

The Clueless and Lark Expedition

1700 Miles of WaveRunning from Omaha to New Orleans

By Judd Spittler

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To anyone who's ever been to New Orleans, the mention of its name brings to mind outrageous bars, mouthwatering Cajun and Creole food, and a special brand of homegrown music. Thoughts like these inspired Mat Weekly, Scot Stangl, Mike Rowley, and myself to embark on a 1700 mile WaveRunner voyage from Omaha, Nebraska, to New Orleans, Louisiana, via the mighty Missouri and Mississippi rivers.

None of us had ever done anything like this before, and were strictly amateurs when it came to personal watercraft. Mat, 34, is an ear, nose and throat physician from Omaha. Years ago, when he bought his first PWC, he dreamed about someday taking it to New Orleans. Scot, 34, is a physician's assistant, also from the Omaha area. Mike, 29, had just moved from Omaha to Dallas, where he is a pharmacist. I completed the crew, and am a 34 year old computer design engineer, originally from Omaha and now living in Upland, CA. I purchased my first watercraft two months before the trip so that I could join the others on the adventure.

All four of us had Yamaha WaveRaiders. Our trip was to be self-supporting, so we had to carry our food, water, camping equipment, clothing, cameras, tools, oil, and 30 gallons of extra fuel per person. This would have been a formidable load for the WaveRaiders by themselves since their enclosed storage capacity is smaller than many car glove boxes. Our storage problems were solved by the HydroTrailers that each of us bought to tow behind us. The HydroTrailers held 10 gallons of fuel and most of our food and supplies. We also each strapped an additional 20 gallons of fuel and other supplies to the watercrafts themselves. If there was any shortage of bungee cords or duct tape around the time of our trip, we were certainly the cause.

Early in the planning for the trip we decided to use the trip to raise money for the "Make-a-Wish Foundation", an organization dedicated to granting wishes to children with terminal or life-threatening illnesses. Money would be raised from corporate sponsors and by getting pledges from individuals on a "per mile" basis. Our trip became known as "The Clueless and Lark Expedition". What had started as a casual trip among a couple of friends began to gain a lot of outside interest. By the time the expedition actually began, we had sponsorship by Southwest Airlines, D&H Products (the makers of the HydroTrailer), Mutual of Omaha and many others. Yamaha was another big sponsor, providing life vests, wet suits, and various accessories. This was getting pretty cool.

We had planned to reach New Orleans in five or six days. After arriving there, we would party for a couple of days, put our WaveRaiders in the back of a rental truck and cruise back to Omaha. Of course not everything went exactly as planned.

Day 1, Friday, August 4 -- Getting Our Feet Wet:

The weather in Omaha was beautiful the day of the launch. We had decided to start late in the afternoon on our first day to allow ourselves plenty of time to get our 'Raiders launched and all our equipment strapped on. Press interest in our trip was amazing. One station did a live, pre-launch interview via satellite during their evening news. We also heard that Willard Scott, the weather guy on NBC's Today Show mentioned the trip earlier in the day. He also, no doubt, mentioned the back-to-back hurricanes approaching New Orleans at the time. We cast off at 5:45 PM after a "Jagermeister" toast. Our goal for the first day was to get to Rulo, Nebraska, 100 miles or so downriver.

As soon as our expedition rounded the first bend, we started running into problems. Some of the HydroTrailers were pretty overloaded and we had not yet mastered "the art of bungee". As a result, equipment, gas cans and oil jugs were sometimes found dangling in the water, attached only by the ubiquitous bungee cords. Many times, the loads had to be plucked floating from the water, or were simply lost to the river.

Our first day ended up being pretty slow. Whenever one person stopped to adjust their load (or mourn its loss), we all stopped to wait. It seemed like we were stopping every five minutes, waiting for a different person to reassemble their possessions. Mike was the worst offender, and was the most overloaded. In addition to what the

rest of us brought, he packed a large gas camping stove (complete with numerous propane bottles), assorted pots and pans, and a large wooden adirondack chair. The theme song to “The Beverly Hillbillies” came to mind when looking at his rig.

As darkness descended upon us, we decided to stop for the evening. That evening we each dined on an MRE (a military ration or “Meal, Ready to Eat”), as we would for most of the trip. We then sat around the campfire passing the two cellular phones back and forth. We were each anxious to tell others about our adventure so far and to let them know we were OK. Later we hopped in our clean, dry sleeping bags and went to sleep. We were camped just south of Plattsmouth, Nebraska. We had gone only 18 miles.

Day 2, Saturday, August 5 -- This Trip Could Take a While:

Our enthusiasm was high as we began the second day. We felt that our earlier problems were behind us. Unfortunately, we found that we still had to stop at times for load adjustments. The frequent stops were frustrating. Whenever anybody in the group stopped, we all stopped, which made for slow traveling. At one point, we decided that traveling in pairs was best. That way, when one person had problems, only the other person in that pair would have to stop, the other pair could keep moving. When someone in the lead group had a problem, the other group could be catching up or leapfrogging them. Somehow we failed to see the major flaw with this approach.

Mat and I were traveling together as one of the pairs when we reached Rulo in the early afternoon. We decided to stop and float since we hadn’t seen the other two for a while. After waiting for what seemed like a long time, Scot showed up...alone. It turns out that he and Mike had stopped to refuel from their external tanks 30 miles upriver and then found that Mike’s starter wasn’t working. It took Scot 40 minutes or so to catch up to us just to tell us what had happened. Mike was still 30 miles up river.

While we were trying to figure out what to do about Mike, we met two friendly women, also on personal watercraft. When we told them about our adventure they volunteered to fill our tanks for free at their cabin on the river. They and some others at the cabin ended up writing some generous checks for “Make-a-Wish”. We were just beginning to learn how genuinely helpful and friendly people on the river could be.

We left to go check on Mike as soon as we topped off our tanks. By the time we got there, a “stand-up” Jet Ski rider and some of his friends had pulled over and were working with Mike on his starter. The problem was a loose electrical connection which they had fixed about 20 minutes after we arrived. The Jet Ski guy and his friends gave us some beers and a contribution to Make-a-Wish. The starter problem ended up delaying us about three hours.

Around 6:00 PM we discovered the “Rivertown Resort and Sunset Grill”, a really nice restaurant and fueling facility in St. Joseph, Missouri. The food there was awesome, especially after a long day on the river. When we asked the waiter about fuel stops downriver he pulled out a copy of the most wonderful publication imaginable. It was called the “Quimby’s Guide” and it listed the mile marker locations of all marinas and fueling stations along the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. (Mile markers are posted along “navigable” rivers just like they are along highways.) Quimby’s was much more useful than the Army Corps of Engineers maps we had brought with us and we knew we had to have it. We convinced the restaurant owner to sell us his copy. The first thing we learned from Quimby’s was that the next fuel facility on the river was 363 miles away. We calculated that with full fuel we had a range of about 240 miles. We were definitely going to have to get fuel from gas stations in towns along the river. We would use our Rand MacNally road atlas to help us find towns.

By the time we left the restaurant, there wasn’t much daylight. We set up camp just a few miles past St. Joseph. As we unpacked, we discovered that our tents, sleeping bags and clothes were all damp. As our trip progressed, we learned that in general, once anything got damp, it stayed that way.

Day 3, Sunday, August 6 -- Navigation Philosophies:

We woke up to the stark realization that it was Sunday already. Our plan had been to reach St. Louis by Sunday afternoon. A supporter had even arranged for the “St. Louis press corps” to meet us at the St. Louis Yacht Club for interviews on Sunday evening. I envisioned an upscale, champagne type of event. Well, we weren’t even to Kansas City yet, and St. Louis was a staggering 450 miles downstream. We knew we had to do better. After traveling 10 miles downriver, a cold, driving rain forced us into our wetsuits, and into the realization that this trip was not necessarily going to be easy.

We encountered the first barge of the trip near Kansas City. As we passed behind the barge, I learned that barge wakes last for a painfully long time. We usually couldn't go much faster than 15 or 20 mph for at least a couple of miles after passing one. Fortunately, we would only encounter one other barge on the Missouri.

As we continued past Kansas City, we found ourselves all traveling together in a single group. This made our personal differences in navigation philosophies especially apparent. My belief was that it was best to stay in the main channel, usually along the outside of the river bends. The others felt that it would be best to take the insides of the curves, since this would result in traveling the shortest overall distance. It was inconvenient for me to stick to my approach. Staying in the main channel meant continually crossing the other's wakes, or forcing them to cross mine. With the HydroTrailers and gear, wake crossing wasn't much fun. I often ended up following the other's lead. Unfortunately fate caught up with me. As we rounded one particular curve, I hit a rock and scraped my hull. Luckily the damage was minor. Mike and Mat also got hull damage within a few miles. Everyone stayed closer to the main channel from that point on.

We pulled over at Waverly, Missouri to find a gas station near the river. As we began a walk into town with the first batch of gas cans, we came across a guy riding a lawn mower down the road. He ended up getting his pickup truck and helping us transport our gas cans. He was also kind enough to offer us some beers. As we prepared to leave, he made a point of suggesting that we be sure to "stay in the main channel" while in this part of the Missouri. That seemed like sound advice.

A few hours later, we came upon the town of Glasgow, Missouri. Since we were well over a hundred miles from the next marina, we planned on "hoofing it" into town for fuel. For the second time, however, someone in a pickup truck offered to take us to the gas station. We attracted a small crowd at the launch ramp, and even posed for pictures with the town's police officer.

That evening, we camped across the river from Boonville, Missouri, where we were able to park our watercraft inside a small protected cove. We found that our sleeping bags, tents and clothes were starting to smell. Ironically, we also discovered that bathing in the muddy Missouri actually left us feeling clean.

Day 4, Monday, August 7 -- Locked Out:

As we dragged ourselves out of our sleeping bags, we found that falling water levels had turned our "protected cove" into a pond. We had to dig a canal through the sand to get our WaveRunners out. Precious time was wasted.

After a few hours of cruising, Mike's overpacking problems were suddenly solved when his camping stove and assorted other items, broke free and met their destiny on the bottom of the river. I suspect the trip was much more manageable for Mike from this point on.

That afternoon, with help from our Quimby's guide, we found the fuel stop on the river in New Haven, Missouri. The owner called a reporter from the local press and we agreed to an interview. While we were there, a guy in a kayak pulled in. This guy was kayaking the entire length of the Missouri river. It was his second attempt at traveling the length of the Missouri. His first attempt, which was on a raft perhaps 30 years earlier, ended when he was run over by a barge. He passed the entire length of the barge under water before emerging at the aft end. We were hoping that our first big river trip would be more successful than his.

Later that afternoon we merged with "old man river", the mighty Mississippi. I didn't even realize we reached the Mississippi until a couple more miles downstream when we reached the only known lock of the trip.

A lock is kind of like an elevator for boats. It is used to transfer a boat from one body of water to another which is at a different elevation. In this case, the lock was built to allow the passage of barges past a small dam on the Mississippi. A barge enters a gate on one side of the lock, the gate closes, and then valves open, causing the water level in the lock to rise or fall, as required, to match the level of the water on the other side. Another gate then opens allowing the barge to continue.

As our tiny vessels approached this truly gigantic lock, we noticed a long pull-chain on a huge concrete wall preceding the lock entrance. Next to the chain was a sign instructing pleasure craft operators to "pull the chain". It reminded me of something from *The Wizard of Oz*. I pulled the chain and we proceeded down toward the lock. After a short period of time, a couple of guys came out from atop the wall, and informed us that "Jet Skis weren't allowed go through the lock". Great! All I could think of was the movie "Vacation", when "Wally World" was

closed. "I'm sorry folks, no Jet Skis allowed in the lock, the moose out front should have told you that!" We spent the next half hour to 45 minutes trying to convince the "lock-keepers" to let us through. Finally, after describing our adventure to them, and assuring them that we wouldn't be coming back, they let us pass.

Downtown St. Louis and the Gateway arch were only a short ride downriver from the lock. When we got to within about 100 yards of one of the bridges crossing the river, we found that luck was with us once again. What must have been half a ton of construction debris fell from the bridge into the water, right in front of us. The welcome wagon had dumped its load on us, and missed.

That night we camped on the grounds of Hoppie's marina, located south of St. Louis, in Kimmswick, Missouri. Two guys at the marina offered to take us to a local convenience store for snacks and other necessities. It didn't really surprise us that they were driving a pickup truck.

Day 5, Tuesday, August 8 -- Gloom and Doom on Mosquito Island:

We knew that the gas pumps at the marina didn't open until 8:00 AM, and had felt that this was going to prevent us from getting an early start on the day. As it turns out, we weren't up and ready to go until probably 9:30 AM. This was pretty typical for the trip. We never seemed to get going as early in the morning as we had promised ourselves the night before.

We discovered that the biggest difference between the Missouri and Mississippi rivers was the amount of barge traffic. On the Missouri we passed two barges. On the Mississippi we passed barge after barge. In most cases we would come across a new barge before we even left the wake of the preceding one. Without all our gear, the huge barge wakes would have been a lot of fun. With all our equipment, however, they were a curse. We began to view barges as our enemies. They made our lives miserable.

Around 6:00 PM we stopped at Columbus, Kentucky. A man and his small son in an old pickup truck took us into town. The gas station/convenience store we went to was closing down soon after we arrived, and the attendant was nice enough to give us their unsold corn dogs and hamburgers. They were dried out and stale, but for some reason they tasted damn good. We got a funny look when we asked about buying some beer for later that evening. I think we were in a dry county.

That evening we camped on an island not far from Columbus. There was a nice sand beach, and a decent supply of driftwood for a fire. I took off my shirt and began the nightly ritual of removing my contact lenses. Under normal conditions, this is a quick operation. On the river, it is more difficult because sand and dirt are everywhere, and the contacts must be kept clean. As soon as I had removed my first contact, the "mosquito air force" descended upon my back. There must have been hundreds of mosquitoes biting me and there was nothing I could do about it without losing my contacts. The pain was hard to describe. Welts covered my entire back. As if that wasn't bad enough, we faced an evening with no beer.

Shortly after the mosquito attack, a huge thunderstorm blew through. We had to stay inside our tents to keep them from blowing away. An hour later the storm passed. It was cool, the mosquitoes were gone, and the sky produced the most amazing lightning show I had ever seen.

Then, with the lightning as a backdrop, discussion of the unthinkable had begun. The other members of the expedition began to discuss the possibility that we might not make it all the way to New Orleans. I learned that they each had obligations which couldn't be broken. This caught me completely off guard. I assumed we would all be able to push toward our goal no matter how long it took. If we couldn't make it to New Orleans by Saturday afternoon, we would have to pull out and admit defeat.

Day 6, Wednesday, August 9 -- Killer Waterfalls:

At this point, we were almost always cruising the main channel of the river. On the Mississippi, the main channel is marked pretty clearly with buoys, at least in most places. At one point, Mat and I were paired up in the rear, while Mike and Scot were a short distance ahead. I noticed something peculiar about the river ahead and then saw Scot and Mike take a sharp dip. When Mat and I approached, we realized that they had both gone over a waterfall that extended the entire width of the river. "Those guys are maniacs!" I thought. Mat and I became confused. How could there be a waterfall in the Mississippi with barges going up and down it?

“I think we missed something, Judd!”, shouted Mat above the roar of the falls.

“Could be!”, I responded.

We headed back up river in an attempt to solve the mystery. About a half mile up, we spotted a single buoy that marked a branch of the river that went to the left of the waterfall. Both the buoy and the channel it marked were extremely difficult to see and we didn't feel at all negligent for having missed it. I am, however, surprised that we didn't see the remains of numerous barge wrecks at the falls. Apparently most barge captains are better river navigators than we are.

Mat and I met up with the others at the base of the killer waterfall. We learned that their dare-devil stunt was completely unintentional. They didn't notice the falls until it was too late. Scot and Mike had spent their last seconds dodging some large rocks that were at the edge of the falls, and were still pretty shaken up. Opinions on the waterfall height ranged from 18 inches to four feet high, depending on who was asked. Either way, I am glad I didn't go over it.

We arrived in Memphis about 4:30 that afternoon, pulling into a marina at Mud Island, right under the aerial tram used in the movie “The Firm”. At this point it appeared very unlikely that the “Clueless and Lark Expedition” could make it all the way to New Orleans by our Saturday afternoon deadline. Mat decided to pull out because his older Raider had a porpoising problem that made it difficult to keep up with the rest of us as we crossed the never-ending barge wakes. He felt certain that none of us would have any chance of making it if he was holding us back. His plan was to do whatever he could to help the rest of us get as far as possible.

At this point however, things started to fall apart rapidly. We learned that Mike was also pulling out. The hull damage he received earlier in the trip was apparently more serious than we had previously thought, and he was taking on water. It appeared that Scot was also bailing out and I think he assumed the same of me. The cellular phones were both dead. We were all tired, irritable, sick of the smell of mildew in our sleeping bags, and frustrated by the fact that New Orleans seemed nothing more than a pipe-dream.

I began to consider going the remaining 650 miles myself. That may have been foolhardy, and would have meant finding my own way back to Omaha, but after coming this far, I didn't want to quit. As I stood on the dock thinking about my options, Scot approached me with a question.

“Do you want to keep going?”, he asked.

Very little brain capacity was expended in considering my response. Within the next half hour we had set our new plans into place. Mike and Mat would rent a car and drive to New Orleans to get the rental truck. Scot and I would do what we could to try making it to New Orleans. In order to make it all the way, Scot and I would have to cover an average of 217 miles each day. Our daily average had been 204 miles per day, and most of those miles had been on the Missouri, which was relatively barge-free.

Scot and I left Memphis at about 6:00 PM under dark and ominous skies. Neither of us had any idea what towns or fueling facilities lie ahead. We hadn't really studied the maps, since Mat had been the primary navigator.

We entered a small but strong thunderstorm a mile downriver from the marina. The rain was so heavy, we could hardly see the shore, and navigation meant going buoy to buoy. Once we got to one buoy, we could just start to see the next. Though pouring rain, the sky ahead was bright and we could tell that we would soon be through the storm. No lightning struck us. We were lucky.

After going a few more miles downriver, it appeared that another, much larger storm was approaching. We decided to stop and set up camp while we had the chance. We quickly committed to a sandbar located just past the Tennessee-Mississippi border. Once we landed, we discovered that the beach went back much farther than we thought. In order to set up camp near the shelter of some trees, we had to carry our stuff at least a tenth of a mile.

I was a little nervous about camping so far from the WaveRunners, since we wouldn't be able to easily check on them during the night if it stormed. To help put my mind at ease, I insisted that we tie the crafts to stakes driven into the ground, instead of just pulling each bow up on the sand as we had usually done. Scot agreed to this although both of us thought it was probably overkill. A short time later the storm clouds vanished and it was a clear rainless night. I studied Quimby's guide and the road atlas before drifting off to sleep.

Day 7, Thursday, August 10 -- Whatever Floats Your Boat:

Once we woke up, Scot and I packed our equipment and took the first loads down to the water. We were startled when we got there. The river had risen at least three feet and our 'Raiders were floating in the water, tied securely to the stake. We considered ourselves pretty lucky. Neither of us would have been happy if our 'Raiders had decided to finish the Clueless and Lark Expedition without us.

Our first fuel stop was to be in Helena, Arkansas, which would be easy to identify since it would be at the first bridge we passed that day. We approached Helena going full speed, with Scot in the lead. I slowed down to look for promising places to search for fuel, hoping that Scot would soon notice. Unfortunately he didn't. I stopped and floated in the water, waiting for him to turn around. I watched and grew frustrated as he disappeared down the river. I pulled ashore under the bridge and, after waiting a short time, unloaded my empty fuel cans. There was still no sign of Scot. Stress levels had been rising as the uncertainty of reaching New Orleans loomed. I was annoyed that Scot hadn't stopped and was again thinking about going the rest of the way by myself.

When Scot did finally show up, perhaps ten or fifteen minutes later, I didn't hesitate to vent my frustrations. This eventually evolved into a more productive discussion about specific ways in which we should work together as a team and what we expected of each other. This was something all four expedition members should have probably discussed before the trip. After our discussion, I waited at the river while Scot went with a local guy in a pickup truck to get gas.

A few hours later the tables were turned when I abandoned Scot in his moment of need. He had stopped for what I had assumed was a "routine" load adjustment. I was a quarter mile downriver before I noticed that he wasn't with me, at which point I turned off my engine, leaned back, and had a snack as I floated down the river waiting for him. Unfortunately, Scot had run out of gas and was struggling with the problem of refueling while floating in the middle of the river. To make matters worse, he didn't see me up ahead and had no idea how far I had gone. When we joined up again, we had another "discussion" about teamwork.

Later we stopped in Greenville, Mississippi. We pulled ashore next to a small tug boat and asked one of its mechanics where we could find gas. Victor was probably in his early 40s and had a strong French accent. He liked to think of himself as a "man without a country". As we were beginning to expect of our new river friends, Victor had a pickup truck, and volunteered to take us to a gas station. When we got back, he gave us a tour of the tug. (Tug boats don't seem as threatening when they aren't pushing large wake producing barges.) As we left, he gave Scot his "Leatherman" tool (those stainless steel things that have the pliers and screw drivers) as a token of his support. We were continually reminded of how sincerely helpful the people along the river were.

That evening we set up camp in an isolated sandbar, probably 30 miles or so south of Greenville. For the remaining nights of the trip, we chose to tie our WaveRaiders securely to shore.

Day 8, Friday, August 11 -- Spotlight on Beer:

Our "Quimby's" guide said that in Vicksburg, Mississippi, there was a "fuel barge" a mile up the Yazoo river, which joined the Mississippi there. Nobody there knew anything about it. We did, however, see a gas station from the Yazoo, and it seemed close enough to just walk there with our gas cans. The gas station had a little grill in back which served the best bacon cheeseburgers I ever remember eating. By the time we filled and transported all our tanks in the 100 degree heat, we were exhausted and decided that we would have rather gotten a ride.

Shortly after leaving Vicksburg, I began feeling extremely thirsty and dehydrated. We pulled over so that I could drink some water. In a stroke of brilliance, I realized that I might be more comfortable if I removed my wetsuit.

Later in the day we landed at Natchez, Mississippi, one of the prettiest towns along the river. Our earlier plan had been to get gas there, but we decided that we probably had enough to make it to Baton Rouge. We made a phone call to Mat and Mike, refilled our water jug and headed off. It was 5:00 PM when we left Natchez, and we figured we would be able to get a hundred miles or so before dark. We were starting to think that we might actually make it all the way to New Orleans. Unfortunately after about a half hour, Scot's 'Raider started overheating. We kept going, at an average of 15 or 20 mph, until about a half hour before sunset. It was disappointing because the water was pure glass, no barges for miles and miles. This was without a doubt the smoothest water we had encountered on the entire trip.

That evening, we stopped 30 miles upriver from St. Francisville, Louisiana. We began our search for Scot's overheating problem as soon as we got ashore. We disconnected the engine cooling lines and blew through them, but didn't find anything. Scot thought perhaps taking it apart and putting it back together would solve the problem. We both hoped he was right. The evening was difficult for both of us as we worried once again that we might not make it to New Orleans.

We knew we needed to start early the next day since we didn't know how fast Scot would be able to go. We decided to save time by not setting up our tents. Scot was planning to sleep in his sleeping bag on the beach, while I put on my wet suit and sat in my beach chair. I didn't want to fall asleep since my alarm clock was not working, (it had gotten wet) and I wanted to get up as early as possible.

As I sat in my beach chair drinking a beer, I could begin to see signs of an "enemy vessel" making its way downriver. The tug's spotlight moved methodically from point to point, looking for navigation markers. It seemed that barges travel 24 hours a day. How else could a craft traveling no more than 10 mph get almost as far in a day as we did. Day after day we seemed to see many of the same tugs pushing loads downstream. Early in the trip, I waved at the barges, but I never saw anybody on the bridge wave back.

As the barge passed by, its spotlight paused at the WaveRaiders, then at Scot and finally at me (all 50 million candle power, or so). I held out my beer in an offering way. The spotlight moved up and down to signal that the crew wished they could join us. I was amazed, contact with a barge crew. I wonder if it was one of the barges we had passed numerous times? I wonder if they were envious of our voyage? I guess I will never know.

Day 9, Saturday, August 12 -- So Close, But Yet, So Far:

I woke Scot up at about 5:00 AM, just before the glow in the eastern sky was visible. We got out on the river just as the sun was breaking over the horizon, our earliest start by at least three hours. As we began our trip down the river, Scot flashed me the "thumbs-up". His overheating problem had disappeared. We were able to go as quickly as the barge wakes allowed.

We arrived in Baton Rouge at about 10:00 AM. It looked just as I had expected: refineries, factories and smokestacks. We pulled over at a barge servicing facility and talked to a guy in the parking lot. Yes, he had a pickup truck, and though initially hesitant, he ended up giving Scot a ride for gas. As we left Baton Rouge, we were both feeling pretty optimistic. We were almost there. Images of Bourbon St. began to dance their way through our heads.

After another hour of riding, our lack of sleep the night before began to catch up with us. With all the heavy barge and ocean-going freighter traffic between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, we didn't want to be drowsy. We decided to stop and float for a while in order to give ourselves a chance to lean back and rest for a minute or two. Both of us instantly fell asleep.

We woke up very startled, since sleeping was the last thing we intended to do. There are probably safer places to take a nap than in the middle of the main channel between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. I couldn't help thinking about the kayak guy's story about getting run over by a barge.

We continued riding, but the farther we went down river, the farther New Orleans seemed to get. Every time we went around a bend, we expected to see the New Orleans skyline. In a couple of cases I was sure I saw it, but it turned out to be a power plant or grain storage facility. To make matters worse, I was getting delirious from what was probably dehydration, and began to shiver despite the 100 degree temperatures. I was feeling pretty sick and was nodding off quite a bit as I rode. I kept wondering if we had taken a wrong turn and were lost. We both wondered if I was going to make it. My feeling at the time was that if I was going to die soon, I wanted it to happen after we got to New Orleans and not before. I wanted to complete the trip at any cost. Eventually we pulled over and got something to eat and drink. This helped quite a bit.

After what seemed like an eternity, we reached the New Orleans metropolitan area. We were both frustrated and impatient at what ended up being a much longer leg of our trip than we had anticipated. We were ready for the end of the trip. All that was left was a few more miles of the Mississippi and a short canal trip from the river to Lake Pontchartrain, where the others would be waiting.

When we arrived at the canal entrance... Surprise! Another lock! As we entered the lock our worst fears were realized: "Sorry, no jet skis allowed in the locks, the moose out front should have told you that!" Scot about had a heart attack.

The "nice guy" approach we had used at the St. Louis lock seemed to have worked pretty well, but apparently Scot felt that an alternate approach would be more appropriate here. Either that, or he just lost control. Anyway, despite a lack of finesse on Scot's part, the guy agreed to let us through if we promised not to go back through the other way later. That was the same thing the lock guys in St. Louis said. The lock-keeper also mentioned something about needing a marine radio to request that a draw bridge further down the canal be opened, but we didn't pay much attention. We were pretty sure that we could go under any drawbridge on a WaveRunner, whether or not it was open.

We shot down the canal at full speed. When we got to the drawbridge, it was pretty clear that we had to wait for it to be opened. The bridge clearance was about a foot, and there wasn't another boat in sight. We thought that perhaps we were in for a long wait. A few minutes later, however, we saw a boat approaching very quickly. I thought for sure it was the "river patrol", coming to get us for blasting through the canal. As it turned out it was just some drunken boaters. Fortunately they had a radio, so they were able to request that the bridge be raised. When we told them about our trip, they decided that we deserved a shot of Jack Daniel's, some beer and a \$50 donation to Make-a-Wish.

The launch ramp where the others waited was just to the left of the canal entrance to Lake Pontchartrain, a mile or so past the draw bridge. No press members greeted us, since we hadn't been able to estimate our arrival time. We ended up getting there at 7:00 PM. If we had been more than one hour slower for the whole trip, we wouldn't have made it in time. We were lucky that the forecasted hurricanes had dissipated before reaching New Orleans.

Both Scot and I were in the mood to detach the HydroTrailers and play around a bit in the lake. The fact that we had achieved our goal made us forget that we were in such a hurry to get out of the water. Unfortunately the clock had run out. We needed to load up the truck and head back.

When the 'Raiders were safely inside, we found the nearest on-ramp, and were on our way back to Omaha. No Bourbon St., no Cajun food, no bars. Our first stop was probably 100 miles later at a Burger King. These were not the end of trip festivities I had envisioned. It didn't matter though. We had made it to New Orleans. We had conquered the river. Clueless and Lark was a success.

Epilogue

Clueless and Lark was the first long trip any of us had ever taken on a personal watercraft, and was the main reason I had decided to purchase my first PWC two months earlier. Overall I think we planned pretty well for such a long and unique adventure. Having 40 to 43 gallons of fuel per person when fully loaded was a definite necessity. Marinas and towns were often few and far between on both the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. The trip would have certainly failed early without this much fuel capacity. Using MREs for our food supply was another excellent idea. The MREs were compact, waterproof and required no preparation. They each contained a main course, a snack item such as cheese and crackers, a dessert bar, a tiny bottle of Tabasco sauce, candy, toilet paper and other assorted items. The HydroTrailers were also indispensable, adding immensely to our storage capacity.

Naturally, however, there are some things we would probably have done differently if we were to do it over again. We all brought way too much stuff. I wore hardly any of the clothes I brought. In fact, I wore the same clothes every day.

The dumbest idea for the trip, at least in retrospect, was to bring attachable running lights so that we could travel at night. We thought that if the moon was shining, we could safely travel at night. Fortunately, after seeing how many small problems we had during the day, we decided that trying to run at night would have been suicidal. Next time we leave the running lights at home.

Our group's future plans include a WaveRunner trip from Florida to the Bahamas. Once there, we will tour most of the major island groups before returning to Florida. This trip should be a good test of our navigational skills and our ability to stay together as a group. We plan on having GPS units, marine transceivers and emergency transmitting beacons, just in case.

The Clueless and Lark Expedition ended up raising almost \$5000 for the Make-A-Wish Foundation. It was satisfying to know that our efforts paid off in such a great way.

Clueless and Lark Daily Statistics (For Reference):

Day	End of Day Location (Nearest Town)	Miles Traveled That Day	Percent Traveled That Day	Percent Finished
1	Plattsmouth, Nebraska	18	1%	1%
2	St. Joseph, Missouri	142	9%	10%
3	Boonville, Missouri	248	15%	25%
4	Hoppie's Marina, Kimmswick, Missouri	230	14%	38%
5	Columbus, Kentucky	178	11%	49%
6	Memphis, Tennessee	222	13%	62%
7	Greenville, Mississippi	203	12%	75%
8	St. Francisville, Louisiana	204	12%	87%
9	New Orleans, Louisiana	216	13%	100%