

dropping 3,000 feet before joining the Main Salmon River and its connections to the Snake, the Columbia and ultimately the Pacific Ocean.

My guide was the tall, lanky Bill Bern't, wearing his trademark Stetson. Shaking Bern't's hand was like grabbing the crook in an oak branch as a strong gust moves the boughs. Here's what four decades at the oars of a river raft or drift boat can do. This was Bern't's

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## My first beautiful cutthroat trout, with its speckled silver-gold body and red streak...

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31st year operating Aggipah River Trips. The name, he explained, comes from the Shoshone Indian name for the river, roughly translated "Big Fish Water" or "Salmon Water."

As the hired boatmen and passengers cleaned up from breakfast and broke camp, I grabbed one of the last Dutch oven-baked cinnamon rolls and headed for the gravel bar where the boats were launched. Bern't grabbed Chuck Sundby, a Boise civil engineer and recent convert to fly-fishing, who'd reserved the drift boat for this six-day river run.

"My wife and I have been talking about buying a drift boat," Chuck said as we boarded the 16-footer and Bern't pushed it into the current. "So we thought, let's take a river trip with somebody who knows how to handle one and see what it's all about."

This was Chuck and Gloria's third day on the river, and Gloria was ready to try the "paddle boat." She'd offered me her seat in the bow of the drift boat alongside Chuck, and she'd be passing us later aboard an eight-person inflatable raft on which everyone paddles to the river guide's commands. But Chuck and I were here to fish. Bill took the drift boat's forward-facing oars and started looking for a promising deep pool or current line as the boat glided through the S-turns the river made as it headed for Jackass Rapid a few miles downstream.

## A Drift Boat Runs Through It

"The drift boat had its origins on the whitewater rivers of Oregon," Bern't explained. "Back in the '50s a family of guides from the McKenzie River country came out here with the boats they'd perfected for fast-water fishing. Their basic design is still used today."

While you could certainly fish from one of the big "oar boats," as they call the big Hypalon rubber rafts here, Bern't said that those aren't nearly as easy to control in strong current, making fly-fishing difficult. In the rafts, passengers ride as a guide mans the two long oars amidships, not so much to row as to control the raft's rapid descent through standing waves of whitewater, while dodging boulders, navigating rock gardens and, most of all, staying upright until the next stretch of calm water — by no means a dry experience.

A McKenzie River-style drift boat looks much like a New England fishing dory, with a sharp entry at the bow, fairly wide flair to the sides, and a transom stern. But these boats carry extreme "rocker," a curve to the flat bottom that puts both bow and stern out of the water, making the boat very responsive to the oars. The traditional building material for drift boats is wood, and some are fiberglass, but the more func-

**The Flying B Ranch and Store at Mile 67 on the Middle Fork is a welcome stop for "essentials" like ice cream bars and soft drinks, plus some new dry flies.**

tional boats for this kind of fast water, like Bern't's, are heavy-gauge aluminum.

There's not a great deal of difference between running a river like the Middle Fork in a drift boat and running it in one of the rafts. "But it has to be done right," says Bern't as he lined up about 45 degrees to the current above the rock ledge and the abrupt drop-off he knows defines Jackass Rapid 50 yards ahead. Once positioned in the current, Bern't turned the boat dead downstream, working the oars to keep it in line. The boat gained speed

