



Whitewater wonder

O.A.R.S. takes adventure, adds water

By Claire Sykes

NO WAY WOULD he do it. The pool was too deep and he was too scared. But if 12-year-old George Wendt was ever going to become an Eagle Scout, he had to earn his swimming merit badge first, and that meant jumping into water over his head.

For someone who “didn’t like the water,” says Wendt of himself then, he ended up taking one heck of a U-turn eight years later. His Eagle rank long realized, he found himself for the first time gripping a paddle as he dodged boulders and logs in a rubber raft charging through the white-water rapids of the Colorado River.

“It was captivating,” he says. “I was hooked.” Today, Wendt runs one of the most successful rafting and sea kayaking operations in North America.

Since 1969, Outdoor Adventure River Specialists (O.A.R.S.) has enjoyed a steady stream of business, with more than 500,000 boating enthusiasts drifting and whipping down 35 rivers and coastlines from Alaska to Chile and Colorado to Fiji. The adventure-travel leader offers 75 eclectic itineraries (mostly on the water) by raft and sea kayak, hiking boot and horse, and mountain bike.

O.A.R.S.’s special-interest options focus on geology, wildlife viewing and photography, wine and craft beer tasting, gourmet dining, chartered trips, and family and singles vacations. Whether it’s a one-day white-water jaunt or a two-week journey, the company’s tours guide everyone from the budding boater to the experienced explorer.

Wendt (not to be confused with the famed *Cheers* actor) kicked off his own outdoor adventures with the Boy Scouts in Pacific Palisades, California. “I was fortunate to be in such an active troop and have a scoutmaster who encouraged me,” he says.

While a history major at UCLA, in 1962, Wendt tackled his first rapids, on the Colorado River through Glen Canyon. “As we approached them, their roar engendered in me a sense of eager anticipation and a joy of living in the moment,” he tells *The Connection*. “And there were beautiful scenes around every corner. It was like a magic carpet ride.”

The following year the Colorado River was dammed, and “the Grand Canyon was my next best choice,” says Wendt, who became one of the first 1,200 people to raft it. In 1965, two years after graduating, he and a couple of buddies bought four military surplus rafts, and ran weekend outings in California for Scouts and students.

Meanwhile, Wendt worked on getting his teaching credentials. He turned his minor in math into a teaching job at a Los Angeles middle school. For the next eight years, his chalkboard displayed scrawled equations about ski lifts and a river’s cubic feet per second, while he ran weekend rafting trips.

Somewhere in there, he met Pam, an X-ray technician, and the two married in 1969. She handed her husband a generous check to get started, typed letters to interested inquirers, hoisted rafts into the truck and, with her keen eye and intuitive sense, helped train the guides.

In 1969, with the centennial of John Wesley Powell’s expedition in the Grand Canyon, the sport’s popularity surged.

By the early ’70s, O.A.R.S.’s revenues (and nationwide interest in the sport) were doubling annually. Business brimmed to full time in 1974 (Wendt quit teaching at this time); eight rivers in Oregon, California and Utah were added by 1977. Soon, O.A.R.S. acquired seven more rafting companies.

Wendt’s fervor for river preservation has always flowed through his passion for rafting—from helping to include California’s Tuolumne River in the National Wild and Scenic River System to establishing protected status for the Navua River in Fiji. Wendt has also testified before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on River Preservation, and donates more than \$70,000 per year to dozens of river-conservation efforts.

“We believe that the only way we’ll continue to have rivers is if we build a desire with the next generation to preserve them,” says Wendt. “This philosophy has been a major part of our business all along.”

CONTINUED ON PAGE 70

Whitewater wisdom

IT’S NOT ENOUGH just to have fun on the water. You also need to be safe. Here are some tips from George Wendt, founder and president of O.A.R.S.

- Never boat alone, unless you’re highly experienced.
- Always wear a properly fitting personal flotation device or life jacket.
- Keep alcohol and other intoxicants on shore, and remain sober while boating.
- Never, ever dive into a river, and be vigilant when jumping into any water.
- Never strap yourself into a boat or wrap fixed lines around your wrists.
- If you fall into a river, float downstream on your back with your feet up to push yourself off any rocks.
- Never stand in a moving current unless it’s calm and below your knees.
- Know how to signal for help—by waving your arms high in the air.
- Protect yourself from too much sun, with ample sunscreen, a hat and sunglasses.
- Wear lightweight, secure and comfortable shoes (not flip-flops).
- Expect to get wet, so dress accordingly.
- Don’t drink untreated water from a river, lake or ocean.



Do it all. Enjoy it all.

with the Satellite A665-S5186
from Toshiba.



15.6" Diagonal
Wide-Screen LED
Backlit Display



Dolby®
Advanced
Audio



Harman/Kardon®
Speakers

Satellite® A665-S5186



Item #559323

TOSHIBA
Leading Innovation >>>

WAREHOUSE ONLY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 69

While he saves rivers, his clients savor gourmet dinners prepared riverside in Dutch ovens by world-class chefs, with creations such as filet mignon with Jack Daniel's flambé reduction sauce, and chocolate meringue bars.

Epicurean sustenance joins river sustainability in setting O.A.R.S. apart from the competition. Its guides provide another advantage, "more than any other river operation in the country," claims Wendt. "They're hardworking individuals who care about the rivers they run, and our clients."

Thirty-five years ago, most O.A.R.S. customers were in their 30s. Now they average late 40s and older. "Many baby boomers think the perfect way to end a day on the river is by sharing a great meal with a fine glass of wine," says Wendt. He also mentions "the memorable bonding that typically occurs on a river trip," which attracts more families to O.A.R.S.

Whether for downtime or a dare, he continues, "few other vacations have such a wonderful way of accommodating each person at just the right level of adventure"—taking them into nothing less than life-changing territory. ☑

Claire Sykes (www.sykeswrites.com) is a freelance writer in Portland, Oregon.

member profile

Company name: O.A.R.S. (Outdoor Adventure River Specialists)

Owners: Pam and George Wendt

Products: Adventure travel, including white-water rafting, hiking and sea kayaking

Address:

P.O. Box 67, Angel Camp, CA 95222

Telephone: (800) 346-6277

Website: www.oars.com

Email: info@oars.com

Member at: Sacramento, California

Comments about Costco: "Since the early 1990s, O.A.R.S. has turned to Costco for many of their office and river-trip supplies, because of its convenience and prices. I really enjoy the friendly service from Costco's outgoing employees. They're happy to help us find whatever it is we're looking for. Since we buy a lot of things in bulk, we also appreciate the large-volume packaging and reasonable prices."—George Wendt



GARMIN

Navigate like never before

The Garmin nüvi 1390LMT packs big features—including free Lifetime Maps and Traffic—into a slim design. This thin navigator also comes with lane assist with junction view, pedestrian navigation options, hands-free calling with Bluetooth technology and ecoRoute™ to calculate a more fuel-efficient route. Item #478198

Also available in select locations: Garmin nüvi 3790LMT. Item #543790

WAREHOUSE ONLY