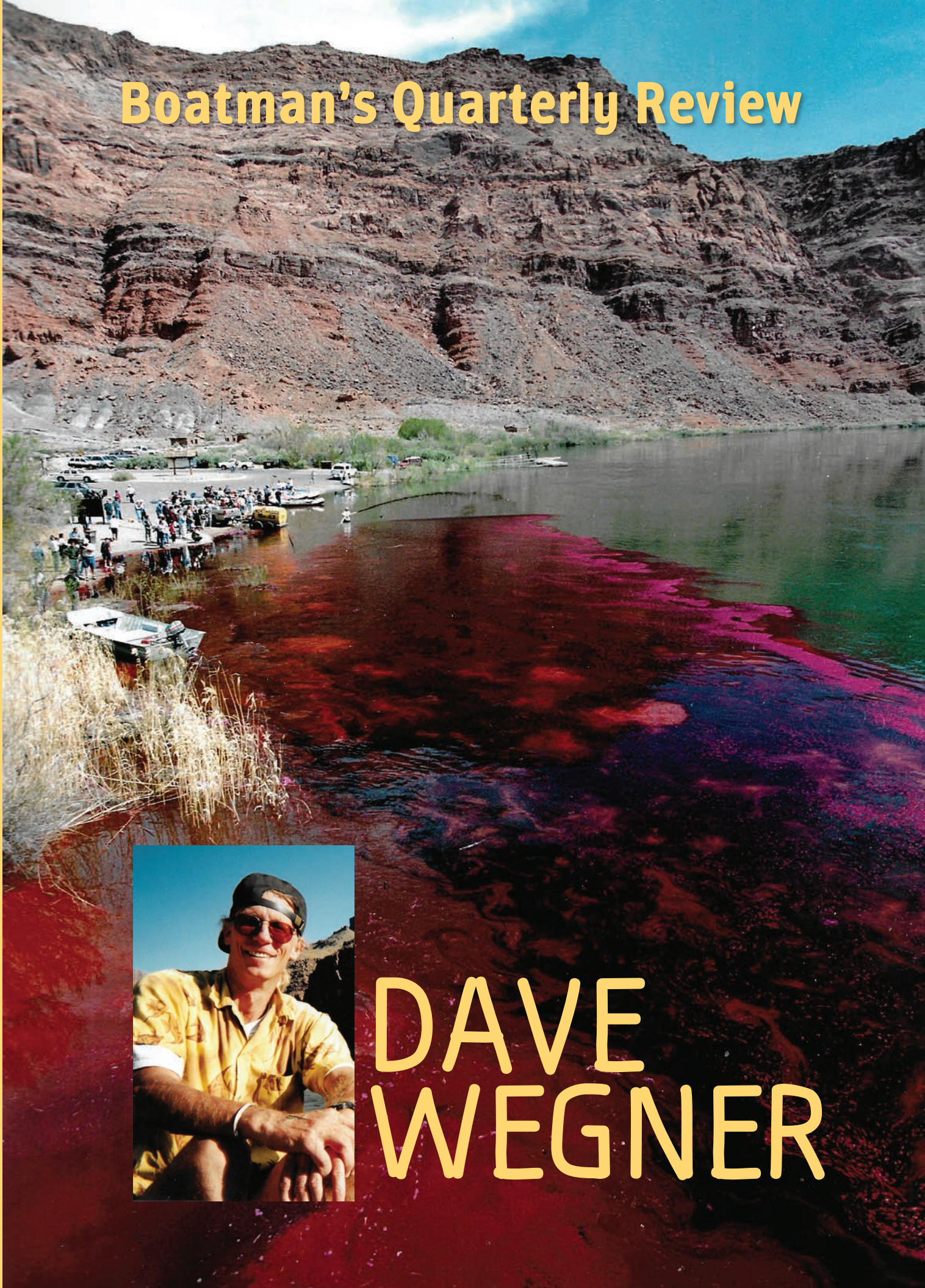


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The Meditation of Riverboarding during Covid-19

In early March of 2020 I was preparing to fly back to the United States via my home in South Africa. I was sitting in the glow of candlelight in a corner of my favorite hole-in-the-wall Indian restaurant in Cape Town when Uncle Jon looked up from his phone and announced that the first Covid-19 case had arrived on the continent via Nigeria. We spoke no more about the virus then, and instead I continued with trying to explain the concept of a riverboard and why I wanted to swim the Grand Canyon on one. Then a local DJ turned up West African beats and my uncle ordered another beer, mumbling in Afrikaans about me getting a real job.

Less than a month later, near the mouth of Pipe Creek, I found

out about the toilet paper shortage and the national shut down. I had nothing else to do but plunge back into the Colorado River, grateful that our group had sufficient TP. I went back to my immediate concerns of staying warm and sticking my lines with a leaky dry suit and mismatched flippers. But the news of the virus continued in whispers around camp from the people who had hiked in, and when it came time to run Crystal, we were all grateful for distraction and were reminded to stay present.

In general, I do not believe in the concept of conquering rivers, mountains or nature. I was definitely not the first, nor the fastest, to riverboard the Grand Canyon. Furthermore, I am leaving the last fifty miles incomplete out of respect

for the Canyon. My intention was to cultivate a deeper relationship with the thalweg and complex currents below the water's surface. I've always been fascinated by the concept of mind-over-matter when observing what's uncomfortable over long periods of time. I have been a student of Ashtanga Yoga for half my life, and I will never forget when one of my teachers in India revealed his opinion that Ashtanga students often have a slightly masochistic side. I considered this while doing upward dog seven hours a day on top of a riverboard in cold water for two weeks.

It's important for everyone to let themselves feel uncomfortable in nature every now and then. In the Yoga Sutras, written by Pantanjali

over 2,000 years ago, it is stated: “*Yogas chitta vritti nirodhah.*” This can be translated as, “Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind.” Some reach this state of *Pratyahara* (sense withdrawal) while seated in meditation, through *Pranayama* (breath control), painting, riding fast motorcycles, doing martial arts or while combining breath with movement throughout a *Yoga Asana* (posture) practice. You don’t have to do what that person is doing on the cover of *Yoga Journal* magazine in order to reach a state of Yoga. Even if you have never thought about it before, I bet most of you have been practicing Yoga when you approached the horizon line of large rapids.

Patanjali also describes the two pillars of Yoga: *Abhyasa* (practice), and *Vairagya* (nonattachment). I often remind students before class to consider “Nonattachment to the practice.” I have been reminded of this when I have been injured, finding myself suddenly unable to row or paddle a raft. It is a curious feeling as we age and learn that, like the river, we must ebb and flow with each new day, not defining ourselves by what we used to be able to do. And

thus, I thought of my personal goal to riverboard the Grand Canyon as a fifteen-day moving meditation. Going into the trip, I figured I’d see how things felt for the first two days and reconsider whether or not I wanted to swim for another thirteen days while holding onto a piece of foam.

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During my inaugural swiftwater rescue course, when I was seventeen, I was first exposed to the concept of riverboards. I recall being the only volunteer when our local canoe slalom champion, Alan Burgmuller, asked for a partner in his tandem whitewater canoe to run Montana’s Alberton Gorge during spring runoff at 38,000 CFS. Of course, I said yes. Probably with an exclamation point. Then, Alan calmly told me we were going to capsize just moments before our canoe flipped bow over stern as it entered the tightest section of the gorge. Aside from the canoe slapping my face, I loved being in the water. I loved the feeling of the currents below the surface and felt momentarily disappointed when Mike Johnston, co-founder of the Whitewater Rescue Institute, swam

up and placed me on the front of his Carlson riverboard. Until that moment, riverboards reminded me of dorky kickboards and the *mindless* laps we had swam in the chlorinated pool during grade school swim team practices. It would take me over two decades to realize the *mindfulness* a small piece of foam could teach.

Then I heard about three women who completed a self-support riverboarding expedition of the Grand Canyon in the dead of winter. The seed was planted, in the same way it had been when I was seventeen and had found out you could be paid to run rivers.

An opportunity to riverboard the Grand Canyon came to me in early 2020 when my company announced a fifteen-day training trip from Lees Ferry to Diamond Creek. This was perhaps the most luxurious way to attempt my swim, with boats carrying warm camp clothes, gear, food, firewood, toilets and rubbish. I knew well the advantage of being part of a team, and the comfort provided by the advancement of river gear in the 21st century. Our fleet of water craft was impressive, everything from hardshell kayaks and shredders to paddle rafts and handmade wooden



dories of varying sizes.

Yet, even the mere notion of peeling on and off frozen neoprene over a fortnight was excruciating. At Lees Ferry, with the weather forecast for cold and snow, I removed the tags from a new dry suit, which then stayed dry-ish for less than a week. The day before we launched, I had dug through bins of unsorted clothing at Goodwill in search of more wool, and happily paid for an ancient, scratchy, white Irish cable knit sweater, which smelled like moth balls, and a fleece ski mask modeled after the mouth guard worn by Hannibal Lecter in the *Silence of the Lambs*. These, along with a stick of anti-chafe balm for my neck gasket, became staple items.

It was snowing when our crew peered over the Lee's Backbone overlook across the river from the Ferry. Compared to the frosty air, the water felt tepid as I slid into the river at mile zero. My biggest fear had been falling behind and holding people up, but because over half my body dragged under the surface, I moved along quickly utilizing the thalweg's undercurrents. I ran the

rapids out in front with the kayakers to be clear of the heavy boats and to feel slightly useful by setting up safety in micro eddies. The first two days I experimented with various forms of cruise control using my flippers like a frog-legged scuba diver. My neck was in agony for 48 hours until I realized I could hold my helmet, with my elbows on the riverboard, and allow my head to hang on the chinstrap. Then, while grasping at wet rocks just below Kwagunt Rapids, one of my flippers broke and I instantly felt my own lack of propulsion. Luckily, we had multiple riverboards on the trip, and the spare flippers weren't buried too deep. From then on, I swam with one long plastic Walmart special and one professional NRS shorty flipper.

Upon reflection, the endless sea of flat water was more of a challenge than any rapid. I worked hard in the flats, and then relaxed within my line in the main flow of the rapids. Almost like running from one gate to another in the airport while resting on the moving walkway in between.

Above the big rapids I would mount the riverboard like a horse,

stretching out my hips as if it were a surfboard, and attempt to stay balanced while peeking like a meerkat above the tipping point in order to confirm my line. Then an ungraceful flop-splash, and quick ferry, before holding onto the board while using small corrective kicks to change position. One highlight was running the left side of Crystal along with a couple safety kayaks. We caught a micro-eddy across from Big Red and then the river surged and I breathed deeply while trying to weasel my frozen fingers securely into a crimp onto the wet granite. While I caught my breath and tried to maintain position, thirteen different water crafts on our trip nailed the right line, and for those moments everyone forgot about Covid-19 and the international shut downs occurring one mile above our smiles.

As expected, everyone inquires about Lava. The hardshell kayaks and I ran first. Upon approach we chatted a little, and it felt like any other rapid on the trip until about ten feet above the V-wave. There, my riverboard and I were sucked down and spun underwater into what felt like a



crocodile death-roll vortex before being launched out of the water like a great white shark breaching. My aim then was to climb onto the lava rock adjacent to the “Cheese Grater” to setup safety for the trip above the Corner Pocket. I swam directly at the right side of the second mountain wave and cleared the Cheese Grater rock before being slammed into what felt like a ten-foot freefall, landing in the eddy right below the small channel of water between the Cheese Grater and shore. I ripped off my flippers and climbed up with a throw-bag, just in time to see the first of the rafts entering the rapid. I know now, that in those moments, we were some of the few humans on earth not thinking about the pandemic.

At each camp I would attempt to dry out damp wool, while I ate as I did in my high school volleyball and long-distance running days. Towards the end of the trip, I recall eating three huge plates of spaghetti after a thirty-mile day. Burning body heat in order to stay warm in the water paired with a full day of swimming left me over ten pounds lighter by the time we returned to the warehouse.

My first encounter with social distancing happened at Diamond Creek. It was when I saw an old friend driving shuttle for another company and I went in for an automatic hug. That was the first of many awkward hugs in 2020. They closed Diamond Creek the day we took off the river, and thus our group was one of the last to run the Colorado before the Canyon was given some breathing room and a break from visitors for over two months.



I struggled with sharing this experience. To me, the completed riverboarding journey was unremarkable even beyond the realization of a personal dream and the breaking down of barriers I had constructed around my own potential to survive for that long in cold water. I hope to continue challenging myself by maneuvering new water crafts in the Grand Canyon, but I am definitely over riverboarding it again any time soon. For now, the board sits in storage, awaiting anyone who wants to borrow it for their next trip. (Personally, I'd recommend kayaking if given a choice.)

I would like to acknowledge everyone who was on the trip and thank a few of my friends who made this entire journey possible. JimMac and West, thank you for endlessly helping me remove and repair broken neck gaskets. Dawn Kish, the incredibly talented photographer who was kind enough to trade drysuits with me half way and share images for this article. Jay, who shared space on his raft for my gear. Marieke, for bringing a fleet of

riverboards and flippers so everyone had the opportunity. Justin, for leading an extraordinary training trip during a sudden national shut down. In closing, I'd like to thank Lynn Hamilton for encouraging me over this past year to write an article and reflect on the experience.

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Photos: Dawn Kish