

Long Boats in Current

I joined seven other ISK members for a weekend course on the Menominee River on May 30-31, 2015. Ryan Rushton, BCU 5-Star paddler and ACA Level 5 Instructor taught the course, aided by his two assistants, Chris Martin and Haris Subacius. We camped in Morgan Park near the town of Niagara, Wisconsin. The put-in site was Pier's Gorge, south of Iron Mountain, Michigan, and a popular location for white water rafting trips.

The purpose of the course was to develop sea kayak handling skills in current and due to the heavy rains in the weeks leading up to the course, the Menominee River was flowing at higher than normal volumes and at places was at high Class III conditions. The speed, power and noise of the river were very intimidating and at times you felt very insignificant in its presence! This was not a lazy paddle and nobody was daydreaming on the water thinking about other things.

Ryan went over the basics before we got into the water and repeatedly (I mean repeatedly!) told us never to stand up if we came out of the boat because of the danger of entrapping a foot or leg in the strong current. To avoid entrapment we were told to float on our backs, feet pointed downriver, with our arms out to the sides.

We started paddling in a quiet section of the river and gradually got into the current. We would go from an eddy with current moving one direction, through the eddy line to current moving in the opposite direction. After some practice, we worked on ferry gliding or moving across the river and maintaining our desired line across fairly turbulent water. Later, some of us practiced moving into position on standing waves to practice surfing. Lastly, we played follow the leader, doing "S" turns in and out of current. There were many capsizes and rescues and it was a very, very tiring day.

The next day we drove further up river and put in at a new spot. This day turned out to be less tiring but much more exhilarating (scary!) than the day before. Ryan took us to an island where the river flowed rapidly around each side (Sand Falls). The island formed a constriction with a definite elevation drop on either side, flowing very rapidly, then opening into a vast turbulent area. He did a demo showing us how to negotiate the drop, aiming for a small eddy on one side. His assistant Haris did another demo and then we all had our own go at it, one at a time. Some made it while remaining upright and some did not! It was a wild ride and we continued down the river.

After lunch Ryan negotiated a major turbulent section with a significant drop and he pulled it off beautifully, paddling with grace and elegance. This was an area that the rest of us carried our boats around but it was fantastic to see him execute it. Instead, we had our own challenge getting our boats back into the water, getting in and peeling out into the main flow, shooting for a small target where the current on each side converged into a "V". It was very turbulent water and we were aiming for a quiet eddy on the far side downstream. More capsizes! We regrouped and found ourselves back where we put –in the day before. It now seemed so quiet in the area (because we had acclimated to the flow) that we almost didn't recognize it. The day was over and it was time to reflect on how far we had come in two days. It was a wonderful course and I'd recommend it to anyone wanting to improve their skills.