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Thundering Cataract Scares, Wows Visitors to Great Falls, Montana

Posted: 06/30/11 01:00 PM ET

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Talk about a once-in-a-lifetime experience! We were traveling through Great Falls, Montana last week and just happened to arrive while the mighty Missouri River, swollen by rain and melting snow, was roaring through the top of Ryan Dam as if that steel and concrete structure was no more than a sieve in a sandbox.

"That water is unbelievable," said amateur historian Bill Marsik, guiding our motorized river trip through the river's famed "White Cliffs" area in the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument, 60-odd miles northeast of Great Falls. "You really have no idea how lucky you are to see the falls the way they looked before the dams were built," he told us. "I never have, and probably never will again. This is what Lewis & Clark might have seen when

they came around the corner and discovered that they had to portage the boats and all their supplies overland for 18 miles." He pointed to the digital readout on the depth sounder, watching it swing slowly between ten and 18 feet. "In a normal year we'd get three, four, maybe five feet here," he said, shaking his head. "This is monumental."

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Yep, that was it, in the video above (kudos, Andrea, for your fab Kodak mini-camera gift). That's what we saw when we drove to Ryan Dam, walked across the swinging bridge to the island in the river and climbed up to the viewpoint opposite the falls. If you're in there in the next few weeks, check it out. With the heaviest winter snowfall in recent years, a cold spring, buckets of rain and a sudden late snow-melt, experts predict that Missouri River levels will continue to rise from the Great Falls eastward. To join Bill Marsik for a White Cliffs tour, look for his website at www.missouribreaksriverco.com. The one-day tour isn't cheap (motorboats chug-a-lug gas by the gallon) but you'll never forget it.

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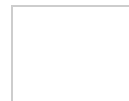
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