

Susan L. Shafer

by John Razzano

THE SCENE: A day off in the middle of the week—a sunny, warm, July day, with big, puffy clouds rolling through a clear blue sky. My two sons, Matt and Greg, are home from college. It’s a perfect day for a father-and-sons outdoor adventure. The problem: Finding a way to cool off, have a little fun in the water, and spend some time enjoying a beautiful natural area. The solution: Tubing.

Next to swimming, tubing (also known as innertubing) is about as basic as a water sport can be. All you need is a tube and a stream of suitable size. Anything from the classic black rubber, truck tire inner tube, to a variety of commercially available doughnut-shaped floats will suffice. Truck tubes, however, are very sturdy and well suited for bouncing off boulder-strewn mountain streams. You can either buy your own or rent at many locations throughout the state (for suggestions, see “Go Tubin” on page 16). We chose to rent.

Soon, we were on the Thruway driving to the sleepy village of Phoenicia, nestled in the foothills of the Catskill

Mountains. We were heading for Esopus Creek, famous for crystal-clear water, trout fishing, natural beauty, and tubing.

The Esopus is well-known for tubing because its flow is predictable. It’s part of the New York City water supply system and usually receives scheduled releases from the Schoharie Reservoir. I say usually, because the day we went releases had been temporarily suspended. We had to rely on the generosity of Mother Nature, which fortunately cooperated the previous weekend with a good dose of rain.

Phoenicia is about midway between Albany and New York City. In little more than an hour and a half from our Capital

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District home, we were pulling into the lot at F-S Tube Rental, one of two businesses in Phoenicia where thrill-seekers can take a wild ride down the Esopus. It was mid-morning and just starting to get hot.

We clambered out of the car and approached a red barn filled with orange life vests, plastic helmets, wet sneakers drying in the sun, “I Tubed the Esopus” T-shirts, and the requisite inflated inner tubes. A white-painted block wall was filled with graffiti, saying things like, “Bhalla Family, New Delhi, India,” “Will be back! Cheryl,” and, “My leg! Diego.” We laughed nervously at that one.

At the rental counter, we met F-S Tube’s proprietor, Richie Bedner (also known as “The Tube King”). Richie was the first to set up a rental business on the Esopus more than 30 years ago, after seeing how much fun local teens were having tubing the creek. Now in his 50s, head shaved bald, he smiles broadly as he says in a thick Brooklyn accent, “The ‘F-S’ stands for Fantastic Service.”

We paid our fare and changed into our swimsuits. Richie gave us a quick rundown on the two routes we could take: the Upper Course is recommended for teens and adults, with more frequent and larger

rapids. The Lower Course is more suitable for families with younger kids. Personally, I would not allow a child younger than 12, depending on size and ability, on the Lower Course (see the sidebar “Safety First”). The trip on either course lasts about an hour and forty-five minutes.

The basic rental fee covers an inflated inner tube rigged with a board in the middle that you sit on and rope hand-holds on the sides, plus a shuttle bus to the launch site for the Upper Course, or back to F-S Tube for the Lower Course. Personal flotation devices (PFDs, also known as life vests), helmets, and even sneakers are available for rent at small additional fees. If you want to bring your own tubes instead of renting, F-S Tube charges a per-person facility-use fee which includes the shuttle bus service.

Wetsuits are also available for an additional charge, but are unnecessary in hot summer weather. Water temperatures range from highs in the 60s to lows in the 50s (°F) when cold reservoir-release water mixes with natural stream flow.

Anxious to hit the water, we climbed aboard the bus for the trip to the launch site, about three-and-a-half miles upstream. The road followed the creek

Safety First!

Tubing is done at your own risk. Streams like the Esopus are not water-park rides. They are wild waters that should be treated with caution and respect. Fast, swirling currents, rocks, submerged obstacles, and overhanging limbs can be dangerous if you’re not careful.



Even though streams are often shallow enough for a person of average height to stand in knee-deep water, it’s hard to get a firm foothold on slippery rocks in fast currents. So, to tube safely, you must know how to swim. You should also wear a personal flotation device (also known as a life vest), sneakers to protect your feet, and a helmet.

Lastly, never tube alone!

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Whenever tubing, it’s important to be safe. While many novices and first-timers choose not to wear a helmet, most experienced paddlers and tubers feel it is a must.



and gave us a glimpse of some of the whitewater we would soon face. It also gave us a chance to appreciate the beauty of the Esopus: a fly fisherman waded in the tea-colored water, whipping his line high overhead; a yellow swallowtail butterfly fluttered over wildflowers on banks flanked by cool green pines, maples and poplars; a man paddled a kayak through frothy rapids swirling around huge boulders.

Reaching our destination, we donned our PFDs and unloaded our tubes. Our driver showed us how to sling them

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behind us and carry them on our heads...funny looking, but comfortable and effective. On our way to the water, we listened to some last minute instructions: paddle with your hands to position yourself before taking rapids; hold on to the rope handles to stay with your tube if you fall out; move to the right side of the stream in the beginning to avoid an overhanging tree; get out at the rock with the word "OUT" painted on it, and it's only a short walk back to F-S Tube from there.

We slapped our tubes onto the water and pushed them toward the right side, as instructed, before jumping in. The initial shock of the cool water soon wore off and we were on our way.

Initially, the current takes you along at a leisurely pace, enabling you to relax and enjoy the sights, sounds and sensations...rushing water, cool arms and back, warm sun on your face and chest, mountains wrapped in their summer green velvet. Ahhh! Life is good!

Suddenly, you're picking up speed! The stream is descending more steeply and you spy your first whitewater in the distance. Paddling furiously to take the best path, you're forced

to surrender to the speed and power of the water, spinning in whatever direction waves and rocks dictate. Thank God for that board in the middle of the tube!

Lesson 1: Tubing is not for control freaks. It's difficult to control a doughnut-shaped float. Though you can paddle or even get out to reposition yourself, you're at the mercy of the current most of the time. The sport's charm lies in the feeling of abandon that comes from letting yourself go.

Once you get through your first rapids, it's back to smooth

sailing. "That wasn't too bad," you say to yourself. These breaks in the action are good for regrouping. You can slow yourself down by paddling toward shore or dragging your feet, enabling your fellow tubers to catch up. Once again, you can commune with nature. Above us, flitting and hovering as they swooped after flying insects, were dozens of cedar waxwings...a species that I was unfamiliar with at the time, but which was entrancing to watch. The creek serves many invaluable functions for both people and the wild creatures that depend on its life-giving water.

The next set of rapids is coming up. This time, they're larger and more challenging. Both of my sons flip out of their tubes. They come up laughing and clamber aboard again. Whew! What a relief. I stayed aboard, but not because of my age and experience. Let's just say I have more gravity, and leave it at that.

Lesson 2: Wear a helmet! When you're whirling around big rocks, it's no time to be macho. Tubing may seem relatively tame as sports go, but it involves very real risks.

We regrouped and continued, a bit chastened by the experience. Another tranquil stretch revealed another beautiful bird. A great blue heron disturbed by our presence lumbered into the air and glided majestically over our heads on its way upstream.

Suddenly, I wasn't moving. I drifted over a shallow area and my aforementioned "greater gravity" had me stuck on the bottom. My two boys drifted past and, before I could get free, were several hundred feet away and going through the next stretch of whitewater. Matt went through OK, but Greg flipped over again. It was a little scary being so far away from him when it happened, but he popped up right away, his ego bruised more than anything else.

Lesson 3: Pay attention to the depth of stream to avoid getting hung up and separated from the rest of your group.

I caught up with the boys and we floated on. At this point, there were no calm stretches left. We rounded a bend and hit two sets of rapids following quickly one after the other...the biggest so far. We had been forewarned about this stretch, but that didn't stop us from feeling a rush of adrenalin as we ricocheted like human pinballs from one boulder to the

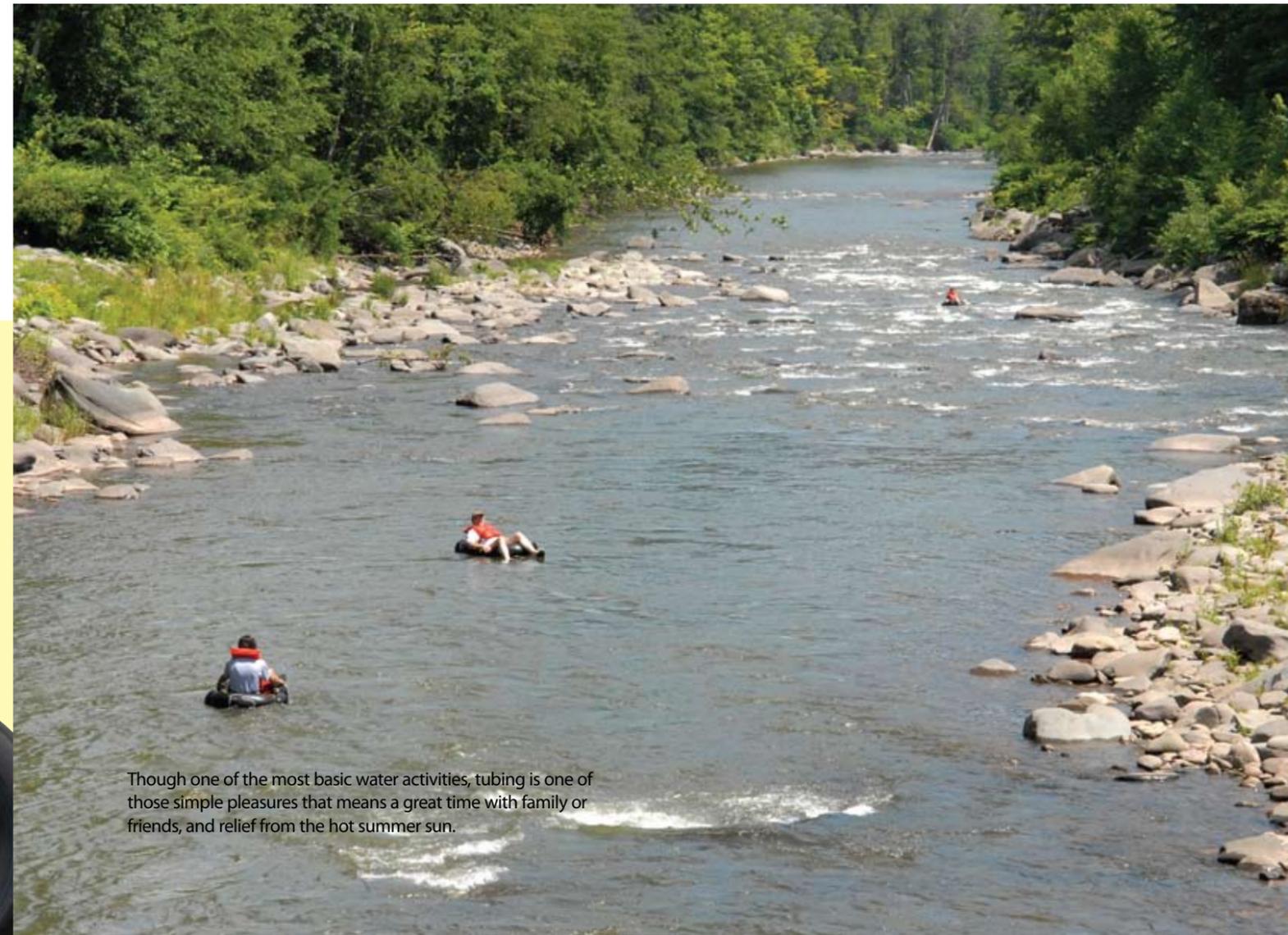
next. Having learned some lessons from the previous rapids, this time, everyone stayed with their tubes.

Wet and weary, we drifted on for another half-mile before the rock painted with the word "OUT" appeared and we made our exit...not very gracefully mind you, as we dragged our tubes to shore, floundering in the swift current. Safely back on shore, we slung our tubes up on our heads and walked back to the car, hashing over a thrilling couple of hours in a beautiful mountain setting.

If you're looking for a great way to get in touch with your wilder side, let me recommend seeking out one of the many beautiful New York State streams where tubing is offered. For my boys and me, it was a memorable experience that introduced us to a nearby natural treasure and left us looking forward to another sunny, hot, summer day when we can do it again.

John Razzano is a contributing editor to the *Conservationist*.

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Go Tubin'!

There are a number of good tubing waters located across the state and numerous accompanying outfitters where you can rent equipment. For more information, check out the following websites:

In Phoenicia, **F-S Tube Rental:** www.fstuberental.com and **The Town Tinker Tube Rental:** www.towntinker.com

Sacandaga Outdoor Center in Hadley offers whitewater tubing on the Sacandaga River and Lower Hudson River Gorge in the Adirondacks: www.4soc.com

Hudson River Rafting offers whitewater tubing on the Middle Hudson River Gorge in North Creek, or on the Sacandaga River in Lake Luzerne: www.hudsonriverrafting.com

Battenkill Riversports in Cambridge offers easy, flat-water tubing on the famous Battenkill River: www.brsac.com/tubetrips.html

Ausable Chasm Campground in Ausable Chasm offers easy, flat-water tubing on the Ausable River through the famous chasm: www.ausablechasm.com

Adirondack Exposure in Old Forge offers whitewater tubing on the Middle Moose River in the Adirondacks: www.adirondackexposure.com

Kittatinny Campgrounds in Barryville or Pond Eddy offers easy whitewater tubing on the Delaware River: www.kittatinny.com

Though one of the most basic water activities, tubing is one of those simple pleasures that means a great time with family or friends, and relief from the hot summer sun.