

Ellen “Magellan” Falterman

Bio: In the summer of 2017, Ellen completed a solo descent of the Missouri from Three Forks to St. Louis at the age of 22. No stranger to adventure travel, Ellen previously had paddled in an Amazon tributary and cycle toured from England to Greece. She is a flight instructor, and hails from rural Texas. Ellen is the youngest woman to solo paddle the Missouri river from Three Forks, Mt to St. Louis. She wrote a wonderful blog about her adventure which can be found at: <https://paddleabout.wordpress.com/2017/06/11/first-blog-post/>



#1: What was the most difficult part about your paddle trip and how did you overcome (if you did) the situation?

“The wind conditions on the reservoirs and the ensuing swells they created were without a doubt the most difficult part for me.”

Physically, they were daunting paddles, but the mental strain that came with the physical challenge was an equal contender. Even if you have a paddling partner, you are very alone. Even in lakes that are in more populated areas like Lake Francis Case the fact is you are still in a large body of water in a very small boat. You are not very visible, and if you flipped the odds that somebody actually saw you are very slim. You must assume you are alone, make your own judgements and snap decisions, and grit through the grit. Stay close to shore. Don't underestimate the weather, it is bigger than you. Whitecaps are a good sign that you should get off the water. Sit it out, even if it takes days. As we say in the pilot world: "It's better to be on the ground and wish you were in the air, then be in the air and wish you were on the ground." So, it's better to be on the shore and wish you were on the water then be on the water and wish you were on the shore.

Take a break, enjoy the view. You'll get there eventually."

#2: What did you feel was the most important thing that you planned for on your trip that you actually benefited from?

"I didn't do a lot of planning beforehand. I planned for maybe six weeks and did minimal research. However, this was not my first long distance self-propelled trip, so if this is your first one, maybe a little more planning would be in order. I tend to fly by the seat of my pants a little and let the chips fall where they may. I did enough planning to know roughly how long it would take and what time of year the weather would be best for me. I did most of my planning during the trip, relying on Dave Miller's book to plan a few days ahead as I journeyed."

#3: What was the 5-most important pieces of gear you carried on the trip? Explain.

"Excluding boat, paddle, and PFD? In no particular order:

1. The Complete Paddler, Dave Miller

If Dave's book didn't have maps in it, I wouldn't be pushing it as much. As I went, I tore the maps out, put them in a clear waterproof casing, and displayed them in my dashboard area every day. It might be noted that I did not have a GPS. It is feasible to do this trip without maps entirely, because it is a river and you just...follow it. But the mile markers on his maps were tremendously helpful, as well as the simple clarity of the black line of the river or jagged shoreline of a lake. Speaking of maps, a large whiskey compass that strapped to the dashboard area was also very helpful.

2. Cell phone

Very crucial in helping river angels help me. Lifeproof case all the way. An accompanying solar charger is also a good idea.

3. SPOT Tracker

I never needed the tracker. It was good for my family and friends to have peace of mind and see that I was safe every night, but I definitely hit the OK button at camp every evening for them. I didn't particularly enjoy being followed by an eye in the sky, but I realize I was a 22-year-old woman travelling alone. The SPOT tracker was me being kind to my parents. I list it here because it very well could have saved my life had I gotten into a situation. If I had broken an arm when I flipped on Fort Peck Lake, how would I paddle to get help? I hadn't seen a boat all day, or the day before...how many days would I have to wait for a boat to pass? Would they even see me? Your life is worth the extra couple hundred bucks, even if you never use the SOS button.

4. Trangia camp stove

I believe the ability to cook is necessary and essential. You can certainly light a fire every night to cook, if you're willing. I see lots of propane camp stoves out there, but take a look at the Trangia. It runs off of alcohol, anything above about 92% should do the trick, but what I found works best is denatured alcohol, also labeled as 'marine stove fuel.' You can find it at hardware stores either in the camping section or the paint section. The stove is lightweight, and has a nesting doll system that contains two pots, a pan, and a small kettle that all fits inside the holder for the burner. The burner is a small container that you fill and light. I can boil water in less than 10 minutes. Pasta takes about 15 minutes, and rice 20-25 minutes. A half-gallon of denatured alcohol lasts me about 2 weeks, and I cooked nearly every night. I brought this stove with me for 4 months on a cycle tour, the thing held up just fine for another 3 months on the river, and it is the cooking stove I use in my van today. It was about \$40.

5.

Hammock, including the sleeping setup of sleeping bag and tarp with cord for rain.

I did not have my hammock for the first few weeks, which was a mistake. I later had a friend mail it to me. When I did not have my hammock, I had a 2-person tent for shelter. I liked having two options, especially on sections of the river where trees were scarce. (More on the reservoirs than the river, actually) I prefer hammock to tent for lots of reasons. I am more comfortable and just sleep better. It might seem weird to sleep the entire night in a hammock, but many people, especially in third world countries, sleep exclusively in hammocks. If you are a tall person, that is not an excuse. There are positions. I also really like the ease of setup and takedown for a

hammock. Dealing with tent shenanigans every single night and every single morning is a drag once your eyes have been opened to the ease of the hammock. I also like that it takes up minimal space for maximum shelter. Look up how to set up the tarp with cords for rain.”



#4: Prior to your trip, what was your weakest asset or least skilled or qualified trait for the trip and how did you overcome this?

“The fact that I had minimal kayaking experience, I would say. I did go out on my local waterways in Austin and flipped the boat, learned how to eject

and do a water re-entry, etc. I have a healthy respect for water; this trip was not a death wish. I didn’t train beforehand to arrive at the headwaters strong and fit. I trained to arrive safe and smart. The strength would come later.”

#5: What was the least important items(s) that you brought and discovered there was never a need for?

“I ended up with some extra cold weather paddling gear that was never used. They didn’t weigh much, and I wasn’t too concerned about space. The kayak had more than enough room for me, since I was anticipating a much smaller total storage capacity.

Might have overdone it a little with the first aid kit, but I just don’t mess around when it comes to keeping your health. Without your body, you’ve got no cards left to play.

My fishing pole and small tackle box did actually come in handy, by the way. Come on y’all, you’re on a river. Toss a line, even if it’s just for kicks. It’s something to do.”

#6: What was the biggest surprise of the journey? Something you did not anticipate.

“I didn’t anticipate anything. I went in with a clear head, a trust in my gear, and knowing I did the best I could. The rest was up to the river. Everything was a new surprise, and I just fell into the pattern of living and surviving as I would have in any other new environment.”

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

“I paddled in an Epic 18 foot kayak. I did not choose the boat; it was a loaner from an expedition paddler friend of mine. Since I had no kayak experience prior to the trip, I had nothing to compare it to. I had never paddled any other kayak before.

The bad things:

It’s a narrow craft, for one. Again, I had no reference, so I thought all kayaks were this wobbly, and just kind of adapted to the best of my abilities. Fortunately, I have a good core and a healthy sense of balance so even in my inexperience I was able to keep the dry side up on all but on one very windy and choppy occasion.

I will mention the minimal storage space, even though it wasn’t a big problem for me in particular, being a pretty light traveler. Just be aware if you use this craft, you might have to get creative with your packing or cut things out entirely. Keep above deck storage to a minimum. This boat will get very unsteady if you have too much weight on top. Think slim and trim in this thing.

The good things: It is a very, very nice boat. I am fortunate that I have good friends that trust me with expensive things. The length of the boat is an asset. 18 feet is a lot, but that allowed it to take waves like a champ once I learned how to move with the kayak and not in the kayak. It is also very fast, and cuts through the water like a dream. The rudder tucks up when not in use, and has a spring that allows the rudder to retract if caught in shallow water and other obstructions, which was handy.”

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

“I didn’t do much ‘planning’ for my food, really. I just figured it out the way I would have any other long-distance trip. So, I figure out how long it would be until the next grocery store opportunity, buy accordingly, always keep track of how much food I have left in days. Never did I have to ration myself and always had a full warm meal every night.”

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

“My water situation was all over the place, not only because I figured it out as I went, but also because I adapt my load based on the situation. I carried potable water in containers as well as

a hand pump. My potable water load varied from about 2 gallons to as much as 8. I never ran out, and only used the filter to make water for pasta or rice or soup or whatever. Start with your options open and find what works for you.”

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



“You know yourself better than anybody else. When researching and reading other people’s accounts and advice, remind yourself that we are all different people travelling at different speeds with different needs and viewpoints and backgrounds and way of living. Absorb the information, take it within you, and find your own way on your trip on our river.”

#11 Words or philosophy to live by.

“Trust the Trip Gods “ -----Ellen Falterman-

