

QUEENSTOWN RAFTING

A week in the life of a grade 5 guide, New Zealand



As we sat on the bank of the Landsborough River we looked over a large, well-known rapid called "Hell Fire". The river was high and we had just scouted the rapid to find the line we wanted to take. We had just finished discussing about 1 or 2 swimmers (people falling out of the boat in the rapid) with Gabby (the Safety Kayaker who stays out in front of the rafts in case there are swimmers) and Jarrod (the gear boat rafter who follows the kayaker down the rapids).

We discussed the paddle boat flipping, which is the boat I'm in charge of, and the possibility of the boat filled with paying clients, flipping. This is the true challenge of Grade 5 Rafting. There is always a discussion of "What if?" and if it's not taken serious it can be fatal.

To give you a better understanding, the paddle boat runs at the back so the safety is there. If anyone was to fall in during the ride through "Hell Fire", they would go a fair bit faster down the river than the raft, as there is less resistance.

As a trip leader I always take the clients in the paddle boat, we do an extensive amount of training and talking about rafting techniques before leaving on the river. A safety talk is followed by a paddle talk, including techniques for swimming aggressively and positively, throw bagging, T-grip rescues, forward paddling, over left/right, and the crowd favourite "Get Down" (which is when you get down in the bottom of the raft as low as you can and hold on very tight).

Once we left the bank, and got back into the rafts, re-joining the clients, we talked about where we wanted to run, and what to do if Plan A turned to Plan B. This was followed by a quick practice of paddle commands before setting off.

Pulling into the current above 'Hell Fire', I have to admit I was confident in getting on the right line (which is being in the easier part of the river, in between the hard bits). The clients had been paddling well; they were quick responding to my commands and had some urgency. They were a good high water crew. We paddled hard into the top of 'Hell Fire' and through the maze of big waves and rocks before we got down into the next big one called "Brimstone".

It was a great run - water was exploding over the raft, and the clients faces buried in the walls of water, and bearing grins from ear to ear, knowing they'd made it! They loved it, they deserved it. They had paddled hard and listened well.

Remembering they are novices that have never been rafting before, they were very humbled in regards to the power of the water. When trying to explain what it is like when you get 'smashed' in the raft by a big wave, it comes across like a big ocean wave dumping on you; or 25 buckets of icy cold water hitting you all at once.

This water is melted glacier snow, from the stunning mountains that surround us. It's the greatest feeling as a tour leader to show people a real time, and you will know it's real when the waters hits you, and you definitely know when you've experienced the raft almost flipping for the first time.



The most nerve wracking part of the week for me, is the day you get the client information. This information refers to their ages, sex, size, medical conditions, dietary requirements, and drinking requirements - the last one is very important for the Aussie and Kiwi clients - believe me you don't want to run out of beer or wine!

We take everyone. As the trip leader I'm responsible for everything in regards to the whole trip; from buying and packing food and packing all the equipment for the 3 days. Safety decisions on the river and timing of activities are all my responsibility.

Once I'd had 10 years under my belt of grade 5 rafting, the nerves in regards to running these trips relaxed a bit, and I realised that for me, this was the ultimate job. 20 years later I am still doing it, and this passion isn't stopping any time soon.

I mean, who gets to spend a day buying food and drinks, packing all the gear into a trailer and getting it readied for a helicopter flight to work? Yes that's right we fly to work. This flight takes us to Top Camp - or 'Toi Toi Flat'.

Rafts, kayak, food, equipment, clients and everything we need for the adventure join us, packed in tight on the 50 kilometres flight through south Westland, where there are no tracks or roads. In our job, we hardly even see other humans. That's pretty rare now-a-days! How cool's that? We spend a night at top camp, followed by a big day of rafting, and then again the 3rd day includes rafting out and then travelling back to Queenstown.

Multiday guides are excellent cooks, but you only get one chance. If you were to burn the Venison hors d'oeuvres - there's no replacements. Dropping the chocolate cake could cause uproar, and you certainly can't risk putting butter in the lactose intolerant scramble eggs.

There is so much to think about, but it's awesome! We have such a good time and the clients are generally amazed by this. After 3 days the clients and guides create a great team.

In regards to learning to raft and kayak, here in New Zealand, we have the Polytechnic - "ITP" Institutes of Technology Polytechnics (similar to TAFE in Australia). They provide a course for Adventure Tourism. You are able to do a 2 year course which involves all sorts of outdoor activities, which you can then specialise in your 2nd year. You can choose to specialise in white water rafting and or kayaking. You generally come away with a Grade 2 or 3 New Zealand Rafting licence. (This is an internationally recognised licence, which has a high standard). Otherwise you can do an advanced white water course of 6 weeks. Both of these courses send you out to work experience. This allows you to show yourself to the companies for future employment.

Once you have done either of these courses there are an amazing amount of rafting operators around NZ. All rivers have their differences of technicality so it takes time to learn the river/rivers, before you are guiding with your own clients. However, everyone's ability and personal drive is different. This is a huge determining factor. Some new guides take 2-3 weeks before they're signed off, others can take up to 4 months or more. Not everyone is meant to be a white water guide. Most companies take on a trainee with the expectation they will be working with them for the next half year, to secure their skill development.

In Australia it is different. Each company will do an in-house training course every 1 or 2 years. It is an in-depth intense course, and at the end of it they will take the best of the group. You then will stay on to finish your in-house training. With the expectation you will be around for a couple of years.

Rafting and safety kayaking is a lifestyle job, which entails an incredible amount of fun, excitement, adrenaline, stress and heart thumping enjoyment. You can use it to travel to many amazing countries for work. The longer you are in the industry the easier it is to be selective of the type of rafting you love. In some countries, their rafting seasons are only short 2-4 months, some 6-8 months, and then there are places which raft all year.

Rivers also change. The water flow determines the technicality; generally the higher the river in volume the more power. The seasons change your river.

Rivers and clients are like a box of chocolates. Always good, but you just don't know what you're going to get! Give us a call, come a long - we're waiting - can't wait to meet ya!
"KC" Gareth Wilson
- senior Trip Leader @ Queenstown Rafting.