

White-Water Rafting ^[1]

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by Joseph Paul Hoffman, 2006

White-water rafting is a large and economically significant tourist industry in the North Carolina [mountains](#) ^[2], with hundreds of thousands of visitors flocking to experience the challenge of running the state's rivers such as the [Nantahala](#) ^[3], the [French Broad](#) ^[4], the Nolichucky, and the Pigeon. As early as the 1920s, white-water enthusiasts began exploring the rivers of the Southeast for recreation. Generally, these early adventurers were severely hampered by the inadequacy of their equipment, which often consisted of cedar or canvas canoes. In the 1960s and early 1970s, private boaters, often in homemade fiberglass kayaks or aluminum canoes, began logging "first descents" on many rivers throughout the Southeast. Often with the aid of little more than a topographical map, intrepid souls such as Ramone Eaton, Fritz Orr, Bob Benner, Hugh Caldwell, and Frank Bell, among many others, began to explore the more remote rivers and streams of the region.

In 1972 Payson Kennedy, a member of the faculty of the Georgia Institute of Technology, and Horace Holden, a Presbyterian minister and canoeing partner of Kennedy's, along with their wives and children, located an interesting piece of property along the banks of the Nantahala River near Bryson City. The two families knew the area well as they had spent many summers in North Carolina running rivers, hiking, and camping. Holden found that the local 14-room motel, restaurant, and gas station known as the Tote'n'Tarry was for sale by the local sheriff. That summer, the Holdens and Kennedys secured the property for \$150,000 and founded the [Nantahala Outdoor Center](#) ^[5] (NOC). After purchasing military surplus rafts, the limited partnership began leading trips down the Nantahala and Chattooga Rivers (in Georgia and South Carolina). That summer, more than 1,200 people took advantage of this new industry. With all of the summer's profits reinvested, the NOC enhanced their fleet with rafts purchased from a manufacturer in West Virginia. The following year, Payson Kennedy resigned from Georgia Tech, cashed in his retirement, and went into the business of outdoor adventure permanently. Although the company is still based in Bryson City and the original river trips are the mainstay of the business, the NOC offers boating trips throughout the United States as well as destinations such as Costa Rica, Chile, Honduras, Mexico, Corsica, Nepal, France, Morocco, and New Zealand.

Although the NOC represents the first ^[5]commercial rafting company in North Carolina, many other organizations have emerged in the state as well. In 1979 Glenn Goodrich, of Stamford, Conn., and the owners of the West Virginia-based Mountain River Tours founded Carolina Wilderness Adventures in Hot Springs. Goodrich had worked for Mountain River Tours during summers as a raft guide while completing a computer science degree at Ohio State University. In 1981 Carolina Wilderness acquired Black Canyon River Tours, located along the Nolichucky River in Tennessee. The company offers guided trips on the French Broad, Nolichucky, and Pigeon Rivers. Other white-water rafting companies include the French Broad River Company in Marshall, Blue Ridge Rafting in Hot Springs, and Cherokee Adventures in Erwin, Tenn.

The white-water trips offered in North Carolina typically fall within the Class I-IV range, meaning that they are suitable for beginners as well as those with more experience. Some North Carolina river locales have been used as training facilities for [U.S. Olympic](#) ^[6] kayaking teams. The best river trips typically occur during March, April, May, and June, as water levels are generally highest during those months.

Additional Resources:

Nantahala Outdoor Center: <http://www.noc.com/> ^[5]

"North Carolina offers numerous whitewater rafting options", by Jack Horan, *News & Observer*.
<http://www.newsobserver.com/2012/07/11/2193361/north-carolina-offers-numerous.html> ^[7]

U.S. Whitewater Rafting Center: <http://usnwc.org> ^[8]

Image Credits:

White water rafting on the Cheoah River in North Carolina, 2009, courtesy of Youtube user weebandit. Available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njLBtPqbaNA> ^[9] (accessed October 9, 2012).

NC White Water Kayaking Playboating, 2012, courtesy of Youtube user jmiramant. Available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3QSVh_AhDc ^[10](accessed October 9, 2012).

Subjects:

Pastimes ^[11]

Sports ^[12]

Authors:

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Origin - location:

Mountains ^[14]

From:

Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.^[15]

1 January 2006 | Hoffman, Joseph Paul

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[1] <https://www.ncpedia.org/white-water-rafting> [2] <https://www.ncpedia.org/our-state-geography-snap-mountain> [3] <https://www.ncpedia.org/nantahala-national-forest> [4] <https://www.ncpedia.org/rivers/french-broad> [5] <http://www.noc.com/> [6] <http://www.teamusa.org/> [7] <http://www.newsobserver.com/2012/07/11/2193361/north-carolina-offers-numerous.html> [8] <http://usnwc.org/activities/whitewater-rafting/> [9] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njLBtPqbaNA> [10] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3QSVh_AhDc [11] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/pastimes> [12] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/sports> [13] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/authors/hoffman-joseph-pau> [14] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/mountains> [15] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/encyclopedia->