

The Call of the Kayak

For paddlers of all levels, it doesn't get much better than Otter Bar Lodge. BY GEOFFREY O'GARA

IT OCCURRED TO ME LAST SUMMER ON THE BANKS of Wyoming's Snake River, as I looked, sodden and shivering, at the sundered carcass of my canoe—not the first canoe sent to a watery grave under my command—that perhaps it was time for a change in the flotilla. Time, maybe, for one of those needle-nosed river mosquitoes that had skimmed by me in the froth while my leviathan was smashing into an uprooted tree.

So I answered the call of the kayak and went west to California, to a place called Forks of Salmon, home to Otter Bar Lodge Kayak



School, which is where one goes to learn how to peel out of eddies and carve white-water waves in a foot-numbing little plastic cocoon, recovering in the evening by dining on roasted pork loin stuffed with artichoke hearts and pine nuts, or Pad Thai noodles with tofu in lemongrass with coconut curry.

Otter Bar Lodge sits deep in the canyon of the Salmon River in the far northern part of the Silicon Sunshine State, an area that few people know, in part because it's reached by narrow hair-pin roads that twist and pothole and sometimes drop off in chunks into the canyons below. The lodge and its cottages perch on a grassy terrace that slopes



down to the green river, which ripples and twists its way through the granite and pine wilderness of the Klamath National Forest. It's beautiful and lonely and pretty wild here, the sort of place idealistic dropouts retreated to a generation ago to live off the land. That's actually what drew a few of the folks who now teach kayaking at Otter Bar.

I have come to kayak for a week, joining about a dozen other sporting types, some of whom are already wise to planning, hydraulics, and strainers, others more accustomed to tubing down a lazy catfish creek. As luck would have it, we are a mostly male group, and mostly on the gray side of 30, with the exception

of a young day-trader from New York and a brew-tossing team of reunited college buddies from the Carolinas; the boys have taken over a wing of the lodge and run it like a convivial frat house.

I'm a late arrival, and all that's left of the first gourmet dinner is a twilight scene of half-empty wine bottles on the outdoor banquet table, illuminated by kerosene lamps instead of candelabra. I spot my cabin mate for the week, Oscar Will, an affable surfer, professor, and rancher who, like me, has left his family at home while he makes a midlife recreational course correction.

Which is literally what we find ourselves doing the very next morning:

Plugged in and ready to roll: An Otter Bar kayaker surfs brisk waters on the Salmon River. For many students the big challenge is the roll (*opposite*), the maneuver kayakers need to right themselves after capsizing.

Practicing turns as we paddle our kayaks around a tranquil and, thankfully, warm pond in the meadow beside the lodge. On shore, Creek Hanauer, Otter Bar's ebullient senior instructor, has led us through stretches and pointers, and we have been issued equipment—kayaks, double-bladed paddles, flotation devices, helmets, spray skirts, water bottles, and nose plugs—before slithering like gators off the grassy bank into the pond.

This is an opening-day ritual at Otter Bar, and we splash around like kids on rafts in a wading pool. Otter Bar's four instructors stand waist-deep among us to size up their new batch of teetery pupils—and in short order have us all wobbling on purpose, flipping our kayak-bound selves over into the first of many unnatural positions in which I would find myself during the week: upside down underwater (nose plug thankfully in place), with my legs sealed inside the kayak's tiny cockpit. My overriding instinct is to grab the tab that pulls the spray skirt free and wriggle out, but for experienced kayakers this "wet escape"

is the last resort. Instead, I'm supposed to bend forward, calm as a sea cucumber, and embrace my kayak so that my arms reach around it and up out of the water; then I'm to slap the skyward-facing bottom of my kayak to signal my companions to rescue me (kayakers always paddle in company for just such events). While I await a response, nose to nose with trout, I'm supposed to stroke the hull of

my boat so that when a friendly kayak nudges mine, my hand will find it. I'd then grab on to the other kayak and pull myself up to the water surface. This maneuver, I found, is surprisingly easy.

Next was *the Roll*. It's surprisingly not.

The roll is a basic, must-know move. When you capsizes in your kayak—which you can't help doing in the beginning and can't resist once you're experienced—the roll is the maneuver that brings you back around without help. It's a move that combines aspects of hula hooping, ballet, and the Heimlich maneuver. Greg Davidson, who spent a good deal of that

first morning helping me, is very low-key about the roll—he's very low-key about everything—but I know that it matters. On the river, a roll is the key to independence, like pepper spray in grizzly country or a credit card at Eddie Bauer. I watch Thanh Vo, one of the three women in the group, doing it effortlessly on one side of me, then Oscar doing it effortfully—but at least he's doing it. I never make it all the way around, flopping each time back into the water.

Happily, we don't have to know the roll to kayak gentler parts of the Salmon, which is where we'll spend much of the week. This is a beautiful little stretch of

the river, winding its way through our granite canyon and opening now and then onto pebbly beaches and creeks and meadows. In the spring, runoff swells the river to challenging rapids, luring experienced kayakers; in the summer the white water is gentle, with smooth pools to rest on and hard stuff only if you want it.

We break up into groups according to ability, each with our own instructor:

The skilled paddlers, like the Carolina boys, go for upperclass stuff on the brawny Klamath River, while my group learns about currents and eddies and such on an easier stretch. My classmate Linda Sutter, a rafting guide working on her kayaking skills, wryly asides to me, "We're being sent to do some remedial work in the resource room."

Linda is relaxed and amused about this—she's rolled before, she knows she'll get it back. At one point during our week, though, Linda dares to suggest that there's a difference between men and women on the river. To my

chagrin, I'm becoming Exhibit A for her argument—by day three I'm trying to beat the river into cooperation, hoping it will regurgitate me in a roll. One contributing factor, suggests 6'3" Creek Hanauer, is that "we're big guys, you and I, with big shoulders and a high center of gravity, and that makes it harder."

Thanh Vo makes the roll look easy, but she knows kayaking is not—she's one of many Otter Bar alumni who have come back for more training. Days follow a pattern, starting with a morning talk. One morning, instructor Scott Harding teaches us about currents and boat angles on the lodge carpet, using a little kayak doll named Xena. Another morning, instructor Greg Davidson talks about risk management—like how to recognize when you are moving from the safe exploration of a sport to misadventure.

The talks were followed by an optional warm-up skill session in the pond, then we'd head off to a new part of the river

for the rest of the day. In the evening, another sumptuous meal, followed by lazy conversation, entertainment—slide shows, live music, videos of kayakers from another planet shooting waterfalls—or, most popular of all, sleep.

The instructors met every morning to assess how we were progressing, and I would learn later that I was a rather sore subject at those meetings. "He's hung up on the roll," someone said. "He's beating himself up." Another opined, "He's got an 'oppositional personality.'" It was all true, I'm afraid; I was stuck.

There are plenty of opportunities to take the pressure off yourself at Otter Bar. Guests can mountain bike, head to town, nap, or read a book. Several of us opted for a very interesting tour of the grounds with Peter Sturges, who with his wife, Krista, owns Otter Bar. Before discovering the Salmon River, Sturges had been a sailor, a fishing guide, and just a guy hanging out in Denver, which is where he was in 1972 when two vagabond friends called from California. They'd come upon a magnetic place of beautiful rivers and wonderful people—the area had a thriving commune—called Forks of Salmon. Sturges just had to come out to see this "paradise."

It still seems like paradise to Sturges, though the town has dwindled. When he bought the Otter Bar property, in 1981, Sturges enlisted Creek Hanauer, who'd been at the commune, to help out with chores and classes. They're a Mutt-and-Jeff pair—Sturges wiry and intense, Creek big and gregarious. Sturges used to teach, but is too busy now running the resort. I don't mean checking in guests, I mean really running the place, like generating power to light the lamps and cool the refrigerators: Otter Bar Lodge is off the utility grid, its heat and power supplied by solar panels, an array of electricity-storage batteries, old railroad diesel generators, and a water-powered Pelton turbine.

On the fourth day, Creek took my group on the river (Otter Bar instructors, all top-notch but with different

teaching styles, rotate among the groups so students can sample each). We were enjoying paddling in and out of eddies, and riding through bumpy water. I was also working on my edging... but the roll was still foremost in my mind.

About midway down the river, Creek waved me over into some calm water for a little special handling and Zen Creek-speak, which we'd been hearing all week: "Failure's a wonderful tool as long as it doesn't become death... I teach kids at school how to be grownups—here I'm teaching you how to be kids. Don't think too much." Most important, he said: "Rolling is like a sigh of relief."

I once again positioned myself underwater in my kayak, my paddle just above the surface, parallel to the boat. I then swept the paddle toward the rear and snapped my hips to bring the boat under me—and myself up toward the surface—at the same time trying to drop my head toward the water (a counterintuitive motion but the right way to rock and roll). The brain in that head, though, stubbornly jerked it the other way, instead ordering my arms to push harder. And plop, just like that, all was lost.

After another half dozen unsuccessful tries, we rejoined the group. As we peeled out of an eddy into a series of small standing waves, Creek told us this

would be a good place for those who *could* roll to practice it in moving water. Without thinking—frankly I was tired of thinking—I flipped myself like the boat before me. Then, still not thinking, I rolled myself up.

"Combat roll!" shouted a surprised Creek (meaning: "You did it in moving water!"). My fellow combatants cheered. Life became instantly better.

On our last two days, our river trips were longer and more challenging. We were all friends now, and all very friendly with the water. I did a few more rolls; some worked, some didn't. But I didn't think about it anymore. As Creek had said, "We're going to teach your bodies, and your bodies can teach your minds."

Wyoming writer GEOFFREY O'GARA's latest book is *What You See in Clear Water* (Knopf). He is actively shopping for a kayak.

TRAVEL WISE ■ **Best For:** People who are serious about learning kayaking (Otter Bar's student-teacher ratio is 3:1). Children must be at least ten years old. ■ **Basics:** Otter Bar Lodge Kayak School, P.O. Box 210, Forks of Salmon, CA 96031; 530-462-4772; e-mail otterbar@aol.com; www.otterbar.com. Rates for standard seven-day/night courses, \$1,690; includes equipment for basic classes, meals, lodging (shared occupancy), and instruction.



Mealtime talk at Otter Bar is of the food—"prims"—and the day's hits and misses.



Chilling on the Klamath River, a class awaits instruction before heading into white water.