

Outdoors

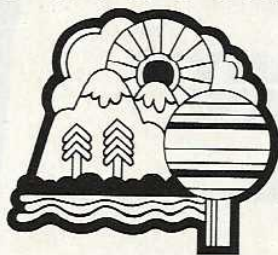


Illustration: Gary Hoover

Looking for some real outdoor excitement? Rent-an-adventure with stuntman, climber, rafter and all-around thrill-seeker Steve Paris.

By Thomas Granger

"I was born about two hundred years too late," mumbles Steve Paris, unrolling a sleeping bag a few feet from the smoking fire that he's built to keep a ravenous mosquito population at bay. The five-foot-eleven, tousle-haired Paris, who seems to have Slinky toys coiled in his biceps, is camped south of Van Buren, Missouri, in an area that contains the best white-water thrills in the Midwest. "If I'd been alive then, I know I'd have been a mountain man," he concludes.

A lifelong outdoor enthusiast, the twenty-six-year-old Paris is completing his first year in a profession that he invented himself: that of a freelance adventurer who will guide anyone, anywhere, for a price. His credentials are impeccable. In addition to working outdoor assignments for various rafting outfitters, he has worked as a Hollywood stuntman and has faced every peril from mountain scaling to kayaking through whirlpools. When not working, he scours the country to experience adventures on his own, traveling in a vintage Saab with a yellow kayak roped to a homemade wooden rack.

Paris' assignment is to take a writer the next day into a Class II (medium difficulty) section of the Current River. He has offered to take his passenger into a St. Francis River tributary called Eleven Points, which has Class IV (of the utmost difficulty) rapids, but the

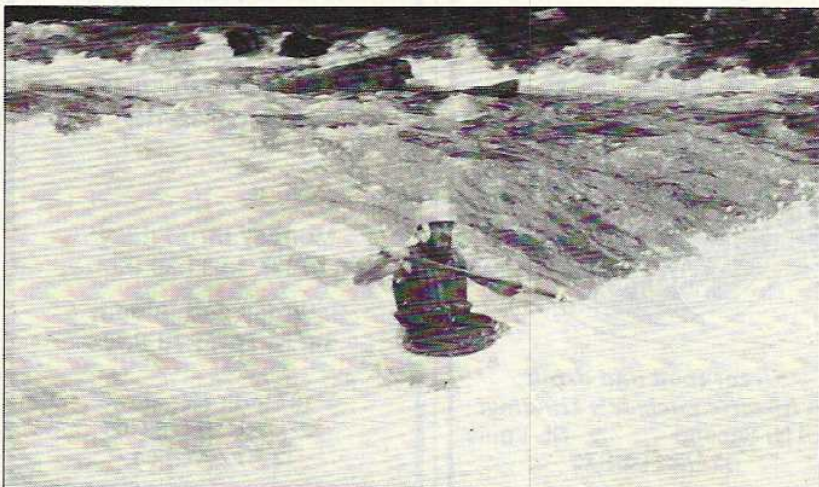
section, on private land, has been closed to the public by its owner, because of a recent rafting death. Secretly, the passenger, who is I, is relieved as hell. What Steve Paris does *not* know, and won't until he reads this sentence, is that I have been terrified of all bodies of water since nearly buying the farm in a boating accident on a lake when I was eleven. A couple of older guys I was with tipped the boat; they thought the ultimate in good humor was to hold me underwater while I thrashed around wildly in fear. Unfortunately, when they let go of me, I became so disoriented that I clawed my way down instead of up. And when, with my last breath I rushed to the surface, I found myself slamming upward into the upturned boat instead, my lips desperately glued to the wood as I sucked mightily at the thin air pocket there. Ever since, I have been scared stiff of water, and so I looked upon this assignment as a sort of personal redemption and to see what would happen.

The night before the adventure, Paris rambled on about his life. He is something of a chameleon, shy

and retiring in social situations, but insists that "you can't shut me up" in front of a campfire. "I don't do very well around people in places such as bars," he shrugs, "but get me out into my environment—on the water, on the rocks or in the woods—and my confidence soars."

He winces when discussing his difficulties with Hollywood types "who continually put me down" when beginning a stint as a stunt double in a movie called *A Breed Apart* (scheduled for winter release), produced for a man known for his "Killer B" movies, Earl Owensby. The movie, whose plot concerns the adventures of some dastardly types out to rob a rare eagle's nest, contains a scene in which the hero, actor Powers Booth, was to perch precariously over a steep ledge. Unwilling to risk their star, the producers paid Paris to do the stunt, take after take. When he finished, smiles Paris, all the put-downs ceased.

"I could have walked out there on the edge all day without a rope—dancing," he grins, no sign of braggadocio detectable in his voice. He attributes his success to



Photograph courtesy of Wildwater, Ltd.

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knowing his limitations, but notes that he has no problem with taking himself to the edge of his abilities. "I cover myself," he adds. "I don't take unnecessary risks, because I'm just a little bit scared. The person who gets into trouble is somebody who is overconfident, who nonchalantly takes chances because there's no fear inside."

Thus far, says Paris, there have been a few times when he thought death had come to claim him prematurely. On one occasion, he went to save a young woman who had flipped from a raft at Broken Nose rapids, on Tennessee's Ocoee River. She was one of three persons whose life he has saved. "She was stuck in a big hydraulic [whirlpool] with two thousand cubic feet of water coming at her per second." After freeing her from the "keeper," he found that he could not get himself out. "I felt just like a little twig tumbling in it," he remembers. It took him several minutes, and every bit of his strength, to extricate himself from the churning mass.

He has also experienced many comic episodes. The funniest one happened quite recently when he guided the governor of a Southern state, who took along the state's attorney, a gigantic man who weighed well over two hundred pounds. The three went canoeing in relatively shallow waters, and the boat kept grinding to a halt on low rocks. "I had to get out, push and then push some more," says Paris.

The morning breaks with skies of the clearest blue. Paris takes out a candle stub, covers it with kindling and lights a fire for breakfast. After a delicious meal of flapjacks and bacon, we are ready to roll. "The two greatest luxuries outdoors are eating well and keeping dry," says Paris, who has taught himself to cook in order to please his clients.

After seeing an outfitter to rent a canoe—a heavy, oft-dented monster that Paris sneers at with distaste—we are off in a dilapidated van provided by the renter to shuffle us to the river.

The Current River shows a bit of foam downstream where we are to

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enter, and I suddenly wish I were off interviewing a celebrity in a bar somewhere instead of abandoning terra firma. "Nothing to worry about," says Paris, fastening his own ultralight life jacket around me and placing the outfitter's clunky orange one at his feet. "This was all flooded just two weeks ago," growls the shuttle driver, a burly bear of a man with arms as thick as streetlamps. "It was all wild then."

"Heh, heh," I reply. "Sorry we missed it."

Once in the water, Paris proves a stern but competent teacher. He offers quick instruction in how to paddle, change directions and avoid obstacles as they come up. It is only after twenty minutes in the ride that I realize he is

steering us into every last bit of white water on the river from his position on back. We knife through three or four churning places before I recall how frightened I was supposed to be.

Suddenly, a blue heron, which looks like the stork you once thought brought babies, flaps its wings on a nearby sandbar and soars over a cluster of trees. "These quiet little joys are the reason I'm out here," breathes Paris. So absorbed am I in the delightful scene that has just passed, that it is only after we pass some trapped logs at the mouth of Troublesome Hollow—so named because of the renegade bushwackers that used to attack soldiers boating through there during the Civil War—that I feel the first signs of soreness in my back and shoulders. Scores of bass and suckers, as well as one gorgeous, bold pike, swish their bodies into deeper shadows as we approach. At this point I ask Steve if he ever has any trouble with his clients.

Sometimes, he admits. Once in a while a show-off will refuse to zip up his jacket in Class III or IV water; now and then, a bona fide drunk will sign up for a ride. "I've taken a customer off a raft because

he wasn't handling himself well," says Paris, who sees nothing wrong with taking a snort himself with supper. "The guy hated me for it, but risks were involved."

Down the Current River we go. Before we are halfway through the trip, we've passed every canoe that the shuttle van had taken out two hours earlier. "How'd you guys manage that?" someone yells. "My partner is a good paddler," Paris shouts back. Even my toes flush cherry red.

The only true difficulty I experience comes not from nature but from man. The first time a motorboat bearing a water-skier bursts past, I am unprepared for the wash that slams into the side of the canoe and drenches

the notepad at my side. Quietly, unhurried, Paris shows me how to compensate.

Now's the time to ask him a tough question, I think. Has he ever run into a situation he thought he couldn't handle? Yes, he admits. One time he was solo-paddling a canoe on the Gulf of Mexico when huge waves made all advance a painful effort. "I broke down and cried once," he says. "Then what did you do?" I ask. He answers, "I handled it."

The remainder of the trip flies by. We view water snakes, a playful otter and scores of soft-shelled turtles. He talks about two of his future projects: an excursion to western Montana to take some businessmen fly-fishing, and an adventure in November, in which he will attempt to scale the White Mountains of New Hampshire. "That," he says, "will be my greatest adventure."

Steve Paris is available for freelance assignments in the Midwest for expenses and a mutually agreeable day fee. Since he is on the road so often, an outfitter friend of his takes messages for him. To contact him, write Jesse Brown's Outdoors, 4369 South Tryon Street, Charlotte, NC 28210. □

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