

Introduction

I've had a lot of nicknames over the years, mostly given to me by friends and family when we traveled to outdoor destinations. When we would go to the mountains for backpacking and I didn't shave for a couple of days, they would call me "Mountain Man." It was more of a joke than anything else because I could never grow a real beard. Being in the Army, I wasn't allowed to grow a beard, so I stayed clean shaven. Any peach fuzz that temporarily appeared on my face was greeted by "oohs" and "ahhs" from my family.

More recently I've been called "River Walker." When I paddled the St. Johns River, one of my first experiences was getting my heavily loaded kayak stuck in areas of extremely low water, and I had to get out on several occasions to walk the river while dragging the kayak. Not a fun time, I will tell you, but it inspired a friend to give me the name "River Walker." The name has stuck.

Someone who doesn't do their homework and prepare for a long trip can find themselves in a sticky situation. That's what I did when I embarked on my St. Johns adventure and took water levels for granted. When I heard that the river was low, I thought to myself "Who cares, I have a kayak! I can go anywhere that regular boats can't go." Boy, was I wrong. I didn't plan properly, and I had to deal with the consequences.

The book you are holding is about how to successfully paddle the St. Johns River without making the mistakes I made. It is meant as a guide to the recreational kayaker, canoeist, or SUP (Stand Up Paddleboard) enthusiast who has been thinking of doing something like this but never found a book on the subject. I am not a historian, a biologist, a hydrologist, or a geologist. What I am is a survivor and someone who can help *you make* a journey down the St. Johns River an enjoyable one.



Most everybody has a bucket list. Over the years, mine became quite lengthy and included items such as traveling the world, becoming a rock star, and landing on the moon. Unfortunately, I never put myself in a position to do these things. I have only traveled to a few countries, the only talent I have for being a rock star is playing “Guitar Hero” on the PlayStation 3, and the only glimpse I have of the moon is from my daughter’s telescope.

Some of the more probable items on my bucket list were hiking the entire Appalachian Trail, visiting Alaska, and paddling the entire St. Johns River. But even those presented reality hurdles. Being able to take six months off to hike the 2,190 miles of the Appalachian Trail all at once wasn’t going to happen. That is something more suitable for college students, retirees, and other people who don’t have to worry about working and taking care of kids. So, I do the next best thing. I take a couple of trips a year to section hikes with my family. At the rate I am going, I will probably finish the entire A.T. in about twenty years, but it will be totally worth it.

To some folks, paddling the St. Johns River may not sound like a very rewarding experience. It may not sound glorious or have extreme adventure like mountain climbing or whitewater rafting. It is probably viewed as just a flat, old river that someone can see from a bridge as they drive over it. For me, however, it is much more than that; it’s all about the river.

Being born and raised in Jacksonville, I literally saw the river every day. The city has seven bridges that cross this beautiful body of water, so it was part of the scenery through car windows as I went to school and grew up.

During my time in the military, I was fortunate enough to fly helicopters. As a bonus, I got to fly helicopters for the Florida Army National Guard, which has an aviation facility in Jacksonville. It was a wonderful experience to be able to go on training missions and fly along the river. From the mouth of the river, through downtown Jacksonville, and as far south as Palatka, I would maneuver the helicopter and think to myself, “How far does this river go?” I never saw the entire river despite my many missions flying over it.

Viewing a river from a car is only somewhat satisfying. Surveying a river from a helicopter is rewarding but distant. Being on top of the water in a kayak is a totally different experience!

If you have ever been canoeing or kayaking, then surely you have enjoyed

the different perspective from that vantage point. You can see the plants both on land and under the water. You can hear the birds as they pass overhead. You can be on the receiving end of a scary moment when you accidentally bump into an alligator and you get splashed. Or, perhaps you will get the occasional startling moment when a fish actually jumps into your kayak. (It happens more than you think!) The warmth of the sun or the coolness of a winter wind can be felt on your face as you paddle in the early morning. The temperature of the water can be either a cool relief from the heat or a chilling wake-up call in the cold depending on what time of year you decide to take a dip in it. You can actually smell the water along with the other fragrances that Mother Nature has arranged for us to notice, both good and bad. When you are on the River, everything is so much closer. Things come alive in a way that you never see if you look at the river from a distance. When you are on the water, you are one with the river!

Until I started to plan my journey, I had no idea that the length of the St. Johns River is 310 miles. Have you ever driven 310 miles on a road trip? It's a long journey even if you are driving 80 miles per hour, but eventually, after a few hours, you get to your destination. Points of interest go by pretty quickly. You might spend three to five seconds reading a sign as you drive by it. You might remember to check on Google about the park you missed or the conservation area you might want to check out whenever you have free time. You probably are not very attentive to all the things you drove by. You are just focused on the road, the traffic around you, and the next exit to get gas or use the bathroom. Point A to Point B.

Now, imagine doing this trip at less than 1 mph, which is the average speed of the current of the St. Johns River. You will notice many more things when you are going slowly down a gently flowing river. Details emerge on the wildlife you experience and the historic areas you never would have known about if you didn't see it for yourself. It is a whole different level of enjoyment when you have the time to sit back and observe versus driving towards a singular destination.

I had always wanted to take the time to see where the river started, where it ended, and all the places in between. It would answer many questions I had about the geography, the history, and whether or not I could physically do it. The idea was planted. All I had to do was find the time and motivation.

In December 2016, I retired from the Florida Army National Guard. After

nearly twenty-seven years of working in uniform, I found myself in a strange place. No drill weekends, no deployments, no flying. It felt as if part of my life no longer existed. The sensible side of me wanted to get back to work and transition myself as quickly as possible into the civilian workforce; however, there was another side of me that didn't want to be in a rush. At my place in life, I felt the need to take time and do things for myself for a change. Projects around the house needed to be completed, so I allocated time to do them. Books needed to be read, so I read them. Adventures needed to be pursued, so I stopped dreaming and started doing. I finally had time to scratch some items off my bucket list.

It was a toss-up between hiking the remaining 2,080 miles of Appalachian Trail or paddling the St. Johns River. The first option would take months. The second would take weeks. I opted for the latter. It was time to get to work and plan the longest and most exciting paddling trip of my life.

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