

RECREATION

Paddle and Splash



KARLA HELD/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

J.D. Alberthal of San Antonio makes his way down the Medina River on his kayak. It was his first day on the river, and he went with friends from Bandera.

Hill Country rivers offer range of experiences for kayakers

BY KARLA HELD
SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

Exercise on a hot summer day can come with a cool splash.

Texas rivers offer excellent opportunities for kayakers — from the beginner to the advanced paddler. And some of the most pristine Texas rivers are within a few hours' drive of San Antonio, including the Medina, Frio, Nueces and Guadalupe.

As with most outdoor outings in the Texas heat, preparation is the key.

Before even planning a trip, check river conditions with a local outfitter. Low flows may require frequent portaging — leaving the river and carrying the kayak around low areas — and high flows can create swift currents, which are revered by advanced kayakers, but risky for novices.

Most outfitters offer sit-on-top kayaks that allow a quick escape should they capsize. Advanced kayakers may find themselves more at home in a sit-in kayak. For a trip for two, tandem kayaks are available — as long as the rear paddler is willing to follow the lead.

Recommended clothing includes a hat, river sandals or sneakers for walking on slick rocks and a lightweight long-sleeve shirt and pair of pants. Outfitters provide life vests. Other essentials include sunscreen, refreshments and water in a soft-sided cooler and a dry bag for camera and cell phone and other accessories.

For the beginner, the Nueces River offers a leisurely paddle. Chalk Bluff, 15 miles north of Uvalde, and Camp Wood offer outfitters and good places to put in. The Nueces, like all rivers mentioned here, is spring-fed. The Nueces is one of the clearest and cleanest rivers in South Central Texas. It's a slow-moving, wide river that also offers fantastic swimming opportunities in emerald-green water.

From Camp Wood, FM 337 — one of the state's most scenic highways — heads east to Leakey. This quaint little town has several "tourist courts" reminiscent of days past and is a perfect base for exploring the Frio River and the

A few good kayaking routes



- 1 Nueces River from FM 335 crossing 16 miles north of Camp Wood to SH 55 crossing 15 miles northwest of Uvalde.
- 2 Rio Frio from County Road crossing near Kent to above the Highway 127 crossing southeast of Concan
- 3 Medina River from Patterson Avenue Bridge off Texas 16 just southwest of Medina to just below Bandera Falls and English Crossing
- 4 Guadalupe River from Brinks Crossing in Kerr County to Canyon Lake; and from Canyon Dam to New Braunfels
- 5 San Marcos River from Old City Park in San Marcos to Luling City Park; and from Luling City Park to Highway 183 bridge.
- 6 Blanco River from FM 165 one mile east of Blanco to I-35 crossing 2 miles northeast of San Marcos

Source: southwestpaddler.com

EXPRESS-NEWS GRAPHIC

Frio Canyon in general.

The Rio Frio Canyon is a geographically unique area of the Texas Hill Country offering breathtaking views of high hills and bluffs, box canyons and diverse wildlife. Jerry and Melissa Bates of Happy Hollow Outfitters south of Leakey offer a range of options based on the length of the paddling trip.

The Frio, characterized by high limestone bluffs and crystal-clear water that gets very cold in the winter, offers moderately fast water, idyllic sections of cypress-lined pools, and many glimpses of wildlife including red-eared turtles, soft-shelled turtles, sunfish, bass, and more than 150 bird species.

Continuing east on 337, the scenic waters of the Sabinal wind through Vanderpool, but the kayaking stop is in Medina on the Medina River.

"We kayak the Medina as much

as possible — usually at least Saturdays and Sundays," said Janice Taylor, who lives on the river in Bandera. "The Medina River is like a secret."

The river averages 30 to 40 feet wide and is lined with towering bald cypress trees. Live oak and rugged cedar also are abundant. The Medina cuts through limestone bluffs and outcroppings with free-flowing springs that feed the river, especially after heavy rains.

In Bandera, there are two main outfitters — Bandera Beach Club and Medina River Company. Both will take you to Peaceful Valley Road, Ranger Crossing or Tarpley Road, with trips ranging from 1½ to 3 hours.

Kayakers with their own vessels have the chance to move on to areas of the river where they're less likely to see other paddlers and tubers. Taylor likes to put in a few miles south of the

town of Medina, where she claims to see few fellow boaters on the river.

"We usually see a few fishermen along the banks but we rarely see other kayakers," she said. "If we do see people we're always greeted in such a friendly manner — it's like we're a novelty."

Bandera is 45 miles northwest of San Antonio, but the quickest way to get on a river from San Antonio is to head north about 30 minutes on U.S. 281. The Guadalupe Canoe Livery provides outings on the green waters of the Upper Guadalupe River. Bigfoot Canoes on FM 311 in Spring Branch offers river trips with camping options.

Karla Held is a freelance photojournalist and kayaker enthusiast based in San Antonio. She can be reached at karlaheld@hotmail.com.

IF YOU GO

One-person kayaks cost \$20 to \$30 for the day and two-person kayaks run \$30 to \$40. Shuttle service varies from \$2 to \$15.

RECOMMENDED EQUIPMENT

Bathing suit T-shirt
Shorts Goggles
Sandals Water shoes
Sunscreen Water
Outfitters provide life vests.

OUTFITTERS

NUECES RIVER

Clear Creek Outfitters:
kayakthenueces.com
Chalk Bluff Park: chalkbluff.com

BANDERA RIVER

Bandera Beach Club:
banderabeachclub.com

FRIO RIVER

Happy Hollow: (830) 232-5266,
happyhollow@hctc.net,
onthefrio.com
Star Rentals: leakeystar.com

UPPER GUADALUPE

Guadalupe Canoe Livery:
guadalupecanoelivery.com
Big Foot Canoes: (830) 885-7106,
bigfootcanoes.com

LOWER GUADALUPE

Rio Raft and Resort: rioraft.com

SAN MARCOS RIVER

TG Canoes and Kayaks:
tgcanoe.com

LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

Alamo City Rivermen:
alamocityrivermen.org
Saturday Paddlers: Joline Moore,
riverjomo@aol.com

OTHER LINKS

Instruction: kayakinstruction.org
Texas Hill Countr River Region:
thcrr.com
Guide to rivers in Southwest:
southwestpaddler.com