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TRAVEL

Poconos rafting gets summertime boost

By Michael Rubinkam
The Associated Press

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LEHIGH GORGE STATE PARK, Pennsylvania (AP) -- Whitewater rafting is a great way to escape the workaday world. But it can be a frustrating experience to drive hours to the nearest river, only to find it anything but white in the typically languid days of summer when natural water levels are low.

That's why rivers controlled by dams can make great whitewater destinations. Because humans -- not nature -- determine how much water flows downstream, a more stable supply of whitewater is assured.

This summer, for the first time, rafters on the Lehigh River in the Poconos will be able to experience whitewater during the normally placid summer months -- as well as spring and fall -- thanks to a change in dam releases. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is more than tripling, to 22, the number of days it releases water from the Frances E. Walter Dam into the scenic Lehigh.

And while these eastern Pennsylvania rapids are gentler than the white-knuckle rides of wilder, faster rivers in places such as Maryland and West Virginia, that's not to say there aren't thrills and spills. Indeed, when I rafted through a 12-mile section of the Lehigh Gorge in mid-May -- on the first whitewater release weekend of the season -- I variously lost a paddle, gashed a finger and nearly fell overboard. And had a blast doing it.

Dam-controlled rivers allow rafting companies to "offer a consistent experience from one trip to the next," says Jason Robertson, managing director of American Whitewater, a group that works to conserve and enhance whitewater resources.

American Whitewater is compiling a list of all whitewater releases nationwide, to be released in time for the 2006 paddling season. In the meantime, the group suggests that would-be rafters turn to state



Rafters paddle down the Lehigh River in Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania.

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tourism departments for names of licensed rafting companies.

Though the Lehigh draws nearly 100,000 rafters a year, many of them from New York, Philadelphia and surrounding areas, it is not the most famous dam-controlled whitewater river. That distinction would probably go to West Virginia's Gauley River, where the Army Corps releases water from Summersville Dam each fall to create world-class rapids that draw visitors from around the nation.

Indeed, there are hundreds of dams around the country that provide opportunities for whitewater rafting. Many of them are owned by hydroelectric companies, which have to comply with federal rules designed to preserve and enhance recreation along dammed rivers.

Summer releases

Along the Lehigh, a transportation issue had delayed expansion of the number of dam release days, which had been limited to seven. When the water level at Frances E. Walter Dam was higher than 1,310 feet above sea level, an access road along the upstream side of the dam would get flooded. The Army Corps decided to move the road, allowing the pool to be raised to 1,335 feet on release days.

Rafting companies, environmental groups and tourism officials alike had been lobbying for years for more releases from the dam. The additional water should not only benefit rafting, but improve the downstream fishery by lowering the river's temperature and allowing more fish to survive the summer heat.

These extra summer releases could give the rafting business "a kick in the pants," says my guide, Doug Fogal, co-founder of Pocono Whitewater, one of four outfitters licensed by the state to run whitewater excursions down the Lehigh.

On the day I went, there were 86 people, including dozens of high schoolers from Brooklyn, New York, on their first rafting trip. A group of middle-aged men wearing pirate hats hooted and hollered as they engaged other rafts in combat with water-filled buckets and water cannons.

Fogal and I tried to avoid the crowds, especially since a photographer in our raft was trying to keep his expensive equipment dry. Fogal, who has run the Lehigh thousands of times, was an expert captain, steering us around rocks that snared some of the less experienced rafters behind us. "Who put that rock there?" one exasperated girl said.

Between rapids named Bridal Veil, Rattler and Pipeline, I took in the breathtaking view.

Ancient cliffs rose 1,000 feet above the river, green with new growth. Turkey vultures circled high overhead while Canada geese flew their routes. Mallards and common mergansers paddled near the riverbank.

About two-thirds of the way down, we pulled over to the side of the river for a boxed (actually, a bucketed) lunch of hoagies, pretzels, cookies and bottled water.

Whitewater rafting on the Lehigh: Commercial outfitters run the river from March through October. Rates vary from \$30 to \$52 per adult, depending on the season. Group discounts are available. The Lehigh features mildly challenging Class II and Class III rapids.

Getting there: Lehigh Gorge State Park is about 100 miles west of New York and 80 miles north of Philadelphia. The northern section of the park at White Haven can be reached via Interstate 80. The southern section at Jim Thorpe can be reached via the northeast extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

What to wear: In cold weather, bring a wetsuit or rent from the outfitter. Avoid cotton, because it loses insulation when wet. In summer, wear a swimsuit and T-shirt. Bring old sneakers (or other shoes you don't mind getting wet), sunscreen and a change of clothes.

2005 whitewater release dates: July 2-3, 23-24; Aug. 6-7, 20-21, Sept. 3-4, 17-18, Oct. 1-2.

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We glided over a few more rapids, then arrived at the pullout point at Glen Onoko Falls, a pretty set of waterfalls high above the river and reachable via a rather strenuous hike. A Victorian-style hotel once stood here, Fogal says.

The hotel burned in 1911, and nature has since reclaimed the landscape.

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