

30 Years After Atlanta, the Only Natural River in Olympic Whitewater History Is Still Yours to Raft

Nantahala Outdoor Center's full-day Ocoee Combo takes guests down the same Upper Ocoee that challenged 130+ Olympic slalom paddlers, including four of NOC's own staff members.

BENTON, Tenn. (July 16, 2026) — Thirty years ago, the Upper Ocoee River hosted the only Olympic whitewater competition ever staged on natural rapids. The course still runs every summer, and this season travelers can raft it with [Nantahala Outdoor Center](#).

On July 27–28, 1996, more than 130 canoe slalom athletes from 30 nations raced the Upper Ocoee. Organizers had reshaped the existing riverbed with boulders and gates rather than pouring a concrete channel, and it remains the only time Olympic canoe slalom has run on a natural river.

Today, NOC guides take guests ages 13 and up down that same Olympic section on its full-day [Ocoee Combo](#), pairing the Upper and Middle Ocoee into a day of Class III–IV whitewater with a riverside lunch between sections. The trip runs from the end of May through September on scheduled water-release days, and it's a fit for first-time rafters and seasoned paddlers.

NOC's tie to the course goes beyond the put-in. When Olympic slalom came to the Ocoee in 1996, four NOC staff members were racing on the same water NOC had been guiding since the late 1970s, nearly two decades before the Games arrived. Guests today run that course with the outfitter whose own paddlers once lined up at the Olympic start.

“I raced with Horace Holden on the Ocoee. I got married there, too. For those of us at NOC back then, it was home water long before it was an Olympic venue,” said Wayne Dickert, a member of the 1996 U.S. Olympic Slalom Team. “The part that still gets me is you don't need a bib number to feel the rush. Anybody who rafts this section is running the same rapids I did in 1996.”

TVA estimates the Ocoee now draws more than 250,000 visitors each year, making it one of the busiest whitewater rivers in the Southeast. On the Ocoee Combo, guests take on the Olympic section first, then continue onto the Middle Ocoee and its run of continuous rapids like Broken Nose and Tablesaw. The anniversary lands during a busy stretch for the river. In September 2025, Tennessee dedicated Ocoee River State Park as a standalone park, its 61st, with protected access to more than 17 miles of river corridor. And the 2028 Los Angeles Games will run their canoe slalom on a pumped artificial channel at RIVERSPORT Rapids (a.k.a. Riversport OKC) in Oklahoma City — the kind of built course every Olympics but one has used. The Ocoee remains the exception, and it's still open to anyone with a reservation (and a helmet).

“People hear 'Olympic course' and figure it's off-limits to regular folks. It's the opposite. We guide paddlers on the Upper Ocoee all summer, guide them through the rapids, and they walk away having actually run an Olympic course, not just read a plaque about one,” said Steven Foy, Director of Outpost Operations at Nantahala Outdoor Center.

Ocoee Combo details and 2026 reservations are available [here](#). For interviews, current rafting photography, or additional background, contact Cat Grygiel at cgrygiel@pineapple-pr.com.

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About Nantahala Outdoor Center

Nantahala Outdoor Center (NOC) is the nation's largest outdoor recreation company with operations spanning Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Over a million guests visit NOC annually to embark on a diverse collection of more than 120 different river and land-based itineraries, learn to kayak at NOC's world-renowned Paddling School, travel abroad with NOC's Adventure Travel program, test the latest outdoor gear and shop at its LEED-certified flagship retail stores or enjoy NOC's resort amenities such as its three restaurants and multi-tiered lodging. The New York Times has recognized NOC as the "Nation's Premiere Paddling School," "The Best Place to Learn" by Outside, and as "One of the Best Outfitters on Earth" by National Geographic Adventure.