

# whitewater rafting

**H**is name was Lando, and my first mistake was calling him Lando Calrissian, the character played by Billy Dee Williams in "The Empire Strikes Back." The look I received from the 6-foot-4, 230-pound former football player was straight Darth Vader.

This Lando knew the force of the Arkansas River and how to steer a giant raft filled with a rag-tag group of adventure seekers. He also knew how to teach us a lesson.

On a gathering of old buddies in Frisco, Colo., we had allowed our ringleader, Patrick, to set up an all-day trip down 22 miles of white-knuckle rapids through the majestic Brown's Canyon.

We wriggled into wet suits, pulled the life jackets tight, sat through the orientation session and plopped ourselves into the raft — laughing, carrying on and demanding action. Less than three minutes later, not 50 feet from where we pushed in and while attempting to "surf" a plume, the boat was tossed and flipped, plunging us all into the beyond-freezing waters of the Arkansas River.

Whether it was a safety lesson, a rescue trial for the other guides or, as I like to think, an attempt to get us back for my silly comment, I held onto my glasses and put the minutes-earlier safety speech into action. Keep your feet up. Hands in. Don't

THAT'S ME AT THE TOP RIGHT OF THE PHOTO — COLD, WET, TERRIFIED

... AND HAVING THE TIME OF MY LIFE **BY MARK LUCE**



swim against the current. People were yelling.

Someone grabbed me and pulled me into the boat. I was shivering, totally freaked out. I badly wanted to bail and salve my wounds with a hot meal on a dry piece of land.

But I didn't. And the remaining 21-plus miles were invigorating, thrilling, scream-inducing and physically demanding. The bumps and jumps through rapids with names such as Siedel's Suckhole (nasty) and Twin Falls (double-plus nasty) were some of the most simultaneously enjoyable and terrifying activities of which I have ever partaken.

I'm not alone. Every year about 9.8 million folks, 3 million of them repeaters, head out into the wild plumes for adventure.

With outfitters and guides all over the country, whitewater rafting is one of the few "extreme" sports you can do with the whole family, and even better, it's affordable. Our all-day run ran us \$69 a head, and included — no kidding — a grilled steak dinner halfway through the trip.

If you're thinking about taking the plunge, make sure to choose your outfitter wisely by researching the subject. When your guide tells you to do something . . . do it. You must have respect for the river and recognize that what you're doing doesn't lend itself to hotshots or hijinks.

If you keep those thoughts in the back of your mind, your experience will be that much better and, perhaps, that much more dry.

Of course, the best part of an exciting day is reliving the entire adventure. Our's was a much-needed long, long soak in the nearest hot tub with cool drinks nearby. And as boys will be boys, I miraculously won the grudge match with Lando in the re-telling of the story.

*Mark Luce lives in Lawrence, Kan., with his wife Jennifer and two children, Miles and Quinton. The most rapids he has seen lately are in the bathtub.*

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