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COLUMN ONE

There's Gold in the Spills

Reno's gamble seems to be paying off as kayakers flock to its man-made rapids in the casino-adjacent Truckee River.

By Ashley Powers
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RENO — The women sink their paddles into the mountain snowmelt, crank their grape- and cherry-colored kayaks into a series of corkscrews, and let the riverbank's gaudy enticements — Jacuzzi Rooms! Theme Rooms! Fantasy Rooms! — evaporate into the spritz of pummeling white water.

Karan Estee and Cari Holliman prefer to frolic on remote rivers lined with oaks or aromatic pines. Like millions of Americans who pour billions of dollars a year into mountain bikes, snowboards, hiking boots and other outdoor toys, these Salt Lake City friends bought their kayaks at least in part to escape the civilized life.

But this time Estee, 29, and Holliman, 30, explored the Truckee River not in alpine canyons near Lake Tahoe, but miles downstream, where engineers hired by the city of Reno have sent it

frothing through a man-made kayak park downtown.

While running rapids within an easy walk of showgirls and roulette tables may seem unique to the Biggest Little City of Contradictions, Reno's urban white water has plenty of company.

In the last few years, about 25 communities including Wausau, Wis.; Pittsford, N.Y.; and the Colorado cities of Boulder, Denver, Vail and Steamboat Springs have re-engineered the waterways coursing through their midst to create the rapids, riffles and "play holes" that white-water kayakers appreciate. Missoula, Mont.; Boise, Idaho; and Willimantic, Conn., are among a growing number of cities pushing to liven up their waterways — and city coffers.

One study shows the number of kayakers nationwide has leapt 125% in the last five years, to 9.9 million. About a fifth of those are white-water kayakers.

A white-water park in Colorado along Golden's Clear Creek brings an estimated \$1.4 million a year into the community through hotel, restaurant and other revenue, according to one consulting firm's study. And promoters say that the parks' advantages go beyond the bottom line by helping improve river quality and luring couch-bound residents outdoors.

One of the country's first kayak parks was modeled after a water course built for the 1972 Munich Olympics. The East Race Waterway opened near the St. Joseph River in South Bend, Ind., in 1984, revitalizing a channel once packed with debris. Open only on weekends, the park draws as many as 10,000 visitors over the summer.

The mayor of ski-happy Ogden, Utah, first encountered the possibilities when he knocked on the door of a kayaker while out

campaigning. The boater badgered Matthew Godfrey about adding rocks and rapids to the Weber River.

Since 2001, a white-water park has carved through the city's west side, carrying a daily flotilla of mainly squat, Kool-Aid colored boats past brick industrial buildings left over from Ogden's days as a Union Pacific railroad town. At first "you saw a lot of head-scratching and eye-rolling," Godfrey says. "The assumption was that people just don't kayak in our community."

Amy Wicks, an Ogden councilwoman, says the park has catalyzed paddlers to de-gunk the Weber by hauling out debris. "If they weren't boating down it, they wouldn't care," she says. Now, planners intend to dot the area's other river, the Ogden, with play spots.

In what may become the most extravagant project, the Charlotte, N.C., area has proposed a \$25-million artificial white-water course, with movable boulders and rapids that can be changed to suit various levels of experience. Meant to emulate the 2000 Olympics run in Sydney, Australia, the waterway would anchor an outdoor adventure park with climbing walls, a ropes course, meeting rooms and a restaurant on 307 acres just a 10-minute drive from downtown.

An economics professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte predicts that the park could generate \$37 million annually.

For its part, Reno is selling itself in outdoor magazines and on big banners downtown as America's Adventure Place, and its 10-month-old Truckee River Park at Wingfield is the linchpin. A University of Nevada, Reno economist predicts the park will draw several thousand fans to paddling events, while enticing locals and out-of-towners alike to spend at least \$1.9 million a year at

riverside eateries, shops and hotels. Two casinos and the city paid for the \$1.5-million Reno park. The state will reimburse them with bond money.

Engineers took charge of the Truckee River as it cleaves downtown, miles from where it squiggles out of the mountains below Lake Tahoe. A few pieces of the river's concrete corral are the only hints of the '60s, when city officials tried to tame the flood-prone Truckee by straightening and deepening it through downtown. Concrete walls encased the small island around which the current now burbles. The local paper called the river "deadly," with a hydraulic rush that could "trap anything that falls into it."

In August 2003, Gary Lacy, Truckee River Park's engineer, had workers replace much of the concrete lining with 7,000 tons of rocks, and crafted a step-like course of 11 pools and rapids rated a mellow Class II to III, on a scale of six. Workers dug the channels into U shapes and used concrete to anchor the rocks. They carved the riverbed into slides: The current smacks the top, froths into white water and spills into a calm pool.

Now neophyte kayakers learn the basics near the spot where Estee rehearses her rotations, far from the moody wild rivers where she and Holliman were schooled in white water. Holliman recalls a kayaking trek through the Grand Canyon, with ocean-big waves and a hovering moon. In Reno, she crawled out of the Truckee, glanced up and witnessed a marriage at the White Lace and Promises wedding chapel.

On the river's south channel, slalom gates striped like candy canes dangle from wires across a channel the length of four football fields. Play holes — waves that allow kayakers to stay in one spot "surfing" and perfecting trick moves — stipple the north channel. Casual paddlers practice, champion kayaker Jay Kincaid trains and the lines get Disneyland-long in the eddies where paddlers kick

back to wait for a turn in the standing waves.

In Colorado, arid from the West's persistent drought, critics don't see kayaking as a good use of water. Farmers worry that sustaining adequate flow for downstream boaters could mean siphoning off water needed for thirsty corn and cattle. "We have a battle on our hands to try to protect agricultural water in the state," says Ray Christensen, executive vice president of the state Farm Bureau. "We could wake up one day and have really done damage and wonder: 'Where did our water go?' "

But in what the local press termed a faceoff between the New West and the Old, two Colorado court rulings settled a dispute over water rights in Golden, Vail and Breckenridge by putting recreation on equal footing with municipalities, agriculture and industry. The state Supreme Court deadlocked on the appeal, letting the decision stand.

Reno's park has gone largely unchallenged.

Some purists say they are uneasy with altering any river in any way. Most of the grumblers came out during construction, says Lynn Zonge, a hydrologist involved in the planning. "They said, 'Why does it look so engineered? Why is there so much concrete?' "

Zonge says the park is nature, but sanitized. Just as parents can fit a TV with a V-chip to block certain channels, engineers can filter danger from a river so that even boogie boarders and tube riders can share the currents. The city manages the park like a skateboard park: Visitors are responsible for their own safety.

The boaters attracted to ersatz rapids aren't absurdist daredevils like MTV's "Jackass" guys frolicking in city fountains, but a subspecies of thrill-seekers, hooked on ease and relative safety.

Just as weatherproof finger-holds on artificial climbing walls appeal to jocks more interested in polishing moves than cheating death, predictable hydrodynamics attract play boaters. The craze even has a nickname: park and play.

Idaho river outfitter Les Bechdel doesn't begrudge his urban brethren. "But from the safety aspect, it makes me nervous," says Bechdel, who co-wrote the book "River Rescue." "They go out there and run these rivers like a banshee and think they'll be really good because they can do all these tricks.... But you have to spend time on a river to know its nuances."

In January, the Outdoor Industry Assn., based in Boulder, Colo., released a study examining why couch potatoes turn into adventurers and why some adventurers revert to the couch. People cited lack of time as the greatest obstacle for getting into — and sticking with — an outdoor activity. Time-crunched urban dwellers and suburbanites account for almost two-thirds of kayakers. Almost half of the paddlers said they've let their gear gather dust.

Kayak parks target this built-in audience. "Man can't build a Chesapeake Bay," says Brad Nelson, founder of a Pennsylvania group that tracks and cheerleads urban kayaking projects, "but man can build a white-water park."

Engineers can also amend riparian shortcomings. "Nature doesn't build great play holes one after the other," says Lacy, the engineer, a paddler himself. "You go to a river and realize there's one good play hole in the whole run, and you think, 'I could go to downtown Reno and there's four in a row.' "

And after schlepping out of the water, a kayaker can grab a hot dog at the cart advertising its "Sausage of the Week," caffeinate at Java Jungle and catch a matinee.

Even die-hard Reno-area river runners get a guilty look on their faces when asked about the last time they punched their kayak through a rapid on the tempestuous upper Truckee. Jon Fairchild and his buddies used to set aside Thursday nights for running that scenic stretch of wild white water half an hour west of town.

The ritual ended when the park opened. Staying in town is just too easy to resist, says Fairchild, a 25-year-old kayak instructor. "You don't pack at all. You don't need a friend. You can go by yourself. We never imagined going kayaking on a lunch break."

Pro kayaker Tiffany Manchester, who trains on Ontario's Ottawa River, loves the convenience of kayak parks such as Reno's, where she has competed. But she understands why old-school "soul kayakers" see the artifice as an assault on the sport's natural essence. At a park, she says, "you don't hear the sound of the water and the birds. You hear cars honking. That's sort of sad."

Lunching at a downtown coffee shop, her hair and wetsuit dripping, Holliman notes the contrast too. "I guess there's some wildlife in Reno," she says as a woman saunters past in tiger-striped pants.

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