



Surf's Up

Ken Hoeve rides the rapids of the Colorado River. Photo by Bjorn Bauer

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By: **Jayme Moye**



How a Vail Valley local pioneered the burgeoning sport of whitewater SUP.

In the late spring and early summer, experienced kayakers in the Vail Valley head to Dowd Junction on the Eagle River. Here, the riverbanks narrow to form an aggressive chute that blasts paddlers over one of the biggest drops on the river and into a series of rowdy class IV rapids. On a warm day in June, former professional kayaker Ken Hoeve shows up to run this thrilling quarter-mile section known as Dowd Chute. Only he's not carrying a kayak.

Hoeve, 43, is part of a new breed of river runners who've replaced their kayaks with stand-up paddleboards. The fledgling sport, known as river SUP, or whitewater SUP, is a high-octane variation of the SUP that's traditionally been done in Colorado—and from coast to coast—on flat-water lakes, reservoirs, and bays. Case in point: Before entering the water, Hoeve sits on a rock and tugs G-form pads over his knees and elbows, similar to the body armor worn by downhill mountain bikers. “Rapids are created by rocks,” he says. “So if you wipeout on the river, you want

to be protected.”



Hoeve rocking the first-ever SUP descent of the Rio Cangrejal in Honduras. Photo by Ken Hoeve.

Hoeve, who works as the morning weatherman for *Good Morning Vail*, first considered running rapids on a stand-up paddleboard in 2007 while in Salt Lake City. A vendor at an outdoor industry trade show introduced him to a new type of stand-up paddleboard: an inflatable. “I immediately thought of whitewater rafting,” Hoeve says. “I got so excited about the idea that, in exchange for a promise to send them pictures,

they gave me one to take home and try in rapids.”

At that point, Hoeve had heard of only two other people in Colorado who’d tried SUPs on the river. It wasn’t an encouraging number, but Hoeve was optimistic about the inflatable board. He tested it on the Colorado River, in the class II and III section known as Shoshone in Glenwood Canyon. “I knew if I couldn’t make it down the rapids on the stand-up board, I could at least swim them,” Hoeve says.

He took a few tumbles in the Shoshone rapids, but like many ocean-surfers-turned SUPers, Hoeve was hooked. It was a fresh perspective on the river from a higher vantage point than a kayak—a way to “walk on water,” Hoeve says. He immediately began thinking of ways to fine-tune the board for use on mountain rivers. He made sketches on napkins, talked to anyone who would listen on the topic, and reached out to every known SUP manufacturer with his ideas. Finally, in 2010, Tennessee-based [Jackson Kayak](#) agreed to design a prototype whitewater board.

Ironically, the end result, the SUPerCharger, was not inflatable. The stability of a hard, plastic board molded like a kayak was more suited to beginners and a better way to make the fledgling sport accessible to as many people as possible. “It doesn’t flex—it’s like a tank going through rapids,” says Hoeve. “We already knew that kayaks work really well on the river, and this is basically a kayak designed for you to stand on.”

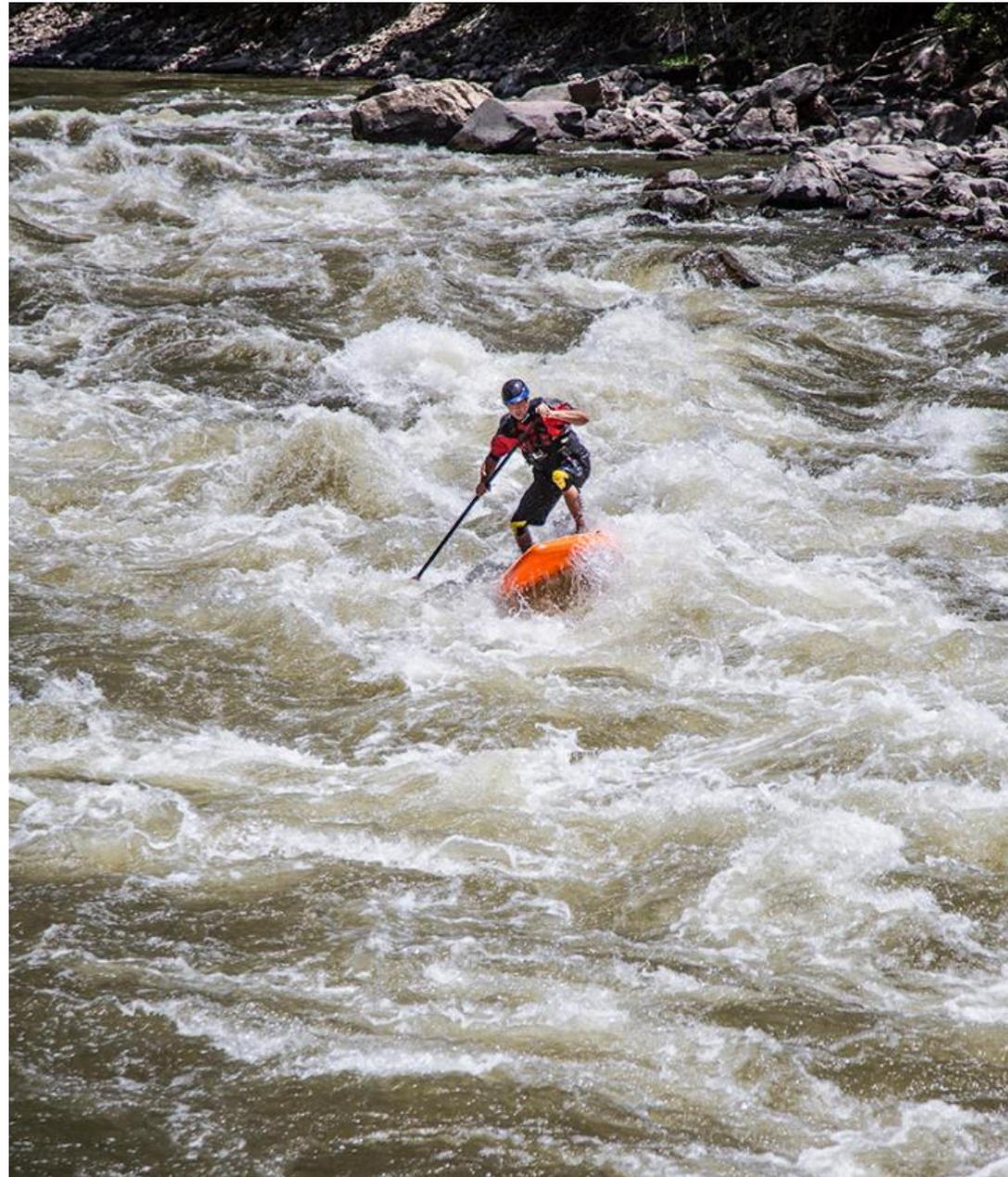


Jayme Moyer and Hoeve start their SUP adventure on the Colorado River. Photo by Bjorn Bauer.

Other brands, like Colorado-based [Badfish](#), have also recently created river-specific SUPs. These inflatables are wider than their flat-water predecessors, which increases stability on moving water. They're also thicker, to better negotiate the aerated water of the river, which is less dense than flat water. And, unlike regular SUPs, the river versions have a shedding bow to ensure that the nose of the board sheds water and resurfaces quickly in whitewater. All these improvements have contributed to the sport's rise in popularity by making it safer and easier to run rivers on stand-up boards. "It's so fun," says Hoeve. "I've never had anyone do it that didn't love it—even the haters,

the kayakers. Once you try it you love it. All ages, all abilities. It's like walking on water, only better.”

Hoeve also credits the [GoPro Mountain Games](#), held each year in [Vail](#), with getting eyes on the sport of whitewater SUP. The Games, a four-day, adrenaline-soaked bonanza of summer mountain sports hosted by the [Vail Valley Foundation](#), set the standard for SUP river races in the rest of the nation's river towns, Hoeve says. He originally pitched the idea of adding a SUP river race to the event in 2009. Later that year, the debut “SUP Surf Sprint,” a three-mile race down Gore Creek, sold out at 50 participants. To accommodate the unexpected demand, the promoters quickly



raised the maximum to 70. The extra slots promptly sold out, with a wait-list.

The 2014 GoPro Mountain Games featured two SUP races, the SUP Surf Sprint and SUP Surf Cross, a spectator favorite that pits four

paddlers in a full-contact race. Both events filled to capacity. “Colorado, and our valley in particular, have been leading the charge of progressing and promoting stand-up paddling on river,” says Hoeve. “We have come such a long way in a very short time—it’s going to be amazing to see where others take it from here.”



Hoeve navigating the whitewater. Photo by Bjorn Bauer.

GET ON BOARD

Whitewater not your thing? Not to worry. Stand-up paddleboarding is considered the fastest growing sport in the outdoor industry, which means there’s a SUP flavor for everyone. Find yours:

FLATWATER To paddle among panoramic mountain views on a serene surface, head to the Dillon Reservoir, also called Lake Dillon, in Frisco. Surrounded by the 13,000-foot peaks of Breckenridge’s Ten Mile Range, this idyllic spot features 3,300 acres of water and numerous small islands to paddle around (and enjoy a picnic lunch). Rent a paddleboard onsite at the Frisco Bay

Marina; \$35 for two hours.

RIVER For your first time on the river, you don't need rapids; moving water will be challenge enough. Start in Eagle County on the Colorado River at Dotsero and take it to the mouth of the canyon. Progress to the class I/II rapids of the 3.5-mile stretch from Gypsum to Dotsero on the Eagle River.



Hoeve's early-morning catch on Sylvan Lake, Colorado. Photo by Ken Hoeve.

YOGA For a challenging twist on yoga, try it on a SUP. In the summer, [MetaYoga](#) partners with [Alpine Sports Rental](#) to offer a yoga class (including board rental) on tranquil Maggie Pond in downtown Breckenridge. SUPs are anchored in the middle of the pond so you don't float away. No SUP experience required.

FISHING Fly-fishermen have discovered that casting from a stand-up board provides a better

vantage point, and that the shallow profile of the board allows access to previously impossible-to-reach sections of lakes and rivers (read: makes it easier to sneak up on fish). Companies like

Badfish and Jackson Kayak have recently launched fishing-specific boards.

LESSONS [Stand Up Paddle Colorado](#) offers lessons on both Dillon Reservoir and the Colorado River, as well as guided river tours. [Alpine Quest Sports](#) in Edwards offers full-day lessons that progress from flat water to class II rapids. Some SUP professionals, like Glenwood Springs-based [Brittany Parker](#), teach clinics and offer private lessons.

Tags: **Vail, Beaver Creek, Breckenridge, Keystone, Canyons, Heavenly, Northstar, Kirkwood, Afton Alps, Mt Brighton, Multi-resort**

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