

RIVER: A little tranquil, a little rough

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1K
waters of the second rapid, shot through a chute and glided to a smooth finish in the pool below. My heart was in my throat — not so much for him as for myself, because I'd already decided I was going to do it as well.

My pass through wasn't nearly as graceful; by some miracle I made it upright to the bottom of the first tier, but those churning waters tossed me from my kayak like a rag doll and I spent some time bouncing along the bottom from rock to rock, popping up from time to time to gasp for air.

Marni sailed through with flying colors in her lightweight teal-and-purple Dagger, the picture of cool — but not before persuading the woman on the bank that we shared her love of the river and would do it no harm. "Have a nice float," she told Marni before finally taking her leave.

It wasn't long before the river restored my equilibrium, floating as I was, suspended between the dog-size catfish below me and the great blue heron sailing back and forth above me. The landscape shifted from sage-green hills to limestone bluffs to sycamore forests and back again, and the red-winged blackbirds trilled from the banks with the liquid notes of a summer afternoon.

The rest of the ride was tranquil, until near the end, when we lost each other in a



DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU SEE: Placid scenes like this one along the Devils River belie the tumult around the next turn.

thicket of reeds. I heard Marni and Karla joking about looking for Moses in a basket; then the river devils reached up from the deep again. I heard the sound of rushing water, and I felt the back of my kayak being pulled in a direction I didn't want to go. I fought to turn myself back around, but it was a losing

battle. Before I knew it, the kayak was smashed up against a tree, tipped to one side and filling with water so quickly I could do nothing but jump out and save myself.

Luckily for me, Karla materialized from nowhere in her tiny red kayak and commenced a one-woman

rescue mission. "Let's let the water work for us," she proposed, and figured out a way to leverage the canoe onto its other side and let the water pour out. I marveled at her 5-foot-2 frame heaving the kayak up like a pack of chopsticks.

This would be the end

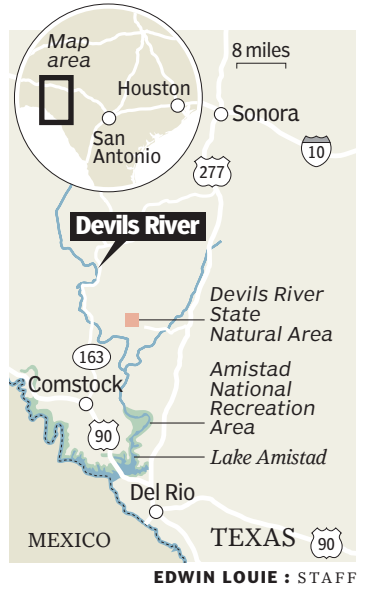
of the story were it not for Marlene Walker and her son Travis. These two genuine river denizens welcomed us to dry land with a friendly smile and a helping hand. Marlene was employed by our outfitter — the only outfitter on the Devils River, as far as we could tell — and they hauled us an hour and a half to where Justin and I had left the truck the day before.

Travis, dressed in his river best with a straw hat, adorned with a turkey feather, and cut-off jeans, clearly belongs to these riverbanks as much as the scrubby sycamores and the rocky bluffs.

"There's no one out here — you get the whole place to yourself, if you know what I



DAINTY: Evening-star rain lilies popped up along the rugged hillsides.



EDWIN LOUIE: STAFF

mean," he said. "Oh, sure, you might get some people here during the 4th of July weekend, but after that, you can do whatever you want because there's no one else out here."

Marlene, for her part, was annoyed by the story of the angry woman who shooed us off her shore. "Our kayakers don't throw trash, and they don't mess up the river," she asserted. "We don't get those types. You gotta work hard to be here. This ain't a float trip, it's a hard day of workin' your way down the river."

Besides taking the photos, Karla Held contributed to this story — and bailed the author out of a serious predicament.

Doing the Devils



KARLA HELD

FOCAL POINT: The towering stalk of the sotol, or Desert Spoon, rises above the West Texas landscape.

Since the Devils River State Natural Area reduced its staff and discontinued its river shuttle service on Sept. 1, one man holds the keys to the kayak business on the Devils River: Gerald Bailey of Devils River Outfitters. It's easy to see why, since he has to drive five hours round trip for each customer. He's been at this for 16 years and knows the terrain like the back of his hand.

The minimum cost for a shuttle is \$300 for an individual or a group of up to six; each additional person pays \$50. Canoe and kayak rental is available, as well.

FLOATS

There are just a few options for kayakers on the Devils River. All time estimates are dependent on river conditions, wind, pace of individual paddlers and experience level:

- **Bakers Crossing to Devils River State Natural Area:** A 15-mile float that averages about nine hours. Water can be shallow in spots, so floaters may have to get out and float the boat and gear for a stretch, but may not need to portage much. Very wild and remote.
- **Devils River State Natural Area to Bailey's ranch:** An eight-mile float that averages four to five hours. This float, the one described in the story, covers Dolan Falls, Three Tier Falls and Indian Springs.

■ **Bailey's ranch to Rough Canyon Marina at Lake Amistad:** A 24-mile float that will require an overnight on one of the islands along the way.

NIGHTS

- **Who Cares Bed & Breakfast:** at the Miers Road ranch of Bailey's associate, Marlene Walker, offers a night's stay, a meal and shuttle. Dinner can also be arranged. Reservations available through Bailey.
- **Primitive camping:** is available along the river at Bakers Crossing. Elsewhere along the river, camping and picnicking must be done on islands in the middle of the river as nearly all the property is private and trespassing is severely discouraged.
- **Camping along the river:** at the Devils River State Natural Area is by reservation and allowed for one night only. Off-river camping is available at a site 1.5 miles from the river, and you can camp there as long as you like. Reservations must be made in advance through the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's central reservations line, 512-389-8900.

DETAILS

- **Dolan Falls:** This is a spectacular sight along the way but can be dangerous, so keep an eye out for it. Most paddlers will want to get out and portage here.
- **Best times to visit:** March through June and September through November.
- **Booking:** Contact Gerald Bailey to plan your trip, 830-395-2266.

— TRACY L. BARNETT



TRACY L. BARNETT: SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS

CARRY ALONG: Karla Held hefts her lightweight Dagger kayak over her head for easy transport.

TEXAS CALENDAR

Texas wine trail

Twenty-two wineries from across the Hill Country are participating in the Texas Wine Month Passport Trail, which continues through Oct. 31. Sniff, swirl and sip your way across the region. Visit 12 wineries, receive their individual passport stamp and qualify for the grand and reserve prize drawings. **Learn more and buy tickets (\$35) at www.texaswinetrail.com.**

Foodies in Fredericksburg

Enjoy a Gargantuan Great Grape Toss and join gourmet chefs from the Hill Country at Fredericksburg's annual Food & Wine Fest on Saturday. Musical entertainment also is on the agenda. **Visit www.fbgfoodandwinefest.com; call 866-839-3378.**

Gruene Clay Festival

More than 60 Texas artisans will display their wares at the 16th annual Clay Festival Saturday and Oct. 26 in the Gruene Historical District. **Visit www.texasclayfestival.com; call 830-629-7975.**

Fall fest in Bastrop

Learn how to make pine needle baskets and decorate pumpkins 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Saturday during the Bastrop State Park Fall Festival in Bastrop. Costumes are encouraged. **Consult www.friendsoflostpines.org; call 512-321-2101.**

Jefferson smorgasbord

Savor "A Taste of Jefferson" on Oct. 26 when the East Texas town converts Austin Street into one large restaurant. Sample food from the city's best eateries. **Access www.jefferson-texas.com; call 903-665-2672.**

Art Past Dark

Fredericksburg's eighth annual Art Past Dark, showcasing works by more than 150 local, regional and nationally recognized artists, will cover two weekends this fall. Separate events and activities are planned Oct. 31-Nov. 2 and Nov. 7-9. See www.artpastdark.com for a complete schedule. Lodging suggestions are at www.FredTexLodging.com. **Call 888-997-3600.**

Bellville antiques show

Bellville's 29th annual Antiques Festival, scheduled Saturday and Oct. 26, includes more than 60 dealers marketing antiques, American country furniture, fine art and used books. Enjoy German food, too. **Access www.bellvillehistoricalsociety.com; call 979-865-0625.**

Stark House to reopen

The W.H. Stark House, closed since early September in the aftermath of Hurricane Ike, will resume public tours Nov. 4. The 14,000-square-foot Stark House, which dates to 1894, suffered minor damage but the adjacent Carriage House was flooded by about

18 inches of water. Until the Carriage House reopens, tours will begin at the Stark Museum of Art, 712 Green Ave. (across the street from the Stark House) in downtown Orange. **Visit www.whstarkhouse.org; call 409-883-0871.**

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