



RAFTING!

White water rafting!

On one of the country's best rivers — the Kern

BY DEBORAH SHADOVITZ

Ever thought of going rafting? Rafting season is short. It begins in April when the snows atop Mt Whitney melt into the Upper Kern, filling it and making it an active adventure. It ends around the end of August, when the water in the Lower Kern becomes too shallow. I grabbed two friends, one younger and one older — and headed to the Kern in May, so you can read this — and still have time to have your own rafting adventure this summer.

Just 3½ to 4 hours north, 60 miles northeast of Bakersfield — at the other end of a narrow road that's nestled between bulging boulders and a sometimes steep drop to a river below — an adventure awaits. An adventure that's wet and sometimes wild. An adventure that allows you to commune with nature and enjoy the quiet sounds of a river one moment and have your heart racing the next — creating delightful hours or days. An adventure that always varies.

There are several ways you can experience rafting — water levels dictating your options and the specifics of your trip. There's the 3-mile Lickety Split out of Kernville. For experienced rafters there's the Thunder Run on the Upper Kern in April/May. Or you

can go for a half, full, or two-day trip on the Lower Kern.

You'll hear the water described Class I-VI. This refers to the amount of white water — the speed, height and challenge of the water. Class I is calm, II gives you a bit of a kick, and IV will have that foamy white water coming up and hitting you. (V requires experience and VI is not runnable.)

The Lickety Split, 3-mile run on the Upper Kern, is a good, quick intro to rafting. This is adventurous when the snow's melting in April/May; mellow and great for young families starting in June. I ran the Lickety Split when the water was high in mid-May and it was a rushing 40-minute adventure. Later in the summer, it can take 1 1/2 hours and be a fun-filled but relaxing day. Because there are seven rafting companies commercially doing this run and it's relatively short, even during the busy season, you should be able to get into it without a reservation. For example, you can just show up at Frandy Park, right along the river in Kernville, to ride with Kern River Tours or Eagle Rafting.

For a fuller rafting experience, especially after May, you'll want to be on the Lower Kern. There are

four companies you can choose between for that. The US Forest Service restricts this to keep river traffic down, and also limits the number of people each company can launch each day, so you'll need to reserve this ahead of time, at least calling a day ahead. I selected Kern River Tours because it's the longest-running company there, it's independently owned, and its managing owner Kenny Bushling is a Kernville native who began as a rafting guide himself in 1986.

For our introduction to rafting, we chose Kern River Tours' two-day trip which would give us the opportunity to become familiar with rafting the first day, building to faster water the next. We'd stop for lunch and also have opportunities to jump out of the rafts and swim. We'd rough camp, enjoying an excellent full-course dinner prepared by our guides. The 2nd day, after a hearty breakfast again prepared for us, we'd progress further down the river and its Class III and IV waters.

From the moment we arrived at the KRT office in Lake Isabella, we felt we were among friends and knew we were in for a great time.

Before we started out with KRT we got a detailed paddling lesson,

learning to power the oars with moving our back and abdominal muscles, not our arms.

This trip was about socializing and enjoying being outdoors as much as rafting. Our guides, Scooter and Dave, were intimate with the river, its surroundings, and its history, sharing this information freely. My friends and I manned one boat, while four strangers manned the other. (Because it was early in the season there were fewer of us and thus, fewer boats. Expect there to be five six-person boats when you go.) KRT was even kind enough to bring along an inflatable kayak (IK) that we were all allowed to try.

As anticipated, the trip was both relaxing and exhilarating — totally enjoyable. At times we'd be in calm water and paddling was optional. Occasionally we'd approach rocks and our guide would instruct us on how to navigate around them. In the calmer waters, we enjoyed conversation, wild ducks, rare turtles, hawks, beavers, the famous Warblers of the Kern River Valley and glimpses of hot springs. Then... we'd hear the sound of rushing water and teasingly ask, "is that rapids we hear?" Our guides had fun with this, sometimes implying danger by giving us the name of the rapid, such as Hari-Kari. Other times, they'd say, "we're not going

to tell you this one's name until you get through it." (Eat Rocks and Bleed, named by Chuck Richards was one of those.) Then we'd see the white water ahead and be instructed on how to steer through, over or around the trees, rocks and drops. We'd be bouncing over rocks and waves, trying to make our paddles actually make any contact with the water — and at that moment icy cold foam would come right up into our faces. Happily, before we were even done laughing over the excitement of it, we were dry again.

I particularly loved it when our guide, Dave, bumped us off boulders to spin us around. For that reason, Pinball was my favorite rapid. Lots of bumping and spinning! Lorrie also loved Pinball — because it was fun but didn't threaten to toss us into the water.

Much of the time, Lorrie and I manned our 12' raft alone with our

You'll want the right shorts or pants for this! My first run was so uncomfortable that buying quick-drying board shorts became priority. Luckily, KRV Novelty Company, smack in the center of Kernville, was open and owner Lucian Whitman gave great advice. He sells everything you'll need to make your stay at the river fun. We were also able to pick up inexpensive rafting shoes there.



photos: Kenny Bushling

guide because our third paddler, Gary, was shooting the rapids solo in the kayak.

Lorrie and I did a great job of remaining in our raft, but I have to admit that while I didn't fall out of the raft, I did fall into it. If that sounds scary, it's not. In fact, each time I slid down off the side of the raft and landed on the floor, I'd be laughing so hard I couldn't get back up to paddle through. (And you want to be paddling. Your raft-mates want you to be paddling!)

The four former college-buddies in the other raft were doing this trip with KRT for the fifth year in a row and love this one weekend a year where they get to be boys again. As we traversed the water, I realized what a great experience this would be for families. It's a perfect shared experience: relaxation, flowing water, sun, great food, and the rewarding feeling of getting past hurdles because of teamwork. I found myself thinking it's a pity that every American doesn't get to raft this beautiful river through this magnificent canyon.

Kern River Tours
KernRiverTours.com
800.844.RAFT

Eagle Rafting
EagleRafting.com
800.375.7395

Lorrie and I actually had an unplanned Upper Kern rafting experience the day before our planned introductory trip. To learn about the area, we met with Chuck Richards, who has been rafting the Kern since 1975. But the water was running fast and Chuck was apparently in the mood for some excitement. So he had a talk with his pal Janet Sharp, co-owner of Eagle Rafting, and soon we "put in" at the top of the Lickety Split run

The first time I realized we were heading directly into waves of white splashing water, and stopping to get out wasn't an option, I thought, "what am I doing here?!" But we were with Chuck Richards — the living legend of the Kern River, the old-hat rafter who loved the thrills and excitement — and certainly knows what he is doing. "Go! Go!, Go!" was all I heard. All Lorrie and I had to do was keep on "paddling though." So paddle we did and soon we reached calm — well calmer — water. How exhilarating! Forty mostly breathless minutes later, we were rafting veterans! We headed to our hotel to shower and then to the Kern River Brewery for a much-needed great burger and home-brewed beer.



Kernville and Lake Isabella

The Kern River is close enough that we can leave home in the morning, enjoy a day or two on the river (camping overnight), and return home. One of my friends did just that. I wanted more relaxation so Lorrie and I stayed in Kernville before and after our two-day rafting holiday.

Kernville is a tiny town that borders the river. Aside from private homes that reach into the mountains, it's pretty much a small town center and one other street. You won't find large hotels or chains here. Think cabins, B&B, small eateries, and local-only businesses. Kernville is about getting away and experiencing nature. One business owner said, "one of the attractions of Kern County is that you can hurt yourself. It's kind of wild and unregulated."

Our first night, I wanted to experience the town, so I selected the Kernville Inn, which sits beside the river and is right on the main street. After our trip, we stayed outside of town at Chuck Richard's Falling Waters Resort. At both, our "room" included a kitchen and living room, great for families and long stays.



photos: Laureen Mitchell

Kernville Inn

The 28-room Kernville Inn, built around 1957, was purchased by a new owner about three years ago and has been very nicely remodeled. Owner Tim Ryan calls it country style, but that's woody and stone fireplace country decor, not ruffles. Most of the rooms have patios, seven have kitchens, four have microwave and mini-fridge, and two have a

second bedroom. All rooms are non-smoking inside. There's a pool out front, and yes, free wi-fi that should reach all the rooms. I fully enjoyed our large, comfortable room and private patio.

When we were there are large group was staying in the row of river-facing rooms, enjoying the lawn outside their front doors just steps from the river where they could cool off. This is perfect for such group holidays. In fact, as I write this, another group has rented the entire hotel and is having a Bar-B-Q outside.

Folks wanting to enjoy the live music right across the street in what amounts to downtown Kernville, can just walk over and not worry about driving home. A .2 mile walk away you'll find the Sierra Gateway Market, which "is huge and sells everything" according to my friend Lorrie, who ran in to get Advil after our first river run. Across from that market, is the Kern River Brewing Company, a good place for a real burger and fresh-brewed beer.



Falling Waters Resort

Chuck Richard's place is off the beaten path, but just 2.4 miles from the town. Standing outside of our river-view cottage, and looking down, I could see some the Lickety Split section of the river. Falling Waters is like a tiny town of 15 free-standing buildings, comprising 30 cottages. All but three contain kitchen stoves, kitchen tables, fireplaces, and couches. There's a pool in the center of the grounds, playground equipment for kids, and Bar-B-Qs. The staff also has roaster ovens, electric skillets, blenders and more. Just ask. All

rooms are non-smoking inside, and of course, there's free wi-fi reaching most cottages.

You have to laugh when you see Chuck's cottages, and when you do you'll know part of why the folks who work here enjoy their jobs. Each cottage has its own theme, from colors to tchotchkes to curtains. We stayed in the Lilac suite, next to Under the Sea. Others include King Arthur's Chamber, Egyptian Nile, Pirates Cove, and Romance. It's unique fun. The staff gets into it, adding pieces they find.

Because it's 2 miles from the Sierra Gateway Market and the nearest eateries, you'll likely want to use your car while staying here. I'm told people love to stay for weeks and fish. It's also terrific for families. And its 13 acres even include meeting facilities.



On the Lake

Lake Isabella lies between the Lower and Upper Kern. Trying to get to the lake for recreation, you're likely to drive right past it, puzzling over where the entrance to the activity is. This is no built-up resort full of rental stands and food concessions. Lake Isabella is actually a reservoir and its water levels are ever-changing. Because of this, the

Forest Service won't permit permanent structures (including real bathrooms) around it. The two marinas on the lake — North Fork Marina and French Gulch — are the only buildings on the lake and they're literally on the lake, fully afloat.

There are plenty of rugged campgrounds right around the lake, there are the marinas and that's it. Activities on Lake Isabella are largely uncontrolled, except for diligent lake patrol helping keep you safe. There are no regulations for 2-stroke engines, so people enjoy wave runners. You'll find people fishing, sailing, wind surfing, kite surfing, kayaking and water-skiing all together.

As not everyone owns a boat and wants to haul it up there, you'll appreciate the reasonably-priced rentals available at the two marinas. Owners Deb and Bill Chase, who started as vacationers from LA, have about 70 water vehicles for rent. They offer pontoon boats (great for parties or groups), fishing boats, wave runners and hard-shell kayaks for rent, and some inflatables for sale. Deb Chase is also known for creating large customized events for children, adults, or special needs groups. ♦

Kernville Inn,
11042 Kernville Road, Kernville, CA 93238
760.376.2206

Falling Waters Resort,
15729 Sierra Way, Kernville, CA 93238
760.376.2242

North Fork Marina and French Gulch
NorthForkMarina.com 760.376.1812
FrenchGulchMarina.com 760.379.8774
The marinas move, so phone for directions.

Calendar of Events
VisitKern.com/eventcal.asp

Other Things to Do

Kernville is small, but the Kern River Valley certainly isn't. There is much to do in this area. These are just two things your family might enjoy right in Kernville.

Kern Valley Museum is full of items and stories from the days of prospectors and miners, saloon patrons, shootings, and outlaws. I liked the story of a bar fight that led to an Ore discovery and the creation of another mine, with both men becoming partners! Kernville, originally called Whiskey Flat, was the true Wild West. The museum has mining equipment, stuff from old movie days, the story of the Isabella Dam, and even prehistoric artifacts. It's open 10-4 Thursday-Saturday.

The Fish Hatchery on Sierra Way is also said to be an interesting visit. The river is known for its Rainbow and Golden Trout.