

Middle Fork of the Kings River

Vitals

Locale: Kings Canyon National Park, California

What It's Like: An epic kayaking trip in every way - a classic amongst classics.

Class: V-V+

Scouting/Portaging: Easy to difficult - a trail follows much of the river.

Level: Online gauge: <http://www.dreamflows.com/graphs/day.100.php>

Time: 4-6 days or more.

When To Go: Mid to late summer - one of the last Sierra rivers to run.

Info From: July 2008.

Other Beta: American Whitewater: <http://www.americanwhitewater.org/content/River/detail/id/227/>

Description

There's not a lot about the Middle Kings that hasn't already been said before. It's an incredibly high quality and very demanding class V multiday trip that has some rich rewards to pay out, which you're likely to pay for with a healthy dose of blood, sweat and tears. It is *completely* worth it.

The whole Middle Kings package is remarkable. The shuttle is a monumental 8 hour one-way, all day drive around the mountain range you'll paddle through, and once done you have to face another day of hiking up, over and down a mountain to get to the river. It's pretty standard to spend 4 days boating down the Middle Fork after which you have the option to either hike up out of the canyon or to continue for another day down the Garlic Falls section of the Kings River proper. Beautiful scenery and wonderful camping is found every day - as well as classic, never ending whitewater along the 60 km and 7000 vertical feet of river.

There is a convenient gauge on the Middle Kings courtesy of Dreamflows. This beta is from a run with daily peaks of 1300 cfs dropping to 1200 cfs during the length of the trip. This was a solid medium level with room for less water.

The shuttle is very long - it is well marked out on the map linked above. The take out is at the end of the road along the Kings River above Pine Flat Reservoir. Alternatively you can hike out of the canyon at the confluence of the Middle and South Forks to the Yucca Point Trailhead along route 180, cutting out a day of kayaking. The put in - the start of the hike in - is at the South Lake Trailhead, southwest of the town of Bishop on the eastern side of the Sierras.

There's no need to sugar coat the hike in - it is hard work and you will be sore the next day. The stunning scenery does help to alleviate the pain... Plan to take all day on the hike in. The trail ascends steadily to the base of Bishop Pass where it then switchbacks straight up a crumbly talus slope. As you near the top you'll likely have to walk through snow to reach the summit. From the pass a slow easy descent leads across Dusy Basin to the edge of LeConte Canyon and the long switchbacks down to the river. Be sure to pick up a multiday wilderness permit from the Inyo National Forest office in Bishop before you start the hike.

The camping where you arrive at the river is mosquito infested and, well, mediocre. If you have the juice you could continue downstream to try and find some granite to sleep on. When you do start boating the river will be small and filled with mank. Although there are some fun rapids in this upper stretch it is largely shite until you reach Palisade Creek a few miles in. Thankfully there is an excellent trail along the river making getting around this shite very easy. Even more, this trail follows the river as far as Tehipite Valley at the start of the bottom nine miles, making most portaging in the upper reaches fairly easy. There is some classic meadow paddling on the upper river with beautiful alpine scenery.

After Palisade Creek joins you'll get to granite and not long after you'll be staring at the pinch waterfall made famous by the cover of the 7 Rivers Expedition. This is the first of many stout rapids on the Middle Kings. This is the real start of the trip and difficult whitewater will continue from here all the way to the end of the trip, with the occasional meadow to paddle

through for a rest. One of the best camp sites of the trip comes at the potential end of kayaking day 1 just above a small 15 foot waterfall - it is spectacular.

Out of this campsite is one of the steepest sections of the river, starting with some stacked boulder rapids with many holes and the biggest slide on the run. Below the big slide are a series of gorges, some of which will require careful scouting or portaging. It is common, but not necessary, to portage 15-30 minutes on the trail after running a super clean 20 foot waterfall. The gorges eventually give way to some easy meadow paddling that can serve as a good kayaking day 2 campsite.

The third day is miles and miles of read and run boulder whitewater with some bigger stuff here and there. The Big Bad Beaver slide (biggest runnable rapid of the trip) comes later on this day. You will eventually reach Tehipite Valley - the camping beneath Tehipite Dome is fantastic.

The last day of the Middle Fork - the infamous bottom 9 - is the hardest. To sum it up it is one tough boulder rapids stacked again and again on top of each other that will require a lot of scouting and judicious portaging. The riverside trail is now gone, and when portaging you'll have to dodge both poison oak and the spikey yucca plants that grow in these low elevations. Difficulty aside (or because of it?), it is fantastic boating.

As you near the confluence with the South Kings the river does ease off. There's a real sense of having done something when you paddle in to the confluence - if you'd like to do some more hiking you can stop here and suffer your way up to Yucca Point - unless you're pressed for time we recommend continuing on down the Garlic Falls section of the Kings - it adds on another day of boating on what is now a real river with lots of big holes and pushy lines.

When you finally get to the take out the beers are going to taste really good. The Middle Kings is often called the trip of a lifetime - that it certainly is, unless you decide to go back and try it again... The whole trip is a set of highlights whose sum equals one of the best class V-V+ multiday kayaking trip in the world. If you decide to take this one on it is something you will not regret. Now, if there was only a way to avoid going back to the put in to pick up the shuttle car....

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