

On the Colorado, the Dress Code Is Casual-Wet

By Sharon Barrett
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Two days into our 16-day kayaking and rafting trip on the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon, I had already shed a breast. I'd been worried before the trip about the silicon prosthesis that six years ago replaced the real breast I'd lost to a mastectomy for cancer.

Not as worried as I was about the Class 10 white water that even my seasoned river-rat companions described as terrifying. I'm not a water person. But my husband takes to water like cheese to pizza. This was his third trip in the Grand. He'd pleaded with me to accept the invitation from a friend of ours who had the permit for this private group of 16 people, covering 225 miles of river in six 18-foot rafts and four kayaks. "Trip of a lifetime," everyone said. So I said yes.

While packing the gear, clothes and equipment needed for the trip, I'd worried about wear and tear on the false breast -- particularly about tear. The prosthesis store clerk had warned me about how easy it is to puncture the device -- no brooches pinned over the heart, she said. So, naturally, I started thinking about sharp rocks I might hit -- not if I washed overboard in one of the big rapids where surely my Michelin-Man-style life vest would save that boob (if not me), but if I fell on one of the many hikes we'd be taking. The Grand Canyon National Park info maintains that most accidents on a river trip happen off-river.

And I had worried about the effect of heat on my fake breast. Temperatures in the Grand Canyon during the time we were to be on the river -- late May to early June -- regularly reach into the 100s.

But it wasn't the heat that caused me to shed the prosthesis. It was the cold. We knew the water would be frigid; it's an average 42 degrees year-round. But we hadn't expected the rain and low air temperatures that came the second day. I was riding as "tube meat" in a raft -- the passenger who's expected to weigh down the front of the boat when the waves are high and violent -- and had dressed to stay warm. Nylon trousers, shirt and underpants that would dry in minutes. SmartWool socks in river booties. Neoprene gloves. A splash jacket. Always a hat. And, from time to time, a helmet.

None of those precautions helped. Shortly before shoving off for that day's adventure, I had slipped in the mud while loading one of the rafts and fallen in the river. (Park info doesn't tell you about muddy banks at many of the campsites, so slippery an eel might regard them as kin.) But I figured with all that quick-to-dry nylon, no worries.

I figured wrong. It was, after all, raining. And then I'd neglected to tightly close the Velcro neck of my splash jacket, so every time we went through big water, I got soaked to the skin. Before long I was shivering nonstop.

A couple of our kayakers also were getting cold and asked for a stop so people could change clothes. Hypothermic now, I was shaking so hard I couldn't get out of my wet clothes by myself. Killeen, a nurse practitioner in her off-river life, helped me change into dry and warmer clothing, including the polypropylene long underwear I'd packed on recommendation from professional outfitters, even though my husband had been dubious. (It's the desert, he'd said.)

Killeen insisted that if I were wearing any cotton, a fabric that is slow to dry, it had to go. The only cotton I had on was my bra. You should take it off, she said. But my breast, I thought. I'll be left with only one. I might also be left dead if I don't remove the bra, I thought again. Besides, I would have so many layers on,

including my life jacket, no one would notice my lopsided chest.

While fast-drying nylon is the recommended material for river trips, cotton does have its place. After Lava Falls (maybe the scariest rapid on the trip) at Mile 180, the river begins to widen, and rapids become fewer and farther between. To cope with sun and heat that only Beelzebub might enjoy, some people in our party wore not just cotton clothes, but heavy canvas-weight cotton, which they drenched in icy river water. The wet cotton provided several hours of coolant before having to be drenched again. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Several mornings after I'd first abandoned my bra, and with temperatures back in the hot-enough-to-fry-fish-eggs zone, I removed the bra for good. Even with the sun barely up, it was already a sweaty effort to put on such a constrictive garment. That decision meant, of course, not wearing the prosthesis. I'd once heard a magician explain his tricks by saying that people don't notice things unless you point them out. I hoped my missing breast might not be noticed.

I hoped also that my attempt at illusion would be helped by the fact that I set out every day covered from head to toe. At 65, I was the oldest person on the trip. Killeen, 46, was the youngest. When it came to river attire, except for my miscalculation about the cotton bra, I considered myself not only older but wiser than the rest. While most of the others wore shorts and tank tops and slathered themselves with sunscreen, I dressed in long-sleeved shirts, long pants, socks and a hat with a wide brim and a flap that covered the back of my neck. And when the sun's rays were close to unbearable, I put on gloves. I'd learned years ago there's a reason many people who live in desert countries cover themselves from top to bottom. It's cooler.

I knew I looked like some dotty English gardening lady, but no matter. Besides beating the heat, my coverup also protected me from getting scratched, cut and pricked by the varieties of unfriendly flora encountered on hikes.

In the evenings, my appearance changed. Most of us "dressed" for dinner. After a sun-heated shower, some of the men put on colorful shirts or whimsical garments such as sarongs. Some of the women, myself included, wore dresses. Following a tip from one of the group's well-experienced river runners, I'd gone shopping before the trip at Goodwill, where I bought two sundresses for a dollar apiece. They were perfect for evenings and nights when the sun had disappeared over the rim of the canyon but the heat remained torrid.

Having gotten somewhat used to my bra-less Amazon approach to dressing, I pondered ditching another garment one particularly hot evening -- my underpants. I'd noticed that some of the people in our party had spent most of the trip that way. And it made sense, especially for the females who otherwise often had to struggle with both wet outerwear and underwear whenever a call from nature came. And with just a dress on . . . well, peeing in the river (where you must do it) was, so to speak, a breeze.

I got no further than thinking about it. After showering and dressing, I arrived at the camp kitchen, where Susan, a retired teacher from Louisiana, was on dinner duty with me. "I don't know why I bother with underpants," I said.

Susan, the next oldest woman in our party, was making her 16th river trip in the Grand Canyon. With her Southern accent so thick and sweet you could spread it on toast, she responded unhesitatingly to my musing. "Because you and I weren't raised that way."

It was a comment on age, not class. We were of a generation that had been brought up to worry about holes in our underwear. (What if you were in an accident and had to go to the hospital like that?) Our youthful nightmares were sometimes about being out in public without any underwear. I'd already pushed the limits by eliminating my bra. So I kept my pants on, even several days later when we approached the dreaded Lava Falls rapid.

There are only two kinds of rafters, I'd been told: those who've flipped a raft and those who will. Jeff, whose raft I would be riding in, was a strong, experienced oarsman, but he'd never flipped. I figured this might be the time. So I dressed for the occasion: wet suit, splash jacket with the Velcro cuffs and collar this time firmly secured, helmet, life jacket and -- underneath it all -- my underpants. (What if you were in an accident and had to go to the hospital like that?) Well, I didn't swim, though Jeff did. He was washed overboard in the first big wave, and I went through the rapid, alone, in tube-meat position, unaware there was no one at the oars.

At Tequila Beach, the first pullover below Lava where boaters traditionally celebrate living through the experience, I changed back into my dotty English lady gardener outfit.

And three days after that, off the river and driving home, I was back in my bra. On the unavoidable route through Las Vegas, I thought about all the topless (and bottomless) attire that's a fixture of that city.

Have fun, I thought. But you'll never have as great a time, or as good a reason, to my way of thinking, for stripping as I had had in the Grand Canyon.

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