

Fear to Fun on the Gunny Run

“Leroy! Is the road passable or not?” I ask the outfitter located at the takeout.

“I’ve been the shuttle permit holder in the gorge for the last 20 years. My drivers have been with me for 16 and 18 years as well. I tell you the road is snotty. Snotty, snotty, snotty. We didn’t run shuttles today or yesterday. And the forest service didn’t either.”

“When do you think it will be passable?” I beg for sympathy from him.

“I’ve seen jackasses try to go down there when it’s wet, like you want to, and I tell you I’m not haulin’ your ass out of there. Neither will any tow company. You’re on your own in there. And if you ruin the road they’ll charge you!”

“Will it be passable Friday or Saturday? You know I could wear snowshoes,” I joke.

“Call me Friday morning.” Click, the a steady dial tone.

It’s Thursday afternoon and I’m in a panic. The Black Canyon’s Gunny Gorge is flowing almost 1400 cfs and the only thing in the way of some fun late season boating is Mancos Shale. It is what we will have to four-wheel over tomorrow, if we want to run the canyon. It’s been a drought in Colorado for five years, and now it is raining in the high desert! The Crystal Dam is releasing due to recent maintenance and not rain. The dam masters must test the new bearings and Flux Capacitors up to 2000cfs. We need to hit it this weekend.

My only other option is to get in touch with an elusive hair boater named Milo out of Crested Butte. Milo has been running the Black Canyon for the last couple of weeks dreaming of the promised flows and leaving breadcrumbs of information the “MountainBuzz” of his exploits. The guy runs it solo and climbs the black rock to the rim to meet his climbing buddies for a break. His shuttle is his beat up mountain bike. He tries to do this all in 24 hours. This is Milo’s idea of a mild adventure race.

“I’m going to do the shuttle with Milo. Do you think the road will be passable by Friday?” There is a long pause on the phone from the forest service employee stationed in Montrose. “Hello, can you hear me?” I repeated.

“Uh...yeah...you said you’re going with Milo?”

“Yes. Do you know Milo? Should I be a concerned?”

“Well...not really. Milo knows the Canyon better than anyone, I guess. The road is saturated right now. You can probably get in, but Milo might have a hard time getting his rig out. But then, maybe not, it is Milo.”

It’s already late Thursday afternoon. I need to get out of my office and get on the road. Where did all these people at work come from, it’s 5:01pm, go home, so I can leave. It is a long four hours to Blue Mesa and visions of late night deer and drowsiness dance in my head.

It's Friday AM and I'm finally in Gunnison. I have got to call Katy and Karen and let them know it's sunny and dry here today. It looks like we're going to be able to run the Gunny Gorge on Saturday after all. Blue Mesa is beautiful this morning and the high desert sun hits my black fleece and warms me up. I take a hike to soak in the warm rays and view the changing beauty of the bright golden leaves of autumn. The cottonwoods are so golden yellow they look as if they are plugged in to the hydroelectric dam downstream.

Gunnison's whitewater park holds its own even in low flows. I decide to warm up for tomorrow by spending the late Friday afternoon in the play park. Cell rings. It's Karen. No word from Katy yet. I hope Katy gets the afternoon update I left on her home phone. I tell Karen the latest and explain the complicated shuttle procedure I have planned via e-mail with an elusive hair boater named Milo, and the Chukar Trail road hazard. All things may come to a halt if the road doesn't dry out I warn. While I am talking on the cell, I notice a guy doing an endless number of flat-water cartwheels in the eddy near me.

"HEY! Are you Gordo?" A deep voice shouts out from the eddy. It's the guy who was doing the endless cartwheels.

"Uh...yeah...I am."

"I'm Milo!" He says, as he enthusiastically shoots out his hand toward me.

"Nice to finally meet you Milo." I say, as Milo begins discussing the shuttle plan, road conditions, flows and shuttle beer requirements with great intensity.

A vanload of high school kids with kayaks rolls in behind me. The squeaky brakes get my attention. Crested Butte Academy is painted on the sliding door. It seems as if twenty kids hop out of the van all at once. Gear is flying everywhere; kayaks get tossed from the racks up top. Danger, better move. Milo screams out orders to the kids like a drill sergeant. "This isn't the skate park, tighten up that helmet strap, knucklehead!" These are his kids for the next two hours. The play spot goes from vacant to whitewater festival atmosphere in minutes. I join the party.

Saturday 5:30am: It's very dark. I feel like I should be going skiing, but I have a pile of neoprene and latex in front of me. Breakfast will be at Micky D's today. I load my truck in the pitch black darkness as a vehicle pulls up close to us with its brights on high. Blinded. "Hello" a voice calls out awfully cheerful for 5:45am. It's Katy! She got the message I had hung at the campground, in hopes that she would find it. Bonus! We're all together now. I've been a little stressed planning, or rather, winging this trip together. Due to the brief communications and complicated shuttle details, I really didn't want it to turn into a cluster fledge. But hey, we're all boaters, and boaters do have a keen sense on how river details fall together.

I'm driving at top speed, down the twisty dirt road, munching a sausage Mc Muffin and trying to navigate Milo's insane short cut directions. I'm feeling a little nervous about getting to Pleasure Park on time to meet Milo. I'm glad I had that serendipitous meeting Friday afternoon. At least I'll know whom to look for when we arrive. Karen and Katy

have no worries, other than Katy is convinced I going to smack a cottonwood tree on one of these hairpin turns and Karen is warning me about tiny bunny rabbits crossing the road. Smack! One bunny goes down. I try not to notice and bury my guilt deep into some place I will never retrieve it.

We meet Steve for the first time when we pull up to Milo's parking spot at the Pleasure Park take-out. Steve's wants me to drive his truck down the wicked, twisty, muddy, bone jarring Chukar Trail for him. I just met him this morning for the first time. It's 7:30 am.

We pile in and go. Shuttle talk is by far the most interesting conversation one can have in a stinky, sweaty, mildew infested shuttle rig. Everyone is cozy. Music plays in the background and conversation flows from religion to politics, especially this election year.

"Steve, what's with the Texas flag?" I ask, as I spy a flag with a huge star in the center hanging from his broken visor. He soberly looks in the cracked mirror and says, "I'm a huge George Bush fan." The conversation falls dead. In awe, we are all dumbfounded as to what kind of jackass boater is Steve? I immediately look at Karen and Katy. Without a word, we have a conversation. "Bush fan?!" No one says anything for the next couple of minutes. I can now hear all the pain that Steve's truck is enduring on the backcountry road.

"It's a Chilean flag." Steve says. A sigh of relief overcomes all of us, and we bust out laughing. What a hoot. Steve went on to tell us he also played on "The Young and The Restless." What a character.

A frenzy of boat loading ensues at the rendezvous with Matt. Matt is running the Black Canyon proper with Milo and Steve. Matt is smart. He's taking his truck to the put-in, over paved roads. As we're exchanging boats, I notice Steve fixing the racks on his decaying fiberglass topper. Steve hit a bump a little too hard on the way over on the shortcut and the fiberglass cracked under the weight of all the boats. "Do I need to fill out a damage waiver?" I asked Steve. He looks quietly at me and continues his intense adjustments.

Next, a huge Chevy Avalanche flies up between the trucks. "Where's the put-in?" a smiling but clueless boater demands. Mark and Ethan have just pulled up to the Chukar Trail road, but have no idea where they are, or where the put-in is, and don't have a shuttle planned. The shuttle is a three hour round trip, that's why I painstakingly planned it with Milo.

"Can you guys give us a ride back?" Mark asks beggingly. I pause, not wanting to commit to a plan I have not thought out in detail. Too many times, I have been caught up in someone else's grab-ass, due to their lack of foresight and preparation. Mark senses my hesitation.

"We're good boaters!" Mark adds, trying to close the deal. I have seen this type of desperation before...at rehab clinics. Mark is waiting for an answer. Non-committing, I

offer, “If I see you at the take out with those puppy dog eyes, I might be able to squeeze you in the back.”

Milo quips an offer to drive his Avalanche out to the paved road for him. Milo grins. Mark grins. Score. He has a free ride back. I just acquired a new friend for today. We set off down the Chukar Trail.

I have boated, traveled, and shuttled enough with Karen this summer to know what she’s thinking. “What have we picked up here?” are her thoughts. “I’m not really sure.” I blurt out. “Milo’s not getting back until well after dark. Mark’s not going to want to wait for Milo. He’s going to want you to take us all the way down this screwed up road to get his truck. That’s a really long day.” Karen’s comments make sense. We need to catch up to Mark and leave his car up top and all go together down the Chukar Trail in Steve’s truck. I step on it.

I asked Steve, before we parted, if there was anything “special” I needed to know about his truck, things that weren’t working according to specs. He said everything was fine. Well, the horn doesn’t work! Now, we can’t flag down Mark. Hauling at top speed, the truck is ready to fly apart, I am hanging out the window trying to wave him down. No luck. Mark has 1450cfs on his mind. Karen screams, “Yell at him!” Good idea. “MARK!!!” I scream at the top of my lungs while punching it hard. Brake lights!

I’m sweating. It’s no longer cold out. The sun is now beating on the five of us. The reason is we’re burning daylight loading boats, yet again. This is beginning to feel like a kayaker fire drill. All snug, we begin the treacherous climb up Chukar Trail wobbling under the weight of the boats. Boom! Ouch. What was that? A bump. That little thing? Check the racks. Shit!

A long discussion develops as we decide how we are going to reload these boats. At over two hundred pounds, I am beginning to feel we have maxed the specified ratings of the makeshift racking system. We are definitely over the rating of Steve’s deteriorating fiberglass top. Instantly, we all become engineers arguing on the “best” way to secure the boats.

Desperate and determined, Mark waves down some fisherman. Chat, chat, chat about the Chukar road, flows, and latest fishing flies. It is amazing how much a boater can know about fly-fishing when a shuttle I on the line. Mark convinces the fisherman to carry one of our heaviest boats, the Creeker. Five minutes later though, Mark and Ethan have four boats neatly stashed in the back of their truck. Hands shake, the trip resumes. The road becomes very rough. I am really happy that the boats are in their truck and not falling down the 1500 foot cliff we are riding on. I envision what a painful act it would be to haul my boat up the muddy hillside, Junipers tearing at my flesh. But, not today, we have a fly fisherman rickshaw.

Yahoo! We finally reach the parking lot on the edge of the Gunny Gorge. It’s 11:00am, we have been doing shuttle since 5:45am, and still have a 1.25 mile hike to the bottom of

the canyon to get to the put-in. Gear unloads quickly and we hit the trail like sherpas on an multi-day canyon expedition. The gorge is deep, but absolutely fantastic. When we stop walking, it is the quietest spot on earth. We just want to sit quietly and absorb it all. But, the clock is ticking and daylight is burning. Mush, no time for rest.

High Noon we reach the canyon floor. Overwhelming sights are in all directions. Even the commode is impressive. Cedar planks. I have to use it. There are just a few brave souls that have come down here today. A small group rafters wheeled their haplon all the way down the narrow trail. 1450cfs will cause this type of behavior. We all gear up and play in the eddy.

Finally, we are on the river. Between the Whitewater Park with Milo's academy kids, and the morning's shuttle ride, it has been a week's worth of adventure already. Now, we get to boat as well. Chukar is the first rapid and a fun and easy to warm up after all that hiking. Most of the river is class III, with two IV in there, so it should be a relaxed straightforward day.

There are about 23 campsites along the entire Gunny Gorge. This would be a great run to do an overnigher. Day one, do the shuttle and play in the first two rapids One Miler and Improvise, both class III. Day two you could run the remainder of the gorge. There is a lot of water here today and the drops are dynamic and playful. Next, we hit Buttermilk (III). This drop is quick, but loads of fun. Next, the river meanders along a long four mile stretch of mellow class II, with one class rapid, Red Canyon (III) in the middle to keep you awake. In this section, there are about ten campsites that are perfect for an overnigher, maybe next time.

Next set of rapids begins with Boulder Garden (IV) and Paddle Keeper (III). These two get you ready for the mile of whitewater that finishes the Gunny Gorge. This last big section starts just before mile nine. It begins with S-Turn immediately followed by The Squeeze, and continues into The Drops. The Drops are three consecutive drops of rowdy whitewater.

After the drops run, the last set of rapids, Cable (IV), Jumpin' Jack Splash, The Gate Keeper, and Grand Finale. These four rapids run together in the deep narrow section of the gorge and end in a crescendo of excitement! The team played in the last drop, a beautiful gorge with steep walls and loud whitewater. A restful eddy is on river right to catch your breath or lower your heart rate.

Not that you will need that because the last three miles is a very pretty flat-water float. So there is plenty of time to rest. This is the only drawback, but only due to the long day. The sun is setting and we are all exhausted. Exhaustion is quickly forgotten with pizza, beer and tall tales in Montrose. If the Gunny Gorge runs again in 2005, expect me to be there, but make it a two day trip!