

**Premium channel:**  
A pit stop near  
Cascadilla Creek on  
the Flathead River.



**RAFTING** By Dave Gardetta

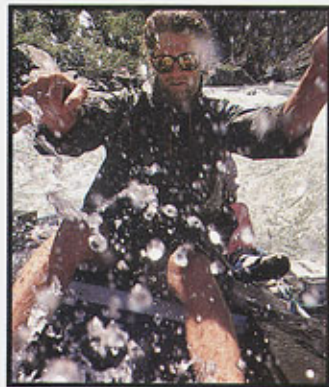
## Be Your Own Guide

*The Flathead's north fork is hard to reach, but not to run*

**V**ETERAN rafting guides can be a nostalgic bunch, and most of them will tell you that unfrequented rivers are about as common these days as undammed ones. "A decade ago, you couldn't talk people into a raft," they say, "but now you can't talk them out of one."

Which is precisely why the north fork of Montana's Flathead River is so special. While thousands of people take commercial rafting trips down the Flathead's middle fork each year, the north fork sees only a few hundred — mostly because the only way to reach its main put-in is to drive 60 miles from West Glacier to Moose City on a bone-jarring dirt road.

But if you're the hardy type and willing to make the drive, you're probably ready for the north fork's 60-mile float, which is wild enough to get your attention but sufficiently tame to tackle in three to four days without a guide. Tracing the western frontier of Glacier National Park as it rolls south from the Canadian border, the north fork features long calm stretches, some Class III whitewater, thick bank-side



**Oar deal:** Bruce Bolding on the north fork's Lower Kintla Rapids.

forests to camp in, and exactly the type of scenery you'd expect in the boonies of Montana. "It's completely remote," says Alex Vandervoort, a guide with Glacier Raft Company, the north fork's only outfitter. "You'll see elk, deer, bears, moose, and even wolves. But probably no other boats."

I made my first trip down the north fork with Lucas Sussman, a friend from New York. We covered 20 miles the first day, studying our map closely as the river split into ribboned tributaries. Along the way, white-tailed deer poked their heads out of the canopy of trees as if breaking the surface of some dark vertical pond. On the trip's middle leg, we rolled past dun-colored fields and over gravel bars, casting for cutthroats and Dolly Vardens. We stopped for the night beside a stand of aspens, drinking Montana Nut Brown Ale and eating chicken and potatoes for dinner. After two days of rowing, our bruised biceps had taken on the color of eggplants, and Lucas's once-pale eastern face had started

to glow. In the distance, the Livingston Range stood blurry and dream-cast beneath a drifting storm front.

We hit the north fork's southernmost stretch — described with a bit of understatement by local river rangers as "real dynamic" — around mid-morning. The river was a maze of hydraulic ambition, continually carving new channels and

getting jammed with drowned firs, spruces, and aspens. While Lucas steered, I frantically searched the map for a tributary that would take us clear of a rapidly approaching logjam. Then a gust of wind came up. "The map," I sputtered, "the map!"

Lucas lunged at it with his paddle but missed. We followed it out of the main current and into a side channel and finally got it back in the boat. It was soaked but intact — a good thing, considering the three other channels in front of us that led straight into a million-acre tract of unknown wilderness. It's not as if there was anyone around to ask for directions. MI

**NOTES** For maps and other information about rafting the north fork of the Flathead, contact the U.S. FOREST SERVICE (406-387-3800 or [fs.fed.us/r1/flathead](http://fs.fed.us/r1/flathead)). To rent boats or gear, or to arrange a guided trip, contact GLACIER RAFT COMPANY (800-235-6781 or [glacierraftco.com](http://glacierraftco.com)).

