



come hell or high water

Two canoeists from Albuquerque are determined to circumvent the southern part of North America on the water

By Dave Menicucci For the Journal

Greg Kolb pointed to the tumultuous rapids below the San Acacia Dam on the Rio Grande south of Belen and said, "If our canoe ends up in those, we are dead." Doug Asher, Kolb's longtime canoeing partner, assuredly added, "But we are going to take-out there," indicating a sullen eddy about 70 yards upriver.

These two 50-somethings from Albuquerque were doing this section of the river as a prerequisite to their lifetime goal: to circumvent the southern part of North America on water. Remarkably, their journey begins at Eagle Nest Lake in Northern New Mexico, passes through New Orleans and the Panama Canal, traverses the Mexican coast to the Colorado and Gila rivers, ending at the Western New Mexico border, a total of 6,000 miles.

Leaving one vehicle at San Acacia, the two traveled together with their 17-foot Old Town canoe to Bernardo, about 11 miles to the north. That was the put-in for this day trip, on which I accompanied them.

Outfitting me with a state-of-the-art life vest, Greg instructed that I should avoid sudden side-to-side movements in the canoe's center position. Meanwhile, Doug was binding down gear. "You must assume that you'll turn over," he said, "so we tie it all in." The sheathed knives on their belts, they explained, were for cutting loose a passenger who is entangled with the gear in a swamped canoe.

We pushed off from the bank into the swift, muddy waters. As we ventured peacefully down the river, the trip was serendipitous. We took-out on islands to view wildlife and vegetation. We explored a half mile of inlets and canyons on the Rio Puerco, a tributary to the Rio Grande. Within a mile of our take-out, Doug declared "refreshment time," and we stripped down and swam the cool water.

But what had been an enticing six hours morphed into a test of skill for these premier canoeists. Approaching our San Acacia take-out, Greg noticed the water moving more swiftly than normal. Doug surmised that the movable dam had been opened, allowing water to flow through it instead of retarding it in order to supply the irrigation ditch. This reduced the water level upstream and increased its speed through the dam.

Our planned take-out, which earlier had water flowing just below the bank's surface, was now about 3 feet above us with a nearly vertical dropoff. We were moving quickly toward the lethal rapids.

Instantly, Greg and Doug turned the canoe into the flow, power-paddling against the current. Finally, Doug spied a live bush leaning over the bank. Carefully positioning the canoe, Doug grabbed the bush, scampered up the bank with the tie-line in hand, and pulled us to dry land.

A harrowing two minutes, ended safely. "We never panic," Greg said. "We think our way out."

Doug and Greg have been canoeing together since the early 1980s. Greg said that for the first six years they rented and tested various canoes in different New Mexico waters, ranging from Rio Grande calm to rigid rapids in the Gila. "We swamped a lot of boats and destroyed one," Doug said. "But we learned a lot." Together they purchased a canoe with a rounded hull, no keel, and modern fiber construction.

Their mission to navigate around the southern part of the continent began in 1992, during a trip to Doug's condominium near Eagle Nest Lake. They were intrigued that the Cimarron River, which flows out of the lake and into the Canadian River, is a Mississippi headwater. "We decided to be perhaps the first ones to canoe from Eagle Nest to New Orleans," Doug said.

Thus, the quest had begun.

After some investigation they discovered that some sections of the Canadian are permanently dry because dams divert the entire flow for irrigation. "It was discouraging," Greg said. "But after a government expert said it was 'impossible,' we had to do it."

They found that the normally dry sections of the river would occasionally run after large rains. Their plan, Greg said, was to paddle up to the dry areas, go home, "wait for rain, dash to the river, and ride the runoff downstream." This meant that they might paddle during adverse or winter conditions.

Knowing the journey to New Orleans was not achievable in a single trip, they planned to "do a section at a time," Doug said. "We'd put-in at our last take-out and continue downriver as far as time would allow."

To date Greg and Doug have paddled 800 miles along the Cimarron and Canadian rivers to near Oklahoma City. Waiting for rain-induced runoffs has added much time to the journey, but Greg declared that "the dry areas are nearly done."

They have logged numerous adventures along the way. "Runoffs bring debris," Doug said, including "millions of cow pies floating alongside the canoe on the Canadian."

Last year, with New Orleans in sight, their quest grew to world-class dimensions. "We wanted something challenging for our retirement years," Greg said. "So we extended our journey through Central America, and back to New Mexico."

Currently they expect to be in New Orleans by 2011, where they will launch a sailboat for Panama. Being accomplished ocean sailors, they will travel straight to the Panama Canal. From there they will "sail to the Colorado River delta," Doug said.

They are considering plans for the Colorado River. "The lower part is shallow," said Greg, "so we might need a swamp buggy," a light, raft-like river-craft powered by a fan.

Once they arrive at navigable waters on the middle Colorado and Gila Rivers, they will switch to a power boat to navigate upriver.

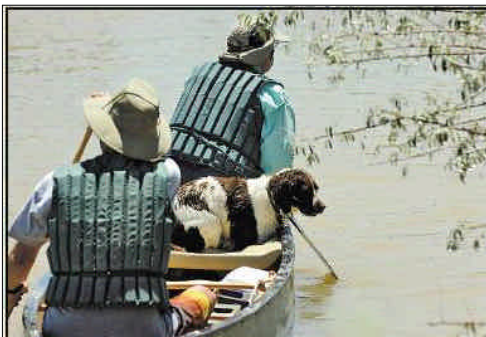
In 2016, these two old friends expect to arrive in New Mexico, their lifetime quest completed and memories of adventure indelibly ingrained. "That will be book-writing time," Greg said. **Want to canoe the Rio Grande?**

Here are some Class I trips (easy, OK for beginners).

1. Put-in below Algodones Dam, take-out at Bernalillo bridge. Can do be done year-round. Watch for abandoned bridge pilings near take-out. 2. Put-in at Bernalillo bridge, west side, take-out at Alameda bridge, east side. Best during spring runoff. Requires four to six hours. 3. Put-in at Alameda bridge below city's new irrigation dam, east side, and take-out at Central Avenue, west side. Springtime best. Watch for drop-off if above dam. Four to six hours. 4. Put-in below Elephant Butte dam and take-out either at Tor C, Caballo Dam or Hatch. Watch Class II rapids near the Butte. All-day or multiday trips. Inexperienced canoeists should consult local authorities about hazards. A good resource is the Bureau of Land Management, www.blm.gov/nm/st/en.html. Another resource is canoeists who have made the run.



ROBERTO E. ROSALES/JOURNAL Doug Asher, left, and Greg Kolb, with their dog "Hunter," paddle a canoe down the Rio Grande, near Bernalillo, as a part of a much longer quest.



Canoeists Greg Kolb and Doug Asher are aiming to travel to New Orleans by water.



ROBERTO E. ROSALES/ JOURNAL Albuquerqueans Greg Kolb and Doug Asher have been canoeing together for more than 20 years.