

In Nova Scotia, a tidal wonder creates a rafting roller coaster

By Kari J. Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

MAITLAND, Nova Scotia — On an outgoing tide, the Shubenacadie River meanders through Nova Scotia, past old native sites, colorful cliffs, historic villages, and the nesting grounds for hundreds of bald eagles. In its quiet hours, it belies any hint of the drama that unfolds twice a day here, where the river spills into Cobequid Bay, an arm of the Bay of Fundy.

At that critical moment when the sea hits reverse, a large wave called a tidal bore forms at the head of the funnel-shaped Fundy (“bore” comes from the Old Norse word “bara,” meaning a “wave” or “swell”). This wave gathers height and strength as it is forced up the shallow Shubenacadie against the outgoing current.

White-water rafters can surf the tidal bore and then ride the roller-coaster rapids created as the incoming water surges over sandbars and gets squeezed by the narrowing riverbanks. The rafts plunge through the waves and a special bilge pump system helps them quickly unload water.

The heights of the tidal bore and rapids vary, depending on the phase of the moon, but typically range from 3 to 12 feet. This is one of nature’s most dramatic sights and a thrill to experience perched on the gunwale of a Zodiac, a rigid-hulled, motorized inflatable raft (read: No paddling required).

The Bay of Fundy is famous for having the highest tides in the world, with water rising as much



SHUBENACADIE RIVER RUNNERS

Rafters ride the surf formed by a tidal bore, a sea wave that runs against the current of the Shubenacadie River.

as 44 feet in just 3½ hours, creating a tidal bore that can travel as far as 30 miles upriver.

In Urbania, Maitland, and South Maitland, three villages along Highway 215 in central Nova Scotia, three outfitters offer two- to four-hour rafting trips that combine high adventure with an interpretive tour of the area.

The rafting companies provide all equipment, including life jackets and, if needed, rubber boots and a heavy rain suit (complete with bib to keep your rain pants from coming off in the rapids). Rafters should bring sturdy shoes or sandals that fasten securely enough to withstand the mud’s suction at stops along the way. Wear dark-colored clothing that is

comfortable when wet (avoid cotton), and can get dirty. The Shubie River, as the locals call it, is brown from the sediment stirred up by the tide’s tremendous force, meaning your clothes, in the end, may look as if they were dipped in chocolate milk.

Rafters follow the bore anywhere from 6 to 10 miles upriver, using the lulls between rapids to go for a refreshing swim or explore sites along the way.

Bald eagles are so prevalent here that it’s possible to see 10 or 20 or more in a stretch of just a few miles. Harbor porpoises and seals are known to make appearances, and it’s not uncommon to see striped bass, salmon, halibut, monkfish, sea trout, and, on rare

occasions, sturgeon.

As you travel this quiet, mostly uninhabited route, you pass stands of old-growth hemlocks and oak nestled in protected ravines, and Gosse Bridge, the first cantilever bridge built in Canada.

The geological sights rival the area’s other natural wonders. Multicolored, sedimentary cliffs rise up to 200 feet and contain gypsum, a soft, brittle rock that’s used to make drywall, toothpaste, and paint. Rafters can stretch their legs on rocky beaches, where they can collect fossils of leaves, insects, and even bird footprints, if they’re lucky.

The river-rafting tour operators are not the only people who have made the most of nature’s resources along the Shubie over the years. Old Micmac sites (former summer camps) are located along the riverbank, along with the remnants of dikes created by the Acadians in the late 1600s and early 1700s. When these French descendants settled here, they built dikes to keep out saltwater and

create fertile farmland alongside the river. You learn about the New England Planters, farmers who were encouraged to move to this region after the British expelled the Acadians in 1755.

You finish your rafting trip with a welcome treat: warm drinks and a full-fledged barbecue.

If you have time, stop and explore Maitland, a one-store, heritage village in what was once a prosperous shipbuilding region that produced Canada’s largest, full-rigged wooden ship, the 267-foot W.D. Lawrence. The village is home to nearly 50 19th-century homes, plus the Lawrence House Museum, which chronicles the area’s shipbuilding history. But whatever you do, don’t miss the opportunity to pair your history lesson with a healthy dose of adventure.

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