

Pack Rafting The Wangapeka

By Nathan Fa'avae





Pack-rafting is a paddle sport rapidly gaining popularity in New Zealand. I first discovered pack-rafts in 2002, at the Eco Challenge adventure race held in Fiji. On the gear list was pack-rafts, which I'd never heard of at the time, so I needed to research what they were and figure out how to obtain them.

My search led me to a company based in Alaska called Alpaca-Raft, which specialised in these unique craft. At first they looked like a toy, something you would buy for a holiday at the beach for kids to play in. I discovered that they were legitimate water craft with the primary purpose of providing a compact and lightweight boat that enabled hikers to cross lakes and rivers as part of their journey. As the name states, they are rafts that can go inside packs, and once inflated, rafts that can carry a hiker

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and a pack. Accompanied with a 4-piece paddle, a hiker with a pack-raft becomes an all terrain amphibious vehicle!

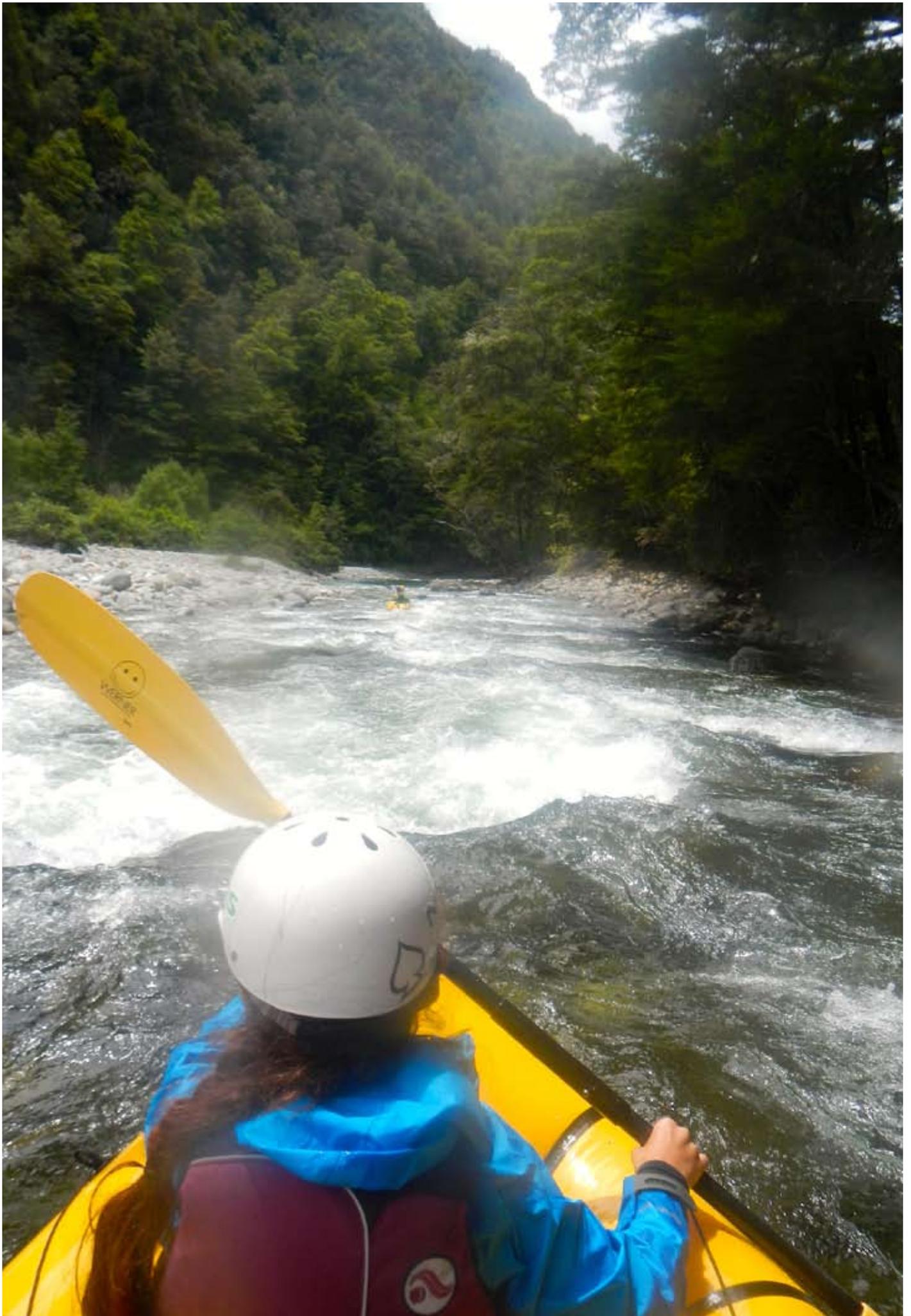
Since then pack-rafts have developed and evolved to the point where good paddlers are taking on challenging Grade Four white water. There are a number of companies making them and a wide variety of rafts and equipment. Pack-rafters can choose between single and double rafts, rafts designed for flat water lakes to technical rapids on rivers.

New Zealand is fast becoming known as a pack-rafters paradise, due to the amount of lakes, rivers and hiking trails. The options for hike-in paddle-out trips are immense, adding a really fun and dynamic aspect to weekend getaways, combining a hike and paddle.

For a few years now we've owned a single and double, regularly enjoying trips exploring rivers that previously were only practically accessible by helicopter. Here's a report from our most recent trip, a weekend before Christmas in 2017.

Close to home is the Motueka River, a river that provides a range of paddling options, easy white water, multisport racing, rafting and canoeing. There are also a handful of tributaries that feed the Motueka, all steeper and offering more for the skilled paddler. These rivers drain out of Mount Richmond Forest Park and Kahurangi National Park. One of the larger rivers is the Wangapeka, more known for the hiking route that goes to the West Coast.





We've walked up the Wangapeka track many times and enjoyed picnics and swims, but never contemplated paddling the upper reaches. My memory of the river was small boulder gardens and deep green pools. I wasn't aware of anyone paddling the river beyond the road end before. We checked the flow gauge, 6-cumecs, and studied maps and google imagery, it all looked promising, with the added safety being that we'd spend a day hiking up the river, scouting it in the process and then paddle out the following day. If there were sections we didn't wish to paddle, we could simply deflate the rafts and hike around them.

We loaded up our packs and headed up the valley, about 4-5 hours of hiking to reach Kings Hut. Staying at a hut overnight meant we could travel lighter. The hike was enjoyable on a summers day, with a few swim stops and checking out some of the rapids. Sometime in the last few years, a major slip had tumbled into the river and created what looked to be a solid Grade Three rapid, a touch beyond the capabilities of the pack-rafts and our crew. That would be a portage.

The last few kilometres before the hut the trail climbed high over an obvious gorge. My wife and I decided it'd be a sensible idea to paddle that section after we got settled into the hut. From high on the trail above, the





sound of white water gave the impression that there was action below, the contours on the map suggested the same thing.

It turned out that with a few quick portages, the section was good to paddle, with some low volume technical rapids and easy drops to run. We decided it'd be fine to take the family through, but keeping in mind that there was rain forecast overnight, depending on how much, could make us change our minds. It did rain overnight, but not enough for us not to get on the water. It looked like it'd risen about 1-cumec, plus it was discoloured.

With pack-rafts loaded and everyone kitted up for a day on the river, we had a quick safety talk and launched. The extra water made it pushier, the moves needed to be made faster. It was an exciting start to the day and with a few short portages we paddled out of the gorge, happy to have done it, equally happy to be past it.

The rest of the afternoon was better paddling with the top up of rain, essentially a non-stop trip of technical Grade Two rapids and drops, it was

really fun. There was a few expected hazards typical of a wilderness river, fallen trees, choke points in boulders, but not knowing the river meant it was always engaging and interesting.

One of the highlights of the trip was the amount of who we saw. The blue duck program in the region has been extremely successful, to the point where they think there maybe too many ducks in the valley, with plans to relocate some to other areas. We lost count of ducks at about fifty, but we have good reason to believe we counted the same ducks a few times, however we'd safely say there is at least twenty.

By the take-out we'd had an amazing day venturing downstream, absorbing the scenery, tranquility and excitement all contained in the bottom of the valley. The trip was another example and reminder of how pack-rafts can easily open up areas for paddling trips, countless places to explore and adventures to be lived.

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