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## Hitchhiking the Hudson

By [COREY KILGANNON](#)

I NEVER thought much about the Hudson River. It was merely that watery western terminus of Manhattan streets; a place where bodies sometimes floated up and jetliners crashed safely; that thing you had to cross to get to New Jersey.

But one recent Saturday, something happened to make me rethink the river: I tasted it.

A rogue ferry wake slapped off the side of my kayak, sending salty splash in my face. There was no gagging nor immediate sign of hepatitis, so I kept paddling, marveling at the swimmers and Jet Skiers frolicking on the clean, choppy water.

The incoming tide rushed me north. That and my briny mouthful reminded me that I was not on some afterthought of a river, but a majestic arm of the Atlantic Ocean, an epic salt-water estuary whose discovery by Henry Hudson in 1609 opened up the entire region — what we now call the metropolitan area — to settlement and commerce.

To mark this year's 400th anniversary of Hudson's historic exploration, the fall calendar is filled with a flotilla of festivals and food fairs, exhibitions and expositions, panel discussions and plays, tours, readings and concerts. I probably won't make it to any of them.

Instead, I decided to retrace his route, starting in a borrowed kayak and then hitching rides along the way, endeavoring a modern-day exploration of the characters who live, work and play along the river where Hudson encountered only wind, fog, rain and the occasional Indian trader bearing tobacco. He sailed 340 miles round trip aboard the 100-foot Half Moon over 24 days in September and October; mine was a serendipitous 60-hour journey — from Times Square to the Federal Dam in Troy — in a taxi, the kayak, a 50-foot yacht named the Jackpot, a fishing boat, a jet boat, a rescue craft, a Half Moon replica and a 19-year-old Lincoln Town Car.

After a quick cab ride from the office, 15-foot plastic kayak lashed to the roof, I launched near West 26th Street, with notebook, camera, cellphone and wallet in a waterproof bag. I had no set plans, just few phone numbers of friendly and knowledgeable boaters along the route.

With current whisking me uptown, I barely had to paddle. I stopped to chat with novice kayakers in classes nestled between the piers, then breezed past the Javits Center and the Police Department's auto pound. I had to negotiate the rolling wakes from the tour boats and ferries near 42nd Street — including the one that splashed some sense into me.

As I approached the aircraft carrier [Intrepid](#) near 46th Street, my perspective began to shift. The city receded into a supporting role, a backdrop, even the seagulls perched on the pilings seeming to take precedence over the human hubbub.

Instead of the varied plant and animal species that Hudson saw in the wilds the Indians called Mannahatta, the river banks were dotted with that peculiar species called the New Yorker.

Near the [79th Street Boat Basin](#), I encountered some natives: the Heath family of the Upper West Side spends summer weekends frolicking in their neighborhood swimming hole, jumping off a boat into the wakes from larger passing vessels.

Paddling along beside the rocky sea wall, I kept pace with the joggers on the bike path until I spied a hot dog vendor. "One, with everything," I yelled, then fumbled for money stowed deep in the kayak hatch. The vendor, Alex Calota, tossed the familiar foil package and refused payment.

It reminded me of the journal kept by one of Hudson's officers, Robert Jouet, which amid the [detailed reports of each day's weather and navigation](#) chronicles various "savages" bringing food and gifts aboard. (on Oct. 1, two were killed after a pillow and other goods were stolen). I told Mr. Calota of my unlikely voyage to Albany.

"Go straight," he advised. "Keep going."

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It was nearing 4 p.m., my aching arm pulled my ringing cellphone from the waterproof bag. It was William Reynolds, captain of a 1989 replica of Hudson's Half Moon, which [functions as a floating museum](#). He had told me we could meet up as he returned the boat to its home in Athens, N.Y., from a monthlong journey up the Connecticut River. "Look downriver," he said. "Do you see me?"

It was a spooky sight seemingly ripped from my childhood history books and PhotoShopped into today's newspaper: an 85-foot-tall three-masted ship, surreally set in the hazy distance among the barges and other modern-day river traffic. I tried to imagine what 17th-century Native Americans must have felt seeing this huge canoe suddenly appear in their river.

I paddled alongside the ship, roughly 100 feet long, and scrambled up her steep wooden sides. The crew lashed my puny kayak to the main deck, then scurried back to adjusting the intricate rigging and trimming sails. Captain Reynolds, who is known as Chip, barked orders about setting the rudder and trimming the topsails and mizzen.

High overhead, topmen scrambled to furl and unfurl sails and tend to yards and booms and spars and various clews. Below, the crew was busily hoisting, loosening, cleating and coiling lines. It was a little more complex than the stints I had done as a child on a neighbor's catamaran.

The Half Moon has sleeping quarters and strutting space for the captain on the lofty quarterdeck, near the stern. Then there is the expansive main deck, or weather deck, where the ship is operated by its six-member crew — including Mr. Reynolds's two teenage children. Below that is the orlop deck, where the crew sleeps on

bedrolls. The hold, or bottom deck, houses the galley and engine rooms.

The ship is fitted with a diesel engine, generator, toilet, modern galley and modern navigational equipment but generally travels Henry Hudson's way, under sail alone and guided by the heavens.

It is a three-masted time machine: Even as we sailed under the George Washington Bridge, its long spans humming with traffic high above the top of the rigging, it was easy to imagine the pristine habitat that Hudson beheld.

The ship slipped smoothly and silently past the northern tip of Manhattan, where Hudson anchored on Sept. 12, 1609 (and, Jouet wrote in the journal, where they encountered a flotilla of 28 canoes filled with men, women and children, but "saw the intent of their treachery and would not allow any of them to come aboard").

Captain Reynolds invited me up to the quarterdeck, reserved for him and the officers; traditionally, officers have delivered orders from the elevated position of a ship's quarterdeck. That let them maintain a level of authority, he explained, adding with a chuckle that it still does.

The captain, who is 57 and has spent years piloting historic sailing ships and tugboats, gave me a quickie primer: Hudson was an Englishman sailing for the Dutch East India Company with a crew of 20, seeking a shortcut to spice ports of Asia. After first trying the Chesapeake and Delaware Bays, they turned north, to the huge river whose mouth Giovanni da Verrazano described in 1524. The Indians called the river Muhheakunnuk, or "great waters constantly in motion," and Hudson would later call it the River of the Mountains.

Moving upriver, Hudson and his crew grew excited because the tide remained strong and the river deep, and there were high bluffs and cliffs.

"The sheer volume of water, this is what was telling them it connected to a major waterway," Captain Reynolds explained. "Imagine the excitement as they saw these mountains and experienced this current."

As he spoke, the captain kept a weather eye on the helm and looked out over the undulating hills of Yonkers, where Hudson's crew traded for oysters with Indians. Next came Hastings-on-Hudson and Dobbs Ferry, and when the sinking sun was setting the sails aglow, he suddenly stopped the vessel, ordered the crew below decks and out of sight, and sent a motorized raft out with cameras.

"He's been searching and searching for the perfect publicity shot," snapped a crew member, characterizing it as an Ahab-like obsession. There were lighthearted mentions of the fact that Hudson's crew eventually mutinied on a later voyage and left him to die.

Photo session over, we sailed under the Tappan Zee Bridge, where the river widens abruptly, which thrilled Hudson as he arrived there on Sept. 14, 1609. Near Hook Mountain, a tall stone outcropping on the west bank a mile north of Nyack, the bosun dropped a line with a lead sinker to the bottom, to determine the depth just as Hudson's crew did (two fathoms, or about 12 feet, akin to what Jouet recorded). Captain Reynolds announced that we would stop there for the night, and that the crew would not have to wake at 5 a.m. but could "sleep in" till 7:30.

From a light sleeping bag on the foredeck, I stared up at the stars through the rigging. To the south, the Tappan Zee Bridge was a black shadow in the distance; upriver to the east were the bright lights of Sing Sing prison.

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I awoke with the sun on Sunday morning, and the weather was, as a typical Jouet journal entry would put it, "faire and very hot." The cook brought up scrambled eggs, fruit salad and cereal, and the captain ordered the decks swabbed. With the wind light and the current headed south, the Half Moon would remain anchored for a while. But I had to press on.

I called John Vargo, who edits and publishes a monthly magazine called *Boating on the Hudson & Beyond*. He sent his 43-year-old son, Chris, to fetch me — and my kayak — in his 20-foot fishing boat.

Chris Vargo, a carpenter and construction worker, grew up swimming, hunting and fishing in and around the Hudson. "The blue crabs come in August — they're big," he said as we passed two men in a weathered dory pulling up traps. "Supposedly they get shipped down to Maryland — Hudson River crabs!"

Jouet's journal notes that in this area, "the river is full of fish." Chris Vargo said that it still is, but that many species have been depleted, including the huge sturgeon that old-timers used to catch to sell their eggs as caviar.

We met his father in Verplanck, about 10 miles — a half-hour in the boat — from where I had left the Half Moon. John H. Vargo, 73, took one look at the kayak and ordered me to leave it in his yard (where it stayed until days after my trip, until I drove up from New York to retrieve it). Then we headed north along Route 218 in his powder-blue 1990 Lincoln Town Car — "It used to belong to Senator Rockefeller," he announced — and stopped at an overlook near Storm King Mountain, where we shared the panoramic view with a motorcycle group decked out in leather.

The elder Mr. Vargo, a former salesman, also grew up hunting and fishing on the Hudson, or waterskiing behind seaplanes. Since he bought the magazine in 2000, he spends most of his days hopping around Hudson marinas, courting businesses and catching up on river stories.

"It's the name of the game, whether you're selling ads or writing news," he said. "You have to schmooze them."

Mr. Vargo consulted the spiral notebook filled with his scrawl of names and numbers, and finally reached his friend Lex Filipowski, a motivational speaker who spends summers knocking around in a sporty white jet-boat. We met him in Newburgh, and soon we were, improbably, headed south, the electronically fuel-injected, supercharged, intercooled 500-horsepower engine roaring away.

Mr. Filipowski wore a bright yellow dress shirt and wraparound sunglasses, his head shaved clean. He advises clients to "fulfill your dreams," and his nameless boat is a testimony to this philosophy.

"When I was a kid I had a dinghy and I always wanted a real boat," he said, bounding over the waves with a broad smile. "You have to believe it can happen."

The river in this section is broad, rough and deep like a big lake, sheltered by green mountains and filled by tugboats, tankers, Jet Skiers and recreational boaters towing large inner tubes. It bears no resemblance to the Hudson I knew down around New York City.

Up ahead, on an island off Beacon, stood [a crumbling castle](#) bearing the words "Bannerman's Island Arsenal," a five-story brick shell that served as a munitions warehouse from 1908 until a fire gutted it in the 1960s. The island steward, Dave Lawrence, explained that Francis Bannerman, an eccentric arms dealer, designed it with his own quirky drawings. The warehouse has real cannons positioned up high, for ornamentation.

"If you have a bunch of Civil War cannons, would you leave them in your basement?" Mr. Lawrence said.

The next stop was Little Stony Point Beach, on the east bank, where dozens lounged on the sandy shoreline, shading themselves under low-hanging trees. Three men were parked on a log, a bunch of empty beer cans next to them. It was about 2 p.m.

"You couldn't go in the water 20 years ago; there was raw sewage all over the place," said one of the men.

"That's probably 40 years ago," corrected the second.

"Eh, give or take," agreed the first.

The third man laughed: "Time marches on."

We marched on, too, for a Coors Light with the commodore of the Cold Spring Boat Club, and then, back in Newburgh, to a wine-tasting at a waterside restaurant, where my scruffiness from more than 24 hours on the river did not keep me from sampling the cabernet and shiraz.

Next, a spin on the local Sea Tow boat, which monitors radio rescue channels and helps disabled boaters for a fee. These can be life-threatening emergencies or cases of poor planning. Soon, we were toting a tank of gas to a craft stranded off the [United States Military Academy](#) at West Point.

Near Lover's Rock, where West Point cadets take their dates, we found the stranded boat, operated by two retired New York City correction officers who had miscalculated their fuel. The Sea Tow captain poured in the gas, negotiated the price and soon the men were on their way.

Back at the dock, it was nightfall. Mr. Vargo saw me clutching my bag and staring north. He grabbed my shoulder and insisted I backtrack, in his car, and sleep on his couch.

"Believe me," he said, "you need a shower."

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Monday started at 7 a.m. with a 35-mile drive beside the river north to Poughkeepsie, where we met Dave Rocco, a retired carpenter for the [New York City Housing Authority](#) who has devoted the past few years to the renovation of the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge, a rusted 6,700-foot span that opened in 1889 and closed in 1974 and connected his hometown to Highland. Mr. Rocco's aging van bears large signs saying "Walkway

Over the Hudson,” and a vanity license plate reading “Walkway.”

After years of fund-raising and letter-writing by the likes of Mr. Rocco, the bridge is expected to reopen in early October [as a pedestrian walkway](#), and eventually to be designated state parkland.

I was eager to get back on the water, but there were things to see on shore. The [tugboat museum in Kingston](#) was locked up, so we trudged on, still in the Town Car, to [Riverview Marine Services in Catskill](#), a repair shop that does a brisk business lowering or dismantling masts of sailboats so they can clear the low bridges.

Riverview's owner, Mike Aguiar, offered us a personal watercraft to go upriver, but Mr. Vargo eyed it warily. I knew he was visualizing me jumping ferry waves and other inadvisable things. As an alternative, he called up Dolores Bouse, who runs [Catskill Marina](#) nearby and said she had a boat with a willing captain.

Mrs. Bouse did not elaborate. Neither did she disappoint. We arrived to find we had hit the jackpot — a 50-foot yacht named the Jackpot, owned and operated by [Steve Martin](#), a retired corporate executive who was happy to blow the cobwebs out of his two 550-horsepower diesels that together burn 48 gallons of fuel an hour at full speed.

Mr. Martin, 59, stood at a control panel with dozens of switches and dials, and a navigational screen next to an open laptop giving maps and coordinates. Growing up in Dobbs Ferry, he worked on his family's fishing boats off City Island; after 20 years in information technologies at JPMorgan Chase, he got his captain's license.

Now he manages his own investments, spending winters at his home on Worth Island, Fla., and summers on the Jackpot. The boat has a lavish living room with plush carpeting and sofas around a glass-topped coffee table. It also has three bedrooms, three bathrooms, a dining room, a carpeted circular staircase and a galley with full refrigerator, range and microwave. Standing on the top deck felt like being on the roof of a moving building.

The expansive view revealed a narrowing, less-developed Hudson, with lots of pristine shoreline and grassy wetlands. We passed the occasional short, sandy beach with canoes or kayaks pulled up and people swimming.

At the Shady Harbor Marina in New Baltimore, we met Paul Bleckman and Lisa McKern, who run [Rascal's Riverdogs](#), a [floating hot dog stand](#) named for their dog. On weekends, they feed hungry boaters at the mouth of Catskill Creek, and on Thursday evenings, they set up at concerts on the banks of the river in Albany.

“There's not too much competition out in the middle of the river,” Mr. Bleckman said. “Boaters can pull right up and finish lunch in 5 or 10 minutes.”

I asked the hot dog guy about a young man I had seen as we approached the marina, who I knew was building a bizarre-looking raft that he planned to take down to New York City. “That guy's certifiable,” Mr. Bleckman insisted. “That thing's going to go in the drink.”

But I was intrigued. Turns out the young man, Dallas Trombley, works as a legislative analyst for the State Assembly. He described his raft — named Assiduity — as “a 24-foot, [biodiesel](#), solar-, wind- and electric-

powered watercraft.” Assisted by a navigator and a cook (his friends), Mr. Trombley, 25, plans to go from Albany to Brooklyn next month, “have a beer and turn around and sail back.”

Mr. Trombley, who grew up in New Baltimore but never had much experience on the river, said the idea [to build a “green” motor craft to sail to New York](#) began as a lark while drinking with friends in college. Each of the past four summers, he has tried and failed — once by sinking, twice by weather and once by vandals who stole and burned the raft.

The quest, he said, has cost him friends, girlfriends, some sanity, thousands of dollars, and all his free time. It had become an obsession, what he described as an intellectual and philosophical “crusade against quitting.”

The vessel looked crafted on the fly by an amateur carpenter with an assortment of light hardware, but Mr. Trombley said building it provides relief from weekdays spent poring over tedious legislation that reads like “a mixture of Milton and V.C.R. instructions.”

As for the similarities between state law and boat building, he laughed: “They both never turn out the way you think.”

Indeed, we could not get the Assiduity started, so Mr. Trombley offered a ride in his ratty 1999 Plymouth Neon, which did not look much more reliable.

As we sped up Route 144, I stared at the scenery whizzing by and thought of all the places I've never been and never will explore. I liked Mr. Trombley and told him I could identify with the disappointment he felt from being headstrong and stubborn and occasionally optimistic — in short, his inner Henry Hudson.

We drove into Port of Albany, through a neighborhood with shuttered storefronts and boarded-up apartment buildings, to [Scarano Boat Building](#), where Rick Scarano showed us around. His 90,000-square-foot hangar-like shop was filled with grand, custom, classic sailboats and ferries manufactured with sophisticated bonding and bending procedures. Mr. Trombley remained proud of his nails-and-plywood contraption.

I could not quit until I saw the [Federal Dam at Troy](#), the end of the Hudson River estuary some 150 miles from where I had started. Mr. Trombley insisted on joining me. At a dead end littered with scrap and debris from a nearby junkyard, I dashed out of the car and scrambled down a woody embankment to the river's edge to stare at the broad dam in the near darkness.

This was where Henry Hudson stopped, after crew members he sent to test the depth “found it to be at an end for shipping to goe in,” according to Jouet's journal.

On the embankment facing the dam, there was a crude shack. My heart swelled — a great interview possibility — but alas, it was empty. It was silly, but I felt Hudson's disappointment keenly.

I got back in the car with Mr. Trombley and recalled that Hudson was then brought a platter of venison by local Indians, and ate with them: a failure feast.

Mr. Trombley and I retired to a bar on a river barge several miles back for a couple of beers. Then he drove me to a Greyhound station nearby and I caught the 10:30 p.m. bus back home to that town at the mouth of the Hudson River.

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