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## Ride the Wild Spokane River

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Brian Massey is blonde, big-shouldered and cut like a surfer. He lives with his pit bull Piper in a mid-size RV. Nearly every evening of the year, Massey pulls his rig up to a stony beach where he paddles out to the big waves of the Spokane River.



Spokane is not known for surfing. But what Brian Massey does in his kayak is like surfing, for he rides waves with incredible style. Imagine Kelly Slater as a teenage board star at Huntington Beach. Now imagine no one watching. That's Massey. His sport of freestyle kayaking may have surfing style, but it's mostly performed on distant streams, far from the glare of white sand and television.

Massey plays on the river year round and often is forced to break the cardinal rule of kayaking, which is to never do it alone. This is one of those days. It's not unusual for him to be the only one in the water. He once went six days without seeing another kayaker. He is lonely and unselfish with what he calls some of the best whitewater in the nation -- the raging river that runs through the heart of Post Falls and Spokane.

"When I am out here alone, that is when I get bored," Massey says. "That is when I wish there were more people in the sport."

The evening I meet him, the few people on shore watching can't help but be sucked in by what he is doing. Piper sits patiently with his spotted eye focused intently on his master. A lone fisherman crouching on one of the large rocks in Corbin Park keeps glancing over his shoulder to watch the kayak whip smoothly across the wave's crest.

As I see Massey freestyle-kayak for the first time all I can think of is a bucking bronco. And how many people die at rodeos. The sport is very Western in its death-defying intensity. But it's also youthful, pitting modern skill, strength and technology against the ageless current of the river.

He called the area a "play-hole." The water is slow enough as not to spit him down the river, but the wave large enough to be titillating. Massey's upper body rises out of a snub-nosed blue kayak that's no longer than he is tall. It's an extension of his body and an aerobatic platform. His nose was plugged, and suddenly he was upside down, then spinning, arms pumping but not straining. Massey danced on the wave for almost two minutes before the river released him.

### Outdoor mecca

The 23-year-old fell in love with kayaking six years ago, and the sport brought him to Spokane. He moved here from Colorado not simply to get a broadcast journalism degree from Gonzaga, but also to enjoy the Inland Northwest's undiscovered outdoor mecca — Spokane.

Spokane? Teenagers from the City of Spokane Valley to Peaceful Valley might disagree that Spokane is a mecca of any sort. The outdoor opportunities in this region often go overlooked as 90 percent of Spokane teenagers spend their days on a Play Station 2. The ten percent who do take advantage of the endless trails, rivers, lakes and cliffs ask the same question Massey does: "Where is everybody?"

How is it that Spokane offers the same outdoor activities as Missoula yet gets labeled "The Can" while Missoula becomes known as an outdoor paradise? And who is to blame for this nasty reputation? Try ourselves.

Nothing is more discomforting, or common, than to hear a young Spokaneite telling a friend from Seattle, Portland, or even Missoula how little there is to do in this God-forsaken town. You can almost hear them.

"I would leave my house and play less Xbox if we had a huge arcade downtown where I could go play Xbox."

### Get over it.

Non-Spokane natives — they do exist — seem almost confused by the lack of people embracing the river in the middle of the city.

"This is some of the best water in the nation," Massey said. He's the only one in line to surf the wave on the nights I visit. "That is why I live here. If this was in any other place, such as Portland or Seattle, it would be 50 people deep."

In those cities, kayakers would wait 20 minutes to ride the wave. And the wave itself would pale in comparison to the fine ribs of water up and down the Spokane River.

Where are all the boats lined up to ride the wild waves of the Spokane River at flood stage? Where are the thrill seekers who would like to try a sport like surfing but faster? Kayaking costs less money than skiing, because the river's free and mountain lifts aren't. And in Spokane, kayaking is a four-season sport. The fact that the river doesn't freeze in the winter gives the Inland Northwest a distinct advantage over places such as Colorado.

"Every tuber on the river needs to get a kayak," Massey said, as he unlaced his black leather shoes and unsnapped his silver watch, referring to the overweight hippies who float on Les Schwab tire tubes. Nothing against tubers, but it's not an outdoor sport (unless sitting in a bathtub is one too).

Massey has never used his degree in journalism. He works at Enterprise-rent-a-car 65 hours a week and parks the RV at a friend's house each night. He empties his RV tank at the Wal-Mart when it needs emptying. And he hits the river nearly every day after work, even in the winter. This day, his RV is sitting at Corbin Park in Post Falls and Massey is getting antsy.

"I don't understand people who wear pants in this weather if they don't have to," Massey said, as he appeared from the bathroom changed from his rent-a-car tie and white shirt into swim trunks. Massey looks like the man from that Bowflex commercial. The strain of kayaking has made his muscles pop.

I felt puny. And I was wearing pants.

### **A Baptism of Fire**

When Massey invited me to kayak with him on the very day I met him, I didn't hesitate to say yes. But now, since I have managed to aim my kayak at the largest rock on the river, and I am heading towards it upside down, face-first, I am starting to regret my enthusiasm.

He told me I couldn't write about kayaking unless I got in a boat and tried it. So, I agreed to meet him and Piper at the river, just off Sullivan Road. I approached him decked out in my khaki shorts and a muscle shirt in an attempt to pass as a real athlete.

"I'm real excited," I told him as we headed to Barker road to take the plunge. "I don't think I'll swim." ("Swim" is the code word for flipping your kayak, ejecting, then swimming to shore.) "I am pretty coordinated and I have tubed the river before."

Massey, always one with a kind and encouraging word, applauded my optimism and told me I was going to do fine as long as I was relaxed. He wants to open a kayaking school one day. I can sense he's a good teacher.

"Kayaking has a steep learning curve," Massey said, as he lowered one of the kayaks off the roof of his RV. "Once you get it you'll do fine."

"Oh yeah," I said, "I am sure I'll pick it up pretty quickly."

I was on the water for five seconds before I flipped the kayak and thought I was going to drown. I flailed my arms frantically before remembering the handle I needed to pull to dismount my boat. After I swam to shore out of breath, Massey paddled up next to me dragging my boat with him.

"That was quick," he said.

"I know," I answered.

Dumping off my kayak would be a recurring theme on our short trek down the river. Kayaks are sensitive. They require a relaxed and centered torso to stay upright; my torso is stiff and jerky, and with each nervous paddle I capsized and launched myself on another swim.

At one point I was swimming for a quarter-mile, choking on river water and trying to get to shore. I gripped my paddle tightly and stroked with my one free hand, trying to gain leverage against the current. My life jacket made my bad swimming technique even worse. When I got to shore, my body pumped with light muscle-spasms — or I could have been shivering from the cold water.

Massey sat next to me. He said, "I have never really been into the spiritual side of kayaking, but there is something about the power of the river."

The Spokane River had choked me, tossed me and beaten me into exhaustion. What makes it spiritual is when you strap in and push off into

the current one more time. I did.

Now, I am again off my kayak, barreling through small rapids towards a towering boulder. The little strength I have is gone and I make a rather modest attempt to try to avoid the rocks. Above the sounds of rushing water, I can hear the edges of the rocks banging against my legs, nicking the skin off the top of my shins. Massey is yelling something (even his shouting is soothing): "Get in the rocking chair position, with your feet in front of you. Hang in there, man." I am not listening. I am waiting to hit a rock big enough to stop my momentum. When I hit a big one, I wrap my arms around the boulder like a child embracing his mother, then compose myself enough to scramble to shore through the shallow water. My boat and Massey are nowhere in sight.

I move all my extremities. Nothing is broken. My shins drip blood along the shoreline as I walk, but I feel good, even confident. It takes about 20 minutes to catch up to Massey, who has docked my kayak and is waiting, as always, patiently. The smile he sees on my face makes him grin.

"That was awesome," he says.

"You are easily impressed," I say.

Before he can ask if I am tired or discouraged I wiggle myself back into the kayak fully expecting to "swim" again.

Massey's steady encouragement pushes me, slowly, along the water. And during the last stretch of the river, with my leg cramping, burning like the fires of Hell, I don't tip once. I reach the shore without swimming.

I feel like hugging Massey when I pull my kayak to dry land the last time, but I don't. It's a guy thing. But he does snap a picture of me, bloody legs and all, leaning against my borrowed kayak. I might blow it up to poster-size.

### **Kayak Possibilities**

Butch Short, owner of Far North Outfitters in Bonners Ferry, Idaho, says that participation in extreme sports helps balance out a life dominated by a stagnant workplace. As technology has made people more immobile, sports have become more and more extreme to compensate for that.

Everywhere — except in Spokane, it seems.

In the past seven years kayak sales at Short's shop have been on the "up and up." That is not the case in the Lilac City.

"When half the people in the city are doing meth and people are out of work, there are not many people recreating," said Peter Brosseau, an employee at Mountain Gear.

While some of this can be blamed on recession and lack of disposable income, some blame has to fall on an out-of-shape work force and teenagers with pasty-white skin who would rather stare at their Play Station 2 than get a tan in the summer time.

What about Bloomsday? What about Hoopfest? Spokanites come out in droves for both events. They support local businesses and pump money into the downtown for two days. The point is: the people of Spokane go frickin' nuts when you give them something to do. Are they too lazy to go find something to do on their own — even when the river is right in front of

them?

In the opinion of Massey and other kayakers, this is where the city needs to step in. They want the city to build a kayak park on the Spokane River right through the center of downtown.

"Spokane is at the crossroads of some of the best paddling in the country," Brosseau said. "If we had a white water park people would stop rather than driving through to competitions in other cities in the area."

Golden, Colorado, built a kayak park. So did Vail. Now Missoula has one in the works. In those cities, engineers plunked boulders and hunks of concrete into sections of the river, creating a series of standing waves. That allows for dozens of kayakers to play at once. The cities can hold tournaments. The cost of one of those parks is about \$200,000.

"The economic payoff for both Colorado parks is already in the millions," Massey said.

"One weekend a year could be the Spokane white water festival," Brosseau said.

Knowing Spokane, in a decade it could be the biggest free-style kayaking tournament in the nation and another opportunity to show off the best part of the city (the remnants of Expo) to the rest of the world.

Some are a little leery of the idea and think the falls will eat kayakers alive. Maybe. But according to Massey and Brosseau, the falls have been run. Of course, the price was a \$500 fine and a few nights in jail.

Rivers are rated in six levels: one is a lazy afternoon float, six is a death wish. "The downtown run, if you include the falls is a class five," Massey said. Which means it's runnable, but very tough.

Brosseau would argue with that number. "It's a level six," he said. "That thing will suck the paint off your house and give your family permanent orange afros."

That sounds intense.

But it also sounds like a challenge to get outside and look closely at the idea. Organize some sort of festival and the people in this city will flock. Combine both festival and sport, and before you know it Spokane will be breeding some of the greatest kayakers in the world. Kayaking is already an Olympic sport. Some of the top people in the sport are good enough to do aerial flips off the waves. The Olympians of tomorrow could be flipping over Spokane, if they knew it existed.

Brosseau already guides down the lower Spokane River. Massey hopes to quit his job and make a living by pushing the sport in this town. Right now it's just a dream. But for a guy who can ride the face of a standing wave, turning somersaults in his bright blue kayak, starting a kayak school seems a simple task.

If Massey could just harness some of the energy of Hoopfest and Bloomsday. If he could just show a few of Spokane's kids how much fun it is to spin upside down in a rushing current. If he could just convince the city that utilizing the river is a good investment. Then we'd see what makes the Lilac City special is the river, not the flowers.

If Spokane doesn't want to get involved with all the red tape that can

accompany the construction of a kayak park, there is always that new place out in the valley, the one without a nickname yet. So how does River City sound?

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