



Mark Fingerhut:

Over 96 days during the summer of his 39th year on planet Earth, Mark Fingerhut paddled the Madison, Missouri and Mississippi Rivers 2,456 miles from West Yellowstone, MT to St. Louis. A lifelong St. Louisan, Mark recognizes the importance of our great rivers not only in our history, but to our continued success as a country. When Mark isn't running with his local drinking/running club, you can find Mark on or near the beautiful rivers and streams around Missouri.

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

Luckily, there wasn't anything too challenging during my trip. With a start in mid-May on the Madison River at West Yellowstone, the first week had some pretty cold and rainy days. I could have better prepared for those conditions with cold-weather gear. As I paddled from Toston Dam to Hauser Dam, I had the pleasure of staying with MR paddler and River Angel Jim Emanuel and his wife Vicki for 3 nights. It was incredible to be tucked in a warm bed and listening to the freezing cold rain on the roof at night. On some of the big lakes, there were a few rough storms that blew through overnight, but I was able to hunker down in my tent and ride them out.

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

With limited storage available in my kayak, packing food was a big concern in trip planning. The Christmas before my trip, my wife and I gifted each other a food dehydrator. I spent 4 months dehydrating all kinds of food to prep for my trip. Meals, snacks, jerky, all kinds of stuff. At any given time during my trip, I had around a week to two weeks worth of food. Then my wife would send re-supply packages to designated marinas or post offices along the way.

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

- *Golf umbrella: shade on hot days, cover from the rain, and a pop-up sail on windy days*
- *Garmin Inreach Explorer+ (paired with Earthmate app on my phone): real time map updates for me and for those following me and unlimited texting*
- *Bluetooth speaker: podcasts and music on long boring days*

- *Camp chair: nothing better after a long day then sitting back, sipping whiskey and watching the river*
- *3ft nylon sling/runner: originally thought I'd use this as a step for remounting the boat, but ended up using it to (a) distribute the weight when pulling/portaging my boat and (b) running through my gear and drybags to haul everything all at once easily when having to camp further from my boat. Lifesaver!*

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

Rough water paddling. I hardly have any whitewater or open ocean experience, so I figured there might be times where I am in some rough water. With a wooden kayak, I conservatively portaged around some rough rapid stretches on the Madison River and below Great Falls. On the bigger lakes, it was a bit of a quick learning experience when the waves and winds started rising. Luckily, having a 20 ft long boat helped with rolling over some big wave days. There were times of discomfort making 4 to 5 mile open water crossings on Fort Peck Lake, but I just hunkered down and powered through. I managed to keep the boat upright through the entire trip, but I do plan to further develop my kayak rolling techniques.

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

Possibly binoculars, just didn't use them very much. I did bring a small tarp that didn't get used. I had a harmonica that I only used once or twice, even though I had dreams of becoming a mouth organ master during the trip.

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

It would probably be the generosity of strangers along the way. I expected people would help me out here and there, but I didn't expect the kind of hospitality I experienced. The Emanuels in Helena, Peggy at Tobacco Gardens, the Norders in Mobridge, SD, the Kuhls in Pierre, and other wonderful river angels along the way. It wasn't the only food, drinks or comfortable places to stay as it was the encouragement and support for such a long journey they provided. I was treated like a member of their families and that really warmed my soul so far from home. I was also pleasantly surprised to cross paths with past MO River paddler Scott Hite in Chamberlain, SD as he biked across the country raising money and awareness for waitone.org.

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

*Custom built, cedar strip 20 ft sea kayak – named the **MOstar**. Built especially for my trip by Shane Camden of Timber Longboard Co. and Paddle Stop New Haven. I had a hand in the design decisions. It was a spectacular boat for this trip. It handled the rough wave days with ease. It was a very fast and stable vessel while still allowing me to store a pretty good amount of gear. A rudder*

was an absolutely necessity to navigate the rivers currents as well as keeping the boat pointed the right way in big waves. The only (small) downside to the boat was that the back hatch sat flat on the deck of the boat and tended to take on a little bit of water when waves broke over the boat. A few times I had to stop and bail a little bit of water when the boat started getting heavy.

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

See above regarding food dehydrating. The only thing I would have done differently is larger portions. Paddling 8 to 10 hours a days burns a ton of calories, and my dehydrated meals didn't quite keep up. Later on during the trip, when I knew I had enough food supply to finish, I started eating two meals a night. I enjoyed hot meals and cold beers at pretty much every town or marina I came across along the way. Even so, I got back to St. Louis down 25 pounds, a diet plan I'd recommend to absolutely anyone.

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

I started the trip with a 4L reservoir and a couple 1L bottles. I didn't consume a ton of water for the early part of the trip when it was still pretty cold. Knowing water sources would be scarce below Great Falls due to the winter/flooding damage to campsites and water pumps, I picked up a 5 gallon collapsible tank at Wal-Mart. The only time I got close to running out of water was when I arrived at James Kipp and water pumps were wiped out by ice flows. Luckily, a couple outfitters finishing up a 3 day trip through the Breaks gladly gave me what they had left. My daily water plan was two 1L bottles in my cockpit, usually stopping in the afternoon to refill those from one of my reservoirs. I had purification tablets packed for emergencies, but never had to use them.

#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?

My #1 piece of advice for anyone considering the trip: Get out there and do it. In the lead up to the trip, I asked myself many times if I was ready, could I handle it, would I succeed, etc. Those questions don't get answered until you are out there doing it. There will always be things in your life that are there and that could be used as an excuse to not do something epic. Toss those things aside for a bit, people who love you will support you. Strangers will become lifelong friends. The people you meet and the places you see along the way will contribute to your story and who you become after your journey.

In terms of specific advice around the trip itself, head on over to <https://paddlestlouis.com/> and have a look.

#11 Worst weather day? What happened?

Probably the third or 4th day on Fort Peck Lake. It was a sunny day but the wind picked up quickly. The waves weren't any bigger than they were on other days during the trip, but due to how the waves were coming out of the coves and bouncing off the shoreline, I couldn't get a consistent

read on the direction the waves were coming from. There were a few tense moments before I decided to pull over. I climbed a nearby lookout point and enjoyed the windy day from a few hundred feet above the lake. I managed to get a bit of cell service for the first time in a few days up there as well. Later in the afternoon the wind died down and I made a few more miles. I endured a wild overnight storm on Lake Oahe, about 90 minutes of nonstop thunder and lightning, huddling in my tent and keeping it standing up, as well as peaking out to see if my kayak was still tied to a tree bending in the wind. Scott Hite and I were also rudely awakened by tornado sirens early one morning in Chamberlain, SD. We rode it out with RVers in the bathroom building at American Creek campground.

#12: Biggest source of inspiration?

*Certainly Dave Miller's *The Complete Paddler* had me daydreaming about seeing the sights and places Dave describes so richly in his book. Following the trips of previous adventurers on the MO River Paddlers Facebook group was a big inspiration. Numerous hours studying the river in Google maps. And what may have pushed me over the hump to actually pull the trigger on doing the trip was the documentary *Blackwater Drifters: Journey to the Gulf*. Leading up to and during my trip, I raised money for Missouri River Relief, a wonderful Missouri-based organization that connects people to the river through river cleanups and educational programs. What MRR does is so important for the health of our waterways and they continue to inspire me to do what I can to help further their mission and introduce people to our wonderful river resources.*

#13: Something nobody really knows about you? (Hobby, skill, previous job, talent?)

Hmmm. Before the past few years, I had probably been to more foreign countries than I had states in the U.S. I studied abroad in Madrid, Spain in college and I was lucky enough to teach English in Japan for 3 years after college. There I had the chance to travel all over Asia and Oceania. In my life as a Software guy, I lived in Hong Kong for 6 months and had the chance to take boring business trips around the US. This trip allowed me to see a ton more of the US in a unique and slower-paced perspective. Mark Fingerhut