

KAYAKING THE NANTAHALA:

HYDROELECTRIC POWER PLANT CREATES AN ECOTOURISM ATTRACTION

by Judi Burton

SOLO OR NO GO

Glittery mountain dust clung to my car as I turned up the 45-degree driveway. Shifting to second gear, my little hatchback climbed like a champ up the seemingly impossible incline to the Carolina Outfitters Pro Shop in the Great Smoky Mountains overlooking the Nantahala (Nan-Ta-Hay-La) River. A gaggle of tourists was receiving a lecture on whitewater rafting etiquette, while being fitted out in well-worn life vests and handed paddles that said "2 \$ reward" on them. I finally found a somewhat-level parking space and spilled out of the car, glad to be on my feet after that winding trek through the mountains. Toeing off my hiking shoes and peeling off my clothes (bathing suit on underneath), I quickly donned wet shoes, a tank top, a hat and sunglasses. I walked another steep way up to the log cabin. A pretty, young woman smiled as I approached the window. I told her I had made a reservation an hour ago for the 2 o'clock. She

looked puzzled as another man stuck his head out and asked what was going on. She took my receipt and gave it to him. He explained that the trip was for 1:30, but I was just in time. I had been planning on going on one of the big rafts with several other strangers they might decide to put me with, but Kelly, the man with my receipt, had other plans for me. He waived me inside the dark, airy room and pointed at a picture of a one-person inflatable kayak called a ducky. "You think you can handle that?" Hesitant, I told him I was a kayaker, but was not familiar with whitewater kayaking. He squinted his creased blue eyes at me and assured me I could do it, so long as I stay near him and do what he does. Excited at the prospect of traversing the famous Nantahala River solo, I took the challenge.

THE POWER IS ON

He walked me to the back and gave me a fast version of the lesson he had

just given the others. Kelly grabbed my life vest by the shoulders after I was buckled into it and said to me square in the eye, "If you fall out, whatever you do, don't try to stand up. Just stick your feet up and point'em down river." I nodded and took the advice to heart. In the van on the way to the river, he told me he was a natural outdoorsman and commanded a troop of young Boy Scouts. "The Nantahala is one big power outlet for the people on the river." I cocked my head for further info. He explained: "In the morning, Duke Energy turns the river on and in the evening, they turn it off. The water comes from the lake upriver." On later research, I found that the Nantahala Lake is approximately 235 feet at its deepest point and about 55 degrees. "There is a dam that holds it overnight to collect the water, then they let her rip in the morning." Kelly told me the water flows through a deep gorge, and the trip is about two to three hours on a raft or kayak. We pulled up to the landing area and Kelly went through

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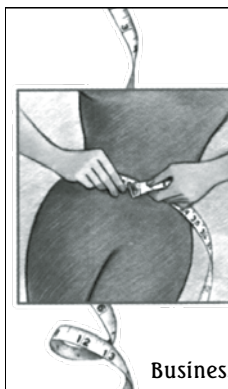
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some last-minute basics with the rafters whom I would be following. Finally, we were in and I could feel the way the kayak moved. It was sensitive and wanted to turn easily with a slight stroke of my paddle. After a few doughnuts—a backward paddling—to get myself acquainted with how it worked, I was ready.

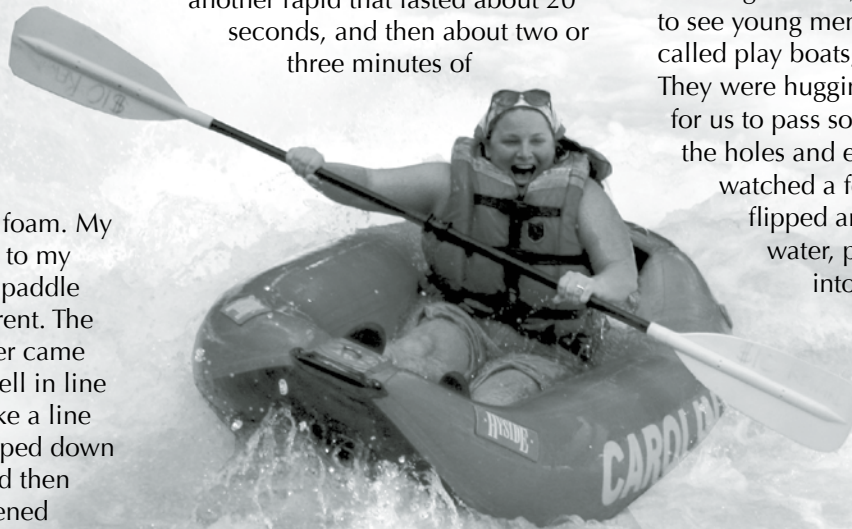
HERE WE GO

We ventured out into the wild river and hugged the right bank as our speed picked up. Immediately, we were taken down a quick succession of whitewater rapids laced with large rocks and green foam. My little kayak responded well to my commands as I dipped my paddle in and leaned with the current. The first surge of real whitewater came upon us quickly as we all fell in line behind Kelly and his raft like a line of ducklings. My kayak dipped down into the water, bow first and then was pushed up again. I opened my eyes, smiled at the cool, refreshing douse, and reassured myself that I could do absolutely anything if I challenged myself. Kelly turned around to make sure all of his chicks were still in line and smiled at me as I shook my head to sling some of the water from my face. "Did you like that?" he asked. I nodded happily. He said, "The Nantahala means River of the Noonday

Sun, in Cherokee, because there are a lot of places where the sun can only reach during noon." I looked up at the high, craggy cliffs adorned with yellow bobbing flowers and decided it was a very beautiful name, and the river was worthy of it.

THE JOURNEY

As we passed overlooks, we saw cameramen and women clicking away at us. Every three minutes, there was another rapid that lasted about 20 seconds, and then about two or three minutes of



calm, leisurely drifting. We rock and rolled down scarier rapids, and at one point, the aroma of pizza wafted across my nose as we drifted past a

group of small huts huddled together. Wetsuits hung on clotheslines and "PIZZA" in capital letters was emblazoned colorfully on the side of one of



the huts. "Torture," I thought, as my stomach grumbled. Finally, we were reaching the end, and were beginning to see young men in itty-bitty kayaks, called play boats, sporting helmets. They were hugging the banks, waiting for us to pass so they could play in the holes and eddies of the rapids. I watched a few as they tumbled, flipped and cart wheeled in the water, propelling themselves into the white foam, their paddles churning, dancing to the beat of the pounding waves.

THE BUMP AND THE FALLS

Kelly herded us to the bank once again and warned us of a certain place called "The Bump" and then "The Falls" up ahead. It was either that or get out at the aptly named "Chicken Landing" just before. I immediately opted for the fun way down. He pat-



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but to no avail. I surged forward over the huge rock that was in my path and caught air as I descended with an idiotic grin carved into my face. I landed well with a great splash and heeled over to the side where Kelly was counting all of the people who were descending the falls. Elated and

ted my head as if I were one of his Boy Scouts and smiled, his blue eyes glowing. Soon, everyone else decided to run the gauntlet as well. I watched and mimicked his moves as the yellow sign "Bump" edged closer. He took his raft over the big rock and he and his passengers floated gracefully over and down. I sailed right after him, correcting my position slightly as I careened into the deep pocket sideways and then was launched up and over "The Bump." It didn't end there, though. As I wrestled to gain my equilibrium and move my craft in place behind Kelly, I saw "The Falls" and felt that wild rolling feeling that you get in your gut as you are about to go down a great big hill. I struggled to follow Kelly's path and watched him plunge deep into the falls of the Nantahala (it was only about a 5-foot drop, but felt much deeper). Watching him go, I realized I was off course by about 4 feet to the right. I pulled with all my might on my paddle in one great sweeping motion to turn me into the correct direction,

tired as hell, I drifted on as Kelly motioned me down river to a bridge and a landing. I skidded up onto the cement landing, dropping my paddle and reclining backward, staring at the blue and white sky through my wet eyelashes. I had never been so happy at a power plant in my life, I thought, as I replayed the jump over and over in my head. Several restaurants loomed over the sides of the river and a play boat kayaking school had an obstacle course under the bridge. Later, I found out that the power plant serves about 72,000 customers. "I don't know if Duke Energy is one of the worst, most vile energy companies in the world," I thought, "but the Nantahala River kayakers sure are benefitting from its engineering and I'm having a blast."

a whopping 30 hydroelectric power plants. Duke Energy buys 100 percent of the energy from a solar farm in Davidson County, NC. Duke also sent a Request for Proposal last summer (the first in the industry) asking suppliers to help quantify Mountain Top Removal, or MTR, and non-MTR coal to see what potential they had to reduce MTR use. They found that Duke could purchase about 10 percent of its coal with a guarantee that it is not MTR coal without having to pay a premium. Duke Energy still has a ways to go, however, before I can truly say it is a planet-friendly company. In the Carolinas today, the company's energy mix is 40 percent coal, 51 percent nuclear, 4 percent natural gas, .7 percent energy-efficiency/demand-side management, .3 percent renewables, and 4 percent hydroelectric. That is pretty far from clean and sustainable. But as I lay here in my tent in the Nantahala National Forest, with the campfire popping and whirring outside and the crickets fiddling out their nightly opus, I marvel at the thought of an energy company that can literally create an eco-attraction for nature-loving granolas like me and produce clean, cheap energy all in the same breath. That doesn't come by very often, and hopefully, Duke Energy will continue to grow into a company that can provide inexpensive, clean power to its customers and still make a profit. The only way for that to happen is by asking for it.

For more info on Duke Energy or to find out how to demand cleaner energy if you live in an area where Duke produces your electric, visit DukeEnergy.com or email jason.walls@dukeenergy.com. For more info on Carolina Outfitters and rates, visit CarolinaOutfitters.com or call 800-468-7238.

WHO IS DUKE ENERGY?

I Googled Duke Energy and found out that so far in the Carolinas, it owns and operates three nuclear power plants, eight coal-fired power plants, eight combustion turbine power plants, and



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