

# Rolling on the River

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*The do's and don'ts of white-water rafting on the James*

I love roller coasters, but I hate where they live. I'd rather get my chills and thrills white-water rafting on the James River. Rolling through the Falls of the James provides the adrenaline rush of several roller coasters, and it's so easy to drive downtown to get it.

If you've forgotten there's a raging river under all those bridges, here are some do's and don'ts for James River white-water rafting:

*Do listen to the trip leader, but accentuate the positive.*

As Mike Siok, our trip leader, reminded us at Richmond Raft Co.'s downtown headquarters, rafting on a river isn't a ride at a theme park. It's not entirely predictable, and there are dangers -- ranging "from stubbing a toe to leaving the planet."

*Do expect a little of everything.*

After a short bus ride across the river to the James River Park, we walked to our rafts, paddles and guides. Guide Gary Majer taught me and three out-of-towners how to be the engine of our raft. "Paddle forward. Paddle back. Break." Got it. It was a sparkling 70-degree October day. A few rafters plopped in the calm water for a swim, but most of us stayed aboard, content to be dry. Gary gave us one version of how Mitchell's Gut, the set of rapids we were about to bounce through, got its name. (Suffice it to say that while some people leave their hearts in San Francisco, Mitchell, a Union soldier, left his guts in Richmond.

*Do read the rapids.*

Not to get too technical about the classification of rapids, but Class I is for babies, Class II is for mild-mannered weenies, Class III is for whooping and hollering, and Class IV is for profanity. Richmond is the only U.S. city with Class IV rapids within its city limits, and my raft was heading into one set of Class IV rapids. Riding the roller coaster of mountainous rapids within sight of Hollywood Cemetery, the Federal Reserve Bank and the rest of the downtown skyline is incongruous and wonderful. I wasn't sightseeing, though; I only had eyes for rocks. White water, wet water, waves of water, punctuated by ROCK.

*Do clench everything you have.*

Staying in the raft in a Class III or IV rapid is a matter of bracing one's feet in the boat, clenching quads, buttocks, and anything else, while grasping the paddle for balance and dear life while yelling

one's head off through clenched teeth. I was sure I was going into the drink several times, but luck held. We'd roll into a rapid, get hit with some spray, go down, careen, lurch, come up, be ecstatic, and WHAM! -- part of the raft would hit a rock and we'd scrunch up like an accordion.

*Do wonder whom you can trust.*

A rafter in my boat popped out near the end of the wild water, but we, a trustworthy crew, hoisted her in easily. Once on another river, a priest pushed me into a Class III rapid to save himself. Quite the baptism by rapid -- and he never confessed.

*Don't start talking about food while you're in the middle of the trip.*

After navigating Hollywood, we pulled up to a rock at Belle Isle to stretch and get a drink. With the smell of barbecue wafting over from a Brown's Island festival, we were doomed to thoughts of lunch, well out of range of victuals. How does white-water pizza delivery sound?

*Do eventually close your mouth.*

Our run through Pipeline rapids was worth skipping lunch and wearing ourselves out. Gary spun us around as we whooshed under a towering rock shelf backward, mouths wide open ... and came out unscathed and exhilarated, mouths still agape.

*Don't miss it.*