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# 7 Amazing Colorado Whitewater Rafting Trips to Book Right Now

Go with the flow on one of these splashy rides, all within four hours of Denver.



[/byline/tessa-yannone]



The entrance to Browns Canyon on the Arkansas River. Photo courtesy of River Runners

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Clad in a blue wetsuit and a life jacket pulled tight like a corset, I sat squished between two friends on a bus rattling its way down I-70 as it followed the course of the Colorado River. Being a newly minted Coloradan, my knowledge of local whitewater rafting was close to zilch—until I found myself hosting out-of-state guests who wanted to experience some foamy fun while visiting the Centennial State. Pressed into service as a tour guide, I needed to find a trip that suited my group’s ability level—and fear threshold—all while considering a possible lack of water due to drought.

Turns out, I needn’t have worried about low water levels—at least not yet. While rising seasonal temperatures have begun spurring peak flows as early as late May, the second week of June has historically been the best time to hit the rapids nearly anywhere in the state, says Conrad Niven, a whitewater rafting guide with Aspen-based Blazing Adventures. This year is no different.

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Although large parts of Colorado have been experiencing exceptional drought conditions for the past four or so years and there are predictions for another hot, dry summer, [those in the rafting industry say that, right now, the water is just fine.](https://www.5280.com/2022/06/drought-is-harmful-for-colorado-watersports-business-so-are-misperceptions-about-drought/) [\[https://www.5280.com/2022/06/drought-is-harmful-for-colorado-watersports-business-so-are-misperceptions-about-drought/\]](https://www.5280.com/2022/06/drought-is-harmful-for-colorado-watersports-business-so-are-misperceptions-about-drought/) Travis Hochard, general manager of River Runners, a raft guide company with outposts in Buena Vista and Cañon City, and board member for the Board of the Arkansas River Outfitters Association, says

river flows are ideal right now. “The current snowpack, as of May 30, in the Arkansas River basin is 101 percent of normal for this time of year,” he says, adding that he’s expecting a near-normal rafting season overall.

Drought fears assuaged, I needed to find a trip to accommodate one friend who was a certified adrenaline junkie and another who was barely OK with getting wet. “People should book a trip that is appropriate for everyone in their group,” Hochard says. “Intermediate level whitewater—Class III—is a good starting point for most people and then they can work their way up from there.” He cautions, though, that if you have young children or someone with physical limitations, starting with a Class II river trip is more advisable. “It’s not always about being extreme,” he says. “It’s about being in nature and having a safe and positive experience with your friends and family.”

Ultimately, I booked with Blue Sky Adventures out of Glenwood Springs. My risk-tolerant friend was pleased with the fast-paced Shoshone Rapids (which were a Class IV that day due to recent snowmelt) at the beginning of the run and my risk-averse buddy was in his element during the mellow second half of the float. So, whether your guests are total newbies, weekend thrill-seekers, or advanced paddlers, we’ve rounded up seven guided rafting trips in Colorado you can—and should—book this month.

## **For first-timers...**

**The Outfitter:** [Blazing Adventures \[https://www.blazingadventures.com/\]](https://www.blazingadventures.com/)

**The River:** Roaring Fork River

**Trip Name:** Lower Roaring Fork

**Why You’ll Love It:** If you’re more of a dip-your-toes-in-the-water type of adventurer, you’ll love the slow-paced nature of this five- to six-hour bob. Blazing Adventures guide Conrad Niven says this is a great trip for wildlife lovers, as he can

nearly guarantee glimpses of ospreys, elk, and deer, and even the occasional bear. On either side of the river are expansive alpine meadows, and you'll float in the shadow of 12,953-foot Mt. Sopris. Expect to get a little wet on some bumpy Class II rapids, but Niven says there's little chance of going for an accidental swim on this trip.

**Distance From Denver:** 3.5 hours to Aspen

**The Details:** Starting at \$120 for children and \$130 for adults, Blazing Adventures offers two trips a day. The morning float includes a barbecue lunch and transportation from all major hotels in the area. The afternoon trip is similar minus the full lunch—but there are snacks aplenty. Make sure to book this trip earlier in the season, as commercial guide companies don't run this river come August.



The Colorado River in Glenwood Canyon. Photo by Patrick Drake

**The Outfitter:** [Blue Sky Adventures \[https://blueskyadventure.com/\]](https://blueskyadventure.com/)

**The River:** Colorado River

**Trip Name:** Half Day Adventure

**Why You'll Love It:** This inexpensive, no-frills excursion—BYO snacks and water!—is ideal for those who just want to see if whitewater rafting is their thing. Blue Sky's half-day trips are a low-commitment option that get you on the water fast, last only a couple of hours, and feature just enough Class III froth to give you a taste of what Colorado whitewater rafting is all about. The first half of this adventure takes paddlers through the Shoshone Rapids, which are typically rated Class III. After you've made your way through that swirling cauldron, the waterway chills out, making it possible for you to take in views of spectacular Glenwood Canyon and the city of Glenwood Springs.

**Distance From Denver:** 2.5 hours to Glenwood Springs

**The Details:** The minimum age for this trip is three; prices start at \$58 for youth and \$68 for adults. Blue Sky provides transportation via bus from Blue Sky's offices in Glenwood Springs to its put-in location as well as waterproof jackets and pants at no charge.

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**The Outfitter:** River Runners [<https://whitewater.net/>]

**The River:** Arkansas River

**Trip Name:** Browns Canyon

**Why You'll Love It:** Due to the technical difficulty of the Arkansas River and a controlled water release program from three different reservoirs, Buena Vista is considered one of the best places to board a whitewater raft in the United States. Hochard explains that during the past two summers the water release program, called the Voluntary Flow Management Program, which started in the early 1990s, allowed river outfitters to move more than 15,000 acres of water to accommodate rafters. The

Ark is a stunning ribbon of water, especially as it runs through Browns Canyon, touted as one of the most-rafted sections of river in Colorado. Niven says this segment is characterized by pool-drop-style, Class III rapids. As the name implies, the river carries rafts through a series of waves before dropping them into pools over and over again. These rapids are not only great fun, but also great experience for beginners who are looking for a little extra bounce, he says. Expect to be dazzled not only by the water but also by a landscape that looks like a mix between Utah's Canyonlands National Park and Colorado's Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park.

**Distance From Denver:** 2 hours and 15 minutes to Buena Vista

**The Details:** Choose from half day, full day, or overnight trips starting at \$90 per person.

## For the weekend warrior...

**The Outfitter:** [Echo Canyon River Expeditions \[https://www.raftecho.com/\]](https://www.raftecho.com/)

**The River:** Arkansas River

**Trip Name:** Royal Gorge

**Why You'll Love It:** This "easy" Class IV whitewater rafting trip turns down the dial on flow while cranking up the dial on obstructions. Because of the narrowness of the river, avoiding boulders, canyon walls, and boat-sucking whirlpools is nearly impossible—which is all part of the fun. Hochard mentions this is a great trip to do later in the season because this part of the Ark is still getting a decent amount of water from the release program, plus he says the scenery is spectacular. Rafters get an extensive safety talk before the paddling begins, but no amount of chit-chat can truly prepare you for taking an unintended swim while running Sunshine or Sledgehammer rapids. Trust your guides as you run this stunning stretch of H2O, which snakes its way through the bottom of the 950-foot-tall Royal Gorge.

**Distance From Denver:** 2 hours to Cañon City

**The Details:** Half-day trips start at \$105 per person and cover about 10 miles of river while the full-day trip is \$175 per person and covers 20 miles. The full-day rafting trip comes with a boxed lunch (vegetarian option included), and the minimum age is 16.

**The Outfitter:** [Clear Creek Rafting Company](https://clearcreekrafting.com/) [<https://clearcreekrafting.com/>]

**The River:** Clear Creek

**Trip Name:** Intermediate Trip (Class III–IV)

**Why You'll Love It:** Steep but with less flow, Clear Creek's Class III-IV rapids are continuous rather than pool-drop-style, so you can expect a speedy and relatively smooth ride. The waterway splashes its way along the I-70 corridor, dipping into narrow, rocky canyons lined with ponderosa pines. If you can take your eyes off the froth, you'll also get views of former mine shafts and old mining equipment from the days of the gold rush. Whitewater rafters are only on the water for about 45 minutes, making a run with Clear Creek Rafting Company an easy afternoon trip from the Mile High City.

**Distance From Denver:** 30 minutes to Idaho Springs

**The Details:** Trips depart at 9:30 a.m., 1 p.m., and 4:30 p.m. daily and start at \$79 per person (price includes free digital photos and a wetsuit).

## For the seasoned river rat...

**The Outfitter:** [Timberline Tours](https://timberlinetours.com/) [<https://timberlinetours.com/>]

**The River:** Colorado River

**Trip Name:** Gore Canyon

**Why You'll Love It:** Considered some of the most technically challenging whitewater run by a commercial company in Colorado, Gore Canyon's rapids will put you to the test physically and mentally. In terms of difficulty ratings, two rapids—Gore and Tunnel—are high on all three of the classifications: gradient, obstructions, and flow.

Although your guide may decide to portage Gore due to dangerous conditions, Tunnel is often runnable. Still, Niven says there's about a 50/50 chance paddlers will end up in the river. Other rapids, with names like Applesauce, Scissors, and Toilet Bowl, are pool-drop-style, which means a bumpy but fun ride. This section of river isn't for everyone; in fact, you'll be expected to answer a questionnaire before you're even allowed to book a spot on this five-hour, 12-mile-long escapade. Can you do 10 push ups? Can you run a mile? Can you swim 10 laps? Answer "no" and you might not be fit to run Gore. If you are given the green light, you'll be in good hands: Timberline Tours was the first to commercially run this hard-to-reach stretch of the Colorado River in the early 1990s.

**Distance From Denver:** 1 hour and 45 minutes to Kremmling

**The Details:** Prices for a full-day trip start at \$225 per person; you must be at least 18 years old and weigh 90 pounds to participate.

**The Outfitter:** [Arkansas Valley Adventures \[https://www.coloradorafting.net/\]](https://www.coloradorafting.net/)

**The River:** Arkansas River

**Trip Name:** Pine Creek and the Numbers

**Why You'll Love It:** This full-day, 12-mile-river whitewater rafting trip combines Pine Creek and the Numbers for a very rapid-y day. Niven says this stretch of the Ark can be looked at one of two ways: as a difficult Class IV run or an easier Class V. Either way, experienced rafters should expect a lot of paddling and some heroic efforts to stay inside the raft. Pine Creek starts in Granite, north of Buena Vista, where boats will first float through high alpine desert canyons before dropping down into the river canyon, where boaters will enter Maytag, a bouncy Class III that barely prepares you for what's coming. Pine Creek not only presents the most continuous rapids in the Centennial State, but it also offers several spots—including a big hole at the so-called S-Bend—where the river eats boats for lunch. Assuming you make it through Pine Creek, you'll still have to manage the Numbers: Labeled 1 through 7 (including some

half numbers) these rapids are easier class IV, pool-drop-style obstacles that will test your nerve but feel (slightly) less frightening than those in Pine Creek.

**Distance From Denver:** 2 hours and 15 minutes to Buena Vista

**The Details:** Trips start at 9:30 a.m. daily; \$174 per person. You must be at least 15 years old to participate.

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