

Rafting companies see decrease in visitation despite similar river levels

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A family smiles as a raft with Performance Tours Rafting crashes through the waves while on a rafting trip. Despite a less than ideal snow pack, current flow rates on the Arkansas River are comparable to the levels that were seen last season. Monsoon rainstorms are expected to keep levels at an enjoyable rafting level for the foreseeable future despite a decrease in visitation from last season.

Performance Tours Rafting/Courtesy photo

Whitewater rafting is a mainstay in the Colorado mountains during the summer season. Guests travel from across the U.S. and the state of Colorado to feel the exhilaration that comes from rowing through rapids, plunging through eddies and drifting across calm pools of water.

In 2021, rafting companies that operate in and near Summit County saw record breaking numbers due to a large influx of people flocking to the activity during the summer months.

Specifically, both Performance Tours Rafting and Arkansas River Tours experienced record breaking numbers in terms of sales and turnout.

“Last year was just a crazy year for everyone,” Arkansas River Tours president and owner Billy Marquis said. “The demand was off the hook.”

Kevin Foley, president of Performance Tours Rafting, contributes the increase in numbers during the 2021 season due to the “pent-up demand” for the activity brought on by the pandemic.



Last season, the whitewater rafting industry saw groundbreaking numbers. Marquis said the industry as a whole saw close to a 50% increase in visitation.

"I think there was a big draw for people to get out of their homes," Marquis said. "Rafting is a pretty safe thing to do during COVID because you are outdoors with small groups, and I think it was something people could do. I think that drove the demand up."

Rafting companies in the area saw record-breaking numbers despite river flow levels dropping toward the end of the 2021 season.

"In 2021, even though the river levels weren't incredibly high, they were still at a level that was still fun for rafting and people wanted to go," Foley said.

Both companies mainly float on the Arkansas River because of its steep drops in elevation and its [augmented flow program](#).

The augmented flow program on the Arkansas River is one of the only flow programs in the state. It allows water to be released from an upstream water sources from July 1 to Aug. 15.

The flow program helps to maintain fun whitewater rafting levels through the summer. The program was used last year on the Arkansas River and will be used again this year in order to maintain water levels for whitewater rafting.

According to Marquis and Foley, current water levels on the Arkansas River are comparable to water levels at this time last year.

Marquis says that the Arkansas River has been hovering around a flow rate of 1,000 cubic feet per second near Canon City, which has created great conditions for whitewater rafting.

"Flows are fairly comparable to what we saw last summer," Foley said. "The rain has helped to boost the river levels, but generally big rains don't bring the river to a super high level."

Foley says it is common for people to think that rain is going to make the river jump way up, but the reality is that rain storms help maintain current river levels at a flow rate that is still enjoyable to raft on.

With the augmented flow program and the promise of more rain, whitewater rafting on the Arkansas River is expected to continue throughout the summer and at least into mid-August.

Performance Tours Rafting, which has two offices in Summit County, usually floats the Blue River, but due to low flow rates, the company has not been able to hold trips.

"Basically in a year where they barely fill the Dillon Reservoir, they are not going to send a lot of water down the (Blue River), and what that generally means is that we will not have raftable flows," Foley said.



A raft with Performance Tours Rafting prepares to navigate through a group of rapids while on a whitewater rafting trip. Despite whitewater rafting seeing record numbers during the 2021 season, visitation numbers indicate that less people are booking rafting trips despite similar flow rates on the Arkansas River. In terms of the popularity of whitewater rafting, Marquis and Foley are seeing less people than they did this time last year.

“We are definitely on a downward trend compared to last year, and for us it is definitely significant,” Marquis said.

Despite seeing fewer guests than last year, Marquis says that Arkansas River Tours is on track to be above where the company finished after the 2019 and 2020 season in terms of visitation.

After a historical 2021 season, both Foley and Marquis were expecting a quieter season in 2022.

“It is kind of expected that we would see a downward trend. That volume level was historical, and it would be unrealistic to think it was going to continue to continue at that level,” Marquis said.



Two rafts with Performance Tours Rafting work to navigate a group of rapids while out on a rafting trip. Despite whitewater rafting seeing record numbers during the 2021 season, visitation numbers indicate that less people are booking rafting trips despite similar flow rates on the Arkansas River. Another reason that Marquis thinks is contributing to less visitation this season is inflation and the prevalence of people not taking road trips. Due to gas prices being so elevated, many people may be waiting for gas prices to level out before taking a summer road trip to the Colorado mountains.

Despite decreased visitation, both Marquis and Foley are still looking forward to a busy and long whitewater rafting season.

“2021 was a banner year, and I don’t think any of us expected to hit those numbers two years in a row,” Foley said. “We are expecting a really busy July and first part of August. Those are usually the trends we see in the rafting industry.”

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