

Journey on the James: Three Weeks through the Heart of Virginia

Earl Swift



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From its beginnings as a trickle of icy water in Virginia's northwest corner to its miles-wide mouth at Hampton Roads, the James River has witnessed more recorded history than any other feature of the American landscape -- as home to the continent's first successful English settlement, highway for Native Americans and early colonists, battleground in the Revolution and the Civil War, and birthplace of America's twentieth-century navy.

In 1998, restless in his job as a reporter for the Norfolk Virginian-Pilot, Earl Swift landed an assignment traveling the entire length of the James. He hadn't been in a canoe since his days as a Boy Scout, and he knew that the river boasts whitewater, not to mention man-made obstacles, to challenge even experienced paddlers. But reinforced by Pilot photographer Ian Martin and a lot of freeze-dried food and beer, Swift set out to immerse himself -- he hoped not literally -- in the river and its history.

What Swift survived to bring us is this engrossing chronicle of three weeks in a fourteen-foot plastic canoe and four hundred years in the life of Virginia. Fueled by humor and a dauntless curiosity about the land, buildings, and people on the banks, and anchored by his sidekick Martin -- whose photographs accompany the text -- Swift points his bow through the ghosts of a frontier past, past Confederate forts and POW camps, antebellum mills, ruined canals, vanished towns, and effluent-spewing industry. Along the banks, lonely meadowlands alternate with suburbs and power plants, marinas and the gleaming skyscrapers of Richmond's New South downtown. Enduring dunkings, wolf spiders, near-arrest, channel fever, and twenty-knot winds, Swift makes it to the Chesapeake Bay.

Readers who accompany him through his Journey on the James will come away with the accumulated pleasure, if not the bruises and mud, of four hundred miles of adventure and history in the life of one of America's great watersheds.

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