

## The River and the Wall

Political Washington is currently awash in arguments about immigration at our southern border and, especially, that manifest symbol of staunching that migration, the Trumpian “Wall.” Our national media tries, as best they can, to educate the public about that border but tends to do it in small, disjointed pieces because the story is so vast and intricate. Now, in a supremely timely movie, we can experience an immersive adventure through a major part of that boundary. “The River and the Wall” follows five friends through the wilds of the Texas borderlands as they travel 1,200 miles over more than two months from El Paso to the Gulf of Mexico, tracing and examining the Rio Grande.

The instigator and director of the picture is wildlife filmmaker Ben Masters, who aims to document this last remaining Texas wilderness as the threat of new border wall construction looms. To share his experience, he recruits several nature-minded colleagues: National Geographic filmmaker and gadfly Filipe DeAndrade, ornithologist and ecologist Heather Mackey, Rio Grande river guide Austin Alvarado, and conservationist Jay Kleberg of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation. To get up close and personal with the river, the group performs their trek on mountain bikes, horses, and canoes. Their exploration takes them through raw but ravishing brush country, the glories of Big Bend National Park, and into the more populated sections of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. They examine the potential impacts of a wall on the natural environment, wilderness, and agriculture, but they also explore the human dimension of the immigration debate.

Our guides are a companionable bunch. Ben is a low-key but expert leader and horseman, Jay is earnest and knowledgeable, Heather is curious and committed, Austin is river-smart and adaptable, and Filipe is the class clown--and least adept in the wild. Masters gives all of them a chance to do solo turns which show off their expertise and skills, whether it's bird spotting (Heather), or rapids running (Austin), or wildlife filming (Filipe).

Telling, too, in a border story touching on immigration, two of the group come from families who came to the States as illegals. Brazilian Filipe's family is from Rio--where he was born--and Austin's family came from Guatemala, though he was born in Texas (namely Austin).

“The River and the Wall” takes a different tack from the current, frenzied media coverage of the border. It does not stress the poignant dilemmas of human border crossings, mostly occurring around cities. In fact, having finished shooting in early 2018, it cannot address the current impasse caused by the major Central America influx that so roils our political waters.

The film concentrates instead on the natural world and the complexities of land use. Its gorgeous nature photography (six cinematographers beautifully led by John Aldrich) highlights the sheer impossibility of “walling” most of the Rio Grande. It notes the generations of peoples fluidly moving back and forth across the border whose mobility would only be stifled with more walls. It also highlights how a crude, straight wall would segregate tens of thousands of acres of rich US farmland that wraps around the ancient convolutions of the river.

“The River” also emphasizes how important the river can be for recreation and outdoor activities and how that can be transformed with barriers. The best example comes when, coursing down a walled stretch on the Lower Rio Grande, Filipe points out how the northern (US) side of the river is an unpopulated space, miles from the wall itself, while the southern bank (Mexican) is alive with families and communities taking full advantage of the waterway.

“The River and the Wall” will give you an introduction to a part of our country too little known but worthy of being experienced.

*(The film runs 97 mins. and is unrated.)*

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