

ANGUS PHILLIPS

Whitewater Fishing on the 'Iron Maiden'



BY ANGUS PHILLIPS—THE WASHINGTON POST

The "Iron Maiden" in calm waters, as Mark Kovach, left, and Andy Schaffer fish for bass.

It was inevitable that with all the whitewater rafting going on, someone would come up with the idea of whitewater fishing.

The notion occurred to Mark Kovach of Silver Spring after he took a Shenandoah raft ride with River & Trail Outfitters several years ago. He immediately began drawing plans for a whitewater fishing raft.

The result is "The Iron Maiden," a customized, rubber rowboat with seats for three and a huge payload for gear and food to take on smallmouth bass trips near Harper's Ferry, W.Va.

"Let me show you how she got her name," Kovach said after he'd stowed the Maiden full of enough stuff to run down to the Chesapeake Bay.

"You two guys each grab a side. Now *heave!*" The Iron Maiden was only a few feet up the Potomac's bank, but it took three great heaves to buck her and her great cargo down the gravel and get her afloat. Thus began a long and interesting day.

Kovach is the only fishing guide working the moderately rough, eight-mile river stretch just above and below the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers.

That's because no one else in the Harper's Ferry area has anything like the Maiden, which plunges happily through rapids with names like Mad Dog and White Horse, making fishing possible in places that might capsize ordinary river boats.

Kovach, a part-time guide (his regular job is training auto mechanics), said the fishing can be very good in the fast water, which is an ideal smallmouth habitat. When the bass turn on, he said he often breaks 100 on the fish-counter tacked onto the Maiden's rubber thwart.

But even when it's mediocre, as it was the day fly fisherman Andy Schaffer and I occupied the Maiden's bow and stern seats, whitewater bassing has appeal.

There are the rapids to shoot—invigorating but not scary—and in flat stretches Kovach tosses in some local lore from this history-rich region, a bit of fly-fishing instruction and a little stream entomology. There is a huge lunch and plenty of food left over, too, which is handy since the trips generally end after dark.

He charges \$190 a day for two, a bit more than the average fee of \$150 plus expenses for conventional guides operating in less turbulent stretches.

It's hard to begrudge the extra fee, since in addition to eats, drinks, tackle, flies and lures, Kovach provides much elbow grease. I felt guilty sitting like a lump as he sweated over 10-foot oars, battling upstream to free lures stuck in the rocks or holding the boat against the current so his "sports" could work a hot spot. I wanted to jump out and help, African Queen style.

Better to save strength. Having transported the Maiden from Silver Spring and inflated and rigged her, Kovach said he was reluctant to cut fishing time short.

The float ran from 9 a.m. to 10 at night, when the Maiden drifted the final mile to the takeout in the deepening darkness.

In between there was mostly catching and releasing, the Potomac featuring a preponderance of "throwback" bass in the 8- to 10-inch range—not large enough to keep but good sport on a fly rod or ultralight spinning gear.

Scattered in were a scant few keeper bass and one large walleye that didn't quite make it to the boat.

Working lures in the clear water below the rapids, in the aerated froth below small ledges and in the eddies behind rocks, we got an inkling of the life of the predatory whitewater smallmouth, which lurks in calm water close to the rushing current, waiting for food to wash its way.

Twice, when the bass lit up, we flailed the water with sinking streamer flies, plastic grubs and little cork or deer-hair popping bugs that the bass slurped up off the surface.

The rest of the time we fished and floated at a more leisurely pace, consuming vast amounts of food and drink and soaking up the sun from our perches in the Iron Maiden.

For a brochure on Kovach's float trips and his fly fishing school, write him at 737 Thayer Ave., Silver Spring, Md., 20910.

Anglers seeking more adventure can write to one of the companies that runs overnight and longer float-fishing trips on the New River in southeastern West Virginia, where the rapids are thunderous. Try Class VI River Runners, Box 78, Lansing, W.Va. 25862; or Simms New River Dories, Dept. SA, P.O. Drawer 243, Glen Jean, W.Va. 25846.