



From left:
The mighty Franklin River. ❖ Negotiating rapids.

Camping & Rafting

(PART TWO) -
Cathy and Andy
get on the river -
and survive!

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Day One

It's a cool, brisk morning on the streets of Hobart when we commence our drive to the put-in point of our seven-day white water rafting adventure on the Franklin River. From now on we are entirely out of reach; free from mobile phone coverage, emails, business and work.

Rafting guide Rob hones our paddling technique to make us an efficient team and we quickly learn that on the river, nothing really matters. It's just day time, night time or hungry time – in-between adrenalin time.

'We have a bit of a challenge up ahead,' yells Rob. 'It's nasty notch where the ravine forces into an extremely narrow slot. Dig deep and paddle hard okay? Listen to instructions.'

Over the roar of the water, my partner Andy whips off an annoying leech and tosses me a less than confident smirk. 'We're gonna die!' he wails, wedging himself into the raft to prevent flicking out into the raging current. The noise is thunderous as we swirl towards a narrow gap between two rocks, determined to make it through.

It's an ill-fated attempt. We're wedged sideways, water barrelling down the rock falls all around us and surging into our stricken raft. We abort and dislodge.

Next, the rapids of Descension Gorge. Andy isn't dead yet, but his nose glows frozen red from copping the waves over the bow of the boat. The constant rain sounds like hail on our helmets and I try to film him enjoying himself: 'Come back

another day,' he wryly suggests. Followed by: 'You do realise my holiday option was skiing in the sunshine of Japan?'

'Keep paddling, keep paddling,' yells Rob as we power over a series of six rapids, whooping with laughter.

At the end of the day we drop into Irenabyss to spend the night; exhausted and spent.

Andy and I pitch our tent, inflate air mattresses and hang sodden clothes on tree branches. Nothing is going to dry.

Day Two

Camp begins to hum at daylight in the drizzling rain. I tie plastic bags over my socks and put thermals under my wetsuit in a vain attempt to maintain extra warmth.

Today the river threads through breathtaking scenery into the Great Ravine, one of Tasmania's deepest and narrowest gorges. Nature is showcased at its rawest, but so am I. I feel physically tested by temperatures that make my gums ache and teeth go numb. I have to manage the thought that I have five more days of this.

This afternoon we portage around The Churn, a rock boulder mass obstructing the river. The rafts have to be unloaded and carried over the sharp, slippery rock. Every step laden with 16 kg kit bags takes concentration and resolve. It's an exhausting lesson in teamwork and tenacity that takes more than two hours to accomplish.

Photographing the event, I make one wrong move and come smashing down on the rocks, head saved by my helmet. My camera lens and swollen, blue leg are not that lucky.

Camp however, is exceptional. A rocky overhang provides solid ground and shelter from the rain, which is now increasing. Andy and I score the 'honeymoon suite', a narrow cave where I drift off to sleep counting glow worms on the ceiling, reminding me of the wonders of nature and the depth of this experience.

Day Three

Wind and rain spirals through our camping chasm all night and come morning the rapids are dark and angry; water levels high. To my great pleasure we aren't going anywhere today. The river rules and we learn its personality changes rapidly.

I tuck back up in my warm sleeping bag where Andy lies broken, like a shaft of ice, on his uneven rock. There is time to breathe, to laugh and to sleep. Another business lady cries. It's been so long since she's sat still for a day she has no idea how to deal with it. Beside her is a long trail of shredded Mintie papers ...

Day Four

If we don't push off this morning we could be stuck here for days. Water levels have dropped, but we fear there's another wall behind. There's urgency in our step.

Coruscades is one of the longest rapids on the river. There's another portage of gear and our empty rafts get stuck in a chute; wedged too far left by the sucking currents. Patience and precision is imperative. At the bottom of Coruscades someone's about to swim. The river is swirling, pumping and super loud. Rob is shouting with frenzy: 'Forward paddle, dig, dig, HOLD ON.' That followed by a large fall that pops out my fellow rafter. 'Man overboard, man overboard.' 'Rescue, RESCUE,' bellows Rob. But we're still being rolled by the rapid. Everyone tries to extract our friend from the icy water and throw him back in the boat, but Rob's still not happy. 'Back on the job, back on the job, forward paddle, we need you.' It's frantic. The adrenalin is pumping.

The fun's not over yet. There's another portage at Thunderush then onto Cauldron – a vertical entry manoeuvre where, once again, a raft comes to grief.

I have put forward the ridiculous request to sit in the nose of the raft while it's lowered over the edge of a narrow shaft, plunging down into thunderous water, headed for the chasm wall. What Rob doesn't realise is there's only so much 'vertical' I can hold until my legs flip over my head and I plunge into the churning abyss. I'm facing straight downwards into the boiling water, hanging, when gravity takes over and I'm rolling out. Fate takes over. At exactly the right moment, Rob launches himself onto the end of the raft, cowboy style. We lose contact with the shelf and launch into the torrent. Andy tells me he heard my elated squeals all the way down the chasm. The next raft isn't so lucky.

They enter vertically flipping as they hit the deluge, trying to dodge log sieves and endless vertical entrapments; guide separated from the raft and swiftly pushed downstream amid nasty rocks and boulders. A swift rescue swings into action to get to the upturned raft and passenger clinging to the side before it disappears with everyone's gear, and emotions, downstream.

So much has happened and it's only lunchtime! The scenery is stupendous. Waterfalls tumble down antique cliffs wooded with ancient forest and fluorescent mosses. It's still drizzling rain so we decide to push on for another three hours' paddle to make it to Newlands where we'll have caves to shelter in again.

This evening Andy chooses a low-roofed grotto anticipating a well-earned rest. He's hit the wall and is grumpy, cold and sick (from what I suspect is not wanting to poo in a plastic bag!) and unwelcoming



Camp camaraderie on the Franklin.



Camp along the Franklin River.

of visitors. But caves provide shelter for many species and tonight we're the intruders.

'Ssssss. Get off. Get off!' hisses Andy in the dark of night, smashing around in his sleeping bag like a frog in a sock. 'There's something on me. Get it off!'

I've been lying awake all night listening to the camp activity amid the pots and pans. I explain that they're probably resident quolls that also need to eat, but clearly I know they're rats. I decide not to mention the massive cave spiders above us and the fact that we're in tiger snake country. Where do tiger snakes sleep anyway? In caves? Of course, but they will be scared away by Andy's flailing and cussing. The normal lack-of-sleep issues in our life are far from our headspace.

Day Five

Again we must wait in camp. Rob cooks pancakes for three hours; others play cards, juggle rocks and balance paddles on their foreheads. After lunch we forest walk to the famous Rock Island Bend; photographed and used in the political campaign to save the Franklin River. Hauling ourselves over sodden terrain with ropes – pulling,

pushing and puffing – we emerge at stunning waterfalls and spectacular vantage points. Above us black cockatoos flap and squawk as the mist rolls in, the sun comes out – and then it rains again.

We take compression bandages wherever we walk and sure enough meet with a shiny, flat-headed tiger snake.

Tonight around the boulders we talk of hardships, sore muscles and compare the biggest bruises. Grown men laugh and cry. It's a turning point. We have all been taken to extremities, won, and are now on the home run. Unfortunately, I'm still a few bases behind.

In the dark hours of the night I head to the river for a drink bending over with cupped hands and slide straight into the icy current! I kick, squeal and struggle to take hold of a slippery ledge to pull myself to safety, but no-one has to know this.

Day Six

With the river widening and changing we revel in the last of the trip's rapids flowing into quiet pools where platypus feed. At Pengana Cave we slip into black, neck-deep water to wade through squelching clay, emerging into the Lost World, an

ancient, eerie green oasis. All too soon we meet the Gordon River, there's a jetty in sight and it's time to put down our paddles.

Day Seven

This morning at sunrise we board our yacht for a peaceful sail along the Gordon River to Strahan for the road trip back to Hobart. It feels heavenly to be in a warm cabin enjoying breakfast (complete with sit-down loos!)

Back in Hobart, we shower for the first time in a week and enjoy dressing for dinner. There's an enormous sense of achievement as we look back on our trip and realise business and work have barely rated a mention. We've not only adventured along one of the last wild rivers on Earth, but we've taken ownership of our own strengths and weaknesses.

Sitting there feeling clean and accomplished I look down at Andy's hand. 'What's that?' I screech. Apparently a big fat juicy leech has hitched a ride back to the city on Andy's finger!

Just like a leech, this is one holiday that will stay with you long after it's ended: not surprisingly, the longer you're home, the better it gets! ❖

FACT FILE

Getting there

Tasmania's Franklin River is an isolated and challenging environment best accessed with experienced river guides. www.franklinrivertasmania.com

When to go

November to March.

Big tip

Be totally prepared with gear for rain, sunshine and dramatic changes in temperature.

More information

www.discovertasmania.com.au

