

Brenda Elwell writes a popular monthly Single Parent Travel Newsletter available on e-mail through her Web site, www.SingleParentTravel.net. Her new book entitled, "The Single Parent Travel Handbook," is now available and may be ordered through her Web site. A veteran of over thirty years in the travel industry, she has traveled to over 60 countries and 45 states, half of them with her two kids in tow. Brenda may be reached via e-mail at Brenda@SingleParentTravel.net.

SINGLE PARENTING DOWN THE SNAKE **by Brenda Elwell, CTC**

The alarm went off at 5:00am. After three leisurely days of hiking and sightseeing through Yellowstone National Park it was a rude awakening. The day before, we had left Yellowstone for the brief drive south to Grand Teton National Park, where we had reservations for a spacious, comfy cabin at Colter Bay, located next to a sparkling lake surrounded by the spectacular Tetons. The early July air was frosty as I stepped out of the cabin to check the weather. After ten days on the trail with three kids, (two were mine, one was borrowed), I found it easier to get dressed myself, then wake the boys, then last, my teen-aged daughter. In our family she was the fastest dresser. Go figure.

By 6:00am we were all in the car, heading for a light breakfast and the starting-point of our all day rafting excursion of the Snake River. We had researched and carefully chosen an outfit called Dave Hansen's Whitewater for three reasons:

- They had an excellent reputation and claimed to have never lost a customer.
- The rafting trips were U-Paddle, i.e. everyone paddles. The kids and I wanted to be active participants all the way. Besides, I assumed it would take our minds off our terror. (It did).
- They offered a combination trip called Best of Both Worlds which was still water rafting in the morning and white water in the afternoon. (You had the option to bail out midway if you lost your courage. None of us did).

At 7:00am sharp our river guide pulled up to the office on his motorcycle. He looked like a leftover version of a 60's hippie with straggly beard and thick sandals. All that was missing to complete the picture was the tie-dye shirt. Hoping we hadn't been assigned one of society's disgruntled dropouts, I expressed my misgivings to my kids, who immediately assailed me with comments such as "Mom, you always taught us not to pre-judge people and now you are doing it!" I was soon to eat my words. Our river guide turned out to be one of those wonderful people who is truly in love with his work. He knew the family history and personality of every bird and animal we saw and had names for all.

At mid morning we disembarked for a one hour break as we were fitted into body suits and life jackets and given a forty minute briefing in preparation for our white water trip. We were told that if we fell overboard, the problem was not that the raft would leave us behind, quite the contrary. We would need to back paddle with our hands to slow our speed so the raft could catch up. As a single parent with one kid on loan, I felt a little better about that. It's one thing to lose your own child on a trip; it's an entirely different matter to lose somebody else's. Back in my BK period (Before Kids), I was a free-wheeling spirit, always ready to race down an expert ski trail in the Rockies or the Alps, but once I became a parent, and later a single parent, I became more fearful. So here I was, once again, apprehensive inside, but trying to look like Super Cool Mom on the outside.

We were a mixed bag of fourteen people in our party - young, old, Westerners, Easterners and Europeans. When the guide called for two front paddlers, my daughter Monique leapt forward to left front, along with a little slip of a woman from Wyoming who took the right. I chose a position as front bailer, with the boys somewhere behind me. We practiced some maneuvers in still water and it soon became obvious my position was well chosen. Both my kids are dyslexic and neither can tell left from right very quickly. When the guide would yell from the rear "Left side paddle!" I would translate that to "Monique, paddle!" to achieve a quicker response.

Shortly thereafter we headed into our first set of rapids, called Lunch Counter, from which we emerged victorious, soaked, and invigorated. My aching arms welcomed the period of still water. I suddenly realized why we had on body suits. In contrast to the bright summer sun, the water was icy cold. With all the adrenaline pumping through my body, I hadn't noticed the chill until now. The kids were having a ball, whooping and hollering. Piece of cake, I thought. Then we came to the second set of rapids - three huge waves called the Big Kahuna. As we paddled into the first one, an enormous wall of water, I had no idea how we would survive, but we did. The force of the second wave tore the rubber band off my waterproof camera wrapped around my wrist. It also thrust the petite Wyoming lady up into the air. Her burly husband, seated behind her, grabbed her, shoved her forward and yelled, "Keep paddling!" By the time we emerged from the third wave we were all coughing up river water, which had slammed into our nostrils under high pressure. It was the first and only time in my life I was glad I didn't have one of those cute upturned noses.

The last set of rapids, called Cottonwoods, though not as big as the others, was much longer, and became a test of endurance. Our guide was so pleased with our teamwork he had us perform a 360 degree victory turn before docking. We were all on such an adrenaline high that our soaking clothes had turned to merely damp by the time we finished the sandwiches that awaited us. Having once again secured my status as Super Cool Mom, we changed clothes and headed off for our evening's single parent travel adventure, but that's another story.

Author's note:

∅ Children of any age can participate in still water rafting.

∅ Outfitters usually have a minimum age of eight years for white water excursions.

∅ Several outfitters have told me that white water excursions are very popular with single moms and their teen-age sons, as it gives them the opportunity to share a fun-filled, safe, macho experience.