

When we think of river-running in northern Arizona, it's all about the Mighty Colorado. But author/explorer Michael Engelhard joined a group to run the Little Colorado during a spring flow and shares the trials, tribulations and rewards of running the LCR.

Riding the Ephemeral

Adventures Along the Now-and-Again Silt and Flow of the Little Colorado River

When we exit the truck, applause greets us, ringing frenetically from the Little Colorado River gorge. Near the overlook, it swells to a crescendo, a roar with a booming bass note, foot stomping in the bleachers. The streambed and Grand Falls, which lies barren or reduced to a runnel for most of the year, have sprung back to life.

Thrilled by the high-flow levels the U.S. Geological Survey posted online, we drove two hours from Flagstaff, on paved byways, across reservation washboard, through pinewoods and past cinder cones, with not a drop of water in sight. Time passed quickly as we chatted and hashed out the logistics of shuttling cars between

the put-in and the takeout.

At the overlook, speechless, we face a mirage: an off-color Niagara in the desert. Gravity rules at the lip, while farther down, the canyon-cutter

writhes like a glossy, rosy-taupe worm. Cascades leap from the falls' outer edges. The main current charges with biblical force over tiered, beveled limestone ledges midstream. Falling, it unravels in frothed dizziness, forming massive, ragged jets. Bloated to an eddying lake, the plunge pool at the bottom trembles with chop but calms near the outlet. Water vaporizes in the impact zone, lashing tamarisks on shore. Driftwood carpets a part of the cove, enough to build bonfires or rafts.

Story and Photos By
Michael Engelhard





Innocent and incongruent, a thin, blue sky arcs above everything. I shudder as much from the spectacle as from the sharp March air, expecting to feel vibrations through the soles of my feet.

The Sproul

Grand Falls is not just a quirk of hydrology but also one of geology. Some 20,000 years ago, lava from a vent known as The Sproul oozed across the flats and then into the Little Colorado's trough, plugging it with a basalt dam. The river was forced to detour, spilling over the dam, and Grand Falls emerged.

At 185 feet, the falls stand 20 feet taller than Niagara. Their range of mood swings illustrates that a river at heart is a weather phenomenon. In flood, the wash channels runoff from monsoon cloudbursts or snowmelt from Arizona's White Mountains, near the New Mexico state line. A good part of the Painted Desert—

friable siltstone, sandstone, and clay—ends up rebuilding eroded beaches in the Grand Canyon.

The Spanish missionary Francisco Garcés called it Rio Jaquesila—the River Unruly. The Navajos called it Red Water. A river *muy macho, muy colorado,*



indeed. The men on John Wesley Powell's first expedition deemed it "so filthy and muddy that it

fairly stinks." They guessed half of its volume and two-thirds of its weight to be silt and mud. It could carry worse things, however, and it has. In 1979, in one of the biggest radioactive spills in U.S. history, 100 million gallons of waste from the tailings pond of a uranium mine poured into a fork of the headwaters. Toxic sludge reached the Navajo Reservation, where traces can still be detected today.

In drier conditions the stream runs shallow and leisurely. Laced with minerals from Blue Spring, it glows aquamarine near its Grand Canyon confluence with the Colorado. Even in its tame state, the Mormons and other settlers had difficulties crossing it. Teams and wagons often bogged down in quicksand. It was easier to ford at Grand Falls and the smaller Black Falls, ten miles below, where the river slides across bedrock.

Seething Cauldron

The initial spell has broken. Shouting above the din, we point and laugh and shake our heads in disbelief. My girlfriend, Melissa, who stands next to me, works as a public health nurse and visits homesteads throughout this part of the Navajo Reservation, routinely driving across just upstream of here, sometimes without wetting the truck's tires. Were she to try today, she would get swept to her death. At the flow gauge near Cameron, the river registers almost six feet deep, passing more than the load of a 20-foot freight container every second.

A half-mile long trail winds steeply into the seething cauldron, and we hump down two Hypalon toys plus gear: paddles, daypacks, an air pump, and life jackets. Eager to launch, we inflate our kayaks

on a sliver of beach. Christa and I are going to look at the chocolate milk rush from up-close. As a desert geologist and Grand Canyon raft guide she cannot resist its siren song, and neither can I.

Melissa chooses to stay on shore, because we did not bring drysuits, and the spray looks as if it could drench you in a minute. For the same reason she decides to walk around the pool's outlet, a boulder-flanked funnel with a pour-over boil in the middle—a Class II rapid, easily. She's always been smart about this sort of thing.

Christa and I sit 10 yards from the liquid wall, dabbling to keep our distance. We don't want to get pushed under it by the gyre; it would destroy our crafts. Spray blasts us, and my clothes begin to soak through. It is even chillier here, in the river's mist plume. Seen from

this close, the falls seem to rotate horizontally, like a huge cylinder, causing moments of trance. The motion suggests a perpetual mobile; it's hard to imagine this silt conveyor could ever diminish or stop.

When we've had our fill, we paddle toward the outlet. Christa runs it first. Not watching her line, not bracing, and not shifting my weight forward, I hit the center hole. The bow goes up and I flying. Gasping in the rapid's embrace, I swallow a sediment-laden pint—at this time of year, snowmelt from the high country feeds the flood. My kayak races ahead, upside-down, but I manage to hold on to the paddle. In transit, I catch a glimpse of my girlfriend snapping candid shots from shore.

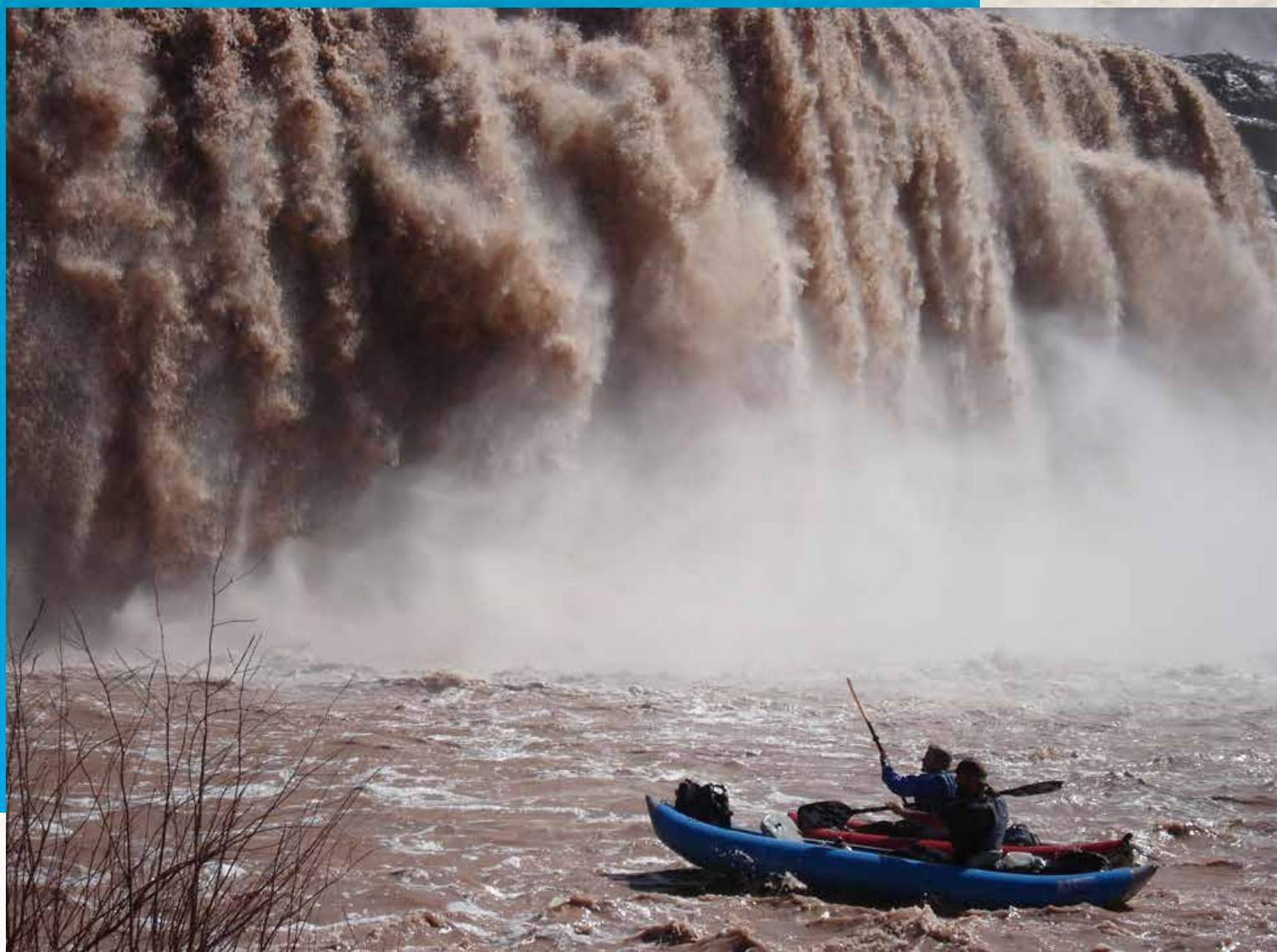
At this water level, there are few eddies to pull into. Luckily, Christa is parked in one with my duckie

in tow. I crawl from the shallows exhausted and not quite clear yet what happened. I have to look at the pictures later to figure it out. Not anticipating a swim, I didn't dress for one. I begin to shiver immediately, with my teeth clacking castanet-style.

Meanwhile, Melissa has joined us, offering spare layers from her pack. My stuff is still there, strapped into the boat. But it's sopping, and I've lost my favorite ball cap. I'll now have to wear a girlie knit hat.

After a quick snack of trail mix and cheese—fuel for the faltering engine—we shove off, Christa in one boat, Melissa and I in the other. I'm shaking so hard that Melissa, in the front seat, feels the kayak vibrating. Let the fun part begin. With the river hushed between here and the landing, we hope to spice up adventure with a dash of archaeology.

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Gathering Places

Wet or dry, this gulch has attracted people for at least 11,000 years. Some Ice Age hunter lost a leaf-shaped, fluted spear point on the prairie close by, a fine blade for killing mammoths; the bones of one surfaced not far from here; the obsidian came from 50 miles away. The lower gorge enfolds the Sipapu, a travertine dome spring from which the Hopis climbed after three previous worlds had been destroyed. Cut loose from this umbilicus—their most recent place of origin—they were set adrift in the fourth and final world.

After they settled down, the Little Colorado connected Homolovi and the Hopi Mesas to the north with Wupatki, the Grand Canyon and points south. Goods, individuals and ideas trickled both ways, according to season and wants. Tokens of far-flung trade—Mexican copper bells and scarlet macaws, shells from the Pacific—traveled as far as Wupatki. The hundred-room pueblo perches on a rock knoll near our takeout and the Black Falls Road, which crosses the river. Its Mesoamerican-type ball court is the northernmost of its kind.

Between 500 and 1225—when they permanently abandoned Wupatki, driven, most likely, by drought—thousands of people lived there or within a day's walk, in outliers such as Wukoki and The Citadel. At these bustling crossroads mingled Sinagua, Cohonina, and Kayenta Anasazi, all ancestors of modern Puebloans. They incised rock varnish alongside the river with evidence of their beliefs and preoccupations, leaving an outdoors gallery hard to match, even on the rock art-rich Colorado Plateau.

Rock Art and Ruins

I cannot get warm, despite wearing hat, gloves, and life jacket on the short walks to the petroglyphs. There are simply too many to check out each one if we want to make Wupatki before nightfall. Engraved

in the cliffs' patina are spiders, bears, turtles, bighorn sheep, birds, lizards and dancers. Flute players and "traders"—figures with packs and hiking sticks—march solo or single-file. A throw dart protrudes from the back of one traveler. Each bend brings a new discovery.

Flint chips and potsherds with black-on-white latticework shine like bone scatter in the sun. We find spirals, waves, sun and star patterns, meanders and zigzags that mirror ceramic or textile designs. We find psychedelic amoebas and cerebral mazes, hoof marks and footprints, archives encrusted with lichen or crisp as new pennies. We find no watercraft, no swimmers; but some scrawls might celebrate clan migrations, or the river's coursing.

It is getting late, and the gorge slowly wraps itself in shadows. Once in a while, the stream wells up a gurgle. In the deep quiet I hear paddles dripping and silt hissing against the kayak tubes. Already the falls have become hearsay, unreal.

At our last stop we climb to ruins that stand on the north rim like broken teeth. Touched by the westering sun, burnt sienna sandstone walls blush cinnabar. The





river's abrading yields clay, the mortar that once kept these walls from crumbling. One building block holds a fossil imprint. The crocodile ancestor's lobed track lends to the ruin an aura of time beyond time—a time before humans were even so much as a thought in the mind of creation. There is permanence of a sort next to this wadi, the fickle flow that has

guided pilgrims and settlers, locals and wandering strangers, a place that lures worshippers to this day. Still cold, or cold again, I begin the descent to the boats. We've got a long way to go, and a portage around a diversion dam yet ahead. We'll be looping back to the truck at Grand Falls in the dark. But we don't mind. It's another day with the river, another circuit

completed. At home, in our easy chairs, it will be good to remember that silt happens now and again. 🏔️

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A former Flagstaff resident, Michael Engelhard now lives in Nome, Alaska, where rivers never are dry but frozen half of the year. He hopes to some day trace one as far as possible, from its headwaters to the coast.