

State Proves a Tough Mama: World's Best Rafters Impressed with Event

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DAILY MAIL OUTDOORS EDITOR

DRENNEN - The accents may have been mixed, but the lyrics rang clear through the crisp autumn air:

"Country roads, take me home, to the place I belong - West Virginia! Mountain mama, take me home, country roads."

The world's best whitewater rafters appeared quite pleased to have contested their world championships in the Mountain State. So happy were they, in fact, that they broke into the state's unofficial anthem no fewer than three times while waiting for the medals for Tuesday's downriver race to be awarded.

For the record, the Czech Republic's men's and women's teams captured both gold medals for the 9-mile dash down the Upper Gauley River. But the work West Virginians put in to host the event clearly captured many competitors' hearts.

"The support from the state for this event was awesome," said Milos Cihak, captain of the Czech men's team. "The state stepped into a difficult situation and did an excellent job."

The three-day series of races originally was scheduled for Brazil, but political unrest in that country forced a last-minute switch to West Virginia. Working on less than three months' notice, private promoters and Division of Tourism officials managed to put together an event that drew rave reviews as it drew to a close.

"Everyone seemed really excited to have us here, and that made it great fun," said Daisy Fair of the U.S. women's team. "We just came from a competition in Africa, and they didn't really even seem to be aware that we were there. Once we got here, though, we were received very enthusiastically."

Though some competitors doubted whether West Virginia's New and Gauley rivers would be challenging enough for world-class paddlers, the event's results removed any such misgivings.

"So much for the Gauley being too easy," said Donnie Hudspeth, one of the race's local coordinators. "Several teams got flipped in these 'easy' rapids."

The Brazilian men's team flipped three times in the long, technically demanding Lost Paddle Rapids, and several men's and women's teams flipped just upstream of the finish line at Sweets Falls.

Cihak said the river's many twists and turns required teams to choose their lines through the rapids much more carefully than usual.

"The biggest rapids here are smaller than the smallest rapids on the Zambezi," he said, referring to the Zimbabwean river that hosted a previous championship. "But these rapids are very technical, and you must remember which way is fastest to go through them."

Until this year, West Virginia's whitewater rivers primarily had seldom been thought of as venues for paddle-sports competitions, but the World Rafting Championships appear to have changed that. Hudspeth said plans were recently completed to conduct next year's National Wildwater Championships on a middle section of the Gauley.

"It'll be an official event, sanctioned by the U.S. Canoe and Kayak Team," he said. "It'll probably be held over a 3-mile course between Mason Branch and Woods Ferry, because wildwater boats aren't made to run the really big whitewater of the upper river."

Hudspeth said Division of Tourism officials' recent work in pulling together the rafting championships makes him feel "very encouraged" about next year's wildwater event.

"They've been awesome. They've really embraced sport tourism, and they seem to understand what an asset it can be to the state," he said.

Alisa Bailey, the state's Commerce and Tourism commissioner, said the event has served as an eye-opener for people within the state and around the world.

"This has opened up a whole new tourism-industry niche for us," she said. "We'd always known about our whitewater rivers' recreational potential, but had never really thought of them as venues for competitions. I think now we'll look more thoroughly into the entire area of sport tourism."

She said she expects the four scheduled cable-network telecasts of the just-completed championships to put West Virginia on the map for many such future events. Not only will viewers see six tourism-related commercials extolling the state's recreational virtues, they'll also see the Division of Tourism's Web site address emblazoned on each raft.

"People around the world will see these telecasts, and they'll get the message that West Virginia has world-class whitewater worthy of a world championship event," she said. "We want to host more of these championships, and I believe we will."

Mark Joffe, the rafting championships' principal promoter, said the world might easily beat a path to the state's doorstep in future years.

"We try to rotate the events to different rivers in different countries, but we definitely will be coming back here," he said. "And next time, we plan to have the luxury of having an entire year to plan the event."

If and when that happens, West Virginia's country roads will have called the world's elite rafting teams home yet again.

Rafting Fans Pushed Out of Front Row: Championships Limit Spectators Along Riverside

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This weekend's World Rafting Championships will probably go down in West Virginia history as the biggest event nobody ever saw.

Although the three-day competition will attract whitewater teams from around the globe, only a relative handful of spectators will get to watch the races.

"There's only going to be room for 500 to 700 people along the riverbanks, and some of that room has to be reserved for competitors, officials and media," says Tony O'Leary, a Division of Tourism employee who is helping to coordinate the event.

As a result, only 350 spectators will be bussed to bottom of the New River Gorge for the races' sprint and slalom events Saturday and Sunday. O'Leary says some additional spectators might be ferried to the site by commercial rafting companies.

Spectator access promises to be even more restricted along the Gauley River, where the competition's downriver race is to be held next Tuesday. Two trails that might otherwise have provided foot access to two of the river's more prominent rapids were damaged by heavy rains in July and were subsequently closed by state Parks Section officials.

"Because it's going to be so hard to gain access to the riverside, we're recommending that any spectators who might want front-row seats should book trips with licensed whitewater outfitters," O'Leary says.

Several outfitters are advertising discounted fares for rafting trips scheduled on race days. Spectators will be able to run the river, pull off in the race areas, and watch as the teams paddle past. O'Leary says those interested in attending should call the state's toll-free tourism hotline, (800) 225-5982.

Donnie Hudspeth, the championships' local coordinator, says restricted access is nothing new for the event.

"Actually, this year's championships will be the most spectator-oriented in their history," he says. "It's always been held in extremely isolated places. Last year, it was on the Zambezi River in Africa, and it's also been held on remote rivers in Patagonia, South Africa and Costa Rica. Spectators simply weren't a part of the equation."

No live TV, either

Promoters had hoped to counteract the event's remoteness by arranging for live telecasts of the races, but plans fell through.

"There wasn't time," Hudspeth says. "We found out we were getting the event in early July. Two and a half months just isn't enough time to get a network package together."

As a fallback, promoters and tourism officials tried to arrange to have images of the race broadcast live on the World Wide Web, but those plans also hit a wall.

"Right now, it looks as if there might be a delayed Web cast," Hudspeth says. "And there will be delayed television coverage, too."

Crews will videotape the races for a one-hour Outdoor Life Network program, and the network will air the show four times in November. In addition, packaged highlights will be beamed around the world to all the major broadcast and cable networks.

"It will still be fantastic exposure for the state," Hudspeth says.

Spectator information

Despite the difficulties of viewing the championships, promoters expect scores - and possibly hundreds - of die-hard paddling enthusiasts to attend.

The easiest and least inexpensive way to see the races will be to show up at the New River Gorge National River's Burnwood Day Use Area early on Saturday and Sunday mornings.

The Burnwood Area is located across U.S. 19 on the north side of the New River Gorge, directly across the highway from the Canyon Rim Visitor Center.

At 9: 30 a.m. on Saturday and 9 a.m. on Sunday, buses will begin shuttling spectators to the Fayette Station viewing area. The buses will run every 20 minutes until the quota of 350 is reached.

Seating along the river will be catch-as-catch-can. No public grandstands or formal viewing areas have been constructed.

"It's basically going to be a 'pull up a rock and sit down' kind of situation," says the Division of Tourism's O'Leary.

Each day of New River racing will begin at 11 a.m. and end at 2 p.m.

The first day's races are match sprints, in which teams paddle a short course in direct competition with one another. The second day's races are slaloms, in which teams race against the clock while maneuvering through a series of strategically placed gates. Teams that miss gates incur time penalties.

Monday officially is scheduled to be a day of rest, but many of the international teams will head to the nearby Gauley River for a previously scheduled whitewater event, the Animal Upper Gauley Race.

Hudspeth, the Animal race's main promoter, says his event's prize money has proved to be a powerful lure for the international teams.

“The World Championships are just for glory,” he says. “I think a lot of the athletes decided they’d like to try to pick up some of the \$8,000 in prize money we’re offering.”

Now in its ninth year, the Animal race will begin at 12:30 p.m. Monday near the base of Summersville Dam and will conclude 9 miles downriver at Sweet Falls. Spectator access will virtually be non-existent for the event.

The World Championships resume Tuesday at noon with a downriver race, also scheduled for the Gauley. Spectators will be able to view the LeMans-style launch from the day-use area downstream of Summersville Dam, but access along the river will be limited to those who take raft trips with commercial outfitters.

Long before the international teams begin sprinting downriver, kayakers will have gathered on the Lower Gauley at Canyon Doors rapids for another satellite event, the Canyon Doors Whitewater Rodeo.

The event, which begins at 9 a.m. and will continue throughout most of the day, will pit up to 110 kayakers against one another in what its promoter describes as “a cross between gymnastics and ballet.”

“The competitors stay in one spot, ‘surfing’ on the face of a big wave,” explains promoter Liz Garland of Backcountry Ski and Sports in Fayetteville.

“They do rolls and pirouettes and other fancy maneuvers, and those moves are scored by a team of five judges.”

As is the case with the downriver race, spectators who wish to attend should book a trip with a commercial rafting outfitter.

Satellite events

For more than two decades, the annual Gauley River Festival has supplemented each Gauley River rafting season. This year’s celebration happens to coincide with the World Championships.

Hudspeth says the festival will begin Saturday at 5 p.m. and will continue to midnight.

"There will be live band music all evening, and the Nicholas County Fairgrounds will become the largest open-air paddling marketplace in the world," he says. "More than 150 vendors will be there, selling whitewater gear, camping gear, mountain bikes, snowboards, tie-dyes, jewelry, pottery - you name it."

Athletic events aren't complete without awards ceremonies, and the World Rafting Championships are no exception. Awards for Saturday's sprint races will be presented at the Gauley Festival at 8:30 p.m.

The ceremony for Sunday's slalom races will be held at 8:30 p.m. at Fayetteville's Town Hall.

Monday's downriver awards will be presented at Glade Springs resort as part of the championships' banquet and closing ceremonies.

Even with the limited spectator access, local businesses appear delighted to host the championships and their related events.

Sharon Cruikshank of the New River Convention and Visitors Bureau says "everyone is scrambling and pitching in to make this event as good as it can be."

"We're excited to have it here," she says. "We believe we have a really great facility for these championships."

Some Rafting Teams Can't Make Trip: Official Says Attacks Will Have Some Effect on Tourism

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State officials expect the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington to dampen people's enthusiasm for tourism in general, but plan to go ahead with an upcoming international whitewater competition nevertheless.

The World Rafting Championships - scheduled for Sept. 22-25 on the New and Gauley rivers - will be held as scheduled, said its local promoter.

"Even though some of the rafting teams are having trouble getting here by air, we still plan to go ahead with the competition," said Donnie Hudspeth. "We believe the best thing we can do is to go on as normally as possible. If we don't, the terrorists have accomplished their goal to disrupt our way of life."

Teams from 12 countries have committed to participate in the three-day, three-event championship. Hudspeth said some teams already are finding it difficult to enter the United States.

"They're having a hard time getting here," he said. "And the situation isn't very likely to improve. One team was on its way here Tuesday when the airports were shut down. Their flight was diverted to St. Johns, Newfoundland."

Despite the difficulties participants are likely to encounter en route to West Virginia, Hudspeth said he doubts if any of the athletes will have trouble entering the country.

"They have all their paperwork in order, and none of the teams are from the Middle East," he said.

So far, men's teams from Brazil, Canada, Costa Rica, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia and the United States are committed to attend. Confirmed women's teams include Brazil, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Slovakia and the United States.

Hudspeth said the World Championships might provide some much-needed salve for the gaping wounds the international community has suffered.

"After the tragic happenings in New York and Washington, this might well be the first international event where people can come together and join hands in friendly competition," he said. "That's the message we want to send."

Even though the World Championships and the annual Gauley River rafting season will go on as scheduled, the state's top tourism official said she expects the terrorist attacks to have at least some effect on the state's efforts to attract tourists.

"The impact on tourism nationwide probably will be severe," said Tourism Commissioner Alisa Bailey.

"Air travel will be a big concern. People will fear for their safety and have a fear of the unknown."

But, she added, West Virginia's tourism destinations probably will be somewhat insulated from that fear. "We're a driving destination, not an air destination. Ninety-six percent of our visitors come in by car instead of by air."

Economic fallout from the terrorist attacks concerns Bailey much more than their impact on travel.

"There's a very real chance of a recession," she said. "Any time there's a lack of confidence in the economic stability of the country, people simply won't spend money on travel. The possibility of a recession is a genuine cause for concern."