

I must admit a certain fondness for the romance of a Hemingway-style big game hunt. I have no desire to hunt elephant or lion but have always enjoyed the notion of traveling with an entourage that sets up a camp of spacious white canvas wall tents and cooks gourmet meals under the stars. So when my friend Curtis

Fleming invited me to join him on a trip to the Deschutes River with Gourmet Flyfishing Adventures, promising the Hemingway experience in the high desert of Oregon, how could I say no?

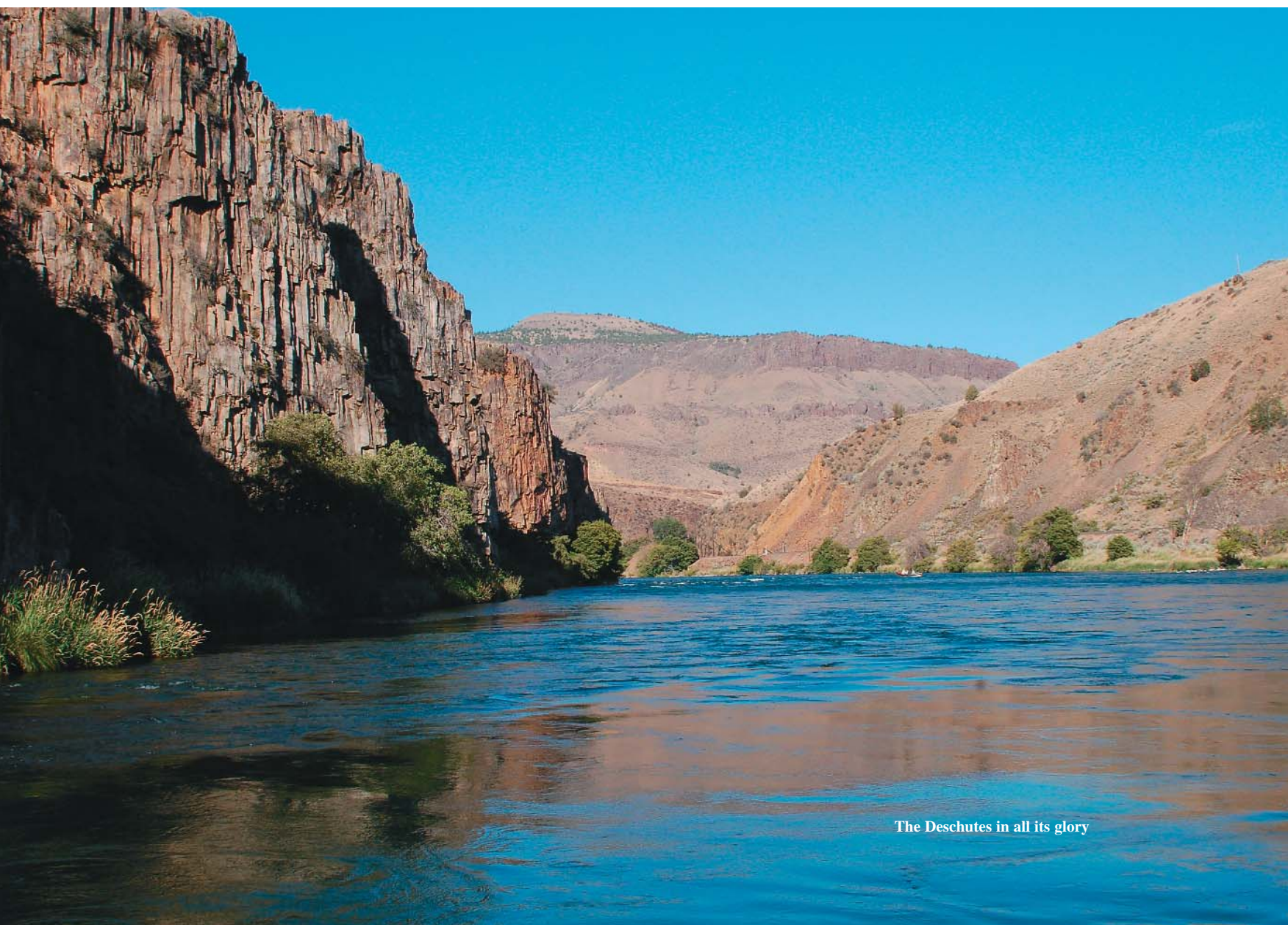
Fleming is host of the popular fly-fishing television program *The Fly Rod Chronicles*, and he had asked me to co-host

a couple of episodes of his show. We would be floating the Deschutes with an entourage that included country music songwriter of the year Sam Tate, his manager Jason Mosier, two cameramen, the entire Renton family and two additional fishing guides. The two additional guides just happened to include Mike McLucas, known affectionately

A fly fishing expedition on the fabled Deschutes

Story by Douglas M. Dear

Photos by Gene Lewis





The author roll-casting for reddsides

A fine Deschutes
reidside



as the Dean of the Deschutes, due to his vast knowledge of the river that was developed over his 40 years of Deschutes guiding before he retired last year. And the second was his son-in-law Mark Malefyt, who has guided on the river for nearly 20 years.

Curtis, his cameraman and producer

Steve Hasty, cameraman Gene Lewis, Sam Tate, Jason Mosier and I rendezvoused at the Portland airport on a beautiful late July afternoon. As we loaded the rental Suburban with all the gear, we made quick introductions and headed out for the four-hour drive to Bend, Oregon where we

would be spending the night with the Renton family. The drive is quite interesting, as you travel in a very short time from one of the wettest climates in North America to one of the driest. You go from the greenest green you can imagine to very brown desert—and it is in this high desert that you find the Deschutes River.

The Deschutes is one of the West's longest-running rivers unencumbered by dams. And it is in these ancient waters that the famous reidside trout have lived for, some say, 10,000 years. Reidside trout are a subspecies of rainbow trout that developed their incredible vigor and strength from fighting the mighty flow of the Deschutes. They have fins that are pronouncedly longer than most East Coast rainbows, and the strength of these fish is ridiculous. I had an 18-incher take all my backing in one

powerful nonstop run. And the powerful color matches the strength—a brilliant, deep, ruby red that has almost a fire-like quality.

Monday evening we arrived at the home of our hosts for the four-day river float, David and Debbie Renton, the owners of Gourmet Flyfishing Adventures. They had graciously agreed to put us up in their spacious home and guest house just outside of Bend. Our float was to begin the next morning, so we all turned in a little early.

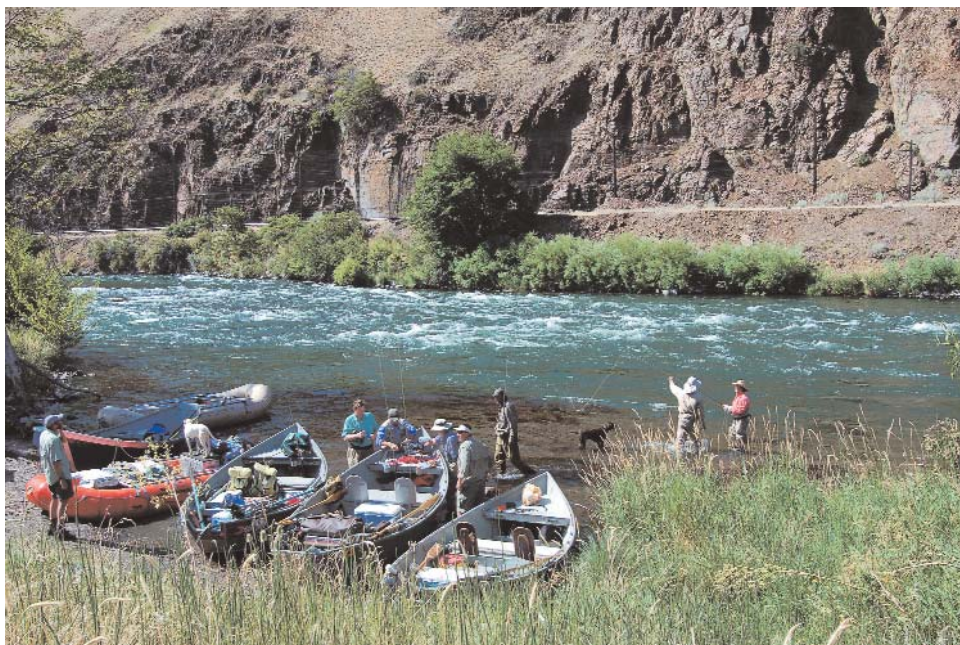
We awoke at dawn and reloaded the Suburban with all of our gear, which was now packed in David's waterproof duffel bags. David and Debbie loaded their truck with all our foodstuffs and hooked on the trailer with three drift boats and two white-water rafts. As we headed to our put-in outside of Madras, Oregon, the excitement began to build.

I had floated many rivers but never for a multiday campout. In planning for the four-day float I had of course emailed with the basic fishing questions — what rods to bring, what flies, and what other gear. I then decided to call our host to discuss the camping aspect of the trip. What kind of food will we be having? “Don't worry, we usually have steak one night, rack of lamb the next night —perhaps veal one night.” What about drinks? “We advise you to bring plenty of wine, and we have coolers and ice to keep your beer cold—we bring plenty of bottled water.” Can we get a shower on the river? “Hot showers in a bathing tent every night.” What about our sleeping tents? “White canvas Montana wall tents with comfortable full-size cots—just bring your sleeping bag because it goes down to 40 at night.” Ok, this all sounds great but what about the uh - uh - -

“Bathroom?”

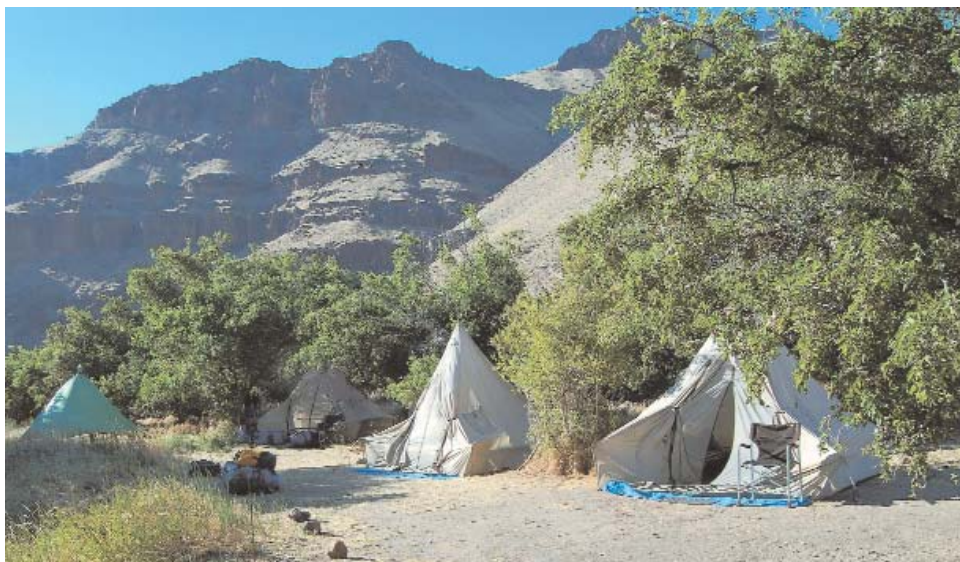
“Yes,” I say feeling like a camping wimp.

“Don't worry—while we are in a rather remote part of the Oregon high desert, the state has built solar-powered outhouses at each of the campsites we will



The typical morning-departure chaos

The sleeping tents, with the green shower tent in the background



be using.” Wow! This really is my kind of a camping!

When we arrived at the put-in, the scene was a bit chaotic—obviously a few other people had heard about the quality of this fishery. There were probably a dozen drift boats and rafts, in addition to our five vessels, being launched that morning. But the Deschutes is a big river, and once under way, everyone spreads out and it is as if you have the river to yourself.

A very odd law on the Deschutes

is that you are not allowed to fish out of your drift boat. Locals say this law was passed by the state legislature in the early 1900s as a way to keep the fishing pressure low so that the private trout clubs that had camps on the banks of several sections of the river could keep the fishing to themselves. Today, Renton believes that this law has in fact been the main catalyst in creating the incredible fishery that is the Deschutes. Renton's point is quite simple, “It's a big river and without fishing from the boat you



FRC host Curtis Fleming, master guide David Renton and cameraman/director Steve Hasty trying to catch the big one.

are doing well to cover 15 to 20 percent of the water.” That leaves the trout plenty of unmolested water for spawning and fisherman-free feeding.

Once we launch, we don’t go very far. In fact, we just cross to a nearby gravel bar and start fishing. We tie on a Size 14 Snickers Bar also known as a Royal Wolf, and start prospecting, as we do not see any rising fish. “They love a little candy, and the Royal Wolf looks like something tasty,” remarks Renton. It doesn’t take long for a nice redside to pound the fly and go for a run. The power of these fish is hard to describe. My first fish could not have even measured 15 inches, yet it took me to the backing. Strong fish in strong currents are a recipe for a great fight.

As the day progressed, we

hopscothed the banks, searching and finding rising fish. Parts of the river bank are Indian tribe-owned, and a special permit is required to fish from there. Other sections of the river bank are privately owned and only members of several trout clubs have the right to stand there. Fortunately, the bulk of the river banks are owned by the state and open to anyone with an Oregon fishing license.

And the feast began—we all rendezvoused at a sandy beach and prepared for what would be just a typical streamside lunch for the rest of the week. Today it was homemade meatloaf sandwiches on rye bread with chips, salad and gourmet cookies. I probably had not had a meatloaf sandwich since I was 12 years old, and wow, was it delicious! To me, that is

part of what makes a trip like this so special. After swapping a few stories and resting up a bit, we shoved off and headed back onto the river. The scenery is so breathtaking that after a while you almost tune it out and then you come around a bend and are just awed all over again by the incredible natural beauty.

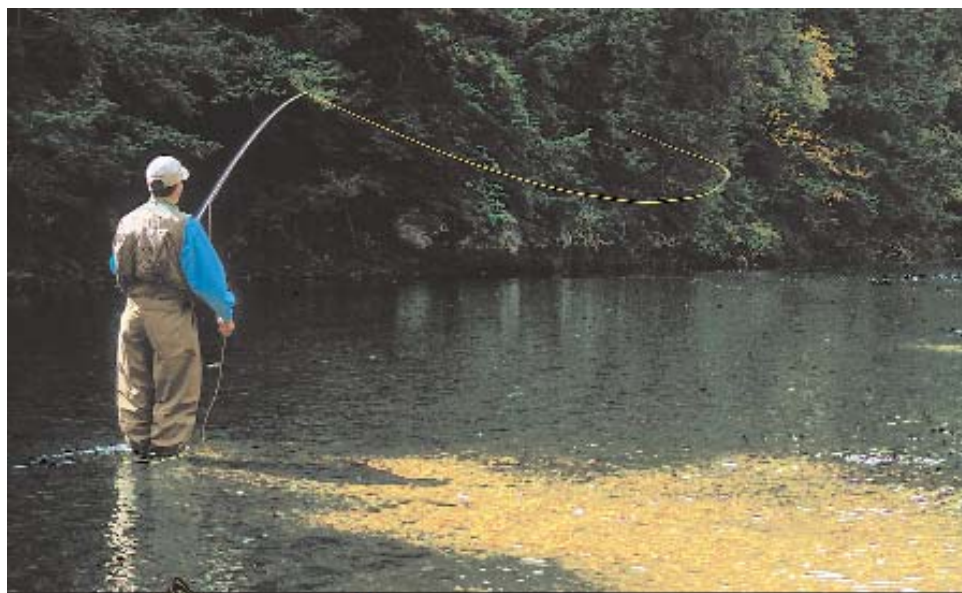
Filming a trip like this for television adds a whole different dimension as you are not just trying to catch fish, but hoping to catch them on camera. Often we had only one camera on two fishermen, so inevitably you catch the best fish when the camera is on your partner. That afternoon was no exception to this rule. In fact, Curtis and I had sent the cameras with Sam and Justin, and we had planned to just fish easy and maybe drink a cold beverage or two. Then

it happened.

David Renton spotted several pods of rising fish along the far bank. We pulled the boat in and Curtis went one way after one pod, and I went the other way after another group of rising trout. The caddis were coming off like clouds of smoke and the fish were sipping away at them. I worked my way up the line of risers and picked off a nice 14-incher, then a 15-incher—both typical hard-fighting reddsides. But then I saw a monster give a sip with a headshake that made me think of Jaws. By this time Curtis and David had walked up behind me. We were all awestruck. The fish had positioned himself right below a tree branch that was about 12 inches off the water. A tough cast to be sure. I carefully worked out a little line and promptly cast right into the branch. I was heartbroken as the fly dangled half an inch above the water.

As I prepared to rip my line out of the tree with all my might, David whispered “Leave it.” Just then the monster came out of the water and took not only my fly but the whole line right out of the tree. Then it was off to the races — he shot straight across the river in the first of several powerful runs. After plenty of give-and-take, all 23 inches of this fine trout was finally brought to the net. Curtis and I were all high-fives. “Just another Deschutes red-side,” said Renton. “Where’s the camera when you need it?” shouted Curtis. Yes, and this was just the first day.

We loaded back into our drift boat and headed downstream to camp. As we came around a bend, I saw our camp of white-peaked tents in the distance. “You can grab a shower if you want; then we will have appetizers and cocktails under the big tent,” said Renton. The big tent was a circus-sized, high-peaked white canvas open-air tent that covered several large dining tables. All of our gear had been placed at the nicely spread out group of tents that each contained two large sleeping cots. Days were hot, 90 degrees or warmer,



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Left to right from the back: Gene Lewis, Knute Renton, David Renton, Debbie Renton, Curtis Fleming, Jason Mosier, Douglas Dear; front row, Mark Malefyt, Steve Hasty, Mike McLucas and Sam Tate.

but you needed your sleeping bag at night as temps fell into the 40s. Appetizers that night consisted of blue cheese and Vidalia onion miniature pizza baked on top of the propane kitchen stove in special oven boxes. "I can cook just about anything with this portable kitchen," said Debbie Renton, our camp chef. Debbie's words proved prophetic as we dined that evening on rack of lamb with fingerling potatoes and a dessert of freshly baked Key lime tarts.

Under the stars after dinner, country songwriter Sam Tate entertained everyone with acoustic renditions of his many number-one hits such as "Moments," "If You're Going through Hell," "Shut Up and Drive" and "Somebody." He even had a little accompaniment from one of our expert guides, Malefyt, who was also an awesome mandolin player.

For four days and nights, this movable feast continued—dry-fly fishing for hard-fighting reddsides by day, eating gourmet meals by night, relaxing under the stars and sleeping in the naturally air-conditioned canvas peaked tents. The Deschutes never failed to deliver for even a

minute during our 50-mile-plus float. The final treat came after the take-out and all our gear had been packed in the truck. We ended with a Renton family tradition of a hand-scooped milkshake at the Oasis Restaurant and Motel. As we cooled off with the delicious shakes, the talk turned to fish that were caught and fish that got away and, of course, when we would be back next year to do it all again.

To find out more about fishing the Deschutes and other destinations with Gourmet Flyfishing Adventures, see gourmetflyfishing.com.

Douglas Dear, a frequent contributor to *The Virginia Sportsman*, is the owner of Rose River Farm (www.rosriverfarm.com), a popular trophy-trout fly-fishing destination located on the Rose River in Madison County. He also serves as chairman of the board of Project Healing Waters, a non-profit organization dedicated to healing our wounded veterans through fly fishing.

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