



SHARING THE RIVER

PASSING THE TORCH DOWN THE GRAND CANYON

For many, passing the torch to the next generation is a natural part of growing older. And what better place than the Grand Canyon to show children what kayaking and river culture are truly about? In August 2025, a crew of whitewater veterans from Germany and Great Britain, including Jutta Kaiser, Joel Scott, and world-class photographer and paddler Michael Neumann, traveled down the Colorado River with friends, children, and family. For twelve days, they shared knowledge, joy, trust, laughs, stories, and, more importantly, the very essence of river culture: respect. Twelve days none of them will ever forget.

Words & Photography: Michael Neumann



When I sat in a kayak for the first time at the age of twelve, more by chance than anything else, I was hooked. It clicked immediately, and I rapidly realized that I would do whatever it took to make this little boat and its strangely twisted paddle my compass in life.

What fascinated me so much about it? At first, it was for narcissistic reasons. In team sports such as soccer and basketball, I was always in the lower midfield, and in individual sports such as table tennis, I had limited motor skills. Kayaking offered me the unique opportunity to quickly become the best paddler in my small village, because there was no one else.

But it did not take long to understand that canoeing is about much more than going higher, faster, or further. Rather, it is the perfect school of life and a guarantee for deep friendships. Anyone who has mastered flash floods on La Réunion, completed a Stikine descent with only two pages of faxed notes from the first descender, or committed to blind compulsory passages in the South African Drakensberg Mountains will not be discouraged by whatever else the universe throws at them. And if you then find a partner who shares the same passion, you can congratulate yourself on your good fortune.

But what happens when you have children? Is that the end of your paddling life, or is it when the real adventure begins? There is no universal answer, but if you live your passion openly in front of your children, there is hope they will follow your example.

My three children were born with it in their blood. After all, my 40-year love of canoeing brought me from northern Germany to the canoeing capital of Augsburg, and it's no coincidence that we live less than 300 meters as the crow flies from the Augsburg ice channel, the 1972 Olympic slalom course. So, it happened naturally that my sons, Kalle, Matti, and Sam, were sitting in slalom kayaks as soon as they could swim.

As a "bongo driver," I used to laugh at slalom paddlers who traveled halfway across the country for two ninety-second runs, if they were fast, on a weekend. Then I discovered the finesse required to compete at the top level of the sport, and from that moment on, I spent many weekends at slalom courses in Germany, but without paddling a single second. Two hearts began to beat in my chest. One belonged to the slalom fanboy, the other to the old whitewater veteran. Despite a busy competition calendar, it was always clear to me that I wanted to pass on to my boys the joy of "real" river running. And what could be more real than the Grand Canyon, the mother of all whitewater gorges?



"IT DOESN'T NECESSARILY HAVE TO BE THE GRAND CANYON TO INTRODUCE YOUR PADDLING OFFSPRING TO THE FASCINATION OF WHITEWATER, BUT IT HELPS IMMENSELY."



Too light to paddle

It doesn't necessarily have to be the Grand Canyon to introduce your paddling offspring to the fascination of whitewater, but it helps immensely. Twelve days and eleven nights, about 420 kilometers through a gorge reaching nearly 1,800 meters in depth in places. Full board, professional guiding, spectacular side hikes, and camps beneath an immaculate starry sky. Could there be anything better?

In early August 2025, we embark on this trip together as a family. The thermometer reads 45 degrees Celsius in the shade, and the Dragon Bravo Fire burns on the North Rim, consuming vast stretches of forest and the historic Grand Canyon Lodge. At the entrance to Lee's Ferry, fire trucks line up to refill their tanks from the river. The conditions are less than ideal for the start of our river trip.



On the river, my son Sam, 13, and Benjamin, 12, the youngest members of the team, face a particular challenge. They are simply too light. Where the rest of us push through waves and most holes with the inertia of our mass, they are repeatedly "swallowed" by them. More than once, after passing through a normal wave train, Benjamin ends up in a respectable back surf before being spat out sideways like a cherry pit.

But thanks to the flawless technique they have learned in slalom, Benjamin and Sam are fully on par with the rest of the group. Our concern that the big water might scare them proves unfounded. They are always able to follow the boat ahead, and when we stop to study a rapid, their judgment usually matches the collective reading of the river. The group moves well together. Beth and Harry find their rhythm again in their boat, showing that a little natural talent, a good sense of body balance, and a dose of courage are all it takes to leave each rapid with a permanent grin. This allows Joel to focus primarily on Benjamin.

Moving together

We quickly settle into a cruisy eat-paddle-eat-sleep rhythm, and it's hard to imagine that another world exists outside the Colorado. The forced digital detox also helps in that sense, as there is no cell phone reception anywhere in the canyon. The river holds us together through each day.

At least as breathtaking as the paddling are the evening camps. Along the route, there are roughly sixty possible places to stop among the hundreds of kilometers of river, each one more beautiful than the last. When docking a new site for the night, everyone helps unload the boats, adults and children alike, carrying dozens of dry bags, camping gear, and kitchen utensils in a long human chain from the riverbank to a large pile on the shore. After that, each person gathers their personal belongings and looks for a cozy spot for the night. The rule is simple: the closer to the river, the cooler the night. Yet on one or two evenings in the Inner Gorge, where the canyon walls press close together, a foehn-like thermal wind makes us feel like French fries in an air fryer.



All in all, we are twenty-seven paddlers, plus three guides and a safety boater. The group feels like a big family. The Neumann and the Kaiser-Scott families form the core, carrying a paddling dynasty with German-English roots. Ages stretch from 12 to 62, and experience ranges from competitive canoe slalom athletes training nearly a thousand minutes a week to people who have not been in a kayak for what feels like half a lifetime. Papa Joel Scott, once a member of the British canoe slalom team, and his wife Jutta Kaiser, a two-time freestyle world champion, are there with their children Benjamin and Maxi. Beth and Harry, Joel's children from his first marriage, both teachers in England, also come along. They have not sat in a boat for about three years, but the pair quickly proves that you don't have to be a top paddler to conquer the Grand Canyon.

The paddleable section of the Grand Canyon lies between two enormous reservoirs, Lake Powell upstream and Lake Mead downstream. These reservoirs regulate the river flow with remarkable precision, keeping discharge relatively predictable, usually somewhere between 250 and 400 cumecs, depending on electricity generation. As the water level in Lake Powell has fallen steadily over the last few decades, the sun now heats the water all the way to the bottom. What once was a bottom-outlet temperature of around 4 degrees Celsius is now a pleasant 16 degrees on the first day. The old rule of "dress for water, not for air" suddenly feels less intimidating, even allowing notorious lifeguards to wear paddling shorts instead of long johns or dry suits.



"WHERE THE REST OF US PUSH THROUGH WAVES AND MOST HOLES WITH THE INERTIA OF OUR MASS, THEY ARE REPEATEDLY "SWALLOWED" BY THEM."

Once the camp bed is set up, there is usually time for a nap, a short hike, or simply reading a good book before the call for dinner echoes across the sand. The guides prepare dinner with great dedication, and every day we are amazed at the fresh food they conjure from the "cellar" of their raft. Inside the metal frame of the twelve-meter-long boat are blocks of ice where provisions such as beef tenderloin, tuna steak, and chicken breast lie stored, gradually thawing as the river carries us forward.

The briefings by Dave Kashinski add excitement to all our evenings. The 56-year-old head guide of Hatch River Expeditions has well over 300 trips under his belt, placing him far ahead in the imaginary Grand Canyon guiding charts. He has no shortage of exciting stories about the canyon and its people, and the children hang on his every word, even if his broad American accent does not always match their German school English.

Dave particularly relishes describing the drama of the rapids. "House Rock," "Crystal," "Hance," "Granite," and, of course, "Lava Falls." Since George Flavell first navigated the rapid in his specially built rowboat in 1896, it has grown into a legend. Located near the end of the whitewater section, it is considered the hardest nut to crack. On the canyon's own difficulty scale, which runs up to ten, Lava Falls scores maximum points. The children go to bed with images of the rapids they have run and the tales they have heard drifting through their minds.

Braving Lava Falls

On day ten, the time has finally come. To prevent our arms from becoming completely exhausted by then, we spend the night just above Lava Falls. The guides don't miss the opportunity to tell more stories of failed Lava Falls descents in the evening. The tales continue to add to the legend, because no matter how many rapids you have skipped and "circumnavigated" on the raft up to that point, the guides insist that navigating Lava Falls is a matter of honor for everyone. Fortunately, Beth and Harry are already in bed.

Spending the night there gives us enough time to scout the rapid and, if we want, run it and carry our boats back up several times the next day, as Dave suggests. Carry it back up? Voluntarily? Even though Lava is considered a Class Ten, the classification primarily refers to fully loaded rowing rafts, Dave reassures.

The Kaiser-Scott family takes their time inspecting the rapid. The attention span of our young paddlers is significantly longer than when they are scrolling through TikTok, and they enthusiastically discuss different lines with us. Father Joel eyes a supposed world record that Dave had pointed out. To his knowledge, Lava has never before been successfully conquered by a family of six. The rag-tag raft is still waiting at the top, but Benjamin, Maxi, Harry, and Beth actually want to give it a go together in their kayaks.

"HE HAS NO SHORTAGE OF EXCITING STORIES ABOUT THE CANYON AND ITS PEOPLE, AND THE CHILDREN HANG ON HIS EVERY WORD."



The family eventually takes on the challenge with a navigation tactic commonly known as the duck march. Papa Joel in front, followed by Benja, my son Sam, Harry, Beth, and Mama Jutta as the rag collector. First, they safely pass the roller on the right, then pull sharply to the left to avoid the highest waves and the rock at the end. Benja accidentally does a little spin in the middle, but when Joel finally looks back after a deep brace, which he still claims today was definitely not an Eskimo roll, he sees five raised heads with big grins from left to right. All-time feelings!

Afterwards, some of the group take up Dave's offer to carry them back up the left bank for about 200 meters and further optimize their line through Lava Falls, true to the motto "second run, double fun." Joel's son Maxi and my son Matti, inspired by videos of slalom world champion Titouan Castryck and whitewater genius Dane Jackson, prefer to



lay their own lines, and each throws a kickflip on the final wave. An hour later, both Matti and Old Man River Dave have four more successful runs under their belts and share the day's record. I couldn't be prouder.

After this highlight, we reach the final camp in the shadow of Diamond Peak. That evening, it is not only us who struggle to hold back a few tears of farewell; the sky seems to be crying as well. A violent thunderstorm rolls in, bringing hurricane-force gusts of wind and torrential rain. Unfortunately, we miss our chance to quickly set up the tents, and we end up sitting on the rafts like drowned rats, finishing the remaining beer supplies. We toast to the occasional paddlers Beth and Harry, who now return to England as conquerors of Lava Falls, carrying the legend with them.



"THE FAMILY EVENTUALLY TAKES ON THE CHALLENGE WITH A NAVIGATION TACTIC COMMONLY KNOWN AS THE DUCK MARCH."

What a descent, and what an introduction to "real" whitewater kayaking for all the kids. Paddling every day, working as one extended family, exploring the surrounding side canyons and their waterfalls. The side hikes and shared camps along the river brought us closer together, and the children rose to the challenge of the water beautifully. While it doesn't have to be on the Grand Canyon, this place sure feels like a great river to pass on the torch and show the next generation what whitewater kayaking is all about.

Author's Note

Teaching your children whitewater paddling always involves a great deal of responsibility. As wonderful as this sport is, the consequences of a mistake, whether due to misjudgment or external circumstances, are often severe. Canoe slalom is, of course, a perfect place to start, because here the difficulties are only simulated, and the consequences of failure are just a cold swim and possibly a broken carbon kayak. Year after year, greater emphasis should be placed on regular and progressive safety courses taught by respected individuals, who in such cases are rarely the parents. As with an avalanche course, where a burial is sometimes simulated, it is very important that children understand the raw power of water, for example through a controlled tree clamp. Whitewater swimming also needs to be learned and should always be practiced under safe conditions, such as in artificial whitewater channels. But eventually, the day will come when children want to set off with friends to experience the very adventures that once fascinated you so much. Then you can only hope that you have used the years you have spent together to give them all the tools they need to make their own right decisions.

