

Annie Balthazar: 2023- Three Forks, Mt to confluence with the Mississippi River near St. Louis

A short BIO— Where from, what ya do, where educated, how you got into paddling or what got you into doing this trip? *I was born outside of Chicago, grew up in Coral Gables Florida; moved to West Virginia in high school when my grandmother and aunt were ill. Spent my entire summers on the Tygart Valley River in West Virginia at our family camp, “Glenburnie”- built by my Scottish grandfather- a physician who served for the British Royal Army in WWI. I was dropped into the river, at 12 months of age, out of our old aluminum Grumman canoe by my cousin because I was crying. I came up swimming with big, wide, brown eyes. I became the “little river otter” and began spending every waking moment in, and eventually on, the river. My earliest memory is solo-paddling the Grumman when I was three years old. I was told the wooden paddle weighed as much as I did! I have been paddling ever since. I have a Masters degree in Anesthesia and served as a medical officer in the United States Air Force. I retired early. I paddled the Mississippi River in 2015 to “paddle the War out of my system” The journey restored my faith in humanity. After 8 years, my heart was becoming misaligned with my actions- I felt drawn to another solo voyage. I was feeling restless and discontent like something was missing. I needed space to get wild & dirty and to re-learn vital earth-based lessons about myself. What better way to do that? Head to Montana & paddle the historic Muddy Mo.*

#1: What was the most difficult part about your paddle trip and how did you overcome (if you did overcome) the situation? *I was surprised that the Isolation became really difficult for me- I was not expecting that. To overcome this, I journaled everyday, FaceTimed with family frequently, and said “Yes, thank you” to most offers to get off the river with River Angels.*

#2 What do you feel was the most important thing that you planned for on your trip that you actually benefited from? *Even though I knew I had no control over the weather, I planned for how I would honor Mother Nature in all of her beauty and fierceness. I had a basecamp,-style, low-profile, sturdy tent for protection; Gortex rain-gear; I studied cloud patterns; I became comfortable with the Windy app and followed the principles of Fetch on the large reservoirs. And I always had a “plan B” to get off the water safely.*

#3 Was there anything that you planned for then you felt was unnecessary or overdone? Explain.

I planned for needing boat repairs and carried a lot of replacement and repair parts for my Kruger SeaWind #56. She was a tank and could have taken even more of a beating. Every part of her held up beautifully.

#4 What were the 5-most important pieces of gear you carried on the trip? Explain. Excluding my boat, paddle, Astral fisherman PFD, and Simms quick dry clothing

1. Hilleberg tent- a few pounds heavier than my others, but it was a safe, fortress tested to withstand the harshest of weather conditions. 2. Gaia app on I-phone- I knew where I was at all times, what direction I was heading, and what services were close & available to me. 3. Rope & stakes for boat- 25ft lengths and ready to go for a quick securing when needed with changes in weather. I was not going to lose my boat! 4. Water bladders (not hard containers) 20L & 10L. 5. 5-gallon bucket kept my kitchen small and portable and could use for water filtering if needed.

#5 Prior to your trip, what was your weakest asset or least skilled or qualified trait for the trip and how do you overcome this? *Reading the skies and predicting weather. I read and watched many videos and listened to many MoRP members, local paddlers, and fishermen.*

#6 What was the least important item(s) that you brought and discovered there was never a need for? *There were several items I didn't use, but gave me peace of mind having....machete, bear banger, bear spray, ferro rod & fire starting supplies, Native American flute (sent home- too tired to play music* @&@^#%#^)*

#7: What was the biggest surprise of the journey? Something you did not anticipate. *How wildly challenging the reservoirs were. I knew they were big and would require endurance and resilience, but also a greater-than-average skill-set and attention to detail. And, how much I enjoyed paddling sections with other people- that usually isn't the case for me.*

#8 What kind of boat did you paddle and what were its good qualities and also the things you did not like about it?

Kruger SeaWind #56. It was designed for big water & wind and she saved my ass on several occasions- held lots of gear; 14 layers of kevlar made her bullet proof; rudder allowed for effortless maneuvering and single blade paddling. Not much I didn't like about her- she was larger and heavier than my other boats and more difficult to load during portages. I also could not stand up in her which prevented me from peeing in a clean fashion!!

#9: How did you plan your meals/food? Did this system work good for you and what would you change regarding this?

I went with high protein items, mostly dehydrated meals by Stowaway Gourmet and Next Mile, keto tortillas and honey/almond butter, and grass-fed beef sticks (thanks to my river sister, Ann Ogg) I drank Spiz meal replacement drinks in the morning and midday. The powder was heavy, but worth it- easy to mix and provided energy & prevented muscle wasting. Would stock up on fresh fruit & veggies when off the river. I also took my daily supplements every morning- BCAA's (branched chain amino acids), Beyond Greens powder, and Emerg C powder. You are what you eat & drink. The older one gets the harder it becomes to maintain strength. I also used Nuun electrolyte tablets. Physically I felt great overall, minus a butt cramp here and there & a broken toe!

#10 What was your system for obtaining drinking water and what were the benefits as well as the disadvantages you had dealing with water.

I carried more water than probably necessary - 30 L . I like my pee to be clear and dehydration is a showstopper for this woman. I carried a small platypus filter (would use 5 gallon bucket to allow sediment to settle before filtering) and a Grayl water bottle. I refreshed and topped off whenever it was convenient. My waypoints all indicated whether water was available or not. I never had to filter river water.

#11: What was your strategy for getting across the large reservoirs, including dealing with bad weather?

I knew I was going to push myself on the reservoirs. I knew the direction and length of each reservoir and marked where the access ramps were. I started early at sunrise and would paddle late, often stopping for dinner and waiting for the winds to die down, though they often never did. My biggest strategy was to be aware of the Fetch- the effect wind has on water, causing wind waves, which increase in height with increasing distance of wind traveling across the water. I checked the Windy app frequently. Paddled in waters closest to the direction the wind was originating. I planned ,according to the weather , where to camp to make for an easier launch in the mornings.

#12: If you were going to give advice for someone planning the same journey, what do you feel would be the best advice and things to consider that you now know about this journey?

Tough question, as we all are very different yet the same in many ways. I guess I would give the advice I gave myself- get strong mentally & physically, be comfortable with asking for help and being humble; test the comfort and safety in your craft- I would not consider a boat without a rudder, though many paddlers have gone without- blows my mind. Believe it when you hear of the saying, “ Unless you allow the “trip to take you”, the Missouri River will hammer you.” Dave Miller refers to this. Avoid full reservoir crossings if possible, choosing the most direct and shortest route and best weather conditions to do so.

#13: Something about your personality that helped you succeed, whether it being a personal belief, lifestyle, family upbringing, mental state or learned quality?

I have a faith in a Spirit much greater than myself. I am resilient and deliberate, humble, thrive on Earth-based wisdom, a minimalist, and I like to get dirty! Not sure if it helped me succeed, but I consider myself compassionate, calm, creative, curious, confident, courageous, clear-headed, and connected. Wowza!!!

#14: Worst moment of the journey?

My worst moment turned out to be my best, in retrospect. I became disoriented and confused on Sir Frances Case reservoirhot temps, but water like glass, blue skies, and only a slight breeze. I was seeing mirages and the water seemed never-ending, lots of submerged sandbars and technically challenging paddling in sections. I closed my eyes, at a standstill in the middle of the river. When I opened them, I didn't know which direction to go without referring to my gps. I broke into tears, shaking, and asking myself, “ What the fuck were you thinking, Annie???” I had hit “the wall” many long-distance adventurers speak of. I pulled off the water, drank, peed, recharged my cool cloth and called Cheryl Pruett in Platte, SD.

She was ready to get me that evening, but I wished to make camp and get my shit together (metaphorically speaking) I slept great that night, knowing I would be picked up the following morning a few miles down river. I spent two days with her, never once feeling judged for having a meltdown - a moment which actually allowed my heart to receive help and kindness. I am forever grateful for Cheryl's understanding and support. I had an epiphany while staying with Cheryl and Roger on their sacred homestead. I am still not sure what transpired on SFC, but I am glad it did. I paddled on knowing I was going to complete this journey, happily & without a doubt.

#15: High tech Gear– Did you bring solar or computer/ gps/ inReach type of gear and what strategy did you use for it?

Zoleo satellite communicator- rugged, simple, affordable, & seamless communicator, SOS device. I did not wish to be “tracked” but I could provide my location at anytime to any phone contact. Goal Zero 100ac power bank with small solar panels- I never had to plan stops for recharging. Could have remained off-grid indefinitely. Gaia app- can't say enough about it. Used it on the Mississippi too.

#16: Did you modify any gear to help in the safety or efficiency of your trip? (A rudder, Spray cover, sail, pontoon etc?)

My boat was equipped with a rudder and sprayskirt. I added a back support to my bucket seat and a gel pad. An air pad would have worked well too. I tried ways of peeing in my boat, but unfortunately never mastered that skill!! Really inconvenient and dangerous at times to get off the reservoirs to pee. Those female devices seem to only work for me standing up. I have heard of female racers using sponges. I also had Watershed bow and stern inflatable gear bags for buoyancy and water displacement if I swam (which never occurred!)

#17: How did you determine where to camp and did you have a specific place that you preferred such as secluded as not to be seen by others?

The weather determined where and when I would camp. I preferred stealth sites unless I happened to be with another paddler, public campgrounds were okay. My boat was heavy so I liked to stay close to it and camp on the banks at safe elevations.

#18: What was your typical meal plan/food and snacks? (Did you resupply, and how?)

High protein, dehydrated meals, ice cream any chance I got. Resupply boxes were sent every 800 miles to river angels at Tobacco Gardens, ND, Oahe Tailwaters, SD, and Omaha, NE.

#19: An interesting unknown fact that may surprise someone and/or has nothing to do with the trip? (This may include an accomplishment, hobby, former job or experience?)

I have dual-citizenship in the United Kingdom, with Scotland being my ancestral homeland. Scotland has approximately 900 offshore islands. I hope to paddle many of those ancient waters in the future. When I die, it is my hope that my ashes will be divided among the Scottish Highlands, the Tygart Valley River in West Virginia, the Mississippi Headwaters in Minnesota, and on the Missouri River in Montana!!