

# TRIP REPORT FORM

**RIVER:** South Branch of the Potomac (through half of Smokehole Canyon), West Virginia

**PUT-IN:** Big Bend Campground (before actual campground entrance, along FR 809

**TAKE-OUT:** Petersburg, WV (at public boat access area just down river from US 220 bridge)

**Approximate number miles by river:** 15 (according to USGS topographic maps)

**CLASS:** I-II(III) The difficulty of rapids on this river section is vastly different depending on water levels. I have run the river at 2.0 feet on the Petersburg gauge and had to walk almost every rapid. I have also run the river at approximately 7.0 feet on the same gauge and worried about losing my canoe and gear. My most recent trip was at 4.5 feet on the Petersburg gauge and the water level was about perfect. No walking was required and several of the class II-III rapids were a thrill. At the 4.5 feet gauge reading, swift water and 2 foot standing waves were common, especially after the confluence with the North Fork of the South Branch. In my estimation, only 3 rapids warrant a class III designation, and **only** in higher water levels. This is due to the technicality of maneuvering and avoiding rocks in swift water, drops, ledges, standing waves which could swamp a canoe, and in one case (*the Old Dam*), avoiding rebar. Overall, I would classify the river as class I-II, with a few more difficult class II-III rapids in higher water.

**SCENIC VALUE:** A+ (the stretch through Smokehole canyon to the confluence with the North Fork is incredibly scenic, rivaling anything I've seen in the east. Bizarre rock outcrops along with sheer cliffs and wooded canyon sides coupled with the fact that only 2 standing structures exist for approximately the first 10 miles make this run quite memorable).

**POLLUTION VALUE:** A (good swimming, although a Do Not Eat advisory is posted for the entire South Branch of the Potomac for non-game fish. The river at and above the put-in is one of the most heavily stocked trout streams (river) in the State).

**DATE OF TRIP:** My most recent trip was on May 26-27, 2001 (camped out night of 5/26/01) I was in a 16 ft. Mad River canoe with a friend, along with camping gear. A 14 ft. solo touring kayak and a 10 ft. solo inflatable kayak, both with camping gear, also made the run.

**WATER LEVEL:** As stated previously, the water level was 4.5 feet on the Petersburg gauge reading when we put-in. The water level fell to approximately 4.2 feet by the time we took out. I feel that between 4.5 and 5.0 feet on the Petersburg gauge is the optimum water level to run this river section. (*Wildwater West Virginia* lists the acceptable water levels as between 3 - 6 feet on the Petersburg gauge, although this gauge may be deceiving because it is accounting for the North Fork of the South Branch, as well as the South Branch of the Potomac).

**DESCRIPTION OF STREAM:** The listed put-in is about half-way through Smokehole Canyon. The river consists of fast moving, somewhat technical rapids interspersed with short, flat sections. Many of the river bends require maneuvering in swift water to stay in the channel and off the walls and shore. Some downed logs and woody debris, along with overhanging trees were evident along the shore and in river bend areas. Several places exist where the water divides into two or three channels. Canoes should stay with the main channel, but smaller boats can explore the back channels. In lower water, numerous rock gardens require constant maneuvering. Some of the rapids contain standing waves approaching 2 ½ feet, which open canoes can skirt to avoid being swamped. After the confluence with the North Fork of the South Branch, the river changes, becoming much larger (*river flow probably doubles*). Most of the difficult rapids occur after the rivers join. Numerous ledges and several drops, along with larger standing waves characterize this section, although longer stretches of flat water also occur. Some of the rapids require precise maneuvering in swift water and should be scouted at least the first time through. Because of the swift water and constant rapids, this section (15 miles) can easily be run in a day with an early start. But to really enjoy the scenery, plan on spending a night camping in the canyon. About a dozen stream-side primitive camp sites exist in the canyon itself, most located after the first class II-III rapid, the King, Queen, Joker . Many of the campsites have excellent views of the sheer rock cliff walls which abound in Smokehole Canyon. Make time to check out the sites, especially Blue Rock, an amazing razor-edge ridge jutting above the trees and towering over the river. Some of the river banks have NO TRESPASSING signs. Please heed the signs. An individual from Wheeling WV, owner of the Smokehole Lodge , owns a large section of the river bank on both sides of the river around the Smokehole Lodge . On several trips, this individual and/or his employees have walked along the river s edge warning us to stay in our damn boats . We did.

**DIFFICULTIES:** Depending on the water depth, you could spend a lot of time walking your boat or clutching onto a swamped boat. The first class II-III rapid, the King, Queen, Joker is the third rapid after the Smokehole Lodge. It is located on a abrupt bend to the right. The river is squeezed here, making river width approximately 30 feet. In an open boat, enter the rapid to river left, cut across current to river right, avoiding 2 large rocks, and quickly turn the boat left around the right side of the second rock to straighten the boat for the plunge through the chute and approx. 4 foot slide/drop. Keep the canoe stable as large waves have to be ridden out before ending in a deep pool. In high water, the confluence with the North Fork of the South Branch can be tricky. The North Fork pours into the South Branch on river left at an approximately 80-90 degree angle, creating swirling currents and a wall of water if higher than the South Branch. Ease your boat into the oncoming current and ride out a few waves. You may have to parallel the joining river currents a bit before they completely join. The next difficult rapid is the Old Dam . This rapid consists of going through an old concrete dam. There are three main water courses, stay far left. Avoid the rock in the middle of the left channel to cascade down an approximately 3 foot chute/slide. The middle and right channels should be avoided due to some rebar sticking out from concrete chunks of the crumbled dam. Some large waves which need to be avoided appear after the drop. After several rapids, one with large standing waves which have to be avoided, comes a series of almost river-wide ledges. The main channel is on river right but requires complex maneuvering to negotiate the set of three drops and large waves. In higher water, this rapid can be run river left or center to avoid the largest ledge area. The most difficult rapid is just

before the US 220 bridge. This rapid, called the Haystacks by locals, consists of 4 river wide ledges, separated by approximately 50 yards of river between. Because the river is pinched here, water flow increases, creating hydraulics on the downstream side of the ledges with large waves, some over 3 feet. In extremely high water, it is very difficult to run this rapid in an open canoe due to wave height, especially if loaded with camping gear. The best bet is to stay left and attempt to ride out the waves and stay straight and stable while going over the drops. This rapid should be scouted. If you have problems with the first or second set of drops, plan on being washed over the remaining two. I have been with a group who attempted to run this rapid in high water with open canoes and ending up losing gear as well as getting some good cuts and scrapes. At water levels around 2-3 ft, this rapid is much tamer and consists of maneuvering thru 4 successive ledge- drops.

**SHUTTLE:** The take-out is located just downstream from the U.S. 220 bridge which crosses the South Branch just south of Petersburg. There is a paved public boat launch here. The road leading to the launch area is a left turn just before crossing the bridge, heading south on U.S. 220 and directly across from a large parking lot. Cars should not be left directly at the launch, so plan on parking in the City Park parking lot on the opposite side of U.S. 220. From the take-out, travel south on U.S. 220. Just after going across the South Branch on a bridge (*several miles north of Upper Tract*), make a right onto County Road 2 (paved). Stay on CR 2 for several miles (*this road is very narrow and curvy and passes spectacular rock formations like Eagle Rock*). Bear right (stay straight) onto FR 809 (gravel). Several signs for Big Bend Campground are near the intersection. Travel on FR 809 north along the South Branch (*watch out for cars parked along the road and fishermen walking the road*) to just before the entrance to Big Bend Campground (*the road ends here*). The put-in is located approx. 1/4 mile before the campground entrance, on the left side of the road. The parking area is located on the left, in between the put-in and the campground entrance. Due to the narrow, winding nature of CR 2 and FR 809, it will take between 45-60 minutes to get from the Petersburg take-out to the put-in, if traffic is light.

Report prepared by: Andrew P. Dick  
[sunman69@junio.com](mailto:sunman69@junio.com)