

kayaking

in and around

westchester

The best places to while away time—
and paddle away stress

BY PETER BRONSKI



T

HE SIMPLE ACT OF SLIDING MY LOWER

body into the hull of the kayak instantly peels away layers of tension that still remain from the past work week. I take several strokes with my paddle, and the boat glides smoothly through the calm, glassy waters of the Hudson River as the trees and shoreline recede behind me. I've left Westchester—and my stress—behind, if only for a few hours.

My destination this morning is the Palisades, whose impressive cliffs tower more than 500 feet above the river. As I pull up close to shore beneath the cliffs, a red-tailed hawk glides overhead, while six turkey vultures soar back and forth. I beach my kayak between two natural jetties and clamber up onto the rough, sandy beach. Another hawk perched high in the branch of a dead tree sits and stares. At this moment, I think to myself, life is very good.

The Hudson is a magnificent and majestic river. The river and its valley inspired an entire style of landscape painting—the aptly named Hudson River School—that became the signature style for rendering America's great national parks and landscapes. The pioneers of the style—Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, William Collen Bryant—focused many of their paintings on Westchester's stretch of the river. Had they been kayakers, I'm convinced those famous painters would have spent more time paddling on the river than painting it.

There is perhaps no better or more intimate way to experience the beauty and grandeur of the river than from a kayak. "When I'm paddling, it's extremely peaceful," says Peggy Navarre, a kayak guide for Hudson Valley Outfitters in Cold Spring, NY. "It's very serene and majestic. You can't believe you're in New York. The 'I love New York' commercials on television, that is what paddling the Hudson is!" Eric Stiller, founder of the Manhattan Kayak Company, echoes these sentiments. "The Hudson is a wonderful body of water. As you paddle north, there's a sense of awe and grandeur that sticks with you. *Wow!* You're in wilderness right near New York City."

In the middle of it all is Westchester, ideally situated to explore, by kayak of course, all that the Hudson has to offer.

Westchester has a long and distinguished history of kayakers and paddlers who trace their roots back to 1886 and the Yonkers Canoe Club (YCC), a fraternal group of elite competitive paddlers who sent members to six Olympic Games, including the 1948 Olympics in which they took home two gold medals. Those Olympians included Steve Lysak, who won gold in a boat he built himself in the club's boathouse, which has stood on the shores of Westchester's Hudson in Yonkers since 1938.

Today, the 100-member Yonkers Paddling & Rowing Club (YPRC), which is housed in the very same boathouse, continues

PHOTO BY JANICE LOZANO COURTESY OF ATLANTIC KAYAK TOURS



Above: The Hudson River Watertrail Association organizes many formal and informal events, one of which, the Albany-to-Manhattan Great Hudson River Paddle, includes views of the Bear Mountain Bridge (looking north).

the YCC kayaking tradition, although with a recreational focus rather than a competitive one. The boathouse is an unassuming building with dark rooms made of rough-hewn wood. The walls are adorned with old photographs, plaques and banners, and numerous trophies sit in cases behind dusty glass—historic memorabilia dating as far back as the 1890s. On the floor, aging red-and-white chipped paint still shows evidence of the old YCC logo—a dolphin holding a paddle—and a dolphin skull hangs on the wall opposite an engraved wooden sign with the motto “The Club Comes First.”

The YPRC is proud of its YCC roots, but modern day club members don’t take their elitist and competitive history, or themselves, too seriously. “We’re in it for fun,” says house captain Jack Gilman, a master boat builder who had an integral role in the production of the new *Hudson River Watertrail Guide, Sixth Edition*, considered *the* definitive resource for kayaking the Hudson. Gilman may know as much about building kayaks as he does about paddling them.

He is one of the principal organizers of the YPRC’s boat-building shop, where, at any given time, several kayaks are in various stages of completion. About a dozen of the club’s 80 boats stored on-site are built by members rather than commercially bought. Gilman, for his part, has built a personal fleet of nine boats, not including two that he donated—one to the New York City Downtown Boathouse and the other to the Inwood Canoe Club. “You can’t build identical boats,” he says. “Why would you want to? I’m building the perfect West Yonkers kayak.”

Today’s post-9/11 world has ushered in a new era of heightened security on the river. Still, of the Manhattan Kayak Company discovered this change first-hand eight months after 9/11 while guiding a couple from Chicago. They unintentionally strayed into a restricted zone around the Statue of Liberty. Suddenly, the trio of paddlers found themselves surrounded by four United States military Blackhawk helicopters.

Though this type of experience is an extreme case, when the Homeland Security Advisory Service raises the threat level to high/orange, popular paddling destinations including West Point and major New York Harbor landmarks—the Intrepid, the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island—as well as more obvious security concerns, like Indian Point, can be off limits.

Still, infinitely more of the Hudson remains accessible than not, and the seasoned guides and kayakers who know the river inside and out offer up this “best of” list of places to paddle in and around Westchester, from south to north:

Piermont Marsh, just south of the Tappan Zee Bridge, “has great places to paddle in and out of,” says Walt Thompson, secretary for the Hudson River Watertrail Association. “It’s a fun place to paddle and see things at a slow pace.” Just to the north, a small lighthouse below the bridge and Sleepy Hollow are inviting nearby destinations. Striped bass are plentiful and migrate each year to Croton Point and farther north to spawn. And, for the first time in recent memory, seals have been seen as far upstream as the George Washington Bridge.

GUIDES AND OUTFITTERS

■ ATLANTIC KAYAK TOURS

(845) 246-2187 or (914) 739-2588

www.atlantickayaktours.com

e-mail: KayakTours@aol.com

Boat rentals: \$35/half day; \$45 full day.

Introductory tours, sunset tours and full weekend outings with a guide are available.

■ HUDSON RIVER RECREATION

(888) 321-HUDSON

www.kayakHUDSON.com

e-mail: kayakHRR@aol.com

Private instruction is \$35 per person per hour.

Guided tours of Sleepy Hollow, Nyack and New Rochelle, among others, are offered.

■ HUDSON VALLEY OUTFITTERS

(845) 265-0221 or toll free (866) TO-KAYAK;

www.hudsonvalleyoutfitters.com

e-mail: kayak@hudsonvalleyoutfitters.com

Four-hour boat rentals: \$45 for a single kayak; \$65 for a two-person kayak. Constitution March tours with group instruction: \$95.

■ MANHATTAN KAYAK COMPANY

(212) 924-1788 or (212) 924-1908

www.manhattankayak.com

e-mail: info@manhattankayak.com

Beginner’s outings cost \$25 for one and a half hours with a guide. Private instruction is \$100/hour.

From the Yonkers Paddling & Rowing Club, strike out for the Palisades, an official “Watchable Wildlife” site that is host to osprey, myriad hawks, great blue heron, double-crested cormorants and monarch and tiger swallowtail butterflies. “The Palisades are gorgeous,” says Gilman. “It’s beautiful paddling up underneath them, and you see more eagles now than you ever have.”

From Peekskill or the Annsville Creek Paddlesport Center in Cortlandt, head up Annsville Creek for a sheltered two-mile paddle during high tide. Better yet, paddle about two and a half miles north towards the Bear Mountain Bridge and the Iona Island-Doodletown Marsh Bird Conservation Area, where 165 different species of birds have been documented, including numerous bald eagles, which have made a dramatic recovery throughout the Hudson Valley. Or head just a bit farther north towards Fort Montgomery and up Popolopen Creek to its picturesque waterfall. “This is one of the prettiest spots along the river,” says Janice Lozano, an owner and guide for the Atlantic Kayak Tours.

For a real taste of natural beauty combined with rich history, strike out from Cold Spring. Paddle south one mile through Foundry Cove and Constitution Marsh, and continue one and a half additional miles around World’s End to catch a glimpse of West Point down river. Or head north through the fjord between



Rochelle. Or drive slightly east and explore Connecticut’s Saugatuck River and Norwalk Islands. If you’re up for an urban challenge, head south to paddle New York Harbor and ply the waters around Manhattan.

Above: Paddlers returning to Cold Spring from Bannerman’s Island cleanup, Hudson River Sweep.

Just starting out? For the sake of personal safety and sheer enjoyment, it’s best to seek out formal instruction, to hire a guide, or to partner with an experienced club member. Classes range from the genuine introductory paddle to focused expert classes.

“When you want to get someplace, you need to know how to paddle properly,” says Stiller. Lozano agrees: “We’re big believers in educating paddlers.


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Storm King Mountain and Breakneck Ridge and up to the castle-armory ruins on Bannerman’s Island (a three-mile trip). “It’s a beautiful river here and great place to paddle,” says Joanne Salvo, founder of the Cold Spring Kayak Club. “The scenery here is breathtaking from out on the water.”

For a more unconventional kayak tour, head out with an experienced paddler from Hudson River Recreation for a full-moon paddle on the river and have a “Twilight Zone” experience as the Metro-North train headlights seem to come right out over the river towards you. Or sign on for a history lesson and paddle the half-day long Treason Trail, the route followed by Benedict Arnold in his infamous act of betrayal that played itself out along the Hudson.

If you’re looking for kayak adventures beyond Westchester’s Hudson, there are three enticing destinations within a short drive. The Long Island Sound offers an entirely different experience and environment, and kayakers can launch at Rye Playland and in New

There are lots of stories of people who almost made the paper. Every year you hear of a few people who went out in a big wind and capsized. It becomes a war story—something they tell like a badge of honor. Really, they just did something stupid. It’s a fairly low-risk activity. People just need to be smart.”

In August 2002, a Piermont woman, out on the river alone after dark in her kayak, capsized and became disoriented. The current carried her downriver, where she became stranded without her kayak on one of the pillars beneath the Tappan Zee Bridge. She was rescued early the next morning by a New York State Thruway maintenance boat. 

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