



The John Day River
Clarno to Cottonwood
(Lower Canyon)
5 Day Trips



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The John Day River

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 Lower 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'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 hot and dry summers are the norm. However, cool and windy weather is also a possibility, even in May and June.

Itinerary

First day

We will meet at 8:00 AM on the date your trip begins at the U.S. Forest Service Boat Launch Area at Clarno, where Oregon Highway 218 crosses the John Day River. (Please have your breakfast before our meeting time.) Here you'll 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 conduct a safety and orientation briefing, which will include instruction on paddle and rowing techniques. We're normally on our way downstream by mid-morning.

A typical day

Each day is a bit different. But a typical day on the river begins with freshly brewed coffee around 7 AM, and breakfast by 8 AM. After breakfast we'll pack our bags and load the boats. Then, after a brief orientation to the day's adventures, we'll head downstream.

We're on the river an average of three to four hours per day. Along the way we stop for a riverside picnic lunch. We may also stop to explore historic sites, or to scout rapids. 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 explore, read, or nap. (There are a few good hikes, but for the most part hiking opportunities are limited.)

Last day

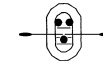
We typically arrive at Cottonwood bridge, our take-out point, between 2:00 and 3:30 P.M.. Your car will be waiting for you there, and once you've unpacked your river bags, you'll be on your way.



Raft Options

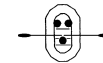
We offer four different boat types on the John Day: guided oar rafts, "row-your-own" oar rafts, paddle rafts, and inflatable kayaks.

Guided oar rafts



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 rows the rapids. And they're a great boat to choose if comfort, safety, relaxation, and sightseeing are your primary interests. (1 to 5 guests plus guide per oar raft; your guide does all the rowing.)

Row-your-own oar rafts



"Row-your-own" oar rafts and catarafts are small, lively versions of the boats our guides row. They're the boat to choose if you're looking for excitement, freedom and a sense of accomplishment combined with a high degree of comfort. A rental fee applies to all row-your-own rafts: please visit our web site or contact our office for details. (1 to 3 guests per raft. O.R.E. guides provide instruction and supervision but are not present in the raft with you.)

Prior rafting experience is recommended, but you need not be an athlete nor do you need prior rowing experience to pilot your own raft. We outfit you and a boat partner with one of our custom designed rafts, 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" river adventure.

Paddle rafts



Paddle rafts are fast and exciting. These popular craft mix whitewater excitement with teamwork and group fun. (4-7 guests plus a guide; every-one gets to paddle.)

Inflatable kayaks

Inflatable Kayaks are small, highly maneuverable one-person craft. They're fast and exciting but also surprisingly stable. We bring along one or more inflatable kayaks to be shared by the group. (1 guest per kayak. O.R.E. guides provide instruction and supervision.)

A few important details about raft options

- ✓ Paddle rafts are available when a minimum of four adults request this option.
- ✓ Inflatable kayaks are available on a shared basis, but may be reserved for exclusive use for an additional fee.
- ✓ You are welcome to switch between boat types, but because of the need for training and practice prior to substantial rapids certain restrictions will apply.
- ✓ Paddle raft, inflatable kayak, and row-your-own raft availability is subject to water level limitations.

Pre-Trip Details

How to Sign Up

Call, write or e-mail us. We'll hold your reservation for 10 days while we await your deposit, which confirms your reservation (\$100 p.p.).

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 Clarno

✓ If you Drive

A number of routes are possible. From the east, we recommend that 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 Fly

Fly in to Portland. No public transportation available, so you will need to rent a car. From the Portland airport follow the directions above.

River Shuttles

Shuttle services are included in the price of your river trip. Reliable drivers will shuttle both your vehicle and ORE's rig to the take-out. The drivers will join us at our meeting place, at which time the vehicles will be driven to the shuttle service headquarters, where they will remain parked for the duration of our trip. On our last day, the vehicles are driven 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 river trip)

The nearest good motel is the Condon Motel on OR-19 in Condon, Oregon. For reservations, phone (541) 384-2181. 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 on the John Day River is often 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'll 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, capilene, 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.)

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 or capilene, 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 (ponchos are not recommended). Rain gear made of modern waterproof, breathable fabrics such as Goretex are best. But for a less expensive option, coated nylon will work, too.

A surprisingly large percentage of heat loss occurs from our heads. For this reason, a wool or synthetic hat will go a long way towards keeping you warm.

Wetsuits are generally not needed on the John Day. However, they do make inflatable kayaking more comfortable in cool weather, and for this reason O.R.E. provides wetsuits on a shared basis for kayakers. If you'd like to bring your own suit, look for an 1/8" thick "farmer john" style (which can be worn in conjunction with a sweater and raincoat). Thicker, full-body scuba style suits are warm, but they're less comfortable, and their bulk makes rowing and paddling more awkward and difficult.

✓ On hot days

Nylon 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. If you are particularly sensitive to the sun you may want to bring lightweight cotton clothes (such as a surgeon's outfit) for sun protection.

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.

✓ 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. Wetsuit boots work well for cool weather and cold water, but they are usually unnecessary on the John Day. Sport sandals and shoes also work well in cool weather when combined with thick wool socks or neoprene wetsuit socks. Sport sandals are comfortable for rafting, and are preferred by many of our guides. But they're generally more expensive, and do not protect your feet as well as do shoes.

✓ In camp

You may want a change of shoes, and comfortable clothing for lounging. This clothing may be of cotton fabric.

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 on-line by contacting REI (800-426-4840, or www.rei.com), L.L. Bean (800-341-4341, or www.llbean.com), or Northwest River Supply (800-635-5202, or www.nrsweb.com).

How to pack it

Pack your gear in a manner appropriate for your journey to Clarno. 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. Items that you want to keep handy during the day but which

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, and work best when painted white or a light color and lined with foam. (Please note: ammo boxes cannot be carried in paddle rafts or inflatable kayaks.)

A few words about the term *waterproof*. The bags and boxes we provide are watertight under most conditions, even when temporarily submerged. However, leakage can occur, and we recommend 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 food storage bags.

Equipment Checklist

✓ River Gear

- _____ swimsuit, or shorts and T-shirt (avoid cotton shorts)
- _____ tennis shoes or sport sandals
- _____ wool or synthetic “ski” hat — for cold/rainy days
- _____ wide-brimmed hat (preferably with chin-strap), or baseball cap — for sunny days (wide-brimmed hats do a better job of keeping the sun off, but baseball caps can be worn beneath the helmets used by inflatable kayakers)
- _____ 1 pair socks (wool or synthetic)
- _____ waterproof rain jacket and rain pants
- _____ Polypropylene or Capilene long underwear tops and bottoms (midweight or expedition weight)
- _____ 1 warm sweater or jacket, polyester fleece or wool
- _____ water bottle or canteen
- _____ waterproof sunscreen (SPF 15 minimum), lip balm
- _____ sunglasses, with strap (i.e. “chums” or “crookies”)

✓ 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 (Thermarest is a popular pad), or air mattress
- _____ small tarp (to place beneath your tent, or as a groundcloth 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) — bicycling, weight lifting, or gardening gloves work well
- _____ binoculars
- _____ camera and film
- _____ 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 — all in unbreakable containers. (We provide coffee, tea, and juice; also wine with some dinners). Please note: Consumption of alcohol is prohibited during the day — but is o.k. once we arrive in camp.
- _____ People sensitive to the sun may want to bring lightweight long-sleeved cotton clothes for sun protection.

Please do not bring: pets, guns, valuable jewelry, cellular phones, or radios (personal “walkman” type music players are o.k.).

Additional Information

Your trip fare includes the following

- ✓ The services of our professional guide staff.
- ✓ Transport of your vehicle from put-in to take-out.
- ✓ 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 may be accommodated with advance notice.
- ✓ Durable, professional quality rafts and river running equipment, including U.S. Coast Guard Approved lifejackets.
- ✓ Waterproof river bags 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 spring fishing. However, as river levels drop and the water clears in late May and June, however, 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 environment along the John Day river.

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 between 8% and 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 policies we explain in our reservation materials. For this reason we strongly recommend that you consider the purchase of travel insurance, which will 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.

