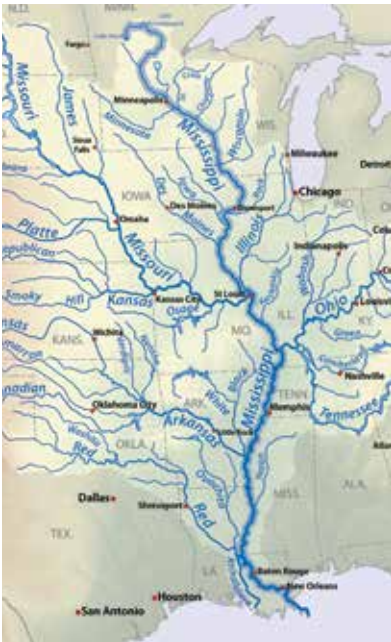


Packing for the Big Paddle



carrying lots of food is heavy and will slow your progress. Find a packing strategy that works for you. Apply this pros-and-cons method to your choice of canoe, tent, dry bags, etc.”

On the flipside, traveling too light also has its disadvantages. Some paddlers find themselves with inadequate clothing or sleeping bags, or in desperate need of food and water. Matt Mohlke tried the ultra-light method

“I was on a shoestring budget of three dollars per day because I read too much Henry David Thoreau as a kid.”

By Ryan Johnson

Few trips are as logistically challenging as paddling the entire Mississippi River. The 2,350-mile trip starts at Lake Itasca, deep in the North Woods of Minnesota, and ends at the salty waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Most paddlers take two to four months to complete the adventure, so they need to prepare for an extreme range of weather conditions. It is not uncommon to begin in snow and ice, only to be battling heat stroke a few weeks later in the Deep South. And though the river flows right through the heart of America, civilization can be hard to find for long stretches of the journey, so paddlers preparing for this grand adventure need to put serious thought into what they will pack into their boats.

A dozen veteran paddlers of the Mississippi shared what they learned about packing for the big paddle. The list of items they stuffed below — and occasionally over — their gunwales, is as long as the river itself. Some

Some paddlers travel with more stuff than others do. (Ryan Johnson)

paddlers are of the minimalist mindset, while others lean towards a life of luxury. More stuff can provide comfort, but the downsides of traveling heavy includes decreased boat performance, more to carry on portages and a longer set-up and tear-down at each camp.

Dominique Liboiron, who paddled the Mississippi River in 2012, summed it up well. “I would encourage paddlers to look at the pros and cons of their packing method. For example, some paddlers carry lots of food. The advantage is they don’t have to stop often to buy supplies. This saves time. Another advantage is they don’t have to leave their canoe unattended every few days when they get groceries. This lowers the risk of theft. On the downside,

on his 1999 voyage. “I slept without a sleeping pad on hard ground and woke up sore ... trying to be spartan and all, but that will never happen again. I lost a lot of weight from not eating right. I would take better care of myself and eat more. I was on a shoestring budget of three dollars per day because I read too much Henry David Thoreau as a kid.”

Recommended Gear

Aside from the basics of a boat, a paddle and shelter, I asked paddlers what they found to be surprisingly important. After paddling not only the entire Mississippi River, but also the Missouri River, Ellen McDonah recalled, “An item that I couldn’t have lived without would be my Jetboil [light-weight stove]. It made meal prep easy and fast.”

Other items paddlers highly recommended were:

- Leatherman (multi-tool)
- mud boots
- weather/marine-band radio
- ear plugs
- hammock
- lip balm
- well-fitting brimmed hat
- synthetic sleeping bag

Leave it at Home

I also asked paddlers what they packed that turned out to be a dud. To my surprise this list turned out to be quite short. However, quite a few paddlers brought a water filter but found they were only brave enough to use it on the uppermost part of the river.

Several paddlers found these items were not worth their weight:

- iron skillet
- axe
- shovel
- laptop

River Angels

Even paddlers with unlimited funds, an impeccable packing list and the most heavily-loaded boats can find themselves lacking something vital. On many long stretches of river you will

be far from a store of any kind. Some paddlers simply pushed through those tough times, but many found themselves blessed by an angel along the way. Social media plays a large role connecting paddlers in need with river angels, who may bring anything from a toothbrush to a new boat.

Linda De Kock held the river angels in high regard. “Our trips were so much easier because of river angels. I was able to leave boxes of supplies with

No matter what they packed, everyone felt their journey was a highlight of their life.

people I met on the Mississippi River page and then pick them up as we went down the river. And several times, river angels would drive us to local stores to resupply. The kindness and generosity we experienced from these wonderful former strangers was life-changing and one of the highlights of the trip. River people are amazing!”

Final Words

Quite a few of the paddlers I spoke with emphasized the importance of researching your trip before you depart. John Sullivan, a veteran long-distance paddler, suggested, “I would encourage paddlers to read river journals/books if they have never taken a long paddling trip before. These journals often provide information on gear that is being used or gear that should be left behind or was not necessary.”

Nearly all paddlers suggest packing light. Craig Aubuchon’s years of experience as an ultra-light backpacker proved valuable on his trip down the Mississippi last summer. “Stay light! It provides important flexibility and safety.”

No matter what they packed, everyone felt their journey was a highlight of their life. Matt Rens suggested, “Enjoy it, don’t rush it. It sucks sometimes. But for God’s sake, after you’re done, it’s the only thing you will want to be doing.” 🍷

Ryan Johnson is a kayak guide who lives in La Crosse, Wis. His last story for Big River was “Born to Paddle — Growing Wenonah Canoe,” January-February 2016.



Linda De Kock, swathed in trusty mosquito netting, prepares dinner. (Gary De Kock)