

THIS IS LAREDO LIKE YOU'VE NEVER SEEN IT



SAN ANTONIO MAY HAVE THE RIVERWALK, but Laredo has kayaking on the Rio Grande!

In the dry desert, it is a timeless channel of water that spreads life to countless communities. It has been called by different names through the centuries, in different languages and by different peoples that have been displaced over time. But its meaning has managed to remain the same—it is the "great river," or "life-giver."

The Rio Grande, or el Rio Bravo del Norte, as they call it in neighboring Mexico, begins as run-off from the snow-capped San Juan Mountains of Colorado and flows through Spanish haciendas in New Mexico's Rio Grande Valley, then passes through Pueblo Indian communities. Ranchers and farmers in Texas and the Mexican states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas, depend on it for their survival.

It was here, on the Rio Grande, that a boundary dispute erupted between two countries in the 1840s, leading to a costly war between the United States and

Mexico. In 1848, the United States had gained half of Mexico's territory through war and with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, the two countries designated their new boundaries, splitting the town of Laredo in two. That same treaty also allowed for shared use of the river.

In popular culture, the Rio Grande is viewed as a place of illegal activity and attempts for illegal entry into the United States. In so many words, we could say that it is the front porch for various government agencies in both the United States and Mexico. While it is guarded by our governments, it does not belong to them. It belongs to the people who live on the border cities that depend on its waters for survival.

Many in Laredo cross the international bridges frequently. Citizens may see the waters of the Rio Grande and practically accept it as fact that the river is polluted and filled with disease. They may not see the river as an extension of their cities. It can then be said that in this city, the river, therefore, is not something to be respected, rather, it is to be

controlled and contained. In 162 years, the people who live by the waters of the Rio Grande have never taken advantage of their rights to reclaim their river. For many who live by the river, it is something that is very much taken for granted.

Stephen Kazcor, who lives in Panama and New Yorker Eric Ellman saw a diamond in the ruff when they came to Laredo. Partners in business, they have created what just may be the biggest thing in eco-tourism this side of south Texas. With its play on words, "Big River Outfitters" offers kayaking on the Rio Grande as a way to promote eco-tourism and spread consciousness about the wildlife and connection Laredoans have with their river.

In just a few months, their business has exploded thanks to support from local organizations and avid environmentalist. Imagine waking up early and embarking on an adventure to see all sorts of wildlife from this iconic river. Such an amazing feeling comes over you as you paddle down this special body of water reminiscent of ancient Native American tribes, Spanish conquistadors, Mexican rev-

olutionaries and American adventurers.

During our adventure of the Rio Grande, we saw no less than three Amazon Kingfishers—a rare bird almost never seen anywhere else in the United States. The water was clean, and we were amazed as to how beautiful and peaceful everything seemed. This is the view of the old Laredo, a city still full of culture, adventures and discoveries.

Priding ourselves on originality, Laredoans can say they live in the only city in the entire country, and quite possibly the only place in all of North America, where one can kayak in two countries at the same time. Rides are only \$20 per person for a morning or afternoon of adventure and fun on the Rio Grande. Experienced professionals accompany every ride, and kayaks and life-jackets are included. Big River Outfitters is located inside the Rio Grande Plaza Hotel, located in downtown Laredo. Visit their Web site at BigRiverOutfitters.org or call (956) 209-1879. Take a date, your family, or your favorite group of buddies to explore the wild side of Laredo. You'll be glad you did.



"In a new chapter about Laredo's nature tourism and outdoor adventure-seekers, kayaking is the latest thing to hit the water of the Rio Grande and cast a spell on the citizens of two countries."

Laredo Convention and Visitors Bureau

"We support the establishment of kayaking tours. The continued growth and improvement of our cities could not continue without preservation of the Rio Grande. Our history is tied to the Rio Grande in so many ways. We as a city are working to embrace and enhance our river. Everyone that has had an opportunity to kayak down the river has had an awakening of the beauty and nature hidden at our doorstep."

Sandra Rocha Taylor, Executive Director of Laredo Main Street

