trip:

