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TRAVEL
 REGIONAL ISSUE



Adrift in the District

Armed with a paddleboard, a native sees her hometown from a new perspective

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Washington is home. As a child, I picnicked along the C&O Canal and biked through Rock Creek Park to the zoo. I counted the stairs up the Washington Monument, climbed the “Awakening” statue when it was at Hains Point and performed with a dance troupe at the Kennedy Center. As a young adult, I put down roots on Capitol Hill and fell in love with my home city. ¶ But every few months, I’d find myself falling into predictable rhythms and routines, and I would long for the open road. I’d hop in my car and drive to, say, California, stopping in small towns, exploring by bike and meeting strangers. I came to understand that adventure fuels me; I need to keep pursuing new things, or I wilt.

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In a former penitentiary and asylum is now a boutique hotel. F3

WEST VIRGINIA UNDERGROUND

A father and son find adventure in one of the state’s many caves. F4

A MID-ATLANTIC TRAIL TO ADVENTURE

There’s a self-guided tour to match any interest. F5



PHOTOS BY BILL O'LEARY/THE WASHINGTON POST

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A man casts his line into the Tidal Basin, as seen from the basin’s inlet bridge, where gates open and close with the tide. An Amtrak train crosses the Potomac River. The Thomas Jefferson Memorial overlooks the closed gates of the Tidal Basin’s inlet bridge. Young people wave from a boat during an outing on the Potomac.

Paddling to dreamy new views of D.C.

D.C. BY WATER FROM FI

So when a kayaking friend surprised me with a pink stand-up paddleboard (SUP) nearly a decade ago — knowing that I had SUPped once and loved it — I ended my embargo on the color pink (imposed after an excessively pink childhood) and embraced the challenge of learning a new sport.

Summer weekend mornings, my eyelids would pop open before daybreak, and I'd pull up a weather website to make sure it wasn't too windy. Driving on empty roads with the board strapped to my car, I would race the sun, wanting to hit the water first.

Initially, I paddled out of Columbia Island Marina next to the Pentagon. Heading into the Potomac, I'd bend my knees, steady my board and look up to see the Washington Monument across the river, behind a grove of trees. My city! I loved it even more from the water.

Before long, I began putting in at different spots along the Potomac and Anacostia rivers. I learned my way around the urban waterways like I had Washington's freeways. Some days, I'd paddle under Arlington Memorial Bridge, past the Kennedy Center and Theodore Roosevelt Island and toward the Georgetown waterfront; other days, I'd reach the Woodrow Wilson Memorial Bridge and cruise over to the giant spinning wheel at National Harbor; still others, I'd navigate past RFK Stadium and toward the National Arboretum and Kenilworth Park & Aquatic Gardens. No matter where I paddled, I was free from quotidian stress. Occasionally, I'd encounter "traffic," which meant yielding to a procession of ducklings. "Rush hour" meant sharing the water with collegiate rowers and the Army Corps of Engineers' debris vessel that picks up logs and branches.

As my confidence on the board grew, I tested myself in new ways — shifting the position of my feet or sprinting to a buoy. Soon, I could surf little waves after a motorboat buzzed by, and I could predict which direction planes would land at Reagan National Airport, based on the wind. Some days, I found myself parallel to the runway, directly under the flight path. Seconds before landing, a jet's headlights would point right at me, and as the giant bird passed overhead, its might would rumble through my body and ripple the water.

My paddleboard, 10 feet long, agile and quiet, became the perfect vehicle for seeing Washington. I appreciated the skyline and monuments, as well as views further inland, such as Washington National Cathedral in Northwest and the George Washington Masonic National Memorial in Alexandria. But even better, the board offered a backstage pass to nooks, crannies and points of view that few tourists would ever see. I paddled by the historic Seafarers Yacht Club, cruised by the missile battery atop the Navy Yard parking garage, steered around the back side of the Titanic Memorial

in Southwest and explored the spot where Rock Creek empties into the Potomac, just north of the Watergate. Great blue herons fished on the banks, and bugs danced on the water's surface.

At times, I felt like a voyeur, watching couples stroll along the Mount Vernon Trail and sailors tidy their boats. Bases heavily guarded on land gave the impression of being easily accessible by water. I paddled past the historic hangars at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling and up to the National War College at the confluence of the Anacostia and Potomac. As I paddled along the water bordering Fort Lesley J. McNair, I glided close enough to the light poles to see security cameras, close enough to a residence to see a boy blowing bubbles in his backyard.

As I've paddled, the city has changed. From the Anacostia, west of the Navy Yard, I watched glass apartment buildings and a soccer stadium rise from the ground. From the Washington Channel, I saw the Wharf materialize so quickly, so utterly changing the waterfront, that I scarcely remember the location of Phillips, where my grandparents took my family for special dinners. As these new developments began humming with activity, the rivers did, too. On pleasant days, I'd paddle past tour boats, dinner cruises, water taxis, dragon boats, canoes and kayaks.

Last July, I heard about a new dock at East Potomac Park. I drove there early one morning and launched my board into the Washington Channel. As I paddled north, the sun rose, slipping between buildings at the Wharf like light through a pinhole camera.

At the far end of the channel, I saw a squat stone archway, and I crouched on my paddleboard to fit underneath. Gliding forward in a small tunnel, resting on my shins, I batted away cobwebs with my paddle. The air was typical for July — muggy and windless — but a chill ran through my body.



Along in the dark cavity, unsure whether I'd ventured into a forbidden area, I was at once fearful and curious.

I continued through the arch and found myself under a low bridge. A short fence stopped me; beyond it, the view opened up, dreamlike. As my board bobbed on the water, I looked out to see the Tidal Basin I've known my whole life. But the perspective was new. Disorienting. Thrilling! The low sun ignited the water in front of me. My heart raced, and I couldn't stop smiling.

I paddled back down the channel, feeling euphoric about my discovery — a vantage point that before that day would have seemed inconceivable. Later that week, I tried to return with a camera. But when I approached the arches, I found the openings blocked. I turned back, deflated and puzzled. Had I been caught unlawfully paddling through the arches? Had someone boarded them up?

Driving out of the park, I stopped at the National Park Service headquarters to find out. The arches weren't boarded up, a ranger told me. Those were the gates that open and close with the tides. Her words echoed in my mind: "You know, the Tidal Basin?" Of course — the Tidal Basin. During all my years in Washington, I'd never considered how the basin functioned. And now, I had unknowingly paddled through its back doors.

Several times last summer, I returned to the arches and found the gates closed. I felt as though I'd seen the Loch Ness monster. Without a picture of the view, would anyone believe me? I vowed to try again in the spring.

In March, I called the Army Corps, which built the Tidal Basin and gates starting in the 1880s to flush debris out of what was once a mosquito-infested pool and a dumping ground for sewage. I learned that inlet gates on the Potomac open to let water into

the Tidal Basin. As the tide ebbs, the gates close, and the outlet gates open to flush water and sediment down the channel and into the Anacostia. Then a new tidal cycle begins. The magic is that twice a day, as the tide changes, the gates open and close on their own.

Two weeks ago, on a warm afternoon, I studied the tidal charts and headed out, attempting again to time my paddle with the opening of the outlet gates. Sun warmed my shoulders as I passed the fish market and a tree packed with black-crowned night herons. But then I saw the closed gates and pulled my paddle out of the water, disappointed. The next day, I went at a different time, with the same results. I considered surrendering.

The third day, it was 40 degrees. I carried my board to the dock late in the day, wearing a wet suit, neoprene booties and a knit hat. I half expected someone to tell me I couldn't go out because it was too dangerous — too cold, too windy, too close to sunset. But the freedom that comes with being on the water means freedom to go out, even when the conditions are dicey. Across from the dock, flags at the Capital Yacht Club stuck straight out like cookie sheets. I was racing against the sinking sun.

Powering up the channel, I found myself in the middle of rush hour, yet alone. I paddled under the Interstate 395 bridge, crammed with cars, and looked ahead to the next bridge, where freight trains carrying UPS and Tropicana containers moved in opposite directions. A plane descended, a helicopter whirred.

From a distance, I could see a golden light shining through the small archways. The gates were open! I paddled hard against the wind, approaching one of the arches. Then I ducked on my board and cruised through the steel-framed gates — which I now looked at with awe. Holding my camera, I glided into the spot I'd



BILL O'LEARY/THE WASHINGTON POST

As cars race across a bridge over the Potomac River, the water below offers tranquil, solitary views of the Washington Monument.

If you go

BOATING IN DC
boatingindc.com
202-337-9642

This outfitter offers rentals at the following boathouses. Some locations also offer daytime and twilight kayak and paddleboard tours of the monuments. All rentals are weather permitting. Stand-up paddleboard rentals are \$22 per hour at all boathouses below that offer it, not including tax. Minimum rental time is one hour, and rates are prorated every 10 minutes after one hour. The all-day rental rate is four times the hourly rate.

Fletcher's Boathouse,
4940 Canal Rd. NW

Access to both the Potomac and the C&O Canal; kayak, canoe, rowboat and paddleboard rentals currently available. Standup paddleboard rentals starting early May.

Key Bridge Boathouse,
3500 Water St. NW

Paddle the Potomac from the Georgetown waterfront; kayak, canoe and paddleboard rentals begin April 13.

Tidal Basin, 1501 Maine Ave. SW

Pedal boats and swan boat rentals currently available.

The Wharf Boathouse, 700 Water St. SW

Paddle along the Washington Channel and around Hains Point; kayaks and paddleboard rentals available starting April 26.

M.K.

For a full list of boathouses, visit washingtonpost.com/travel

been thinking about since last summer, the small pool of water between the gates and the short fence that abuts the Tidal Basin. I looked out to the Thomas Jefferson Memorial and Washington Monument, and my heart sang. Around the water, cherry blossoms were starting to open.

The sun dipped below a line of trees. My feet ached with cold, and I knew the tide was about to change; if the gates closed, I'd be stuck there for 12 hours. I paddled the half mile back to the dock, the wind now behind me. Bright blue and pink lights decorating the I-395 bridge reflected on the water. Mallards bobbed, and boats, still dressed in their winter white shrink wrap, cracked in the marina. At the Wharf, the Anthem marquee glowed. A gas-powered fire pit flickered at the end of a new pier.

The wind knocked my board into the dock, and I stepped off the water, wasting little time before I was in the car, heat blasting. After surviving what felt like a perilous expedition, feeling triumphant, I drove out of East Potomac Park with my board on the roof, merging with traffic on Maine Avenue SW, and I headed home.

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