

Hell

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NICK KELLEY
STORY BY NATALIE KREBS

DESPITE DECADES OF ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE, THE COUNTRY'S OLDEST RIVER REMAINS RESILIENT—AND FLUSH WITH SMALLMOUTH BASS. BUT TO ACCESS THE BEST FISHING, YOU'LL NEED A BOAT, THE SKILL TO ROW IT, AND THE WILL TO TAKE ON WEST VIRGINIA'S WHITEWATER.

or High

Water

↔ RIVER RUNNER

Measurements taken at the old mining town of Thurmond show the New River spikes to nearly 100,000 cfs each March, then dwindles throughout the rest of the year. That makes spring the most hazardous—and thrilling—time to raft it.



1 THE NEW RIVER IS MANY THINGS—gorgeous, deserted, dangerous—but new isn't one of them. It was named unwittingly, so the story goes, after traders labeled each landmark "new lake," "new stream," and so on. The description stuck. Yet at 360 million years old, it's one of the oldest rivers on the planet. The New existed before tectonic forces shoved the Appalachians up around it and the current carved out what's now the New River Gorge—the longest and deepest gorge in Appalachia. It's also one of the best fishing destinations east of the Mississippi.

As we load boats at the put-in, I survey our crew. My buddy Zach Simon guides whitewater here and in Colorado, and his Lab, Otter, has spent more time on the water than most humans. Nate "Archy" Archambault guides anglers on the New; his girlfriend, Kate Barker, didn't own a PFD until this morning. Photographer Nick Kelley is snapping pictures even though I know he wants to unpack his flyrod, and I'm here for the bass—and the rapids.

We could find more pristine whitewater out West, but there's no river with a better story. The New is a comeback kid. Those geological processes that exposed sandstone and shale along these banks also exposed seams of coal. The New River coal field boomed in the late 1800s, and the river ran black. The rush petered out after World War II, and most of the mines closed.

The New River recovered, mostly, but there are still scars. In the sand where we stake our tents, you can still see flecks of black coke from the coal ovens. Meanwhile, the river suffers from continued illegal waste dumping by residents and failing sewage infrastructure.



1

↔ FISH FANATIC

Archambault got his nickname in the Marine Corps ("Archy is easier to say when you're getting shot at") and spent his first years out of the service with Outward Bound, volunteering as a liaison between veterans and "super hippie raft guides." The Florida native spends half his year fishing saltwater, and the rest on the New. Whenever he gets a day off from guiding anglers in West Virginia, he gets right back on the river to throw flies himself.

2

↔ GEARING UP

Flyfishing isn't one of my vices, so I opted for a medium-action spinning outfit instead. This Abu Garcia Revo STX reel did the trick.

3

↔ FREE-FLOWING

The New River Gorge drops 750 feet over 50 miles, creating its famed whitewater. Congress protected this stretch, and 70,000 adjacent acres, in 1978 with a National River designation.

4

↔ RUNNING SHUTTLE

After we load gear and strap the raft frame to Simon's truck, his fellow guides drive us to the put-in in exchange for beer money.



5

↔ RIVER RATS

Simon, 35, and Otter, 11, have spent most of their lives guiding: summers on the river, ducks and geese in the fall.

6

↔ BRONZE BEAUTY

We land bass all week and release each one. Not because we're catch-and-release purists, but because Archy and Simon refuse to eat anything that lives in the New River.



“The New existed before tectonic forces shoved the Appalachians up around it.”

Archy catches 24-inch brown trout in feeder streams here, pulling them from under mats of plastic trash and dirty diapers. Ar buckle Creek, which flows past the rafting company where he and Simon work and into the New, holds trout. It's also an EPA Superfund Site, still dealing with fallout from the coal industry.

It feels like the river is trying to sweep away our mess and win back the gorge. It feels wild. Once, we spook a black bear on the shore that flees over the railroad tracks. I paddle past farmhouse-size boulders and twisted metal wreckage. There's no patch kit that could fix the gashes it would rend in our rafts.

Our days on the river are lazy ones, punctuated with flurries of bites and rapids to navigate. But to catch fish—and to survive the whitewater—you need experience or a guide. "If you make mistakes, they're huge," Archy says of the hydraulics, the strainers, the undercut rocks. "And it takes just one mistake."

We don't see other boaters until the last day, as we approach the biggest rapids. I assume this final gauntlet will mark the end of our trip (Class IVs and Vs at peak flow). But as we drift toward the takeout that lies just past the soaring steel bridge, a smallie strikes my swimbait. As quickly as I release it and cast into another riffle, there's another bite. Soon I'm catching fish on nearly every throw: small ones, each as feisty as the last. I scramble to release each so I can catch the next, all while playing keep-away with Otter, who's as fond of fish as his namesake. Simon rows to a rock just under the surface and climbs out. He leans into the current, holding the raft so I can keep fishing. At last we have to call it and give in to the pull of the river.

“ It feels like the river is trying to sweep away our mess and win back the gorge. ”



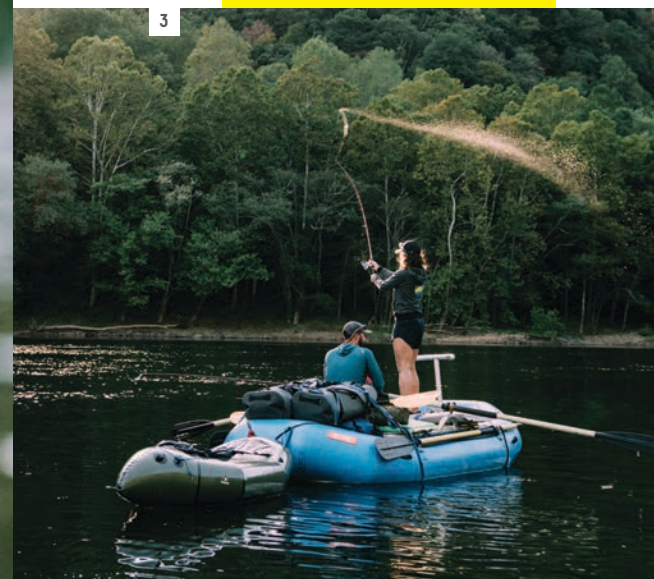
1
 ↳ HUNGRY HOGS
 Archy caught this fish near camp, but the best smallie action is in the rapids, where bass like to tuck behind rocks, in eddies, and in the pillowy Vs of water just ahead of the rapids, feeding on whatever floats by.



2

2
 ↳ DROPPING IN

It's easier to muscle through flat stretches of river while rowing backward, but it's critical to face rapids head-on. This allows boaters to read the current and make the technical maneuvers certain sections require. Here, Archy tucks in his oars to clear the rocks as he threads a narrow chute. Careless rowers can easily snap oars on hazards like this, rendering themselves handicapped mid-rapid and thus more likely to flip, get swept into danger, or both.



3



4

3
 ↳ THE MOTHER SHIP

After paddling my packraft all day, I tie off to Simon's boat for the evening bite. He's ferrying much of camp on his 12-footer, including the cooler full of food that serves as his seat. Yeti dry duffels stuffed with sleeping bags, a 5-gallon jug of drinking water, two spare oars, dog food, and the crew's daily ration of whiskey.

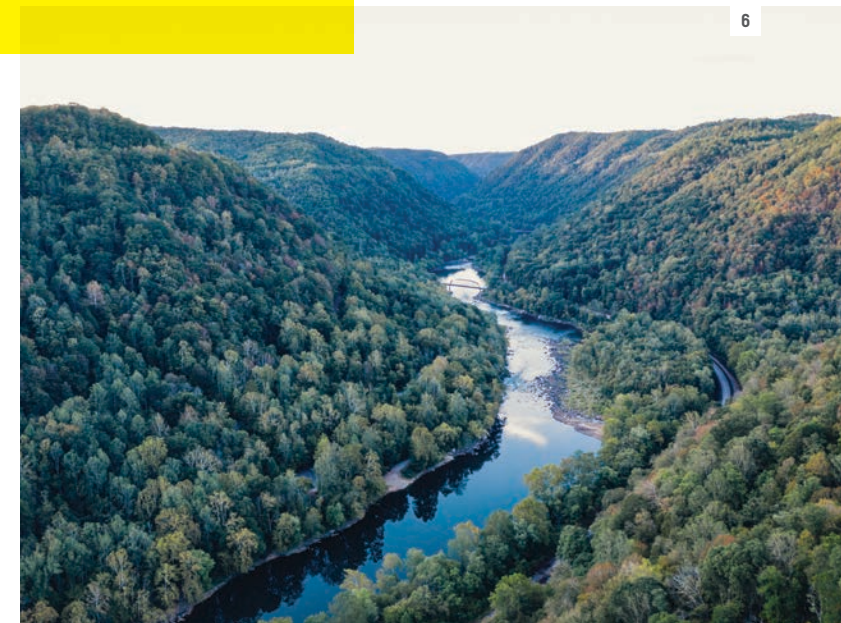
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 ↳ ON THE OAR

Simon leads commercial trips with individual, waiver-signing paddlers, and has been known to kayak and riverboard (imagine swimming with a kickboard in Class Vs), but he loves his custom-fitted oar boat best.



5

5
 ↳ LUNCHTIME LOBS
 Otter and Simon sneak in a few casts at midday. It is possible to fish from the public banks, but the terrain is so steep and the woods so thick that locals often can't reach the water on foot.



6

6
 ↳ RAILWAY TO HEAVEN
 The Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, which runs beside the river, was completed in 1872. It's still active with freight and Amtrak cars, as I learned when workers started hosing down cars near our campsite at 5 a.m.

“ If you make mistakes, they’re huge. And it takes just one mistake. ”



1

①
↔ FEAST FOR FIVE

We might not have had fresh fish, but we didn't go hungry.

②
↔ WAVE TRAIN

These little rapids wouldn't pose much danger if I fell in, but standing in the riverbed would. Never try to stand in shallow swift water. You risk foot entrapment and getting pushed beneath the surface.



2

③
↔ PERFECT COMBO

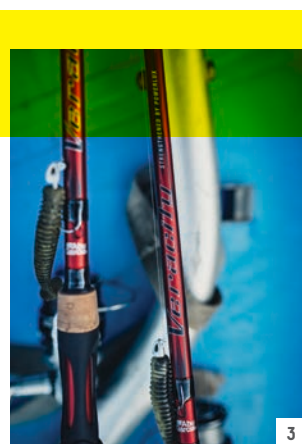
We used 7-foot medium-action rods to throw PowerBait Power Swimmers with white jigheads. This worked well until Simon lost my rod in the last rapid.

④
↔ LIVING DANGEROUSLY

I've run rapids without a guide, but it's much safer to boat with someone who knows the river—or how to navigate an unfamiliar one. A good paddler can read a rapid like a good angler can read the current, but we didn't need to scout the New because my companions have it memorized. Before each stretch of whitewater, Simon briefed me on which path (a "line") to take through the rapid, which way to swim if I flipped, and which undercut rocks could trap me below the surface.

⑤
↔ FLOAT ON

There are plenty of slow-moving stretches on the New, giving solo rowers a chance to catch bass.



3



4

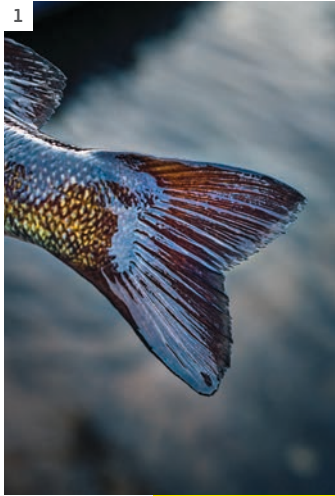


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⑥
↔ CLASS CLOWN

Here, Archy drops into Middle Keeney, a Class IV rapid named for a coal-union organizer. It's important to lean forward, rowing (or paddling) with powerful, even strokes to punch through big waves head-on. Hitting a rapid at an angle can flip your boat. If you do fall in, know which way to swim or look to your guide for a hand signal. Don't wait for rescue—swim hard, and never try to grab onto tree branches sticking out of the river. The force of the current can trap you against submerged limbs like noodles in a colander.



“ I paddle past farmhouse-size boulders and twisted metal wreckage. —

1

↔ NO TALL TAIL

The fishing, of course, is best in the early morning and evening, but we also seem to get more bites whenever a train rumbles by. Archy swears the vibrations scare the fish out of their holes, and it doesn't take long to discover he may be right.

2

↔ LAST CALL

The final mile of riffles before the old Fayette Station Bridge and then the famous New River Gorge Bridge holds some of the best fishing of the trip. The smallies here are hand-size but hungry, and hit nearly every lure I throw to them.

3

↔ BRONZE MEDAL

During one conversation, someone mentions that Bill Nye the Science Guy doesn't have a science degree. "You don't need a degree if you know your shit," Archy says. "I don't have a degree in fishing, but I caught the biggest fish today."

4

↔ LEANING INTO IT

Last summer, Simon traded a truck camper for cash and this welded stand, a literal lifesaver for steady fishing through whitewater. The metal platform gives me a lift too, making it easy to sight-cast to bass holding in eddies and above rapids.

5

↔ ROCK BOTTOM

The massive boulders lining the New also hint at what sits below the surface. Here, Simon floats into a cave that becomes an undercut at higher water—a death trap for capsized boaters who get sucked into the opening and pinned by the current.

6

↔ DRY FIRE

Each year, the New swells its banks and sends mud, trash, and timber rolling downriver. This leaves tangled heaps of sun-dried driftwood along the beaches, providing more than enough fuel for the few campers who sleep there.