



## Backpack and raft Denali National Park

SOME HIKERS KNOW how to treat themselves right. There's the backcountry barista packing the espresso kit; the hammock zealot; the guy with the silk bag liner. But the best luxe items are the ones that take your adventure up a notch, letting you experience the backcountry in a new way. We offer Exhibit A: the packraft. Imagine hiking to a remote headwater, and instead of slogging back to the trailhead, the river carries you—and your pack—in contented bliss.

Packrafts were designed as survival craft for World War II pilots; by the 1970s, forward-thinking (though hairball) Alaskan adventurers started bringing the bathtub-sized inflatables into the bush. Today's models are so bombproof, light (down to 4 pounds), and, well, packable, they can transform hiking trips into multisport expeditions. They still see the most use in Alaska, where shallow glacial rivers are braided highways that perfectly complement extended hiking routes.

Adventure racer Roman Dial, a biology professor at Alaska Pacific University, is writing the first-ever guidebook to Alaskan packraft routes, most of which he established. His do-before-you-die pick? The Savage Sanctuary Route in Denali, named after the valley you hike up (Savage), and the river you paddle back down (Sanctuary). "Its off-trail hiking, easy whitewater, and epic mountain views make this the ultimate packraft trip for an experienced backpacker," he says.

Start with a bus ride from the visitor center to Savage Campground, then pick up an old horse trail that heads upstream (south) along the Savage River. Three miles in, the track threads through the mountains via a narrowing valley, and the mostly treeless Upper Savage Valley unfurls beneath your boots. This basin makes a good first night's camp. On

day two, hike 4 miles to the head of the valley, where Fang Mountain looms. Mileage isn't huge, but the landscape is. Camp in sight of Fang and choose one of the infinite high points along easily reached ridgelines for an unreal view of Alaskan vastness—and maybe a peek at McKinley.

The next leg is the crux. From the upper middle fork of the Savage, head southwest 3 miles through a narrow slot of a pass, gaining about 500 feet. Then descend a steep section of tundra to a tributary drainage leading to the broad valley of the Sanctuary.

Make camp near the river; the extra weight in your pack will pay dividends tomorrow when you put in and cap off your trip with a 14-mile float. You'll paddle the fast, braided Sanctuary River past unmistakable Double Mountain on river left and rolling green plains, home to wolves, moose, and grizzlies. Spotting a griz is an extreme stroke of luck but scary as hell—and better done from an inflatable getaway vehicle. If all goes smoothly, you'll reach Denali Park Road by lunchtime, where you'll take out and immediately start tallying the perks of your newest backcountry addiction.

**GUIDE / MAP** Look for Roman Dial's *Alaska Mountain Wild: A Trip Guide to Alaska*, due out in 2008. USGS: *Healy C-5*

**GEAR/PERMITS** Alpacka Rafts ([alpackaraft.com](http://alpackaraft.com); 2005 Editors' Choice Award). For permits, visit the backcountry info center at the Riley Creek entrance station: [nps.gov/dena](http://nps.gov/dena).

**DIGS / EATS** Life is good on the porch of an Alaskan spruce cabin in Healy ([aksprucecabins.com](http://aksprucecabins.com)). Hit the Black Diamond Grill, also in Healy, for grilled king salmon. (907) 683-4653

Tyler Williams

GET IN THE FLOW: DENALI'S SAVAGE RIVER RUNS NORTH OUT OF THE ALASKA RANGE.