

## The Royal Juggernaut

We grabbed our equipment which consisted of a yellow life jacket, river booties and a helmet. I eagerly put my helmet on and was ready to jump right in.

"Your helmet is on backwards, dude!" The hippie rafting guide laughed and scratched at his long matted hair. He had a full beard and blonde mustache. Two bright blue eyes were covered by outdoor style glasses, the ones with the special layer to prevent glare from reflections.

I took the helmet off and fell in line, behind the other rafters for the bus. The bus, which was about 20 years old, was going to take us to a certain spot on the river. There, we would begin our half day rafting excursion.

The sun was bright and warm; it was a perfect day for whitewater rafting.

When we reached our destination, we split into groups and picked up our rafts. They were heavy and I had to use all my strength to lift it. The team and I walked the raft to the gently rolling waters. Cold water flooded my boots, it felt like ice. "Forest", our rafting guide, prompted us in position and we were off onto class IV rapids.

The Royal Gorge cliffs looked like roughly chiseled works of art, especially with sunlight creating triangular shadows from the rocky edges. I nervously tried to steady myself on the raft so I could view the gorge from all angles. Ashy Pine, Aspen and Oak trees were clustered on both sides of the river's rocky edge. It looked as if someone had planted handfuls of trees and then decided it needed more diversity. So he sprinkled Yucca and prickly pear to mix up the monotony.

"Watch out! Row!" Forest yelled at us. Water splashed at my face and for a moment, my vision was gone. When I opened my eyes, I realized I was under the freezing water. Still grasping my paddle, I floated to the surface.

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"Get him! Grab him! Come on, Guys!" someone said.

Two hands grabbed at my life jacket, pulling me back onto the raft.

"Good job, guys! You!" the guide pointed at me. "Pay attention, dude!"

I nodded while I tried to catch my breath. The shock of the cold water coupled with the intensity of the fall had freaked me out.

"Alright, coming up here on your left is what we lovingly call the "Juggernaut!" Forest directed the group on paddling and then we entered the Juggernaut. The rapid violently thrust us into a huge boulder protruding out of the base of the cliff. As we hit the boulder, cold water quickly showered the raft slightly slowed down our paddling. It was the second immersion for me but the first for my rafting team. I heard gasping and yelling from the other team members. Another wave of icy cold water smashed up against on top of us.

"Work together, C'mon!" Forest yelled so loud his voice echoed throughout the canyons. I dug my paddle in against the current, at one point I thought it might snap in half. The raft then bounced away from the boulder, placing us back in the safe flow of the river. We were all silent when a kid in the front screamed "That was awesome!"

"Yeah, that's one of the best ones!" casually agreed the guide. He then went on to talk about other rivers he had rafted, including one in Brazil and Washington State.

That rapid had been exhilarating. At first I was shocked and scared but that quickly dissipated into exhilaration. The euphoric feeling was unlike anything I have ever felt before. At that moment, I felt one with Spirit and nature. I silently gave thanks to the unknown creator for the beauty of the canyon and the high that I felt.

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About 30 minutes and two small rapids later, we floated to the end of the trip. The team stiffly got out of the raft and took positions to carry it back to the rundown bus. We were all silent, probably reflecting on the experience.

Forest patted me on the back "What you're feeling is why I love my job, dude."

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