

Richmond, Va., outdoor adventure capital, in *The Impulsive Traveler*



Lynda Richardson/LYNDA RICHARDSON - Bald eagles can be seen on the James River tour given by Captain Mike Ostrander in Richmond, VA. A bald eagle grabs a shad along the James River near Richmond VA.

Text Size

By Maureen Egan, Published: August 12

Talk about being high-strung.

Suspended 35 feet off the ground in a rock-climber's harness, I had a death grip on my friend Tom's T-shirt as we lurched through the Lateral Limbo, one of nine high-ropes challenges on the University of Richmond's leafy campus. This was "Fearless Friday," what the team-building company Challenge Discovery calls the feel-good Friday evening fun time on its Odyssey Course. My group, however, felt mixed emotions during our three hours traversing the 20- and 35-foot-high obstacles of cables, ropes, beams and wobbly platforms strung out between open-air treehouses.

Richmond is often stereotyped as a slow Southern city still stuck in an earlier century, but I'm here to tell you that the reality is much more robust and river-y. Set aside the history for a minute — or a weekend: Virginia's capital, a.k.a. the River City, is overflowing with adrenaline-pumping outdoor adventure opportunities.

The evening was calm and pleasant, as was J.D. Watt, our pastorlike facilitator. He assured us in his folksy way that we could accomplish great things together: attack the Frankenstein, outfox the Complex X, all the while finding inner capabilities and learning to rely on one another. We believed — sort of. We muttered. Some of us shrieked. One friend cheated, tiptoeing across one pole of the Team Beam — two suspended telephone poles that veer alarmingly away from each other — by herself. When, several feet from stability on the beam, hands locked together and bodies stretched to the limits of geometry over thin air, Amy lost trust in George, he looked her in the eye and shouted, "You're strong! You're beautiful!" It didn't exactly work, but it made the rest of us want to partner with George next.

The work — or play — was muscle- and mind-taxing, exhilarating and enlivening once we leapt past our hesitation. Through it all, Watt encouraged and praised. "You're capable of more than you realize." It was corny, but his measured insistence had the

desired effect. We felt sky-high upon zip-lining down, and just a little sore the next day.

To the east, on the other side of the city, the bird's-eye view of the ropes course turned into views of birds' eyes when my husband and I met Captain Mike Ostrander on a Saturday morning for a two-hour eagle-tour on the sprawling tidal portion of the James River.

We hopped aboard his 24-foot pontoon boat at Deep Bottom Boat Ramp in eastern Henrico County, a few miles from downtown. The boat is nothing fancy, outfitted with a cooler of dead shad to lure bald eagles and a thermos of coffee to wake up morning tour-goers, but it's better suited to exploring the James than John Smith's and Christopher Newport's shallop was when it sailed up the James just days after the English landed in Jamestown in 1607.

Almost immediately upon shoving off, Ostrander, a longtime fishing guide who has a bumper sticker on his car that says, "I live in the James River," pointed out Pops, an eagle named for his grandfather, perched in an oak on the far bank. Ostrander stopped the boat and retrieved a shad. Standing at the stern, he flung the carcass out onto the water.

The eagle took flight, drifting nonchalantly overhead as our captain backed the boat away. We craned our necks to follow Pop's crisscrossing course. Suddenly, the eagle swooped down and nailed a touch-and-go landing about 60 feet from us, wings pumping, talons snatching his brunch, which he ate in a nearby tree. We gasped and cheered and took blurry photographs, realizing that such majestic scenes were better appreciated through our own lenses than through the camera's.

A diving eagle can go 35 to 40 mph, much faster than our leisurely chug, but our hearts were racing nonetheless. This tour

is about the speed of the bald eagles' recovery on the James — from zero nests in the 1970s due to the runoff of DDT and other chemicals — to more than 144 nesting pairs today, including five along this five-mile stretch and two within Richmond city limits. Ostrander sees signs of two more nests just east of Deep Bottom, so the eagles have landed safely.

As we trolled past family farms and historic bluffs, we scored several more eagle sightings — in nests, on the wing, skating on top of the water, scooping up fish so fast and furiously we could hardly focus. Ostrander is the ideal tour guide, exuding a love for the river, its creatures and its patterns. He exclaims “that’s awesome” regularly, but he’s no surfer dude; he’s just telling the truth.

Unlike the eagles, I get my fish fix at Pescados China Street, a whimsically decked-out lunch, brunch and dinner spot in working-class Oregon Hill. The Latin and Caribbean-influenced menu is as playful as the turquoise, orange and red walls. Fish tacos of seared dorado with mango-habañero aioli and coconut black beans is a typical multi-layered and -flavored dish, and a finish of avocado tart cools everything off.

After lunch, it’s time to get back to the river, this time for a faster-paced journey. As it passes through Richmond, the James falls 105 feet in seven miles; hence the Class III and IV rapids that rush through downtown. The rocky roar stopped Newport and Smith in their tracks on their visit 404 years ago, but today it propels thousands of people a year downriver on guided white-water trips.

Riverside Outfitters' motto, “Get out and stay out,” is a terse tease, but they get people out on the river — white-water rafting, tubing, kayaking or stand-up paddle-boarding. Their guided raft trips through the city include an earful of history, a mouthful of water and an eyeful of incongruous urban rapids. There are

sections of the route where I can't see a sign of human habitation. Then our rafts line up for First Break, our first Class III rapid, at the tip of Belle Isle, and the 19th-century Tredegar Ironworks buildings, which now house a Civil War museum and visitor center, and the 20th-century Federal Reserve Building designed by Minoru Yamasaki provide an intriguing juxtaposition.

Better to pay attention to the rapidly approaching rapid. Because I'm in the middle of Richmond. On a raft. And it's time to take the plunge.

Egan, a freelance writer in Richmond, is the author of "Insider's Guide to Richmond" and co-owner of Real Richmond, a food tour company.

Getting There

Richmond is about 107 miles south of Washington on Interstate 95.

Amtrak offers daily service to Richmond Main Street Station (RVM-downtown) and Staples Mill (RVR-suburban). Fares from \$62 round trip. Megabus offers nonstop service with fares ranging from \$8 to \$35 each way.

WHERE TO STAY

Berkeley Hotel

1200 E. Cary St.

888-780-4422

www.berkeleyhotel.com

Boutique hotel in historic Shockoe Slip. Rooms from \$135.

Grace Manor Inn

1853 W. Grace St.

804-353-4334

www.thegracemanorinn.com

Elegant, up-to-date bed-and-breakfast in the architecturally rich Fan District. Rooms from \$157.50.

WHERE TO EAT

Aziza's

2110 E. Main St.

804-344-1523

www.azizasonmain.com

Deli case full of Lebanese favorites and delectable cream puffs. Wood-fired pizza from \$8.

Pescados China Street

626 China St.

804-644-3474

www.pescadoschinastreet.com

Vibrant decor and menu featuring fish full of Caribbean and Latin flavors. Entrees from \$14.

WHAT TO DO

Fearless Fridays

28 Westhampton Way

University of Richmond

877-337-8326

www.challengediscovery.com

Odyssey ropes course for age 12 and up. Fridays 7-10 p.m. year-round. Sign up by the Wednesday before. \$15 per person.

Discover the James

Deep Bottom Boat Landing

9525 Deep Bottom Rd., Henrico

804-938-2350

www.discoverthejames.com

Two- and three-hour nature, history and photography tours on the tidal James with Captain Mike Ostrander. Weekend or private tours start at \$40.

Riverside Outfitters

6836 Old Westham Rd.

804-560-0068

www.riversideoutfitters.net

Guided kayak, canoe and white-water rafting trips. Must be at least 12 years old to raft. Raft trips from \$54.

INFORMATION

www.visitrichmondva.com