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River guide rafts white-water rapids of the Salt

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BusinessScope

By Michelle Bearden-Mason
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Jerry Baldwin gets a little antsy this time of year to get his feet wet.

After months of being dry-docked, the 53-year-old Baldwin is gearing up for another season with Salt River Canyon Raft Trips, the company he founded in 1978.

April through September, the Tempe man will say goodbye nearly every weekend to congested traffic and a harried work schedule dictated by his four Valley equipment-rental stores for the quiet rush of the Salt River and its roller-coaster rapids.

As a river runner, it suits Baldwin just fine that few people know about the white-water rapids on the Salt River. But as a businessman who needs at least 300 customers per season for his rafting company to break even, he's eager to let people know about the treasure he discovered years ago.

"You think of rafting in Arizona, and you think of going down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon," Baldwin said. "But we've got something just as challenging and beautiful in our own back yard. It's a real find."

Baldwin, an Arizona State University graduate who cut his teeth in the truck leasing industry before establishing Rental World in 1970, began rafting the upper Salt River with friends in the mid-1970s.

Seeing an untapped market, he approached the White Mountain Apache tribe — which controls the land the river cuts through — in 1978 about obtaining a commercial permit to start a weekend rafting company.

The Indians agreed to a \$50 annual permit and a \$3 per person, per day charge, making Baldwin the first entrepreneur to be granted permission by the Apaches for such an operation.

After investing \$15,000 in equipment and training fellow rafting enthusiasts as guides, Baldwin scheduled weekend trips for the months of March, April and May.

"We've always had a good working relationship with the Indians, recognizing it's their land and they have the right to call the shots," Baldwin said.

But as the river trips grew in popularity, so did the cost of the permit. The Indians now charge Baldwin \$2,500 a year, plus \$10 per day per person. That initial cost discourages most competitors, Baldwin said, "because it's hard to make that kind of commitment up front."

"If I didn't have my other business, I wouldn't be able to afford this," said Baldwin, whose inventory has grown to 50 rafts and additional equipment totaling some \$40,000. "All I care about is breaking even. There's a chance I'll make a profit this year, but that's not why I got involved in this. I did it because I love it."

River rafting is a thrill Baldwin has experienced some 200 times since he took his first trip as a "reluctant passenger" on the Colorado River 14 years ago, and one he insists "I'll never tire of."

Some 20 guides — ranging from college students to lawyers and computer operators — work for Salt River Canyon Raft Trips. All have been trained by Baldwin, and like the owner, are working for love and not money.

"They may make \$100, \$120 on a weekend trip. It's a second job for nearly all of them," Baldwin said. "We hardly have any turnover because it's considered a glamour opportunity. Keeping people hasn't been a problem at all."

Baldwin's prices — which include transportation from Globe (87 miles east of Phoenix) to a campsite about a 90-minute drive north in the Salt River Canyon, food and "everything but your sleeping bag" — run about \$245 for a weekend trip. He also provides

group discounts and special rates on certain weekends.

At this time, he said he's the only commercial outfitter on this stretch of the Salt River Canyon.

Except for scattered advertising in newspapers and magazines, Baldwin has relied on word-of-mouth for publicity. Demand convinced him last season to offer the trips through the summer, rather than closing shop in May and sitting out the hot summer. It was a successful move that is now a permanent schedule.

While Baldwin has mainly catered to Valley residents searching for a weekend getaway, a new development may propel him into the national tourism picture. The U.S. Forest Service last week granted commercial permits for trips through the river in the Tonto National Forest to Baldwin and two other outfitters from Flagstaff and New Mexico.

That means Baldwin will be able to offer five-day excursions from Cibique Creek in the Salt River Canyon to the bridge at Roosevelt Lake during the week — which he predicted will draw out-of-state visitors to Arizona.

He said he plans to put the word out to tour operators and travel agents that the Salt River is "on the top with the best of them" for white-water rafting.