

5 rafting guides take you down 5 whitewater trips

What to know about your rafting options straight from the sources

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Dan Foley guides a group down the Blue River.

Performance Tours Rafting/Courtesy photo

Anyone familiar with the whitewater rafting community and culture knows it's the people – the guides themselves – who can make a trip a special memory for a family, group of friends or strangers riding together in a raft.

That's why five of the most respected and experienced guides in the area have been selected to describe the trips and rivers they know like the back of their hands. Through learning about their personalities and the characteristics of the rivers, you can decide which experience is best for you and your party.

Note that seasonal time frames listed depend on the water level and snowpack for the year, so always check ahead.

Browns Canyon

Distance: 14 miles and 10 miles (short trip)

Time on water: 4 hours (14 miles), 2.5 hours (10 miles)

Season: Late May until early September

Difficulty: Intermediate



in the state located an 80-minute drive south of Breckenridge.

Branson said the western, high-Alpine desert scenery of the canyon is a great daytrip getaway for visitors to Summit County. The imposing views of high rock towers showcases the special geology of slot canyons through which the upper Arkansas River has cut.

On a trip with Branson and KODI Rafting, you'll find the first 2 to 3 miles to be very chill, a stretch Branson dubs "the milk run." It's here where Branson gets to know the families and groups who've joined him on the journey, as Browns' Class 3-plus difficulty is ideal for newcomers and more experienced rafting parties.

Boats enter into the Browns Canyon National Monument at the 3-mile mark. The fast, fun Class 3-plus rapids begin and repeat in back-to-back-to-back fashion for Rocky Mountain excitement.

After a short break, Branson will guide through the stretch's more famous rapids that include the Zoom Flume and Seven Stairs. It's in this section of heavier Class 3 rapids where guests will experience their biggest thrills before the trip ends with a mile of easy floating, during which Branson and the crew will recap the trip.

"And it's an amazing drive back, as well, through the Arkansas Valley," Branson said.

Branson said the trip does vary some based on the time of year and water level. He said a flow of between 800 and 1,500 cubic feet per second is the sweet spot for all age groups. Guests should not be deterred by lower water levels, as he said the experience leads to more of a team aspect.

"We're jumping left to right – when you're nailing moves, it makes quite a different trip," Branson said.

Blue River

Guide: Dan Foley, Performance Tours Rafting

Distance: 7 miles

Time on water: 2 hours

Season: Beginning of June to mid-July

Difficulty: Intermediate

Class: 3-plus

Dan Foley, 29, has guided the stretch of the Blue River north of Silverthorne since he graduated from college seven years ago. Foley said what makes the Blue special is not only its location in Summit County, but also its one-of-a-kind, high-Alpine environment above 8,000 feet.

While other trips on the Arkansas River to the south and the Colorado River to the north and west take place in more Western, canyon-like settings, the Blue is in a mountain meadow in the shadow of the Gore Range.

It's not uncommon for guests to see wildlife such as moose, osprey and mule deer on a trip. The views come on a stretch that, though skinny, features high-thrill rapids such as Boulder Creek and Pipeline.

"The highlight is when you first go into the Boulder Creek rapid," Foley said. "It's kind of mellow when you go into it, but after that, it's pretty much repetitive whitewater for the next 40 minutes."

Foley said the Blue is particularly narrow and fast and is a trip where guests will get into the rapid action soon after they learn to paddle as a group through an initial windy stretch.

Foley said he and Performance Tours are able to run the trip down to 350 or 400 cfs, an experience that has people paddle more technically in shallow stream flow.

"It's still really, really fun and enjoyable at that level," Foley said.

Though trips can run as high as 1,600 to 1,800 cfs, Foley said the sweet spot is between 800 and 1,100 cfs. That's when all of the river's rocks are covered and everyone from beginners to advanced thrill-seekers will have fun.

The Numbers

Guide: Curtis Haley, Performance Tours Rafting

Distance: 6 miles **Time on water:** Up to 1 hour and 45 minutes

Season: Mid-to-late May through late August



Difficulty: Advanced to expert

Class: 4

Curtis Haley, 44, has guided on The Numbers for nearly a quarter of a century. What he loves about the trip is how it's considered the most continuous stretch of Class 4 on the continent.

Haley said one distinctive element of The Numbers trip versus Browns Canyon is the lower amount of water in the river though it is higher upstream in the upper Arkansas Valley. Haley said the valley The Numbers sits in results in many more waves than other trips, even if the waves in the other trips are bigger.

At high water, Haley said The Numbers is "crazy fast" action where rafters are getting soaked and paddling all the time. At medium to low water, he said the trip evolves into an experience where people are routinely maneuvering through and around rocks.

"And at medium water, you can see The Numbers from the road above, and the cool thing is when you look at it, most people would think you couldn't get a raft down that," Haley said. "But with an experienced guide, it's fun to work as a team."

In terms of scenery, Haley said The Numbers is a happy medium between the high-Alpine of the Blue and desert feel of Browns, incorporating a bit of both.

The Numbers is one of the most fun stretches Haley has ever guided during his worldwide experience. That's because, he said, it is one of the more technical sections he can think of that's not incredibly dangerous.

"For me, really it's just the challenge of taking people down it," he said.

Haley said he'll run The Numbers down to 400 cfs and all the way up to 2,200 cfs — with 1,800 cfs being his personal favorite. In either case, Haley said those who take on the trip need to be athletic or experienced and ready to self-rescue if bucked from the boat.

Pine Creek

Guide: Zach Hubbard, Arkansas Valley Adventures

Distance: 5 miles

Time on water: 1 hour and 30 minutes

Season: Memorial Day to Aug. 15

Difficulty: Advanced
Class: 5

Zach Hubbard, 58, has guided on Pine Creek 60 miles south of Breckenridge for three decades since his start back in 1992.

When introducing the challenge that is Pine Creek, Hubbard paints a picture: If you think The Numbers is steep at dropping 60 to 80 feet per mile, Pine Creek drops more than 200 feet per mile.

If you're up for that kind of an aggressive challenge, Hubbard said the experience will start with the perfect warmup for a Class 5 rapid: Granite Gorge.

This trip is also special in the sense that guides and guests get out of the water and scout the Pine Creek rapid by foot on shore before they run it.

"We show people what's going on and tell them places they need to swim if they are in the river and what to watch out for," Hubbard said.

Hubbard said the steep grade and narrow width of the stretch leaves little room for error, and the trip runs between 400 and 1,000 cfs. At high or low water, understand you are getting into what guidebooks back in the 1980s described as "the most notorious rapids in the Rocky Mountains." It includes such spots as Pine Creek, Triple Drop, Squeeze Box, Maytag and Hopscotch.

"It's always had a big reputation," Hubbard said.

Gore Canyon

Guide: Chris "Sunshine" Edwards, Liquid Descent

Distance: 10 miles

Time: 4 hours

Season: End of July to mid-September

Difficulty: Expert



Class: 4 to 5

Chris “Sunshine” Edwards, 34, has guided the remote stretch of Gore Canyon 45 miles north of Silverthorne since 2006.

Edwards said Gore Canyon is different from the other trips to the south in that its season is later in summer, beginning at the end of July due to the timing of the water flows and spring runoff that feed the stretch. Edwards said Gore Canyon is one of the biggest whitewater trips you can take in the lower 48 states.

“It’s the premier run in Colorado,” he said.

Edwards said there is a swim test on the 2-mile float in flat water before the aggressive rapids. There, rafters can get used to the cold water swimming in a Class 2 rapid.

The welcome-to-Gore-Canyon moment comes on a big entrance rapid called Applesauce. This commences three Class 5 rapids in a row that drop 119 feet in a mile — the steepest section of whitewater you can commercially run in Colorado.

The trip then evolves into more Class 4 rapids to boogie through before approaching Class 5 Tunnel Falls, a double-tier drop of 13 feet that feels almost vertical on the second drop. More Class 4 rapids follow, including a rapid called Toilet Bowl that can lead to great surfs. The trip rounds out with a half-mile of nonstop Class 5.

Liquid Descent runs a safety raft with each guest boat. The company’s careful, methodical approach to the stretch enables guests to access it despite its danger when it runs between 850 and 1,400 cfs.

“That’s what’s so rewarding about guiding that section: People are just — they are flying pretty high,” Edwards said.

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