

Northern Innovators



Sheri Tingey yanks a zipper that runs like a scar along the bulge of an inflatable raft. The wetsuit-type closure she just installed on the body-length boat will allow a man from Whitefish, Montana, to stow gear inside the same chamber that floats him.

"I was on a rafting trip with (lightweight traveling extremists) Forrest McCarthy and Roman (Dial) in Mexico when Forrest said, 'Why can't you store stuff inside the tubes?'" Tingey says in her airy, pine-scented shop, located about 100 steps from her log home above Mancos, Colorado. "The boats even ride better in the water now with the weight lower."

"Zipperboats" are the latest of Tingey's improvements to the packraft—a rip-resistant, ultralight boat that compresses into a loaf that fits the bottom of a backpack. With her Alaska-inspired creations, the owner of Alpacka Rafts has changed adventure travel around the world.

"You look at maps totally differently," says Steve "Doom" Fassbinder, 39, one of Tingey's seven full-time employees who piece together rafts. Fassbinder, who also brainstorms new boat designs, tests them on trips from Alaska to Australia, often with a fatigue bicycle strapped on front. "Water can be part of your route, not just an obstacle anymore."

On a pleasant June day in Mancos, about 25 miles west of Durango in the southwest corner of Colorado, Tingey's hilltop shop whirs with motion. With muscular hands, two framing carpenters feed supple plastic fabric into rolling pinch points of hot-air welding machines. A few steps away, a Hispanic man and woman who have sewn since childhood run the black fabric of boat decking through their needles.

On the floor, a rescued Chihuahua barks at anyone who does not look or smell like one of Tingey's employees. He is one of several dogs underfoot in the shop, located on a 7,800-foot mesa forested with ponderosa pines and ringing with the calls of red-winged blackbirds. Tingey will soon move her manufacturing center to a larger building just outside Mancos city limits. She needs more room because field scientists and fishermen and backcountry adventurers worldwide have discovered Alpacka Rafts.

The Alpacka story starts in Alaska. More than a decade ago, when Tingey was living in Anchorage, her son Thor was a student at Colorado College, which offered an adventure-travel program. Thor signed up for a 150-mile human-powered trip from Rohn Roadhouse to Lake Clark, where his father was National Park superintendent. The 22-year-old used one of the few lightweight boating options of the

time—a Trail Boat by Sevylor. When he returned a week later soaked and shivering, Thor swore off the undersized boats. On his next adventure trip with the school—a 350-mile journey from the Marsh Fork of the Canning River to the village of Kobuk—he purchased a Curtis Raft, another lightweight option of the time.

Before Thor's trip, Tingey took one look at the boat and ran out to an Anchorage fabric store. She purchased some heavy polyurethane cloth and glue and sewed in a tougher floor.

"It was a three-and-a-half pound boat when I finished," she says. "When he shipped it back from Kobuk, it was close to 15 pounds—it was nothing but patches."

Tingey knew she could do better. She had cut and sewn her own clothing since she was in fifth grade. In the 1970s, she owned a successful business designing ski clothes. And then Thor asked his mom if she could build him a better boat.

"That was the light bulb," Tingey says, picking glue off the tips of her fingers. "I thought, 'Yeah, I can do this, and I'd like to do this.'"

Tingey felt the universe was talking to her: She had boated "ferociously" for years. She had familiarity with creating things from abstract shapes ("a pattern is a pattern is a pattern"). And she was looking for something to do with newfound strength as she emerged from years of being sapped by chronic fatigue syndrome.

"It's something I was supposed to do," she says. "Packrafts are a perfect melding for me of all the things I've done in my life."

She gathered up the available packrafts of the day, including the Trail Boat and a boat made by the Sherpa Snowshoe Company. Floating in all the boats, she felt instability she did not want.

"They were all built to float 15 feet offshore of a lake," she says. "But the Alaska crazies were making them do all sorts of things."

She asked those wild men of the backcountry, such as Roman Dial—later the author of a book on packrafting and an Alaska Pacific University Professor who took a sabbatical to packraft all over the world—what they desired in a portable raft.

"They said, 'A three-pound raft would be lovely, but