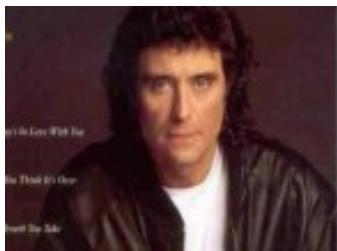


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The Next Bob Dylans

Friday, August 5, 2011

Adventures
20

Eat, Pray, Tube: Adrift on the Delaware River

By [Matthew Creamer](#) | August 5, 2011



The first thing you need to know about the Delaware River Tubing Company is that it's located in the New Jersey borough of Frenchtown. It was so named for the tongue of its early settlers, many of whom followed the flight of a Swiss opponent of the French Revolution to the leafy lands along the lazy, shallow, deeply brown river that's a natural divider with Pennsylvania. The French appear to be largely gone, though at least one of the town's residents is well known for spending some time in the Old World: Elizabeth Gilbert is right here in Frenchtown, where she is writing a novel, and the husband she snatched up at the end of *Eat Pray Love* operates a Southeast Asian import shop.

The second thing you need to know is that, in contrast to the hamlet that gives it a mailing address, a trip with the Delaware River Tubing Company is not a quaint affair. To approach it on one of the blistering days that have afflicted the lower 48 states of late is akin to rolling up to a firebase or a refugee camp.

Immediately visible is an endless flow of school buses coursing through the company HQ, plopped in the parking lot of a roller rink. So is a large crowd (or rather, an assemblage of crowds) that, upon closer examination, show themselves to be sweaty, confused and polyglot. Among the babel were both the North and South Jersey dialects, as well as Spanish and Arabic. There was what appeared to be a heat-resistant Indian family draped in traditional clothing marching towards the vast stacks of vessels, speaking a language unidentifiable to my Hindi- and Gujarati-speaking wife.

Those buses transport the customers to a designated launching spot on the Delaware, where all will begin their four-hour glide. That much is clear, but instructions on how to inject oneself into the

river fun are not plentiful, as my wife and I learned on a recent broiling Sunday. We made the 90-minute drive from New York after due diligence demonstrated without question that if one is going to go tubing in the metro area, [Frenchtown is the place to be](#).

We asked a few questions of one of the longhaired collegiate types that, along with the closer-cropped never-gonna-be-able-to-retire types, fill out the staff. That got us to the shed where \$64 dollars got us two tubes, or donuts. We declined upgrades that might have gotten us a tube with back support or paddles. There's no real guidance on how to choose the tubes; you just see which fits your ass. We also received two wristbands, one for transportation, the other for a "BBQ meal." (On this day, heavy tubing demand meant that they were out of their usual meal wristbands. Ordinary rubber bands were being used—and thin ones at that!)

Before you get to the food, however, you have to get to the water. That journey involves a short ride on one of those school buses that seemed to be reconfigured expressly for the transporting of tubers (those who ride inner tubes, not tubers). The seats don't face front, but rather each other, creating a wide enough aisle to accommodate the rafts. There are two drawbacks to this otherwise genius design:

1. How to use this system wasn't communicated clearly in all cases and, in the cases when it was, the rider often either a. Didn't understand or b. Disregarded the instructions.
2. The infiltration of non-tubular vessels, including elephantine rafts that require long paddles and a sort of bastardized kayak that, as far as I'm concerned, should be outlawed.

The all-too-common effect was to create a pile of tubes, rafts and kayaks, wasting space and time and, well, what else is there? Adding even a minute to vacation bus trips is never welcomed. The confined space, plus the seating arrangement, plus the preponderance of Northeastern skin on display, but in the shade, and therefore minus the glaring summer sun that serves as a much-needed blinding agent in most flesh-baring contexts, made for a rather grotesque equation. Sure, there was the body hair, but more alarming was the volume of moles whose size, color and fearful asymmetry screamed out for dermatological exam.

But this doesn't last long. After a short, not-very-bouncy ride, it's a quick, somewhat scary scramble down some muddy sandbags and, bang, you're in the Delaware River.

Now what?

For many of you, tubing—or "toobing"—probably conjures Mountain Dew-fueled, hyper-adrenalized attacks on the rivers wild put in place by God only so you could motherf*ck them into submission. But its origins are genteel. Tubing [received media attention](#) when Princess Panthip Chumbhot of Nagar Svarga invited close friends to her estate for inner tube trips down the Chong Lom. Smashing into rocks or drowning wasn't the main danger, as a *Sports Illustrated* article from the time tells us: "A murderous bandit chieftain named Tiger Sangat has set up headquarters in a far corner of her acres, which makes it necessary for two armed guards to keep the princess company wherever she goes. For them it is often a pleasantly cool duty." Realizing she was on to something, she started charging regular folk five baht a ride.

Princess Panthip Chumbhot would likely be proud of what Delaware Tubing Company has made of an enterprise that probably yielded some nice pocket change for her. With buses departing roughly every five minutes, the operation dumps New Jerseyans into the water with a brio that Tony Soprano might appreciate. The downside of injecting yourself into that sort of volume is that any hopes for a quiet journey of water-born reflection are dashed in the early minutes. The pink, blue and yellow of other people's tubes are everywhere—touching you, even. The river is not wide; there's not a lot of room to escape the schools of tubers. Big extended families or unnaturally expansive packs of friends float together, often tethered by rope. Their conversations, often just giddy call-and-responses of bad river-themed jokes, were very much audible and very much awful.

One fellow got our trip off to a Biblical start, screaming for no apparent reason, "Let there be light..."

"And God said let there be light and there was light," someone else on the river corrected him in surprisingly accurate but not particularly devout fashion.

"...and hot dogs. And malt liquor," finished the first.

For all the talk about alcohol, there's less drunkenness than you'd expect. There is a fair amount of friends and family being loudly rude to each other, calling each other "dirtbags" and what not. A "Roseanne" script it is not. While we waited in line for the wristbands, a teenaged girl asked her father if their brood should tether their tubes. "Neh, I wouldn't mind if I lost you," he said, patting his belly and looking around for some sort of approval.

It's also worth noting that the whole area is quite clean, perhaps due to the trash-fetching dog named Peace, described by Delaware River Tubing, Inc. CEO Greg Crance in this TV interview.

After the impromptu Genesis reading, I was struck by the feeling that this racket might get tiresome over the 3.5 to 4 hours it takes to travel to the bus pick-up point. As I flopped backward onto my tube, with the hazy sky gnawing at my SPF 50, the river slow and tepid like a warm bath, the dolts screaming, a question arrived: *Is there anyway out of this?* There really is not. As my wife pointed out—frequently and for no certain reason—a health emergency probably wouldn't receive quick treatment. (She also pointed out regularly and perhaps significantly that there are no bathrooms.)

After a while it took a turn for the better. That'd be when the strains of "Every Rose Has Its Thorn" could be heard, followed by "Jump," emanating from the stereo of some kids hanging out on the river's little islands. Being from Jersey means it's likely that certain things in your blood, among them the chemical ingredients of a plastic bottle and an appreciation for tomatoes, corn, blueberries, and hot dogs and hamburgers or, indeed, "hamburgs," cooked outside on a grill, and classic or even "cock" rock. Any of those things will often make an otherwise shitty situation seem just grand and the combination of any two or can act like a shot of B12. So Poison giving way to Van Halen, just as signs for the "World Famous Hot Dog Man" appeared, worked in concert to turn this jammy around.

The "Famous River Hot Dog Man" and his presenting company are proud not only of the meal, but the meal's girth. The wristband does not just get you a crummy hot dog; it gets you two hot

dogs, a bag of chips or a frozen candy bar *and* a soft drink served in an unironic styrofoam cup. You can also sub out the dogs for a cheeseburger, as we did, in tribute to the company's second slogan, "Where the Customer is King." Upgrades are possible here if you want a veggie burger or chicken breast sandwich and don't mind forking over a few dollars. And it's ok if your money is wet, a sign tells you. We decided not to sit on the partially submerged picnic tables that comprise the island's dining areas, because that would be weird.

The burgers are typical Jersey fare—tightly-packed, well-cooked patties slapped with a slice of American cheese—with a yumminess multiplied by being outside, on an island, in the middle of a river. The island is actually owned by the Delaware River Tubing Company, purchased in a visionary moment years ago.

Bellies full, we began the second part of our journey, which unfurled in a sort of unpeaceful peace. The trees on the banks form a membrane just thick enough to block out the sight of passing cars, if not their sounds, and a few small hills on the Jersey side break up the flat monotony. The not-terribly-swift current is broken up only by teeny rapids that give you a bounce or two. It's comparatively exhilarating. There were other moments of excitement: a vaguely maniacal looking snorkeler muttering to himself, a powerboat zipping upriver, a few errant tubes with their owners trailing them furiously.



But, to be clear, you spend most of your time floating with a slowness that puts the mind on a current of its own. I couldn't help but wonder what George Washington, who pulled off a river crossing just south of where we were to mount a surprise attack on some snoozing Hessians in Trenton, would think if he saw the long armada of tubers. His Delaware was icy and treacherous and his America knew nothing of "Proud to Serve" tattoos blurry on back fat or floating coolers festooned with the N.Y. Giants logo, our contemporary bric-a-brac of freedom. The revolutionary in him might flash his dentures at the thought of the endless ribbon of commonfolk marring the backyard views of the multimillion-dollar manses perched on the Pennsylvania side—one with what looked like a treehouse bigger than our apartment.

Or what would Elizabeth Gilbert think? Had she and she and Jose ever shuttered Two Buttons on a Saturday just to take this decidedly downmarket journey? If we read the Bali—or "pray"—section of her opus as the emotional synthesis of Italian gorging and Indian asceticism, is a tubing jaunt down the brown waters of the Delaware not merely an extension of the dialectic, and a more affordable one at that? Remember when Richard, addressing her as "Groceries," told her, "Life didn't go your way for once. And nothing pisses off a control freak more than life not goin' her way." Tubing is all about giving up control. You've surrendered your gadgets, your afternoon and any control over your direction. There is one drop-off point and one pick-up point and between, there is only the tube. You have little say over who's around you.

You submit yourself to the current until the end. We washed up at another set of sandbag steps and filed up them, along with another few dozen disgorged tubers. The bus we took back to the roller rink was even more disorganized. It was dominated by a single family that chattered happily in Arabic and, flouting all relevant design principles, made an unruly pile of their vessels. The patriarch wore a Phillies cap, its maroon "P" the only thing that signified to us, besides their breathy repetitions of "insha'Allah."

Matthew Creamer has lost to IBM's Watson, survived a chemical weapons incinerator, gotten to the bottom of an urban legend in Alabama, and made it in and out of both Cuba and NYU legally. He is an editor at large at Ad Age and can be found on Twitter.

Vintage Delaware tubing photos [by Joe Shlabotnik, from Flickr](#).

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[checkonetwo](#) (#3,234)

Or you can buy your own tubes and go with your friends. Someone has to drive the cars down to the stopping point but it is far cheaper, there are no buses involved, and you can make the journey shorter than four hours if you so choose. Much more appealing, as far as I'm concerned. I did it this way and it was quite possibly the most relaxing day I've ever had in a summer.

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 1:41 pm](#)

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[Matt Creamer@facebook](#) (#21,446)

@checkonetwo Multiple cars? That's too fancy for me!

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 1:51 pm](#)

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[gfrblxt](#) (#11,113)

As someone who just had the experience of doing EXACTLY THIS in Frenchtown (_looooove Frenchtown_) for the first time a couple of weeks back, I can only say YESSSSS!!!! My only suggestion would be to go on a weekday, if possible; many of the "crowdedness" issues mentioned are probably less of a big deal then.

The "Famous River Hot Dog Man" rocks. Please note: when the signs say "Paddle", you really had better paddle....it's harder to go across the river than one might think. The "FRHDM" guys have a boat that can be sent out to pick errant tubers out of the river if they accidentally miss the burger place.

And the buses....are a trip. Figuring out how to arrange the tubes in the middle space between the rows of seats is hilarious. We were thinking of setting the tubes up like a big roll of Life Savers and putting people in the holes.

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 1:47 pm](#)

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[Clarence Rosario](#) (#134)

I've done the Chattahoochee in Atlanta, the Sacramento in Chico and the Kings in Fresno, and never come close to \$64 for two people.

Well, maybe \$64 worth of beer.

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 2:21 pm](#)

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[BadUncle](#) (#153)

@Clarence Rosario Next time you're enjoying the flotation arts in CA, try the Russian River, in Sonoma County.

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 2:37 pm](#)

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[dado](#) (#102)

@BadUncle I did battle with the Klamath once. Not for the weak hearted.

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 2:57 pm](#)

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[BadUncle](#) (#153)

I wonder about the cumulative effect of tubiste urine on the water supply.

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 2:37 pm](#)

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[David Roth](#) (#4,429)

This is really good, and after a week at the Jersey Shore I can vouch for the "neh" and the portrayal of the area's general genial loutishness. That, despite itself, the piece makes me want to go tubing is probably something for me to work out myself.

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 2:50 pm](#)

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[Clare](#) (#516)

Wasn't Delaware River Tube Company one of the Philadelphia groupons last week?

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 3:05 pm](#)

[Reply »](#)  0



[gfrblxt](#) (#11,113)

@Clare: It was a Central NJ one a couple of weeks ago, which is why we went. Made a lot more sense to spend \$18 pp than \$36 or whatever.

@David Roth: I don't find the Jersey Shore (or NJ, in general) to be any more loutish than lots of other places I've lived. You should try the tubing. If you can get a Groupon ;)

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 4:03 pm](#)

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[Nate Jones@twitter](#) (#11,668)

Jumping into the praise of this article to say that the only way this could have been better is if was about rival Bucks County River Country and included this classic commercial:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9GRjao71gs>

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 3:38 pm](#)

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[Myles Tanzer](#) (#13,698)

@Nate Jones@twitter I was praying that someone would post this!

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 5:08 pm](#)

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[jen325](#) (#12,292)

Yeah, we New Jerseyans love being reduced to stereotypes.

Anyway, I only went tubing on the Delaware once, and there weren't very many people on the river. It was actually pretty enjoyable except for the fact that 10 minutes into it, my dad and brother forced me to paddle because the river wasn't moving quickly enough. That ruined the experience.

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 4:04 pm](#)

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[ericdeamer](#) (#945)

Sorry this is my second annoying comment along these lines of the day, but this is so weird to me because I'm from Indiana and in Midwestern dialect "tubing" AFAIK refers exclusively to being pulled at great speed behind a motorboat on an inner tube. This is done on a lake, not a river of course. I've lived in the tri-state for 11 years but I've never heard a northeast/mid-atlantic person talk about "tubing". So to you guys "tubing" means floating on an inner tube down a river and just being sort of slowly moved along by the natural current? I've literally never heard of this before. Not knocking it. It actually sounds MORE fun to me than the midwestern version. I'm just amazed to hear the term used so differently. But yeah, this isn't "tubing" in the midwest. There tubing is basically the lazy man's water skiing.

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 4:21 pm](#)

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[agba](#) (#21,460)

@ericdeamer Untrue! In Missouri tubing can refer to either of these activities. One, however, is clearly superior.

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 4:33 pm](#)

[Reply »](#)  0



[Matt Creamer@facebook](#) (#21,446)

@ericdeamer And then there's snow tubing as well!!

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 4:39 pm](#)

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[goodiesfirst](#) (#3,448)

I'd nearly forgotten about things you could do with tubes! Growing up my dad worked at Goodyear so we were well supplied for river tubing in the summer and snow tubing in the winter. The rest of the time we kept giant inner tubes in the front yard just for us and neighbor kids to bounce around on (but you'd have to rotate them, so you didn't create a brown circle of dead grass).

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 8:25 pm](#)

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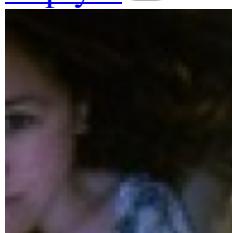


[Bus Driver Stu Benedict](#) (#5,842)

Is it possible to waste gravity? I think so.

Posted on [August 5, 2011 at 9:14 pm](#)

[Reply »](#)  0



[Cassandra Myers@twitter](#) (#21,664)

I did that once back in high school. Then for my friends and I would drive up from SJ in two cars, and do it for free. Decidedly cheaper, more dangerous, and less hot dog fueled.

Posted on [August 6, 2011 at 4:38 pm](#)

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[main modern](#) (#21,872)

as someone who lives a mile away from delaware river and 20 mins from frenchtown.

1) The delaware is one of the dirtiest rivers in america, and I haven't gone in it in 10 years; because I ALWAYS get sick the day after.

2) lambertville/ new hope (15 miles south) is better than frenchtown...frenchtown is FILLED w/ yuppie bicyclists.

Posted on [August 7, 2011 at 8:37 pm](#)

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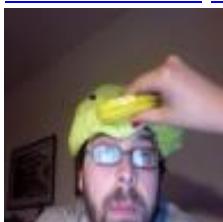
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