

# The River *Wild*

Luxury wilderness rafting  
and gourmet cruising on Idaho's  
legendary "River of No Return"

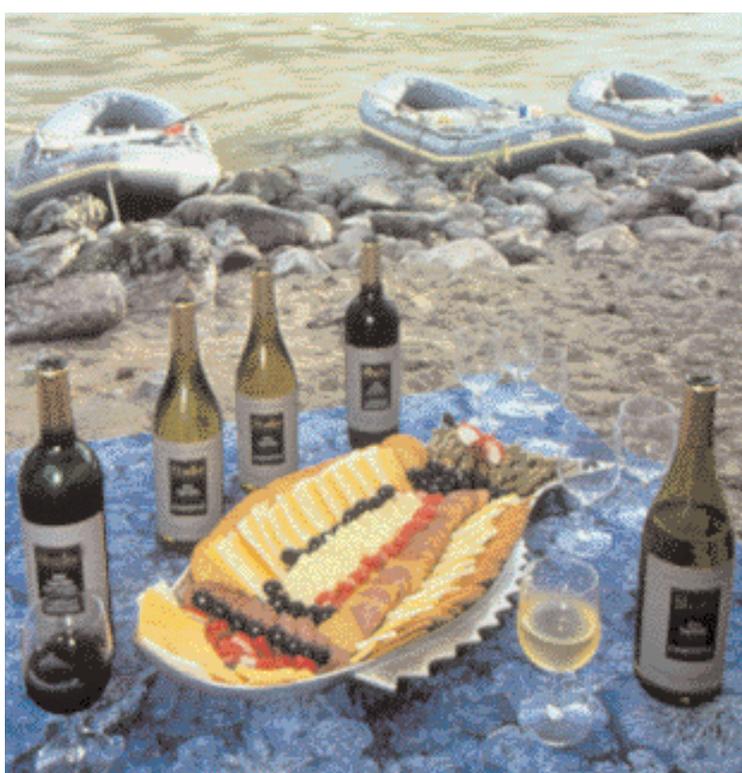
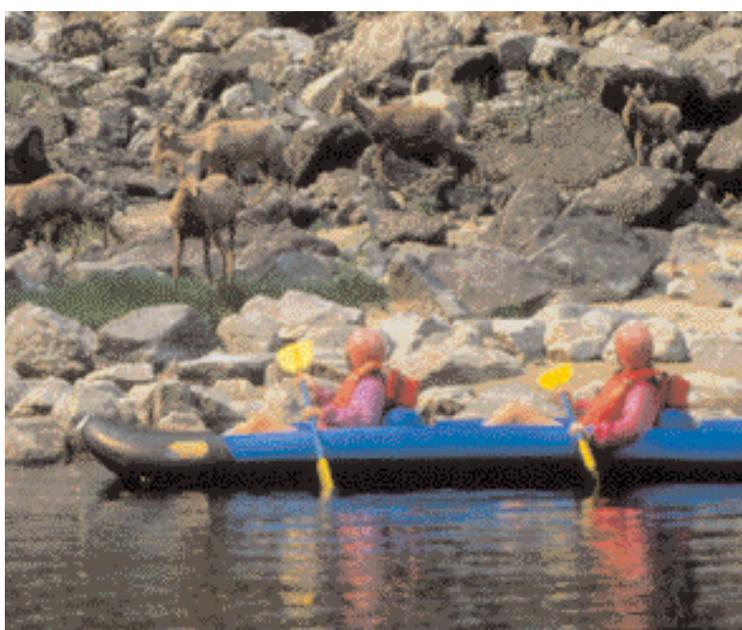
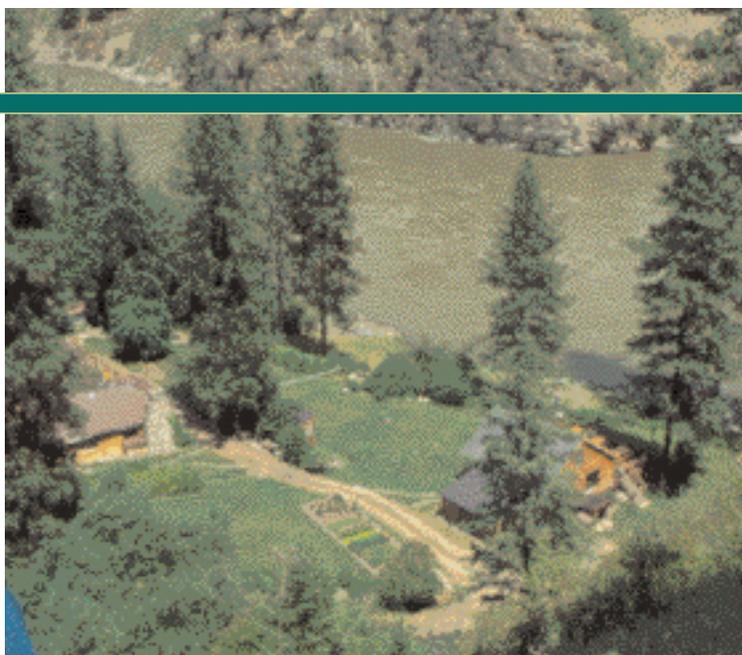
By Judy Alexandra DiEdwardo

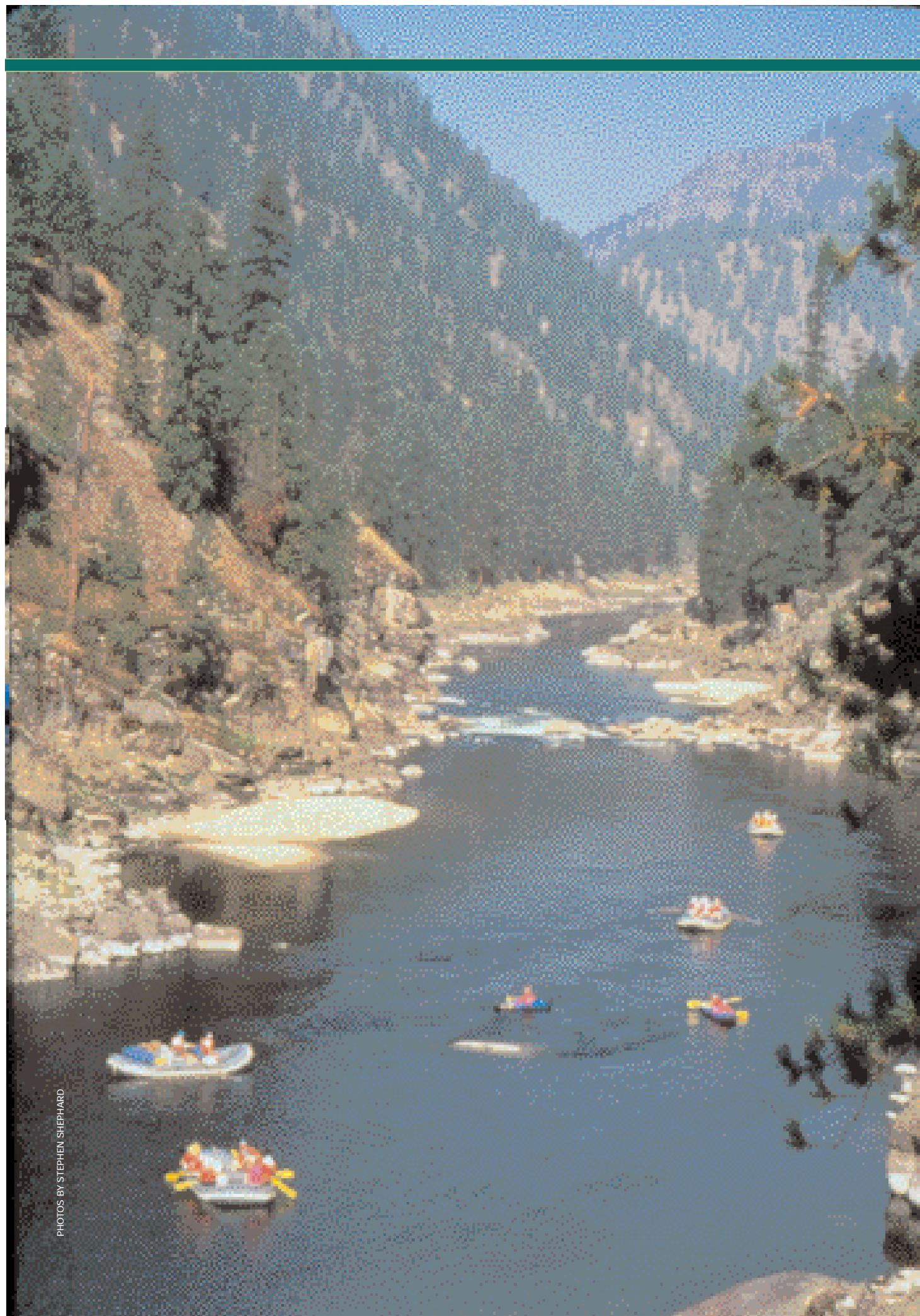
The invitation couldn't have come at a better time. I longed for a reprieve from telephones, e-mail, and I-95. So I jumped at the chance to join a week-long luxury river rafting expedition on 80 miles of Idaho's legendary Salmon River, a one-way ticket through 2.2 million acres of pristine wilderness. I yearned for the river's powerful roar, the forest's earthy aroma and the transformative power and solitude of nature.

Longtime river veteran and nature enthusiast Steven Shephard, owner of Salmon River Outfitters (SRO), understood. He created the deluxe river expedition company more than a decade ago to provide access to the natural beauty of this area while combining as much personal comfort as possible.

Once in Boise, I board one of Salmon Air's six-seater Cessnas for the spectacular hour-long flight north to the remote town of Salmon on Idaho's east coast. I am already giddy with adventure as we bob in the undulating air currents that waft across the voluptuous Sawtooth Mountains. At 10,000 feet, we pass over frozen lakes and winding rivers and the most private parts of Idaho. No roads. No people. Perfect.

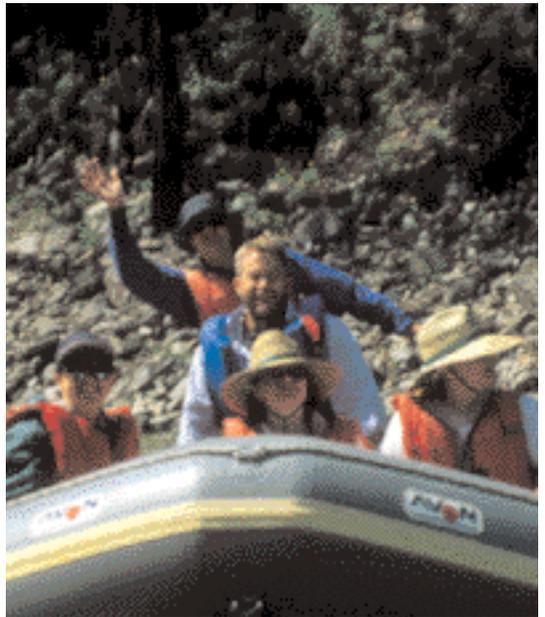
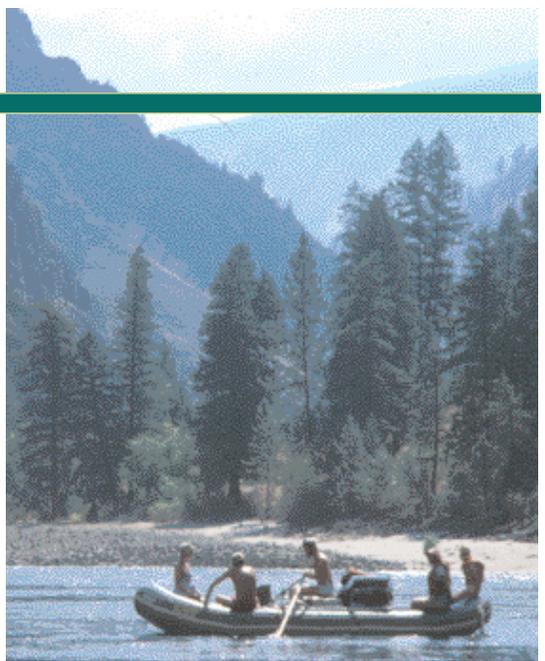
Shephard greets me at the air strip for the short ride to the Stagecoach Inn where the slow transition from the modern world begins. I had met him once before, but now, in the soft light of a perfect summer afternoon, I see why people note his





PHOTOS BY STEPHEN SHEPHARD

Years of experience have made Shephard's crew highly adept in the makeshift kitchen, especially with regard to campfire-warmed Dutch ovens, which are used for everything from Gruyère soufflé to a decadent peach cobbler.



likeness to actor Sam Shepard. He has the sturdy good looks and bright, soulful eyes of a man deeply touched by nature.

#### WE'RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE

At 8 a.m. the next morning I meet my six river guides and 15 fellow river mates who range in age from 13 to 75: an anesthesiologist from Washington with his two teenage daughters; two doctors from California with their two teenage daughters; two lawyers from Minnesota; a newlywed couple from Arizona; and noted Beaulieu Vineyards winemaker Joel Aiken who is joined by his wife and two children. This is one of SRO's five wine tasting trips for the season and the Napa Valley icon has brought his top vintages, which will be sampled during each evening meal.

Introductions complete, we board a converted school bus for the three-hour drive along the river's north bank to the rustic, yet modern Salmon River Lodge where we spend the night and enjoy a final hot shower. It is here where we receive instructions on river etiquette, ecology, safety and comfort. Our sleek armada of four Avon oar boats is neatly packed with everything from a full kitchen to camping gear, which includes spacious nine-foot square two-man dome tents, oversized sleeping bags, air mattresses and duffel bags that SRO provides for each guest.

To ensure smooth sailing and guarantee a perfect fit each time the rafts are loaded and unloaded, Shepard provides each guest with a very precise packing list and an official SRO duffel bag for all personal clothing and possessions several weeks before the trip. Extraneous items are stowed separately and trucked to the take-out point in McCall on Idaho's west coast.

The next morning, under a bright blue sky and light easterly wind, we don our blue and yellow life vests, climb inside the bobbing gray vessels, and push away from the river bank. Also in tow are four one- and two-man inflatable kayaks and an eight-man paddle boat for those who desire heightened adventure. The raucous laughter and nervous chatter cease as we are humbled by the immense and unexpected power of the frigid green water that swirls beneath us.

Even though it's summertime, the early morning sun can't climb over the steep walls of the jagged canyon fast enough to warm the chilly, 60 degree air. I immediately regret not having followed Shepard's packing list more closely and pray that I am not splashed by the churning water ahead. Too late. The fast-approaching Killum Rapid initiates us with a spray of icy water. Although the excitement lasts for less than a minute, our adrenaline is still racing when we arrive at the next mogul of churning water before settling into longer stretches of panoramic flat water. The sun is warm and quickly absorbs

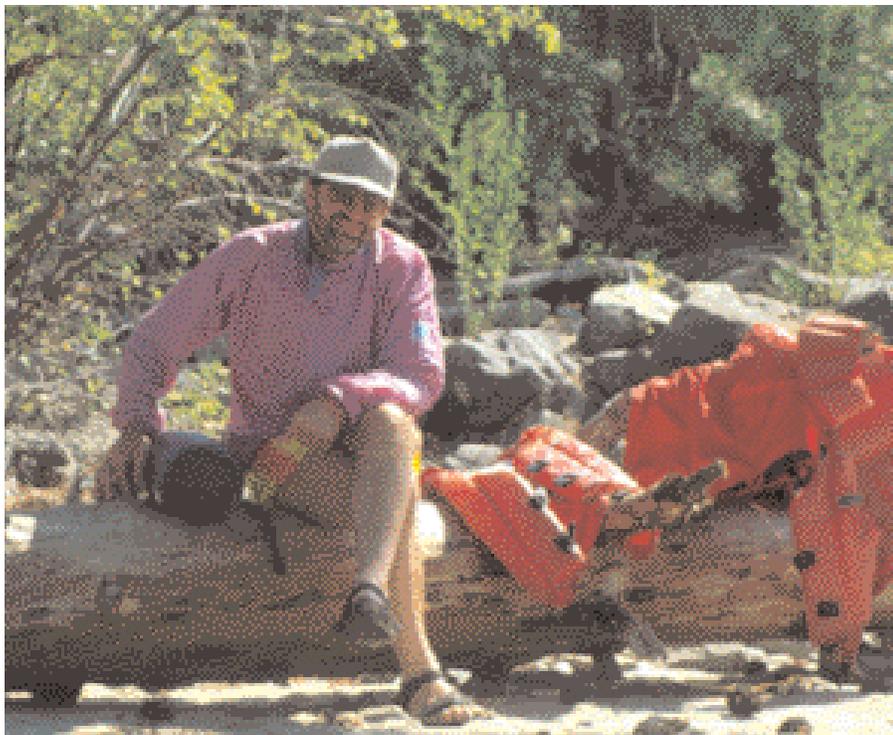
whatever water managed to sneak past my armor of outerwear. But I am no longer concerned about warmth. The majestic beauty of these ancient red and brown canyon walls and to the sheer solitude of river life — palpable to all five senses — rocket me beyond the realm of physical comfort. I can't imagine a total sensory experience more divine. And we've only just begun.

#### THE RIVER OF NO RETURN

While Salmon white water has claimed its share of inattentive boatmen, it is actually quite tame, punctuated by just enough Level 3 and 4 rapids along the way to make it interesting. The South, Middle and East forks each flow to the south and hang from their host like three wiry tendrils. The river's most daring tributary is the Middle Fork — its 100 miles of blistering white water isn't appropriate for neophytes. Instead, we will travel along the river's main waterway, which is more suitable for all levels of experience. It has its share of turbulent rapids as well as the long and lazy stretches of smooth water that make for great conversation and wildlife sightings of bighorn sheep, moose and bears.

The Salmon River does contain salmon, but not anywhere near the numbers it once had. A combination of factors have contributed to their near extinction: dams on the lower rivers have interfered with migration patterns, and sediment from deforestation and pollution have made for poor salmon egg conditions.

The river, which is deeper than the Grand Canyon by one fifth of a mile, was first encountered in 1804 by Lewis and *continued on page 140*



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Clark after having been home to the Nez Perce and Shoshone Indians for 8,000 years. It was the search for gold in the late 19th-century that first opened the Salmon River Canyon to settlement and wooden boats that were capable of running its rapids. As mines proliferated, the need to transport equipment and men grew. Flat bottom boats were discovered. Powered by 28-foot oars, or sweeps, these 32-foot-long vessels were navigated down the river. But the river's powerful current ensured that it would always be a one-way trip. Once the destination was reached, the boats were disassembled and the wood sold. The boatmen would return by foot or horseback to Salmon, where they would build new boats and start the process all over — which is why it is referred to as the River of No Return.

However, I have an alternate theory. The river has a cathartic quality. The sheer grandeur of this wilderness area is enough to change a person for life.

Almost 400 miles of this wild and scenic river bisects Idaho from east to west, emptying into the Snake River, which ribbons its way north up the state's western edge. From there, it flows into the Columbia River and then on to the Pacific Ocean. Along its journey, it flows through the River of No Return Wilderness Area, the largest regulated wilderness spot in the continental United States. And true wilderness it is — except for the few ranches and rustic guest lodges — are the only signs of 21st-century technology.

#### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Off-river diversions over the next several days include a variety of challenging and easy hikes up and around the canyon during lunch and evening stopovers to explore deserted homesteads, gold mines and Indian pictographs. Soaking in natural hot springs was indeed the most delightful surprise of the trip. After concluding our first 20-mile stretch down the river, we arrive at a sprawling blend of white sand beach and thick, dense woods just in time for

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dinner. Within 20 minutes, the rafts are systematically unpacked, tents are erected and the guides are busy preparing the evening meal, replete with hors d'oeuvres.

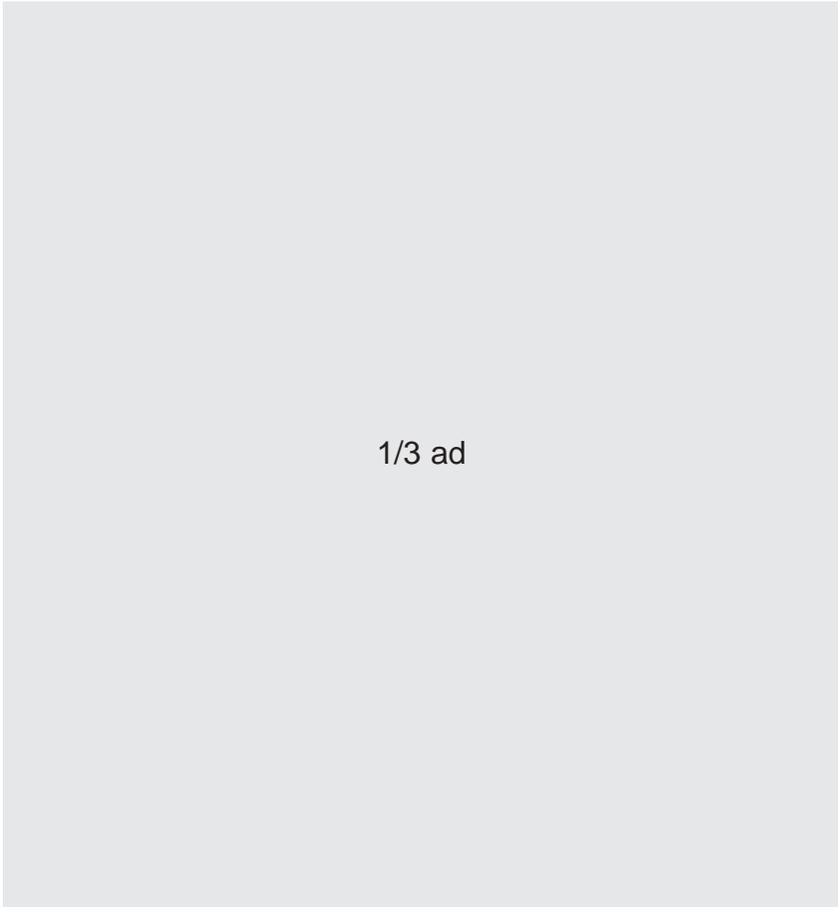
As for the food, you won't find any Spaghetti-O cans on this trip. In fact, both *Gourmet* and *Food & Wine* magazines could not find enough superlatives to applaud Shephard's culinary excellence and creativity. Breakfasts are especially delightful and nothing like the grub we prepared during my Girl Scout days. Banana buttermilk pancakes, yogurt topped with dates and coconut, bacon, honeydew melon and the best coffee this side of Costa Rica greeted us on the first day, and each subsequent feast only got better.

We had our token meal of salmon (marinated in an herb mixture of vermouth, lemon juice and olive oil) preceded by an hors d'oeuvres spread of creamy spinach dip served on crisp chips, along with a selection of California wines. Years of experience have made Shephard's crew highly adept in the make-hift kitchen, especially with regard to campfire-warmed Dutch ovens, which are used for everything from Gruyère soufflé to a decadent peach cobbler.

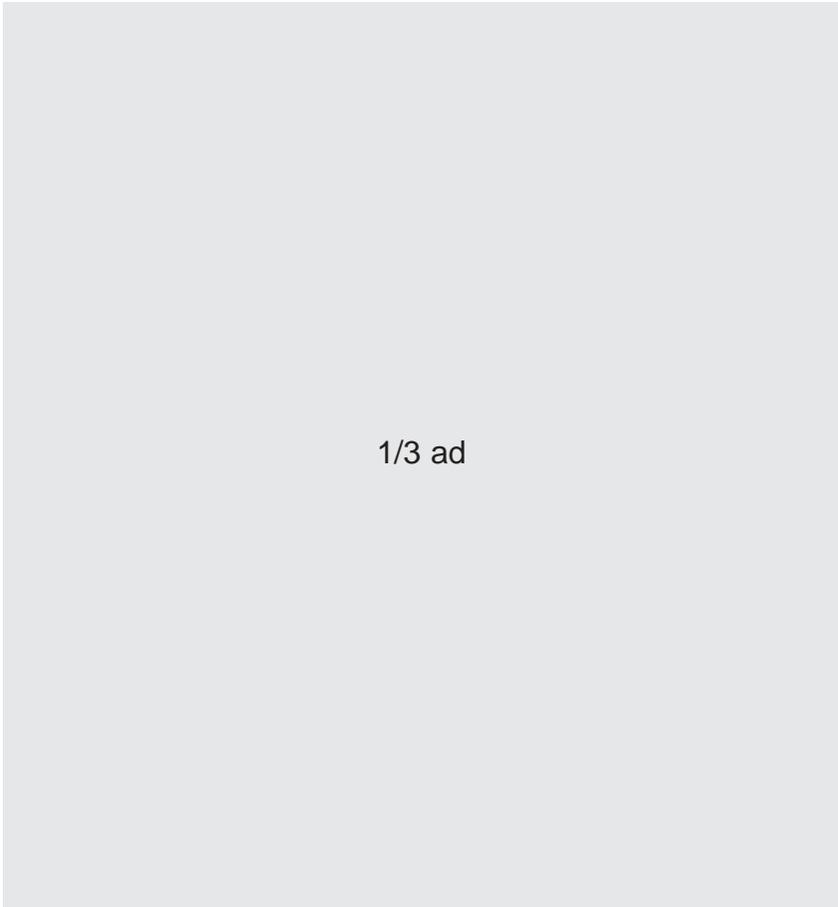
#### NATURE'S REIGN

Our next day's float was lazy and allowed plenty of time to scan the dense forest above the canyon ridge for wildlife and enjoy a land excursion to the remains of a miner's settlement. Protected under the National Register of Historic Places, these hand-hewn log structures are where pioneer local Jim Moore sold supplies to gold prospectors in the 1900s. Rumor has it that Moore's savings, which he allegedly stashed in a jar, may still be buried here.

We resume our transit down the river, our heads filled with visions of the bustling commerce that once thrived here. The air here is thick with the scent of pine emanating from the thick forest that blankets the ridges. The silence is punctuated only by the water, churned



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## THE RIVER WILD

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and dripping from the oars, and the sounds of birds passing lazily overhead.

Beneath a graying sky, we cover our distance for the day and eagerly steer our armada of rafts shoreward for the evening. Once the last tent has been erected, the rains begin. It rains throughout the night and into the next morning. We take turns asking Shephard for his forecast, as if he has the power to dissipate the thick, black clouds above. Without question, it is the rain that forced our final surrender to nature and our human desire to shield ourselves from the elements. Until now, the only sacrifice had been the tangibles — creature comforts — including our watches. But somehow the damp chill of the rain tugged at something deeper. Ironically, the rain did nothing to interfere with our sheer enjoyment of this wilderness oasis. Some seek refuge beneath our huge communal tent and wile away the afternoon enjoying steaming mugs of hot chocolate and light conversation. I join a small group of raingear-clad adventurers who opt to meet nature head on with a hike up and along the steep embankment's lush canopy of trees, where we are rewarded with a breathtaking view of the river. Walking through the dense forest made more fragrant by the rain, I am transported 100 years back in time when Lewis and Clark dared to follow the river through this harsh and rugged land on their historic pre-Gold Rush trek to the Pacific. No maps, no Avon rafts, no hot chocolate to ease the way. All they had was the river and the promise of discovery.

### EPILOGUE

Our last day on the river is bitter-sweet. The end of this glorious trip is a reality that none of us feels prepared to face. Less than 30 minutes from the take-out point the lighthearted mood of our group begins to dissipate. Some are eager to return home, yet reticent to bid farewell to this stunning landscape that has been ours for the past week. Others sit quietly, staring off into the distance as if trying to find the words to transition back to civilization.

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“It happens all the time,” says Shephard of the phenomena. “After a week of letting go of everything familiar, most people feel a little jolted when it’s time to go back home. But one thing is for sure. No one comes back quite the same as when they left. Perhaps that’s why they call it the River of No Return.”

Indeed. Unloading the last of my belongings from our raft, I take a final look at our watery week-long host — her beautiful face splintered and gleaming with sunlight. I think of the early pioneers who tried to navigate her, the lives she had taken and given, and of the indelible nature of this rare and wonderful experience that I knew would be with me forever.

**GETTING THERE:**

Salmon River Outfitters runs trips from June to September. For those who can’t part with creature comforts, the same trip is available with accommodations in private lodges along the river. Reservations, 800-346-6204; Rates, \$1,495 (camp); \$1,870 (lodge). [www.salmonriveroutfitters.com](http://www.salmonriveroutfitters.com)

**FLIGHTS:**

Delta, Northwest, Continental and United all fly to Boise. Once inside Idaho, Salmon Air has the most regular flights between Salmon and McCall. Reservations, 800-448-3413; Rates, \$200 (roundtrip).

**ACCOMMODATIONS:**

Salmon: The legendary Stagecoach Inn is the rendezvous point for Salmon River expeditions. The rustic 100-room river-front hotel was an actual stagecoach stop for early settlers traveling the west. Reservations, 208-756-4251; Rates, \$53-69.

McCall: This quaint mountain town’s most popular inn is the 34-room lake-front Hotel McCall that opened in 1904 to accommodate local miners and loggers. Rooms feature everything from duvets and DVD players to complimentary milk and cookies; suites feature fireplace, large screen TV, full kitchen and spectacular lake views. Reservations, 866-800-1183; Rates, \$55-\$350. ❖

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