

WHAT MAKES THE PERFECT RAFT GUIDE?

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In a varied career in the Outdoor Leisure industry I have worked in numerous countries including New Zealand, Austria, France, Spain and the UK. I now manage a Centre in mid Wales but know that I would never have achieved this position had it not been for the wealth of experiences, fun and learning that I've had along the way. Recognising that the customer should always come first and that their safety and their enjoyment should be the highest priority, I have decided to put down my thoughts particularly in respect of White Water Rafting. Rafting has always brought me particular enjoyment, challenge and learning and my hope is that readers will be able to relate to some of my thoughts and observations.

Once whilst leading a rafting course I was asked a question that got me thinking, "Can anyone learn to be a raft guide?" This question made me think of another one, which I then asked myself.

The following reflections comprise my personal answer to my secondary question.

I am sharing these views not so as to point out a definitive, nor to be an aid as to what new guides should rigidly strive towards, but rather as a conversational piece with the aim of provoking discussion into what you and others feel is THE answer.

Me playing at Photo Rapid in Austria



White Water Rafting

Tirol Austria

50% Water Reading

This figure I know will be the most controversial percentage. Why have I put it so high? Well, it brings me back to the initial question asked of me on a raft in Scotland while delivering Level 1 training. My answer was that I could teach anyone who had significant water knowledge already in place, it is far easier to train white water kayakers to become raft guides than, say, rugby players or even flat-water canoeists. Both can be fit, strong and keen (notice I did not say footballers!) but the former have a massive advantage, not just because they already use a paddle and a boat, but because they know where the water is going and what the water is doing.

By knowing that current travels in vectors, you can understand what exit angle your raft needs to be at to come out of a bend.

By knowing that there is a cushion wave against a big rock, you can understand where the raft might go if it collides into it.

By understanding downstream 'Vs,' you can recognize the deepest water channels and where the raft might go and how fast it might get there. If the river was 10 metres wide and one-metre deep and then the river flows into a gorge five metres wide, you know that if the depth stays roughly the same, the speed will double. You then know that force will be affected; hydraulics will be more powerful, and so on.

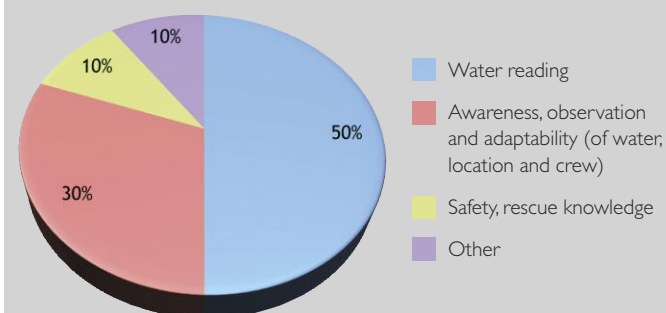
By understanding upstream Vs you know where rocks are and, be ready to avoid them! Guide books for rapids all around the world talk about magnetic rocks. I know, I have hit some that I swear had some unnatural gravitational pull towards them. However, contrary to this common rafter's belief, they aren't actually magnetic. By looking and reading the water you can see what's happening.

An understanding of river morphology also gives the guide a sense of judgment. One of the hardest decisions a guide can make is when to say, "Not this time," or "not today," and "let's walk around." Can you look at a rapid and say this without understanding why? By noticing the potential dangers a sensible decision can be made. Indeed, this decision will be further refined by your own assessment of the crew and other factors referred to later in this essay.

If you have made the decision to run a harder rapid, water knowledge is vital in order to put safety cover in the correct places:

- What features might trip up the raft or the crew?
- Where might a crew member's raft go if it hits these features?
- What is the worst-case scenario?
- Where is the best place for a rescuer to be because of that hazard?
- How will I make a rescue from the hazard?
- What is my plan B, plan C?

My own suggested values as to the most important Raft Guide Skills.



To assist me present my debate I'll be referring to the percentages given in the above pie chart.

30% Awareness, observation (of water, location and crew) and adaptability

When on a rafting river the environment is extremely fluid (excuse the pun). There are ever changing situations, especially on natural rivers, where the water level can rise and fall very quickly.

You can come round a corner and there can be a river wide tree jam. I mention this example here because this exact thing has happened to me! While on the third day on rafting expedition in the remotes in New Zealand, my crew of two, another guide and myself all on the same raft, came round a blind bend on a relatively easy stretch and encountered a river wide tree jam. We ended up wrestling with high sides on the tree. In the last minute I physically chucked my two customers out over the tree in time for me, the other guide and our fully laden gear raft to be flipped upside down and dragged under the tree. Thankfully we popped up the other side unhurt. The customers absolutely loved it, we meanwhile got another chance at life and to think how we could have avoided this situation!

It is important for a guide to watch what is happening on the river, on his boat, with his customers and also everyone else's boats and customers.

How quickly can you react to a situation?

When I teach guides, I am always telling them to keep an eye out for future water. If I have to stop, where is the best place in 10, 20 or 100 metres? What would you do if this happened? What's your plan B and C, if plan fails? If that guide does not make the ferry glide, what will happen and what can you do to help? Where in that case is the best place for me to be? What kit should I start preparing or should I just start going over where that kit exactly is so I'm ready to react if needed? I always like having my throw bag in the same place on my body and in situations when I might need it, I always find myself constantly checking the toggle is in exactly the right place.

My first time guiding Kaituna Falls

By understanding **downstream 'Vs,'** you can recognize the **deepest water channels** and where the raft might go and how **fast** it might get there



Tree obstructions, Wales



Again this brings us onto planning and setting up rescues, putting people in places where they might be needed but being ready to change this plan as the rescue unfolds. Back up plans are essential and the more severe the situation the more backups and adaptability are needed.

Observation is critical with rescues – how many people started in the raft when it flipped? Where have they gone? What equipment is where? Where are the other boats on the water? Who else is near to help? What's the river doing? Can we put upstream/downstream spotters in place?

A good way of training is by guiding rapids/sections without the use of your crew. Can you make a manoeuvre when your crew suddenly stops paddling or all fall out? For my New Zealand raft guide assessment, I had to raft a couple of miles down some tricky rapids while the assessors and crew relaxed back in their seats. Powering and prying down that river made me understand that I had to be adaptable and I learnt afterwards a few cheeky techniques that reduced the strain on my back. I know a few raft guide assessors who take the guide's paddle away on assessment days and gives them a centre stick, this definitely makes for some interesting assessments!

10% Safety, rescue knowledge (communication skills)

Well, so far I have already mentioned rescue in both my percentages above (some people may say this is cheating).

Having a good understanding of rescue knowledge is a vital skill whenever going on swift water, especially when the customers could potentially be inexperienced. I require all the guides I assess to have an understanding of this. The WVRT course by Rescue 3 is a brilliant eye-opener to the world of rescue and I cannot stress enough the worth for any potential raft guide.

The safety talk delivered at the start of the day is the raft guide's first chance to really impress vital information on your customers. In a short amount of time you have to cover everything from introductions, to equipment, how to use it, and safety. Customers will only take in a certain amount of information so make sure you keep going over the important bits on the water and prep your crew before you go into serious water. Mark Hirst recently did a handy write up on the safety brief, now shown on the IRF website if anyone wants more information.

My final point about the safety talk is the white water swimming position. This is such an important aspect, but also one I find customers are often quite poor at mastering. I have now got into the habit of getting all my customers to actually practice it on dry land before we start a trip. If nothing else, it helps embed it into the physical memory as well as the psychological.

There is a reason why on every trip you should have a senior guide as well as your Level 1 and 2. Experience is so important; the senior guide should have more knowledge and understanding of different rivers and different situations. Having more tools in your toolbox means you have more options to play with, if and when needed. In the event of an incident it will be everyone chipping in to get the job done but this is made a lot easier when it's led by an experienced guide.

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go into serious water



Always have a back up plan, Pod and myself rafting down the Garry



Double guiding front and back the Waiora

Helicopters swing loading our gear out to us in New Zealand



If you're running a trip of any distance (maybe excluding artificial rivers), a wrap kit is important, this is normally stored in your sweep boat. When taking a wrap kit on a journey, make sure every guide on the trip knows what's in it and how to ask for it. In addition to this, every raft guide should have a personal kit on them to deal with situations (if I went into kit in depth this piece of writing would suddenly get out of hand very quickly, probably boring a lot of people so let's finish here saying, "Know what kit to take with you and how to use it).

Communication is a part of rescue knowledge. The white water environment can be a very noisy place, where just trying to speak to the person next to you can be difficult let alone if they are on the other side of the river or stuck on a rock. When listening to a lecture at the last Rescue 3 conference about the safety cover for the Sickline event, the speaker said most rescuers had radios but because of the noise even these were most of the time useless. Whistles and hand gestures seemed to be the preferred method.

New Zealand has some comical hand gestures but they seem to be quite comprehensive. I seem to have found myself picking up different signals from all around the world. I particularly like the signal for 'cover' – two hands above my head, finger tips meeting. I also like this one... it means, "This is Bull S@%t."

Unfortunately there are different signals used all over the country, not to mention the world. Kayakers use different ones to rafters, canoeists different to kayakers! One thing Rescue 3 is trying to do is to come up with a generic system for all... whatever signal you use. The important thing is everyone on your trip is briefed so they fully understand the meaning.

Remember too, that depending on their personality, different individuals will respond differently to your commands and observations. A little thoughtful psychology never goes amiss.

The remaining 10%

Key stroke skills

Rafting, compared with kayaking or canoeing has perhaps less strokes to learn. However, instead uses a few strokes in a variety of different ways and techniques. Each stroke can be adapted and done differently for different purposes. Pushing or levering different parts of the boat or body produces different outcomes. The different stances you put yourself in on the boat will change your efficiency dramatically.

Obviously the use of your crew is an expected tool too, but don't over rely on them. You can nearly guarantee 'sods law' will stick his hand in when you least expect it.

Learn to develop strokes on both sides, do not become the one-sided paddler. The choice of paddles raft guides use seem to have changed over the past 10 years. We are starting to move away from the huge bladed paddles that put a lot of pressure on your back and are instead leaning towards smaller blades and efficiency of the paddle stroke.

Fitness

I'm not sure if I take this for granted being a person who has always been very active and relatively fit. Obviously being in charge of a crew of people you need to be physically able to step up to the challenges of the job.

At times you will be tasked to go above and beyond. When an incident happens you might be running along banks, jumping over rocks, swimming through fast water, pulling/lifting heavy objects (just to state a selection) and that's not mentioning guiding the raft!

Momentum and drift

I nearly tried to put this under one of the bigger percentage headings but felt it justified its own individual spot. I feel momentum and drift are some of the hardest tricks to get used to for the new guide. Once this is fully understood, rafting becomes so much easier!

- **Momentum** – getting your raft up to speed and carrying its own speed,
- **Drift** – the fact that your raft will keep spinning/turning on its own.

Kayakers and small boat users often find jumping into a raft frustrating because everything has to be done so much earlier and exaggerated. When heading for an eddy, you need to set your angle much earlier and start your approach much sooner, as your momentum will often take longer to stop. Also it's not just the water currents that will affect your boat, wind can be a big obstacle. Whilst teaching a guide course in Scotland, we had to high side boats to the wind to stop them flipping on the River Orchy! This was probably the weirdest 'over' I have ever called – and I was very happy to have other professional guides on my boat!

**Personality**

You can definitely argue this could call for a much bigger percentage. No customer wants to get on a boat with a boring guide with no enthusiasm. It is often the guide who stays in the memory longest at the end of a commercial rafting trip... maybe that's why they have so much fun partying with the customers in the bars later! A fun, exciting persona but with a radiance of professionalism and confidence is important for your customers to trust you and not start doing their own thing.

In Austria we often worked with German speaking clients, where my safety brief was fluent but outside of that my German language was nearly non-existent. The only way I got through my trips was smiling, body language and universal personality traits. I still say though that a personality alone won't keep you safe and get you far on a river without the necessary skills and knowledge to compliment it.

Repair knowledge/raft design

The extent of knowledge and the kit you will need will depend on the trip you are doing and the senior instructor should be the lead regarding this. Your kit

might be very basic like a roll of Duck Tape and some Storm Sure, or it might be a huge bag full of spare patches etc. On one helicopter rafting trip I was leading in New Zealand, I was helicoptered to a remote mountain on the North Side. The weather was terrible and the swing load of rafts and gear we had underneath had to be dropped near to the end of the flight.

On recovery of all the gear to start our five-day trip we noticed most of our kit was fine except for the eggs, which had broken as had all three of our pumps! Our two big pumps were trashed but our smaller one looked fixable. In the end we fixed it with a load of butter from the food stock. Sometimes raft repair needs a bit of adaptability and imagination!

I am fully aware many of my percentages could be split and maybe cross over but I hope you get the gist of my thoughts. In essence, experience must be the most important factor for a raft guide. Without being there, trying that and wearing the t-shirt, my percentages don't work!

A follow-on question for myself and others to think about is, how much these percentages would change if the question was:

- What makes the perfect white water canoeist/kayaker/instructor?
- Would there be a massive difference?

