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Gowanus Canal — yes, that one — now a fun venue for the summer of COVID-19

By [Hannah Frishberg](#) July 24, 2020



The Dredgers' first pandemic-era paddle-in film screening. [Nicole Vergalla / nvedits.video/photography](#)

Floating toward the bay, the setting sun illuminates a rainbow oil sheen. I stick my paddle in it and it shimmers, then dissipates. A pair of strangers gently bob to my left, and our group's leader talks about Dutch settlers and oysters before becoming momentarily distracted by a dead, bloated fish drifting by.

The Gowanus Canal is [famously filthy](#), but my recent tour of it with the Gowanus Dredgers Canoe Club felt like an escapist fantasy: Maskless on the water, insulated from city sounds by the wall of industry that lines the canal, the water droplets occasionally splashing onto my bare legs were, momentarily, the only threat of disease I could fathom.

Since 1999, the Dredgers have been canoeing their polluted eponym and advocating for it to be properly cleaned. While most scheduled programming remains largely on hold due to [the coronavirus pandemic](#), the Dredgers find themselves in the unique position of being able to continue offering pleasure cruises, their canoes primed for social distance — the seats are 7 feet apart — and the Gowanus so nasty New Yorkers avoid it like a plague worse than the current one.

“We’ve always had an inherent attitude of respect for contamination,” Dredgers co-founder and current board member Owen Foote told The Post, adding that the group has long been in the business of using hand sanitizer.

Through the end of their season in October — when the cold weather makes the waters dangerous — the Dredgers have a full roster of donation-based activities lined up for the [Superfund site](#).



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There are Sunday morning [Lighten Up](#) excursions for those looking to skill-build and burn calories (\$5 donation suggested); narrated [Sunset Canoe Rides](#) in partnership with Untapped New York (\$35); and the occasional full-moon paddle, which, Foote warned, is “a little creepy.” For the landlubbers, the group hosts [shoreline art walks](#) and Friday

night [Boathouse Jams](#) by their Second Street clubhouse, and individuals of any skill level can also book [self-guided voyages](#).

“We outfit them with life jackets, give them minimal instruction and set them adrift,” Foote said.

He added that yes, people *have* capsized over the years. But despite its reputation, the Gowanus’ water is New York State Department of Health-approved safe for boating, although not for swimming or fishing, [an 86-page report declared in 2017](#).

The group also has a few [kayak tours](#) scheduled at their Kayak Staten Island branch. If they can get sufficient enrollment, the Dredgers will be collaborating with Gowanus-area children’s gymnastics center PowerPlay on a waterborne day camp.

They are also aiming to regularly host nautical equivalents to the [quarantine-chic drive-in](#): the paddle-in.

“Paddle-in movies are a great way for people to get their feet wet — not literally,” Dredger Celeste LeCompte, who helped organize a screening of “The Thing” this month, told The Post. “People are so hungry for opportunities to be together in ways that are safe, and the canoe offers a great opportunity to freely enjoy time with their friends.”

For the paddle-ins, the Dredgers project films from a shoreline bank onto the graffiti-free wall of a building-supply company. Black-and-white films, they’ve found, make for a better picture in this jury-rigged setup.

The group has a fleet of 12 canoes, all of which were needed for this month’s movie. Each can fit two strangers or three members of a [quaranteam](#), and there are an additional 40 seats available on land. Independent boaters are encouraged to bring their own vessels; one skiff with a popcorn machine distributed free snacks to the crowd at the most recent screening.

The events are all weather-dependent, so those interested should follow the Dredgers on [Instagram](#) or [sign up for their email](#) list to stay updated.

While the canoe enthusiasts have been able to maintain a relatively normal lineup of happenings this summer, one aspect of their outings has undeniably changed: “Most of the participants this season have been local and not visitors,” Foote said, a “big-time” change from previous seasons, which were populated by out-of-staters.

Where participants hail from, though, pales entirely in the context of a blessed opportunity to safely commune.

“It’s really been a joy watching the gathering of individuals, even if we’re at a distance,” said Foote. “Even if you’re canoeing 150 feet away from another canoeist, you still shout ‘Ahoy!’ ”



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Paddling along the Gowanus Canal on one of the Gowanus Dredgers canoe tours.
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