

By GEORGE ROBERTSON, M.D.

The little town of Erwin, Tennessee seems to have little to offer. It lies in the heart of the Smoky Mountains just southeast of Johnson City. Its oblong layout is dictated by the surrounding peaks as it hugs the valley near the North Carolina state line. But the best thing about this remote small town is the scenic river flowing through it.

On Wednesday, Linda and I put on our personal flotation devices and helmets in preparation for the white water run on the Nolichucky River, a 9-mile stretch of whitewater just up river from Erwin. A 45-minute bus ride took us over the pass where the Appalachian Trail crosses the road and then into North Carolina where we would put our seven-person raft into the muddy water above a long stretch of whitewater in the eastern USA.

We practiced our strokes and Ben, our raft guide, shouted instructions loud enough to be heard over the churning roar of the river.

The Nolichucky has its source from two rivers in the Appalachian Mountain chain and is named from the Cherokee Indian word meaning changing waters. Part of its course marks the boundary between Tennessee and North Carolina. This day it would be running at 1,400 cubic feet per second which was a higher flow due to recent rains.

It was a muggy hot day but the water splashing us from the waves on the river cooled us perfectly for the ride. Soon after getting acquainted with the raft and the other paddlers, we entered the first class IV rapids. Surprisingly, we made our way between the rocks and over a 2- to 3-foot waterfall without getting ejected from the float. One stretch of rough water was ¼-mile in length and started with a class IV at the top with several less dangerous ones in the middle and ending with another class IV at the bottom.

The rafts ran the difficult strip in pairs so that if anyone turned over the other close one could help with the rescue. Once again, we all got through the churning course in great style. It was a less demanding spot that got us in trouble when we tried to float over a submerged rock sideways and came to a sudden stop throwing the only member of our crew who couldn't swim

Rafting the Nolichucky River

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over the side. She had the most terrified look on her face which I could see submerged under the water on the downstream side of the rock. Her son sitting behind her was able to extend the paddle handle for her to grab pulling her back to the raft and then grabbing her life jacket to drag her back to safety.

In a quiet flat water area we pulled the rubber vessels over for a lunch on the rocks. Fried chicken strips wrapped in aluminum foil were still hot and really tasted good when accompanied by the pasta and fresh peach slices. After lunch we ran the last of several class III flows before taking out at the USA base camp on the river's edge.

I was thankful that our guide had steered us safely through the 9-mile course and during the easy floats had entertained us with jokes and folklore.

Editor's Note: George Robertson is a physician with Family Medical Associates, PC, in Lebanon.