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Salt River

Report by Marc W. McCord

Rapids of the Upper Salt River US Highway 60 to SH 288 ~ 51.9 Miles

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Baptism Rapid (II to III) - located immediately below access above the US Highway 60 RAP, may be unrunnable in low-water conditions, and features large holes in high water conditions.

Island Rapid (III to IV) - at about 0.4 miles, is characterized by dangerous boulders in both channels, and should be avoided except in high-water conditions.

Bump and Grind Rapid (II to III), - at about 1.5 miles, starts easy before a concealed rocky ledge across the river at the lower end of the drop. Rafts should be lined in low-water conditions.

Maytag Chute (III to III+) - features chutes on either side of a small island - GO FAR RIGHT immediately after clearing Bump and Grind. The drop may be scouted from the island.

Reforma Rapid (III+ to IV) - at about 2.3 miles, features deep holes, huge boulders and technical difficulty. It is dangerous, especially in high-water conditions, and should always be scouted before running.

Mother Rock (II to III) - at about 2.4 miles, is characterized by a huge boulder in river center, with a boulder garden rapid immediately below the rock. Start right of Mother Rock, enter the rock garden on the far right to set up for Overboard Rapid.

Overboard Rapid (III to IV) - at about 2.7 miles, features a large boulder on river right at the end of the rapid. Start far right, then work left to avoid the rock and a huge hole that can flip canoes, kayaks and rafts. Overboard Rapid should be scouted from the rock garden above BEFORE running.

Exhibition Rapid (II to III) - at about 6.0 miles, features haystacks and hidden holes, especially in high-water conditions. The rapids starts wide, then narrows at the end.

Three-Way Rapid (II to II+) - at about 7.7 miles, starts as two channels with the left channel going straight downriver through a rock garden at the bottom with a sneak to the right channel about half-way through it, and an easier right channel passing through bushes.

Salt River Draw Rapid (III+ to IV) - at about 9.1 miles, is dangerous at all flow levels and should be scouted from the river left bank before running. Avoid the huge reversal wave on river left at all times! Below this rapid, the river drops at about 26 fpm for the next 4 miles.

Salt Banks Rapid (II to II+) - is fairly easy and straightforward. However, it is located at a sacred Apache site where ALL land access is prohibited. Do NOT disembark along this section of the river!

Ledges Rapid (II to III) - at about 11.0 miles, features several drops in quick succession, with big boulders and holes, especially along the river left side, which should be avoided.

Little Boat Eater Rapid (III to III+) - at about 11.6 miles, is located along the left bank and features a definite keeper hole at the bottom - stay right. This rapid is more trouble in low-water conditions. Below this rapid the river drops at a rate of about 29 fpm for the next 3.5 miles.

Rat Trap Rapid (III+ to IV) - at about 13.9 miles, is more technical in low-water conditions. It features a steep but short drop into submerged rocks and holes that offers a good sneak route on river right in high-water conditions.

White Rock Rapid (II to III) - at about 14.1 miles, is a long rock garden along river right around a sharp right bend - follow the main current to the right.

Granite Rapid (III to IV) - at about 16.5 miles, features a river center boulder, a right side line that requires careful steering and boat control, and a left side line that may have a huge hole that can flip boats, sending paddlers swimming. Below this rapid the river drops at a rate of about 21 fpm for the next 5 miles through Gleason Flat, then at about 24 fpm for the following 8 miles.

Eye of the Needle (III+ to IV) - at about 21.7 miles, is potentially dangerous at any level. The approach is not always obvious. On river left is a very narrow passage with a significant drop between boulders. The best line usually is to the left. A river-wide reversal wave can be created in high-water conditions, in which the far right line is preferred by most experienced boaters. Always scout this drop before running!

Black Rock Rapid (III+ to IV) - at about 22.3 miles, is a major rapid with technically difficult maneuvering required. It is characterized by an entrance from a right turn into a big drop and tricky cross currents. It can be run or lined through the left channel in high-water conditions, but in low-water conditions a technically difficult waterfall is created. This drop should ALWAYS be carefully scouted before running or lining.

Pendejo Wall - at about 26.7 miles. Keep away from the left wall to avoid trouble, especially in low-water conditions.

Upper Corral Rapid (II to III) - at about 27.2 miles, features a strong current into lower river right boulders.

Lower Corral Rapid (II to III) - at about 29.0 miles, is a long rapid starting at Jump Off Canyon around a sharp left bend into about a 3/4 mile-long pinball table of boulders to be avoided. This rapid should be carefully scouted before starting, and eternal vigilance is required while running it.

The Maze (III to III+) - at about 29.7 miles, begins around a sharp right bend into strong currents, huge boulders and potentially keeper holes in higher flow conditions. The most difficult hole is near the top of this drop, where the natural current takes boats. Many paddlers choose to enter along the far river right wall. Always scout this rapid before running it. Below this point the river drops at a rate of about 31 fpm for the next 3 miles.

Quartzite Rapid (III+ to IV, with Class V consequences) - at about 31.6 miles, was formerly a solid Class IV to IV+ rapid with Class V to V+ consequences before being illegally dynamited in 1993. The upper drop is still very challenging and not easy to scout. A significant drop on river left can be run in high-water conditions (above about 4,000 cfs). At optimum flows (about 750-4,000 cfs), the line of choice for most boaters is around the huge boulder on far river right. At flows below about 750 cfs boats can be lined long the river left side. Extreme caution is urged at ALL flow levels. This remains a dangerous drop at all times.

Corkscrew Chute (III to III+) - at about 31.7 miles, is a strong hydraulic below the pool after Quartzite Rapid, characterized by a strong current that flows into the canyon wall, then into the meat of the hydraulic, where a drowning occurred in 1999. At lower flows there may be an island in the pool just below Quartzite Rapid.

The Sleeper (II+ to III+) - at about 31.9 miles, is a sneaky hole on river right. Keep left to avoid the hole. Below this hazard the river drops at a rate of about 16 fpm for the next 12 miles.

Cliff Hanger Rapid (I to III) - at about 34.2 miles, features a strong current into a river right bluff with an eddy pool to the left. This hazard is primarily more difficult for rafts than for kayaks and canoes, though all should carefully choose their lines and control their boats through it.

Wake-Up Rapid (II to II+) - at about 36.2 miles, is fairly easy most of the time, but in low-water conditions the best line is along the far river right bluff.

Five-Way Riffle (II) - at about 42.1 miles, is an easy rapid where the far river left chute is usually the line of choice for most boaters.

Ten-Way Riffle (II) - is fairly easy technically, though it can be a pain in the butt at flows below about 600 cfs, increasing in its "pain" factor inversely proportional to decreasing flows. Starting about 3 miles below Ten-Way Riffle the river drops at about 17 fpm for the next 6 miles.

There are no other significant rapids or drops on the Upper Salt River. However, the remoteness and difficulty of access over land all along the river, as well as possible encounters with some potentially harmful animal-type critters and hot, summertime temperatures with a LOT of solar exposure, make the Upper Salt River a place requiring careful preparation and attention at all times. Flash flooding is always a possibility, though rare in its occurrence.

Do NOT attempt to run the diversion dam at about 52.7 miles, just below the SH 288 take-out! It is a dangerous low-head dam where several drownings have occurred in recent years.

The information presented herein reflects the collective experience of many river runners over a period of several years, and is not intended to be the last word on difficulty or best lines to run. All river runners should know their skills and limitations, as well as limitations of their boats and gear. Swiftwater rescue and First Aid training are recommended. Except for professionally-guided raft trips, this river should ONLY be attempted by experienced whitewater boaters having at least strong intermediate level whitewater skills. All river runners should know the river conditions, forecasts for weather conditions, and then decide upon running the river according to their capabilities as individuals and as a group. This reach of the Salt River should NEVER be attempted alone, or in very small groups because of its remoteness and technical difficulty. The life you save MAY be your own!

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Last updated December 30, 2014

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