



The John Day River

Clarno to Cottonwood

(Lower Canyon)

5 day trips



Oregon River Experiences

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The John Day River, which drains a large, semiarid watershed in northeastern Oregon, runs 280 miles from its headwaters in the Blue Mountains to its confluence with the Columbia River between the towns of Arlington and The Dalles. The river is entirely undammed, which makes it the longest free-flowing river in Oregon and one of the longest in the United States. In 1988 Congress designated 148 miles of the main John Day (including the stretch we float) as well as 101 miles of the north and south forks as National Wild and Scenic Rivers. The watershed supports one of the largest remaining populations of wild Chinook salmon and steelhead in the Columbia Basin. A wide variety of bird life may be found here as well.

The John Day is the ideal river for a scenic float. Very few rapids are encountered during our 70 mile journey, and most of those are quite mild. This leaves us with ample time to relax, sunbathe, and take in the passing scenery. Although the river is close to Portland, here it it's lower reaches it is little traveled. Both solitude and colorful scenery are here for you to enjoy.

Human History

The Tenino Indians lived along the south bank of the Columbia River as well as along the lower stretches of the John Day and Deschutes Rivers. Over 150 sites on both banks of the John Day have yielded artifacts and other signs of habitation.

Pictographs just south of the Clarno Bridge include an elaborate series of geometric and realistic designs on the cliff above the river. The red pigments may have been applied at different times to the fine-grained absorbent rock. Although some colors are still clear, others are badly weathered. The designs include human figures, hands, floral designs, and many other patterns that can't be separated from the mass of superimposed lines.

South of Clarno near the northward bend of the river, the cliffs east of Muddy Creek are covered with pictographs colored in dark red pigments. "Lizards" superimposed over grid patterns are in fairly good condition.

Red pictographs are painted on cave walls in the same area, at Currant Creek Cave. The cave has a small opening that conceals a larger interior where ten small pictographs were painted. At nearby Cherry Creek, red pigments display a variety of geometric designs on a cliff near the old road along the creek. Initials of early settlers have also been scratched into the rock.

The John Day river was named after an early fur trapper who passed through the area on his way to The Dalles. Accompanied by a friend, both were captured by Indians near the river. John Day had started for Oregon with a hunting party. He fell ill in eastern Idaho from exhaustion and lack of food. He and a companion, Ramsey Crooks, elected to separate from the others and continue on by themselves after Day recovered.

It was their misfortune to meet with unfriendly Indians who stole everything they had, including clothes, before letting them go. As Day and his companion walked north toward Walla Walla, Washington, they were rescued by a trading party from Jacob Astor's fort on the coast. Day never recovered from his experience, and died in less than a year.

In 1861 gold was found up Canyon Creek, a tributary of the John Day, as well as along Griffin Creek, just southwest of Baker. The thousands of miners and prospectors who arrived at Griffin Creek held a formal meeting and named their settlement Auburn. Overnight, Auburn grew to briefly become the largest town in Oregon, before disappearing again in 1903. Canyon City, two miles south

of the John Day, had 10,000 persons, including hundreds of Chinese who worked the mine tailings.

Clarno itself was never a large town. It was named for Andrew Clarno, who settled there in 1866, operating one of the first post offices in the county. His son, Charles, ran a ferry close to where the Clarno Bridge was built in 1897. Clarno, an enterprising person who admired steamboats, constructed a miniature river boat, the John Day Queen. The Queen was 40 feet long, 10 feet wide, and 10 feet tall. She navigated as a ferry and pleasure craft on a ten mile stretch of the river near Clarno.

Weather

The weather along the John Day River is usually very pleasant. This is a semiarid environment, and warm and dry summers are the norm. However cool evenings are also the norm, and cool days cannot be ruled out, particularly at the start of the season.

	<i>May</i>	<i>June</i>
Average daytime high temp.	67	75
Average nighttime low temp.	35	42
Average monthly rainfall	1.3"	1.0"

Trip Itinerary

First day

We meet at 8:00 AM at the BLM Boat Launch Area at Clarno, where Oregon Highway 218 crosses the John Day River. Clarno is roughly 165 miles southeast of Portland. (Please have your breakfast before our meeting time.) Here you will meet our Lead guide and crew. After a brief orientation you will pack your things into our river bags, and park your vehicles nearby. (Our shuttle service will transport your car to our take-out.) We'll then conduct a safety briefing, which will include instruction on paddle and rowing techniques as needed. We're typically on our way downstream by mid-morning.

Days on the river

Each day begins with freshly brewed coffee by 7 AM, and breakfast by 8 AM. After breakfast we'll pack our bags, load the boats and begin our journey downstream.

We're on the river an average of three to five hours per day. Along the way we stop for a riverside picnic lunch. We may also stop to explore historic sites. We usually arrive in camp by mid to late afternoon, and while the guides prepare hors d'oeuvres and dinner, you'll have time to swim, fish, read, or nap. (There are a number of good places to hike, but for the most part hiking opportunities along the John Day river are somewhat limited.)

Last day

We plan to arrive at Cottonwood bridge, our take-out point, between 2:30 and 3:30 P. M. Your car will be waiting for you there, and once you've unpacked your river bags, you will be free to be on your way.

Boat Options

Guided oar raft



Our 14 to 18 foot-long guided oar rafts are the most stable of river boats. They're ideal for young children and anyone who wants to hang on while the guide does the work. And they're a great boat to choose if relaxation and enjoying the scenery are your primary interests. (1 to 5 guests plus guide per oar raft.)



Row-your-own cataraft



"Row-your-own" catarafts are small and lively. They're the boat to choose if you're looking for freedom and a sense of accomplishment combined with a high degree of comfort. (1 to 3 guests per cataraft. O.R.E. guides provide instruction and supervision but are not present in the boat with you.)



We outfit you and a boat partner with one of our custom designed craft, rigged with frame and oars. We provide coaching and encouragement, and while your guides lead the way you float "follow the leader" style down the river. You trade off rowing with your boat partner and have ample time to relax, take pictures, or take in the passing scenery. Oregon River Experiences pioneered row-your-own river vacations. This is the ultimate "hands-on" rafting adventure.

Prior rafting experience is recommended for those considering this boat option but it is not essential. We also recommend a moderately good level of physical fitness. However by no means do you do not need to be a daredevil or an athlete to pilot your own cataraft under our supervision.

Paddle raft



Paddle rafts are fast and exciting. Each paddle crew consists of 4 to 7 guests plus a guide. Each crew member gets a canoe type paddle and works as a team under the direction of the guide. For those who want to combine excitement with group involvement, a paddle raft is the boat of choice.



Inflatable kayak



Inflatable kayaks are small, highly maneuverable one-person craft that are sporty yet also surprisingly stable. We bring along 2 to 4 inflatable kayaks to be shared by the group.



Stand-up paddle board

Stand-up Paddle Boards (SUPs) are great fun to paddle. You don't need much whitewater to have a great time with a SUP. For safety we allow their use in flat water and selected small rapids only, but trust us, they're plenty exciting even in when the river is mild!



A few important details about boat options

- ✓ Paddle rafts are available only when a minimum of six adults want to paddle.
- ✓ Inflatable kayaks are available on a shared basis, and may be reserved for exclusive use by special arrangement only.
- ✓ You are welcome to switch between boat types, but because of the need for training and practice, restrictions will apply.
- ✓ Paddle raft, inflatable kayak, SUP and cataraft availability is subject to water level limitations.

Pre-Trip Details

Where and When to Meet

We will meet at 8:00 AM on the date your trip begins at the BLM boat launch area at Clarno, where Oregon Highway 218 crosses the John Day River. Clarno is roughly 165 miles southeast of Portland.

Getting To and From the River

Several routes are possible. From the east, we suggest you take I-84 to OR-19, OR-19 to Fossil, then OR-218 west to Clarno. From Portland, we suggest you take US-26 to Madras, US-197 to OR-293, OR-293 to OR-218, and OR-218 to Clarno. If you'd rather drive through the Columbia River Gorge, head south on US-197, from the Dalles, or US-97, from Biggs. If you will be arriving in by air, fly in to Portland. No public transportation available, so you will need to rent a car.

Trip Shuttles

Shuttle services are included in the price of your river trip. Reliable drivers will shuttle both your vehicle and O.R.E.'s rig to the take-out. If your party will arrive in more than one vehicle please notify us at least two weeks in advance so appropriate arrangements can be made.

Accommodations (before and after your trip)

Consider staying at the historic (and recently renovated) Hotel Condon, in Condon, Oregon. For reservations phone 800-201-6706. There are many motels available in The Dalles, Biggs and Madras. Allow two hours to drive from Biggs or The Dalles to Clarno, and at least an hour to get from Madras to Clarno. Camping is available at Shelton State Park on OR-19, 10 miles south of Fossil.

What to Bring

Weather in the John Day River canyon is typically very warm to hot, and little rain falls. Still, cool wet weather can occur on any trip. And it can be quite chilly when it's overcast, breezy or rainy, especially when you're in a raft. So please pay close attention to selecting your clothes and gear for your river adventure. Hopefully you will never need most of the cool-weather gear we recommend that you bring. But please do bring it, just in case!

What to wear

On cool or rainy days: Appropriate clothing for these conditions is clothing that dries quickly, and keeps you warm even when the garment is wet. Modern high-tech synthetic fabrics such as polypropylene and polyester fleece do both. (Wool provides warmth when wet, but does not dry quickly and is less comfortable. Wool is often less expensive, however, especially when purchased from Thrift or Military Surplus stores, and wool/synthetic blends can be a good choice.)

Think in terms of layers of clothing for changeable and cool weather. As conditions change you can add or subtract layers as needed. The first layer in cool weather should be long underwear made of synthetic materials such as polypropylene, which provide warmth and wick moisture away from your skin. The middle layer(s) should consist of polyester fleece (or wool), and will provide further warmth. The outer layer consists of a rain jacket and rain pants. Rain gear made of modern water-proof, breathable fabrics such as Goretex are best. But for a less expensive option coated nylon will work, too. Wetsuits are generally not needed.

On warm or hot days: Synthetic fabric shorts and bathing suits are worn, as well as a hat to keep the sun out of your eyes. Cotton shirts may be worn to keep cool and to ward off sunburn. But cotton clothing is recommended for hot weather only. Wet cotton will lower your body temperature. This is great for keeping cool during a heat wave, but cotton provides no warmth when wet the fabric gets wet. If you are particularly sensitive to the sun you may want to bring lightweight cotton clothes (such as a surfer's outfit) for sun protection.

On your feet: For footwear while on the river we recommend nylon or canvas tennis shoes, or sports sandals such as Tevas. For extra comfort you may want to wear nylon or polypropylene socks as a first layer. Sport sandals are comfortable for rafting and are preferred by many of our guides, but

they can be expensive and they do not protect your feet as well as do shoes. (Wetsuit boots are typically not needed on the John Day.)

In camp: You may want a change of shoes as well as comfortable clothing for lounging about or hiking. Cotton clothing may be worn on shore in dry weather. But in order to be prepared for rainy weather we recommend that you also have camp clothing available made of synthetic fabrics.

Where to find it

Check with local sporting goods stores. If they cater to outdoor sports (hiking, backpacking, etc.) rather than team sports, they should have most of the items you need. Gear is also available through mail order and online, for instance by contacting REI (800-426-4840, or www.rei.com) or L.L. Bean (800-341-4341, or www.llbean.com).

How to pack it

Pack your gear in a manner appropriate for your journey to the river. When we meet we will supply you with a watertight river bag into which you will pack your clothing. This bag is roughly 14" in diameter and 24" tall. We'll also provide you with a second, larger river bag (roughly 16" in diameter and 33" tall), which you will share with one other person. Into this second bag will go your tent, sleeping bag, sleeping pad, and other bulky items. These bags will be transported from camp to camp by raft but generally will not be accessible during the day. For items that you want to keep handy during the day bring a small daypack or dry-bag. Items that you want to keep handy during the day but which absolutely must stay dry (camera, binoculars, a book, etc.) go best in a 50 caliber military surplus ammo box. O.R.E. provides these boxes on a shared basis. If you would like your own, they are available at most surplus and some outdoor stores. (Note: boxes cannot be carried in paddle rafts or inflatable kayaks.)

The river bags and boxes we provide are watertight under most conditions, even when submerged. But for extra security we recommend that you wrap your sleeping bag and clothing in heavy-duty plastic garbage bags for extra protection. We also recommend that you pack your camera, binoculars, reading material and similar items in large zip-lock bags.

Rental Equipment

O.R.E. offers camping equipment for rent to those who do not own this gear (or do not wish to transport it from home). High quality, two-person backpacking style tents are available for \$40 per trip. Sleep kits (synthetic-fill sleeping bag, cotton liner, self-inflating sleep pad, and ground cloth) are also available for \$40 per person per trip. Reservations and advance payment are required. To place a reservation for a tent or sleep kit please call our office at 1-800-827-1358.

Equipment Checklist

✓ River Gear

- _____ swimsuit or shorts and T-shirt (avoid cotton shorts)
- _____ tennis shoes or sport sandals
- _____ wool or synthetic “ski” hat — for cool/rainy days
- _____ wide-brimmed hat (preferably with chin-strap), or baseball cap — for sunny days
- _____ 1 pair socks (wool or synthetic)
- _____ waterproof rain jacket and rain pants
- _____ Polypropylene or similar long underwear tops and bottoms
- _____ 1 warm sweater or jacket, polyester fleece or wool
- _____ water bottle or canteen
- _____ waterproof sunscreen and lip balm
- _____ sunglasses, with strap

✓ Extra River Clothing, Camp Clothing

- _____ camp shoes (or lightweight hiking boots)
- _____ 1 pair long pants
- _____ 1-2 pair shorts
- _____ 1-2 long-sleeved shirts
- _____ 1-2 short-sleeved shirts
- _____ socks and underwear

✓ Camp Gear

- _____ compact, lightweight tent (freestanding is preferred)
- _____ compact, medium-weight sleeping bag
- _____ compact foam sleeping pad or air mattress
- _____ small tarp (to place beneath your tent, or as a ground-cloth for sleeping under the stars)
- _____ personal toiletries, including small towel, biodegradable soap, dry-skin lotion, prescription medicines
- _____ small flashlight or headlamp, with extra batteries

✓ Optional Items

- _____ gloves (especially if you’ll be rowing)
- _____ binoculars
- _____ camera
- _____ reading material
- _____ pen and journal or notebook
- _____ compact fishing gear

- _____ spare glasses, sunglasses
- _____ small daypack, ammo box, or small dry bag
- _____ beer or soft drinks (up to 2 six-packs per person), wine or liquor—in unbreakable containers. (We provide coffee, tea, and juice; also wine with some dinners). By the way, consumption of alcohol is prohibited during the day but okay once we arrive in camp.

Please do not bring pets, guns, or valuable jewelry

Additional Information

Your trip fare includes the following

- ✓ The services of our professional river guides.
- ✓ Transport of your vehicle from the put-in at Clarno to the take-out at Cottonwood Bridge.
- ✓ All meals, from lunch on the first day through lunch on the last. Our menu is delicious, varied, and hearty. Meals are freshly prepared by our guides from the highest quality ingredients. Juice and water are available at each meal. Coffee, tea, and cocoa are available at dinner and breakfast, and complementary wine is served with some dinners. Special dietary needs can be accommodated with advance notice.
- ✓ Durable, professional quality rafts and river running equipment, including U.S. Coast Guard Approved lifejackets.
- ✓ Waterproof river bags and boxes for your personal gear.
- ✓ Cups, plates, and eating utensils.
- ✓ Camp chairs.

Fishing

Chinook salmon are found in the lower John Day River during the spring but silt laden waters generally make for so-so fishing at that time. But as river levels drop and the water clears in late May and June the fishing for smallmouth bass is often excellent. You'll need an Oregon fishing license, which is available at many Oregon sporting goods stores.

Camping

We select streamside meadows and beaches for our campsites. Our guides establish a central kitchen and social area, and trip members select spots in the surrounding area to pitch a tent or roll out a sleeping bag. O.R.E. will set up a portable toilet at each camp, which will be located with privacy and convenience in mind. O.R.E. practices minimum impact camping, and the crew will instruct you on the simple steps we follow to protect the river environment.

Gratuities

Our guests sometimes ask whether it is appropriate to tip the guides. Tipping is optional, but if your guides did a great job then feel free to thank them with a gratuity. The amount is up to you, but tips in the range of 8% to 20% of trip cost are typical. Gratuities are customarily presented to the Lead Guide, and will be shared equally among all guides on your trip.

Nearby attractions

While in the area consider a visit to nearby John Day Fossil Beds National Monument. For more information contact the Monument at 541-987-2333.

Cancellations and Travel Insurance

The size of our trips is strictly regulated by law, and your reservation means we cannot sell the spaces to others. So we strictly adhere to the cancellation and refund policies we explain in our reservation materials. For this reason we recommend that you consider the purchase of travel insurance, which will (amongst other benefits) reimburse you if you must cancel your trip due to illness.

Emergencies

It may be difficult for family and friends to reach you while you are on the river. In case of emergency they should contact the local Bureau of Land Management office (Prineville, Oregon) at 541-416-6776. They should also call the O.R.E. office at 800-827-1358.

