

Bio - Shane Westen

I grew up in a small town in Central Illinois. As an adult I served as an Infantry Officer in the National Guard and worked in agriculture before choosing a career change that brought me back to the same high school I graduated from—this time as the PE teacher.

Now I'm a teacher who chases adventure and tries to inspire students through stories of grit, sport, and personal challenge.

Kayaked the Mississippi River in 2013–14, kayaked the Missouri River in 2025, hiked the River to River Trail in Illinois (2024) and the southern 800 miles of the Appalachian Trail (2021). I've also cycled cross-country: Santa Monica to Chicago via Old Route 66 (2021), then Chicago to New York City (2024).

#1 What was the inspiration or what sparked this journey, and how did you begin planning for it?

In high school I wanted to canoe the Mississippi River and would daydream about it for a long time. I built a romance with a long distance adventure. It took me a long time to get there to do it, a few years later the itch for adventure returned and never went away and the MO was added to the list of adventures to take!

My planning was minimal. I took a spreadsheet from Dan Faust's blog and added to it and I made a google map with mileage, camp sites, places to resupply water and grocery, and things that might be handy to know.

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

I have done some long adventures before so I know I did not plan the best. It took me more time to find the boat because I knew I wanted a Hobie revolution 16 and it was discontinued. The map was nice to have when I knew where the next water refill was at.

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

I put a lot of time into adding to the spreadsheet and I did not use it after a couple weeks out. When I would look at the map I was glad the spreadsheet was made back home. My lack of actually preparing for the trip added to me not overdoing much in the prep phase for this adventure. I didn't really start lining supplies up until a couple weeks before the departure date, this is the least prepared for an adventure I have had.

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

Boat- I wanted the Hobie revolution because it was longer and more narrow than the model I took down the Mississippi River. I wanted it to have the nicer seat in it because I knew how long I would be sitting and I wanted the foot drive because I would be able to do things with my hands in the boat while I was making miles.

Tent- this is your home while you are out, make sure it is quality and will hold up to the elements. I had a Big Agnes- Fly Creek- Bike Packer. This tent has been with me across the country on bike and held up well. Even though it had some age to it in thought it would hold up to the weather.

Phone, Jackery battery, and solar panel.- to keep your electronics dry you need them to do their job.. The battery and solar did its job. I did run into issues towards the end because it would come unplugged when I was on the water. It would have been an easy fix if I would have prepped better.

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

On the Mississippi river I did not handle the solitude that great. On this trip I was ready for it and knew what to expect for being in solitude for so long. The alone time only got to me on day 30ish when I was wind bound on Lake Sakakawea.

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

I brought fishing stuff and never used it, this also happened on the Mississippi. I had not spent much time in my boat before I left. I bought the outriggers with me and I used them the first weekish and then packed them away. I could have cut some of my gear down if I would have packed with more detail then a quick throw together. I will remember this for the next one!

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

I knew the lakes were huge, but I underestimated just how vast they really are—massive stretches of water with no current. It felt like paddling across inland oceans, not a river.

On these adventures, you expect random things to happen, but that's part of the draw. Surprises only happen when you're out there. When you start an adventure, you're committed to the whole experience until you tap out.

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

Hobie Revolution 16. I wanted it because it was longer and more narrow than my Hobie Outback, the features it has that I enjoy, had a removable seat that was more comfortable than the older models, it was pedal drive( I wanted to be able to use my hands when moving) it had plenty of storage for gear. It had a sail kit, so I left it at home.

The biggest problem with Hobie boats is they are heavy.... 86 lbs you earn your portages for sure. I did bring an extra wheel set so I did not need to balance the boat when I was walking it. I only used the second wheel kit a few times

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

I did meals that all I needed to do was boil water and add to the freezer back, ramen bombs and oatmeal. Meat ( spam and tuna creations) and tortillas. After some resupplies I went more on the "canned" meat then getting heavy on PB and J tortilla, sausages, and poptarts. I only ate when I was stopped besides some snacks in the boat, my crappy diet and pace would explain the weight loss during the trip.

#10 What was your system for obtaining drinking water and what were the benefits as well as the disadvantages you had dealing with water. How much water did you carry when you left Ft. Benton, since this section is the greatest distance between fresh water sources?

I had my Sawyer Filter with me and never needed to use it. I carried 3 one gallon water jugs with me and 2 water bottles with me. I did get nervous during this stretch because of all the chatter of how much water you needed to carry and I had half of what the low end was. I drank rain water one morning from my rain fly and the same morning tried to leave my dry bag so it would catch some for me and it just got my stuff inside the bag wet. I finished this stretch with a little more than a half gallon left. That was the only time on the trip I was below a gallon of water with me. Most of the time I carried 2 gallons.

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

Pay attention- be aware of what the wind and weather forecast is. Be prepared to stop and bunker down. Make your camps accordingly and try not have them overly exposed if there is a threat of poor weather.

#12: Did you do trip updates for a website or social media? Was this worth your time and are there any tips on how to do this from the river?

I posted about every other day or so on Facebook and Instagram- I felt it was worth my time because it gives a look to my friends and family of what these adventures are like- even if the camera doesn't do it justice sometimes. I think it is fun to hear when people say they were following along or when they say they show their kids the trip. I also think it is funny to hear people complain about how I have the time for the trips and the "must be nice" / "i could do it too" comments.

I have taken a camera with me on most trips but this is the first one where I was set that I was going to edit the footage out and put it online. Not that it is good or anything. I found it was nice for me to relive the trip and it gave me more closure to the adventure than actually finishing it 5 months ago. Going back to the day to day after this trip was the most difficult out of all my adventures.

[www.youtube.com/@shanewesten](http://www.youtube.com/@shanewesten) - Shameless plug, subscribe to my channel so I can someday make a few bucks and lead to plenty more of these types of adventures.

#13: Did you use solar power to recharge any equipment? If so, what system did you use and any tips on using it out on the river?

Jackery Explorer 100 Plus Portable Power Station  
Jackery SolarSaga 40W Mini Solar Panel

Near the end of the trip the cord would come unplugged when I was traveling so I was not making power during the day. This would have been easily fixed with an extra cord between the plug from the panel and the battery itself. A shake down weekend would have pointed this out to me, my lack of a timely preparation did this, but it was able to get the job done and did not cost me any time or days down.

#14: 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?

If you're serious about doing it, start making it happen now. Dreams like this get harder, not easier, as time goes on. You'll never regret trying—success or failure—but you will regret never going. Years down the road it's easier to live with "I tried" than with "I always wanted to or I wish I would have"

Ask people questions and selectively listen to what people tell you. There are many ways to do the trip and hundreds of types of gear. Many people who have never done it will tell you how to do it and people who have done it will say this is the only way. Get the gear that works for you and matches the type of adventure you want to have.

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

I grew up on a farm and my dad made me work pretty hard early in life and this grew a strong work ethic in me.

All boys like to play sports and I was short and skinny so if I wanted to be competitive I had to play hard all the time and could rely on being bigger, faster or stronger than the others I had to put in work.

The military is why I am comfortable being uncomfortable. I can deal with annoyances very well and on long distance adventures there are many annoyances and inconveniences.

I am starting to get used to these adventures and just like anything repetition/ practice makes the next time easier.

#16: Worst moment of the journey?

Before Great Falls when my Peddle Drive broke- Got it fixed in great falls after a few days, not that bad just annoying.

Day 30ish on Lake Sakakawea I was wind bound all day and I allowed myself to get in my own head and had a moment. I was lonely and wondering what I was doing out there, I missed my friends and family and I didn't want to bother anyone and call them in the middle of the day on a week day.

Lake Sharpe- Was a bear cat. It should have been 2-3 days and took me 4, windy, I kept breaking rudder lines, I almost stepped on a rattle snake in the morning when I was going to do my business. I was worn out and that lake gave me a fight!

#17: Did you use personal locator beacons such as SPOT or inReach? If so, how often and what was your strategy for using it and did you feel was necessary to have?

No. It would be nice but I don't feel the "need" to have it. The longest stretch without service was in the breaks.

They do have their place but I felt it wasn't for me on this trip. The SOS button would be nice in an emergency.

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

I did not modify any gear for this trip.