

Mother Nature's water park

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Wisconsin's original lazy river isn't in a water park.

You won't catch a whiff of chlorine, hear the lifeguard's whistle or be pelted by a fake waterfall as you float by in a yellow inner tube.

The Lower Wisconsin is the real thing, a wide river with enough current that you don't have to work too hard at paddling - as long as you aren't in a big hurry. And who wants to rush, when there are sandbars to picnic on, islands to explore, fish to catch and Frisbees to throw?

Our annual canoe trip with my husband's sister and her family is a family adventure that's every bit as much fun as those monster Dells water slides we also love. Our party of four adults and four kids rents three canoes (the kids take turns riding in the middle perched on coolers).

Last summer, we canoed 16 miles on the Lower Wisconsin River starting in Muscoda, a small town about an hour from Madison. That's about five hours of paddling time - a day trip for more ambitious groups - but we spread it over three days. With children who'd rather swim than sit in a canoe, we find our lazy-river strategy works best.

Tall trees lining the shore gave the feeling of being in the middle of nowhere, though in reality we were only a half-mile or so from a major road. As we glided through the water, we spotted soaring geese and barely moving turtles. The kids, ages 7 to 13, swam all day, built sand tunnels and hunted for clams.

At night, we toasted marshmallows on sticks over the campfire, and watched the crimson sunset over the water fade to a sky filled with stars. "In my opinion, if you've never done it before and you don't get hooked canoeing on this river, you never will," says outfitter Scott Teuber, owner of Wisconsin River Outings in Boscobel.

The 92.3-mile stretch of the Lower Wisconsin from the last dam at Prairie du Sac to the Mississippi River is the longest section of free-flowing river in the Midwest. The best-known town along this stretch of the river is scenic Spring Green, home of Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin, the House on the Rock and the American Players Theatre's outdoor Shakespeare productions. Two summers ago, we started out from one of the canoe landings in Spring Green and got off the river 14 miles downstream in Gotham.

Muscoda is farther downstream, the river a little more leisurely. From Boscobel, where we took out, it's another 30 miles or so to the Mississippi.

Most of Teuber's business for guided trips is on weekends, and he's taken out groups ranging from a mother and her three daughters to nearly 50 on a father-son outing.

We rent just the canoes and bring our own tents, sleeping bags, cooking equipment, food and water.

Here is some of what we've learned on these family trips:

In and out of canoe:

It's straightforward, fairly easy paddling - no rapids, no rocks. Teuber says he's found on his guided trips that most people get the hang of it within the first two miles. Proper loading of the canoe is important, because if the bow is up it's a lot harder to keep the canoe from getting turned by the current.

Figure the river is moving two to three miles an hour, depending on exactly where you are and the water level. Add about a mile an hour for your paddling, and you can estimate how long your trip will take you. We've never tipped, even with squirmy kids reaching over for more sunscreen and one adult (I won't name names) who periodically likes to stretch his legs by paddling standing up.

By law, children age 12 and younger must wear a personal flotation device and everyone else must have a life vest within arm's reach. If you do fall in, don't panic and try to swim against the current. Relax and let the current take you, and in 20 or 30 yards you should be able to touch bottom again, Teuber says.

Respecting the river:

We found plenty of shallow, protected areas for swimming, but there are drop-offs, especially on the downstream side of sandbars. "The river can be deceiving," Teuber says. "The people who have problems in this river don't appreciate that fact."

Even though our children are all good swimmers, we always gave them clear boundaries and one adult kept an eye out.

The water level varies depending on the time of year, how much rainfall there's been and what's been happening upstream - all things your outfitter will know. The water is generally high in the spring, and lower later in the summer. Last year was unusually dry, so we wound up getting out a lot to drag the canoe through mere inches of water. "Beached again!" the kids would wail.

Setting up camp:

Our kids wanted to camp on every sandbar they saw, but we always go for spots that aren't too near a bridge (faint traffic noise at night) and have good swimming. An average water level means you'll have a lot of sandbars from which to choose. When the river is high, you might have to paddle for a while before you find a place to camp.

That also can be the case on the weekends, when it's best to stake out your spot by mid-afternoon. The unwritten rule: "Nobody ever shares a sandbar," Teuber says. Most people don't want to camp within sight or earshot of another group; that's the whole point of being out here.

Years ago, before we had kids, my husband and I took a weekend trip with another couple. We didn't get on the river until late on a Saturday afternoon, and wound up pitching our tents on a very small island - and nowhere near far enough from a rowdy group on the opposite shore.

Remember, the river can rise quite a bit overnight. (We were lucky that tiny island didn't disappear before morning.) Your outfitter should know what's going on upstream and have a pretty good idea how much the river will rise. "I know within a couple of inches how high the water is going to be," Teuber says.

Take your time:

Bask in the sun, linger over a cup of coffee, see who can spot any wildlife. Keep your eyes open for Canada geese, bald eagles, deer, beavers and river otters. If you like to fish, you might catch walleye, catfish, small-mouth bass and sauger.

One of my favorite memories from our most recent trip was watching the younger kids spend hours hunting in the water for live clams. They gave them names and carried them around in water-filled buckets for a while before releasing them in the water. We dug out the camera and took "portraits" of the clams to remember them by.

Then we went back to being lazy.

If you go

Canoeing the Wisconsin River

Go: If you like water, sand and wilderness camping without a lot of heavy lifting

No: If you can't swim and would be nervous on a river; or if you must have bathroom facilities

Getting there: The Lower Wisconsin River is about a four-hour drive from the Chicago area. To get to Spring Green, take the Northwest Tollway (I-90) to the U.S. Routes 12 and 18 West exit just east of Madison. Follow Beltline West (U.S. Routes 12 and 14) to the Route 14 West Exit. Take Route 14 West to Spring Green.

Renting canoes: Many outfitters operate in communities along the Wisconsin River. Two we've used are Bob's Riverside in Spring Green, (608) 588-2826, www.bobsriverside.com, and Wisconsin River Outings in Boscobel, (866) 412-2663, www.canoe-camping.com. Canoe rental is by the day and includes life vests and paddles. Bob's Riverside charges \$22 per day per canoe rental and \$11 per day per inner tube; additional fee for shuttle back to your car is based on distance. Wisconsin River Outings has all new canoes for 2004. The rates are \$30 for one day, \$27 per day for a multiday rental. The shuttle from Muscoda to Boscobel is free; the fee for longer distances is \$2 per mile regardless of the group's size.

Guided trips: Wisconsin River Outings charges \$50 per person per day for a guided river trip, which includes meals. Sleeping bags and tents also are available for rent. The menu for a typical two-day trip includes: sandwiches, chips and fresh fruit for lunch; pasta, salad, bread and fresh Wisconsin corn on the cob (in season) for dinner; vanilla-cinnamon French toast, bacon or sausage, juice, hot chocolate and coffee for breakfast.

What to bring: Besides the usual camping supplies, pack more sun-screen and more towels than you think you'll need. We figured on about a gallon of water per person per day; it's better to have too much than to run out. A folding camping table is a nice luxury and will help keep sand from getting in all the food. Glass is not allowed.

Where to stay: If you don't want to head right back home, you can add on a stay to see the sights in Spring Green or a side trip to a Wisconsin Dells water park. See which lazy river your kids like best.

When to go: Summer is the peak time, of course, but for day trips, consider spring or fall, too - late April and May if the river is safe for paddling and late September and October when the leaves are ablaze.

"Number one, nobody is up here," says Wisconsin River Outings owner Scott Teuber, "and it's beautiful during that time of year."

Learn more: Visit www.springgreen.com to learn more about the Lower Wisconsin and nearby attractions. Teuber of Wisconsin River Outings will be exhibiting at the Des Plaines River Canoe Marathon on May 23. He's providing canoes for the race, which starts in Libertyville and ends in Mount Prospect.