

Nature's roiling roller-coaster

*Rafting on the Bay of Fundy's
tidal bore is a wild adventure
not for the faint of heart*

BY LYNN HADDRALL

We scan the horizon as our inflatable boat floats gently on the Shubenacadie River in Nova Scotia. In the distance, we spot a white line, barely visible. It draws ever closer, gaining froth and intensity as it nears.

We grip the sides of our raft and brace for impact, hearts beginning to race. This is



You'll want to hang on tight when rafting on the tidal bore on the Shubenacadie River in Nova Scotia. And don't open your mouth or you'll swallow sea water!

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PHOTOGRAPHY • RIVER RUNNERS



ABOVE: Tourists get ready to ride the tidal bore on the Shubenacadie River in Nova Scotia. Visitors are warned to wear old clothes, since the river's reddish mud tends to stain.
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the tidal bore, oddly named. It is as far from boring as you can get.

Our family has explored many sights on Canada's East Coast during treks to the family cottage. We're accustomed to the ebb and flow of tides and typically check tide times in the local newspaper to plan our day. But we had not experienced the tidal bore, a Bay of Fundy phenomenon where twice a day, the incoming ocean tide reverses the river flow. Freshwater mixes with saltwater.

"You have this very long, narrow bay and then you have the global ocean tides. They work very much in sympathy together, in the sense that the Atlantic Ocean is forcing this tide back and forth and it's perfectly in harmony with the shape of the bay," explains David Barclay, an assistant professor of oceanography at Dalhousie University.

Imagine the Bay of Fundy as someone sitting on a swing. The Atlantic Ocean is the person pushing the swing. "They are perfectly in time. And that's how you get what might be the biggest tide in the world," Barclay says.

"It's sort of like ringing a bell and you get a particular sound. If you hit a pie plate, it's not quite as nice. The Bay of Fundy just gets rung by the Atlantic Ocean in such a way that it has a very harmonic action."

The moon and sun drive this phenomenon through gravity, the highest tides occurring when a full moon aligns perfectly with the sun.

We chose a hot day in July to sample this marvel of nature. With a full moon, waves were expected to range from one to three-plus metres.

Locals recommended River Runners Rafting as a good place to observe or ride the bore. It recently celebrated 20 years in business near the village of Maitland, between Wolfville and Truro. Brian van de Vrie and his wife, Kim, started it. The business has grown substantially since they launched with just two boats.

Van de Vrie grew up on the river and always enjoyed playing on the water. He has a forestry background and prefers life outdoors. His business draws customers from around the world, including wedding parties and corporate groups. He jokes that Australia must have had an airline seat sale a few years ago when Australians suddenly showed up in droves.

"Eighty per cent of the customers are looking for bigger waves, six feet and up," says van de Vrie. "But families with younger children might choose smaller waves. We recommend children be six or older. Kids are pretty neat. Adults are more timid than a lot of kids. Kids just want to go, go, go."

The company uses Zodiac inflatable self-bailing boats with 60-horsepower engines. Van de Vrie likes the Zodiac's quality construction. "They are over-engineered. They just last and are strong. They have to be strong for the abuse that they have to take."

Safety is a priority. Everyone gets a safety orientation before going to the river. Guides receive a month of training on the water and must have their CPR and first aid certifications. As we lined up for life jackets (full-body insulated suits are also available), we asked what happens if someone falls overboard.

About once a week someone falls from a boat, van de Vrie says, but often it's on purpose. Guides are prepared either way. The passenger's boat shuts down and retrieves the person. A spare boat follows the group. If anyone wants off their boat at any time, they can transfer to the safety boat.

River Runners, about one hour and 20 minutes from Halifax, offers full- and half-day trips, assigning them names based on the height of expected waves — Super Wild Ride (one to three-plus metres), Fast and Fun (one to two-plus metres) and Action for All (half to one and half metres). Prices range from \$60 to \$90 per person.

We opt for the Super Wild Ride. The



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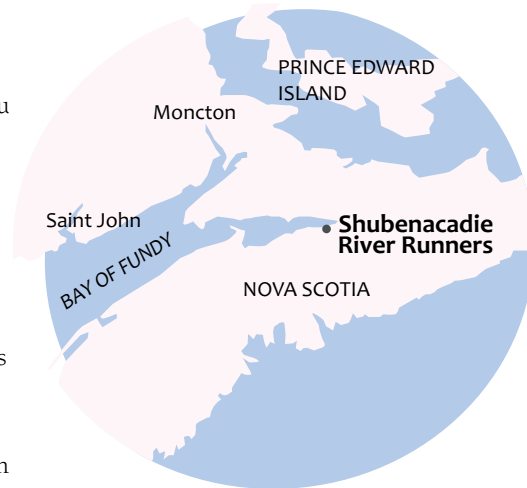
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journey starts calmly as you board the motor-powered Zodiak. The leading edge of the wave reaches the boat and at first you ride it like a surfboard. The ride intensifies as guides manoeuvre the boats back and forth, over and through the waves. You are buffeted by whirlpools and cross currents.

Our eight-person boat had an American couple, two British friends and our family of four. Most of us urged our guide to hit as many big waves as possible. There was one woman on the boat who looked like she would rather be anywhere else. She hung in gamely to the end.

It's definitely not for the faint of heart.

My teenaged son, Declan, and his friend, Tyler Johnston, called dibs on front spots where the bow crashes through the waves. Adults did not jockey for those prime positions, happy to sit further back. Tyler strapped a GoPro to his head to capture the



ride on video.

"Shooting the video was a challenge because I had to duct tape the GoPro to my hat and then tie the hat to my life-jacket," Tyler said. "Going over the giant waves was definitely the hardest part because I had to hold onto the raft with one hand and

use the other hand to hold the camera on my head. It was a great experience that I will never forget and it came with a great adrenalin rush."

Declan was underwhelmed when he first spotted the thin white line on the horizon. He soon changed his mind.

"I was thinking to myself how anti-climactic it seemed, but I wasn't really prepared for the result of this tiny little line. Before I knew it, we were being thrown from wave to wave, tossed back and forth violently with almost no breathing time," Declan said.

"The boat would go over the crest of one massive wave, only to be looking at another even bigger wave next in line. It was exciting, to say the least. The experience was one I would recommend, especially for thrill-seekers."

Sometimes riders get an added treat

by spotting wildlife such as bear or deer crossing the river. We saw some American bald eagles.

Be prepared to leave the river with your clothes stained red by the clay soil. We were warned to wear old clothes that could be discarded. We bought cheap white T-shirts for the boys, who gained an authentic souvenir that has retained the river's mud-red shade.

After the ride, I was ready for a hot shower. You can take one right at River Runners. Also waiting for you — cookies and hot chocolate.

This was a fun family outing. We met people from other countries. We rode a really wet roller-coaster and experienced the incredible power of nature. Some day, that power may be harnessed for more than tourists. The tremendous Bay of Fundy tide could power homes and businesses,

if people can figure out how to capture it without damaging the environment.

Barclay, who has been working at Dalhousie for about a year, says there are a dozen people there working on Bay of Fundy projects.

"The bore only comes twice a day, but the tide is flowing for the rest of the day at huge speeds so there is a huge potential to capture that energy," he said. "It makes sense for lots of small communities in Nova Scotia to be getting their power from their doorstep, rather than from far away. It's certainly a hot topic."

The Bay of Fundy is one of the few places in the world where you can experience the powerful tidal bore. Barclay is the ocean expert, so I asked him — have you ever taken a ride on it?

"I haven't done it yet. Can you believe it?" he said, laughing. "But I have to do it."

IF YOU GO:

- July and August are the busiest times. Weekends fill up first. It's good to book in advance.
- If you laugh or scream with your mouth wide open, be prepared to swallow a lot of saltwater.
- Wear old clothes and prepare to see them stained red. Bring towels, shower supplies and a change of clothes.
- Old sneakers or water shoes work best. Flip-flops are a bad idea.
- Leave valuables like jewelry and phones behind.
- Tie down anything that could be lost, such as hats and sunglasses.
- Several companies offer tidal bore rides. You will find contact information for them at novascotia.com. River Runners can be reached at riverrunnersns.com or call 1-800-856-5061.
- Watch a video of our family ride on YouTube. Search for "Tyler Johnston's Tidal Bore."

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