



Clear Creek Whitewater Revival

**Rafting at
cleaned-up
rapids brings in
\$10 million a
year to area
businesses**

BY CASSI CLARK

You can raft on Clear Creek? Fourteen years ago the question rang in John Rice's ears as the Golden rafter started a company to take Denverites and their friends down his favorite rapids. Having overcome small-town politics and numerous water pollutants, rafting has finally settled in as a summer tourist draw for Clear Creek County.

Like any change in a small town, rafting was slow to take off. Yellow water and steep banks made rafting Clear Creek desirable only to the truly dedicated, boasting a mere 600 to 800 user days per year from 1989 to 1991. John Rice started taking people down the South Platte tributary in 1992, selling hundreds of 15-minute trips through Lickery Split, the mile-and-half long float through Golden. He quickly saw the need for longer trips of varying difficulty.

Meanwhile Ed Rapp, then a county commissioner, was working with Coors, the state of Colorado, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to clean up the 60-mile creek. The hope was that the first project, capping the McClelland/Speccht mill site, would be a demonstration of what could be done.

Rapp insisted the site not only be buried with topsoil and vegetation to prevent polluted water runoff but that it also would allow public access to the creek. Rice jumped on the opportunity to advance rafting, and in 1993 he helped design the Dumont put-in, slightly upstream from the rodeo grounds.

And so it began. The Chicago Creek put-in was built around 1997 at the intersection of Highway 103 and Interstate 70, and the city of Idaho Springs began issuing nine annual permits to take out at City Park on Colorado Boulevard. By 2003, the county was licensing 15 companies to use the Dumont and Lawson put-ins each summer and enjoying nearly 25,000 user days.

Continued cleanup efforts by the Clear Creek Watershed Foundation, headed by Rapp, have turned the creek into a favorite among fishermen and an economic source for the county.

"Clear Creek has had the most explosive growth out of any (Colorado waterway)," Rice says. ▶▶

Growing 10 percent to 60 percent a year, it is now the fourth busiest river in the state behind the Arkansas, the Animas and the Colorado River through Glenwood Canyon, bringing in an estimated \$10 million to the businesses of Clear Creek County.

Gloria and Mark Leonard, owners of Your Fishing Partner, on historic Miner Street in Idaho Springs, have capitalized on their fellow creek recre-

ators by selling Teva Sandals, sunglasses and Chums neck cords. Many businesses like Java Mountain Roasters and Beau Jo's pizza give discounts to rafting patrons.

"The rafting companies are great about co-marketing," said Asta Loevlie, owner of Java.

The Buffalo Restaurant and Bar, Skippers Ice Cream Parlor and Tommyknocker Brewery and Pub offer discounts to guides as well as

rafting customers, enjoying the influx of seasonal locals.

Though acceptance came slow, many businesses are now paired up with Mile Hi Rafting to offer package deals. Accommodation packages include 10 percent off rafting trips and rooms at the Super 8 Motel, Rose Street Bed and Breakfast, Historic St. James Vacation Rental and All Aboard Inn in Georgetown, as well as The Miner's Pick in Idaho Springs and The Peck House and Mad Creek B&B in Empire. Even the ski shops cash in by renting their buildings to the raft companies for the summer.

Whether it's rafting that brings tourists to the area, or mountain visitors who discover they can raft, too, the new industry is good for business. Last year, nearly 37,000 rafters came through Clear Creek County.

"I love seeing (rafters) come through," says Ala Salter of the Columbine Inn.

And the future looks good. Clear Creek County Open Space has hired Gary Lacey, a whitewater park developer from Boulder, to help design a new whitewater park in Lawson. In addition to creating new water features, the plan includes a parking area and restrooms. Open Space volunteers also have been talking to the county's road and bridge department about replacing the culverts under Alvarado Road with a bridge, allowing full access to Clear Creek with out portaging.

"Clear Creek is a rambunctious river that provides a lot of excitement per mile," says David Costlow, owner of Mad River Adventures. "It's pretty continuous whitewater."

The 75-feet-per-mile overall vertical drop makes Clear Creek steep compared to the Arkansas's average of 35-feet-per-mile or the lower Colorado River's 8-feet-per-mile. But because the creek is only fed by runoff, the season is short, from May to the beginning of August in wet years.

Despite operating at the whim of Mother Nature, raft companies are able to offer beginner, intermediate and half- and full-day advanced trips throughout the season, from Lawson to Clear Creek Canyon. Visitors to the county can also expand their experiences with adventure packages that combine a Mile Hi raft trip with a ride on the Georgetown Loop narrow gauge railroad or a horseback trip with A&A Historical Trails Stables in Idaho Springs.

Clear Creek does one-sixth the amount of business as the six-times larger reservoir-fed Arkansas River, but only 30 miles from Denver this little gem makes for fun day trips or weekend getaways.*

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