

TEXAS

# Kayaking on the Nueces: solitude and a taste of vintage country

■ Crystal-clear waters and smaller crowds offer a refreshing alternative to the Guadalupe, especially if you choose a knowledgeable outfitter

By TRACY BARNETT  
SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS

**CAMP WOOD** — If you're looking for solitude, silence and crystal-clear, sparkling waters, the Nueces River is a refreshing alternative to the Guadalupe with its tube-toting, beer-swilling, party-hopping crowds. Not that I've given up on the Guadalupe entirely. My friend Karla Held, photographer, adventurer and kayaker extraordinaire, tells me the best waters are upstream from the commotion I navigated on my last Guadalupe float. But for a real adventure, one must go a bit farther afield, and with Held as my guide, I agreed to take my first river kayak trip on the Nueces. You can put in at Chalk Bluff, about 15 miles north of Uvalde. Or for a bit more solitude, drive a half-hour farther north to the quaint and tiny town of Camp Wood, where Tony's Tacos sports a hand-painted palm tree, BJ's Cafe and Sweet Shop bustles behind a stamped-tin facade and a sign on the hardware store wisely admonishes, "He who angers you controls you."

**Pickups and feed sacks**

Marilyn and Tom Stoner at Clear Creek Outfitters awaited our party of four with down-home friendliness and a deep knowledge of their terrain. Marilyn called up a slide show of digital photos taken along the river — "People ask us, 'You got any fish in there?' and we show them this," she said, pointing to a shot of an 8-pound largemouth bass. Meanwhile, Tom unfolded the topographic map he pieced together from a dozen smaller ones and showed us our options. In his workaday life, Tom Stoner takes care of the ranches that line this stretch of the river, and on the weekends he helps Marilyn with her outfitter business.

"Oh, so you're a cowboy!" I said, half-joking, to which he nodded.

"Modern cowboys are pickups and feed sacks," he said. Even the landscape is changing as increasing numbers of ranchers trade in their cows for deer.

"It's not hard to see why. A well-managed deer place can bring in \$15 an acre," Stoner said, referring to leases.

Other changes have been more insidious. Border Patrol agents patrol the river in search of undocumented

immigrants, who have always found their way to these parts, but these days some of them are travelers of a different sort. Heavily armed and often smuggling drugs and other substances, they've brought a dark new presence to the tranquil river valley. Marilyn recalled one who broke into the home of a neighbor.

"What happened?" Karla asked, expecting the worst.

Marilyn responded matter-of-factly, in her quiet but firm drawl: "Oh, she shot him."

**Restless river**

Tom Stoner, like many cowboys, is a weekend naturalist, and he gave me a crash course on the geology of the region. The river, he said, likes to jump its banks during rainstorms, and when it does, you never know where it's going to end up. He's known it to shift three-quarters of a mile away from where it ran before. Typically, however, the channel will shift 30 to 40 yards, leaving nothing but gravel in the former riverbed.

That's why it's important to call around and talk to outfitters like Stoner who know the river well. Last year, with the intense drought, he barely made enough to pay for one kayak. "One quarter-mile stretch of river washed out to bare plate," he said. "Anyone who tried to kayak that stretch ended up with a half-mile of walking."

We were lucky: The generous

rains of spring not only nourished a profusion of wildflowers, they filled the river channels with a vigorous flow of sparkling blue-green waters, and we didn't have much portaging to do.

**Playing in the waves**

Held sent us on our way with her camera in hand, promising to catch up with us later. And so she did; while we were wrestling with the current and trying not to run into a rock wall at the end of a swift-moving channel, she was photographing our exploits and the scenic vistas beyond. Her experience as a tour guide in Central America rendered this river child's play for her, and she was quick to catch up and pass us, finding the perfect gravel bank for our picnic and a cooling swim.

Quesadillas, gorp and an MRE brought along by Karla's friend Dan left us with full bellies and satisfied minds. We explored the shaggy riverside habitat, with its water willows and sycamores, and spent some time riding the current and soaking up the sun.

It's the closest I've been to my happy childhood experiences canoeing on the National Scenic Rivers of the Missouri Ozarks — the Current, the Jack's Fork and the Eleven Point, with their soaring cliffs and crystal waters. The Current and the Jack's Fork, being closer to St. Louis, gradually took on more of the character of the Guadalupe, and it became necessary to plan float trips during the week or off-season or to make the five-hour drive south to the Eleven Point to avoid the bumper-to-bumper canoe traffic and to find anything approximating the solitude we found on the Nueces.

Our day ended all too quickly, and I resolved to return one day to explore this region when I can spend the night in one of the cabins upriver from here.

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EDWIN LOUIE : CHRONICLE

**BOOKSHELF**

## Get tips for outdoor fun

These new books are geared to travelers who relish outdoor activities:

**Let's Get Primitive: The Urban Girl's Guide to Camping** (Ten Speed Press, \$14.95): Author Heather Menicucci describes her transformation from a lipstick-wearing, bug-fearing diva to an expert on backcountry camping. She includes entertaining anecdotes and lots of advice, including suggestions for gear that will make your camp-outs more pleasant — like sleeping pads, headlamps and a water purifier, along with more common items ranging from foil and paper towels to a roll of duct tape for emergency repairs, DEET bug repellent and a lighter.

**The Great American Camping Cookbook** (Broadway Books, \$17.95): Author Scott Cookman offers "grub lists" (hint: don't forget the bacon); recipes for johnnycake (originally known as "journey cake" because it was a traveler's staple), great "camp coffee"; bannock, a pancake-type bread made in a greased skillet; pan-fried fish; baked beans; and soups.

**Monsters in the Woods: Backpacking with Children** (University of Nevada Press, \$15.95): Aimed at families, this book is by Tim Hauserman. It tells you what you do and don't need to bring (again, duct tape is recommended as a must-have, and dehydrated or freeze-dried food will be lighter to carry than canned). It also offers advice for backpacking with infants and toddlers (such as dealing with diapers on the trail, and staying home if the weather is bad).

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**PLANNING A FLOAT**

■ **Getting started:** A few words of advice to those contemplating kayaking on Texas' beautiful rivers: Do your research. Go online and look for outfitters in the areas you're thinking about exploring.

■ **Clear Creek Outfitters:** Marilyn and Tom Stoner's operation on the Nueces River is 40 miles north of Uvalde in Camp Wood. The Stoners rent kayaks and all the gear, and provide shuttles and expert advice. Call 830-597-6400; e-mail toms@hilconet.com. To reach Camp Wood, take Interstate 10 from Houston to San Antonio, then follow U.S. 90 west to Uvalde. From Uvalde, take Texas 83 and Texas 55 north to Camp Wood. It's about 310 miles from Houston.

■ **Also recommended:** Karla Held, photographer and nature guide, is knowledgeable about the area and happy to share her expertise; e-mail karlaheld@hotmail.com to arrange a guided tour or to ask questions and/or compare notes. Another good guide is Marc McCord with Canoeman River Guide Services in Richardson. Access www.canoeman.com/CRGS.

— T.B.



KARLA HELD : FOR THE SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS

**LOTS OF FUN:** Activities range from fishing to paddleboating at Chalk Bluff Park, north of Uvalde along the Nueces River. Chalk Bluff is a popular departure point, too, for kayaking excursions. The Nueces is one of many spring-fed rivers in central West Texas.

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