

# kayaking & canoeing

There is something primal about digging your paddle into the water and propelling your spirit forward. I remember in my youth, the pirogue slicing through black African waters across the lagoon and past the crocodiles. It felt like adventure. Later in life, my canoe drifted across a mountain lake. It felt like serenity. This morning, as our kayaks launched into the Guadalupe River under the cypress trees and past the feeding white-tailed deer, it felt like home. There is a natural rhythm to the action of paddling a kayak. When you paddle a kayak down a Texas Hill Country river, it feels right. You can almost see the cares of the "civilized" world as they sit on the shoreline watching you leave them behind; you drift with the current, and you do not look back.

Today I shared this journey with my daughter Megan. She has an adventurous spirit. She really had no choice in the matter. It was genetics, karma, or both. The poor girl is doomed to a life of exploring, experiencing, and living. It is a shame what parents do to their kids. This morning she did not seem to mind as we paddled along tree-lined riverbanks and listened to the birds' morning songs. When we reached a patch of mild rapids, I could see her power up through them and I knew she was having fun. I think she even forgave me for waking her up before sunrise.

Guiding us along the river was Ben Munoz of Guadalupe Canoe Livery (830-885-4671). This stretch of river was new to us and Ben had volunteered to give us the tour, pointing out where he and GCL owner Bill Johnson had seen a flock of wild turkey the day before. Ben, also a former Marine, was a gracious host as we paddled along the Guadalupe. Occasionally we would slow our progression to share our impressions of a tree, rock formation, or the river. For the most part, we just paddled in silence. When you are out in the subtle beauty of the Texas Hill Country, not much needs to be said.

In parts of the river, we paddled rhythmically, in the circular fashion of the kayaker through the glassy water. Wild flowers grew along the banks. Cardinals sang as kingfishers fished. Mayflies hatched near the shoreline. Guadalupe bass jumped into the air, perhaps to catch the mayflies, perhaps because it was fun. Map turtles slid from their sunny places as a soft-shelled turtle sniffed the morning air. A herd of Axis deer stood silently watching as we passed them by. At every turn, the hill country showed us something new—a window into what goes on while people waste time and money at the mall.

In other places, the river narrowed. The current quickened and we paddled with intensity partially to power through the rapids, and partially because it was fun. We stopped along a gravel bed to survey a section where the rapids rushed under two fallen trees. After a brief survey of the river and the obstacles, Ben pointed out where we would need to "do the limbo" under the fallen trees while keeping our kayaks pointed downstream between the rocks and powering through the rapids. We got back in our kayaks and as we launched I heard Megan say, "Excellent!" We each smiled and laughed our way down the rapids, under the trees, and through the rocks. Half way through one set of rapids, Megan was spun around. She has some experience at white water canoeing and actually cut through one set of fast water backwards to avoid being tipped. I have experience at laughing at myself, which really came in handy as I zigged when I should have zagged and almost swamped my kayak. The thing about the rivers in the Texas Hill Country that makes them great is that they are both serene and fun. Under normal conditions, there is just enough water to give you both the calm stretches where you can take in the scenery, and faster, class II rapids that are just plain fun.

Hill Country Rivers include the Guadalupe, Medina, Llano, Nueces, Frio, Sabinal, Pedernales, Blanco, Lampasas and the San Gabriel. Just to the west of the Hill Country is the Devils River, which is wild, scenic, and eventually meets the Rio Grande at Lake Amistad National Recreation Area. Each of these rivers has some service available, either a full service kayak/canoe rental/shuttle, or one that will shuttle you and your vessel from point to point. On this trip, we chose to run the Guadalupe from Spechts Crossing to the Guadalupe Canoe Livery docks at Hwy 281. This is a trip of about three hours and was perfect for an early summer morning.

I grew up paddling a canoe, but this was my first time with a kayak. If you have ever wondered if paddling a kayak is rocket science: don't; it's easy. Because the water is often very shallow in places, "sit on top" kayaks are prevalent in the Texas Hill Country due to the fact that they have less draft than the "cockpit" style. A kayak feels like something you are wearing that floats. It is as if you have inflatable pants. You get to feel the river, and the motion of paddling a kayak is circular, natural, and serene. Canoes work very well on our rivers, again because they have a shallow draft. Whenever I paddle a canoe, I feel like a pioneer. It feels adventurous. And, it is a lot better use of my limited lifetime than sitting on the couch watching reruns of shows that weren't any good the first time. This leads to another great benefit of getting off the couch and enjoying the Texas Hill Country outdoors; you can burn a calorie or two and have fun doing it.

The wonderful thing about rivers is that they connect things. Rivers connect us to moments in time. As I paddle my kayak along the Guadalupe, I am reminded that Comanche braves, Confederate soldiers, Texas Rangers, and intrepid homesteaders all watered their horses here. You have to think about that, because otherwise you would never know it; they never threw a beer can in the water. They only left the tracks of their horses, and perhaps a memory or two. I like that about those who came here before me, and I hope to do the same for those who will come after me. Our Texas Hill Country rivers deserve to be treated kindly. After all, they are teaching us all the time. Life flows, is transient, movable, uncertain, beautiful, at times turbulent, giving, and in the end...it does not end; it just changes course.

A green heron watches me suspiciously, as I pass slowly by. He is still catching his breakfast while I'm beginning to think about lunch. High on a hilltop overlooking the river is a ranch house from which emanates the sweet smoky smell of a brisket being born. I fight my primal urge to paddle for the shore, climb the hill and ask, "What's cooking?" In the distance I can hear the sound of "civilization" intruding, and in that moment I know that our journey is about to end. Like taking the last sip of a very good bottle of wine, it's best not to lament the ending; instead I feel fortunate to be truly alive and know that the memory of this adventure will belong to Megan and me for at least this lifetime. I know that we will never forget laughing as we ran down the rapids or feeling blessed as we watched the deer as they watched us. We will never forget the feeling of launching into the river or the beauty of the Texas Hill Country that surrounded us. Funny, I can't remember a single thing about any of my past trips to a shopping mall. X

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