

Ride the Tide: This summer, there are many ways to explore the Providence River



Marcello; photo credit: Alison O'Donnell

Providence is a hopping city — usually. We find ourselves a bit limited this summer, because COVID, but because Phase 2 reopened some businesses and parks in the state, we once again have recreation options on the water. In fact, more options than ever before!

Matthew “Marcello” Haynes became a gondolier in 1999, something he’d always wanted to do. You’ve likely seen him rowing down the river at a WaterFire event. In 2007, he bought the company La Gondola. Right about that time, Tom McGinn bought the Providence River Boat Company. Then, in spring 2017, as Marcello describes it, “I, Tom and his partner, Kristin Stone, sat for a pint one night and decided we’d like to open a kayak company. So we’ve been contemporaries on the river for quite some time.”

Together they started Providence Kayak, now in its fourth season. Venn diagram aside, whether you’re looking to ride the Providence River in a gondola, kayak or river boat, they’ve got ya covered.

They started with a dozen kayaks and built up from there. Ever expanding to accommodate their customers, this year includes additional choices. “We have 17 kayaks on the water right now,” says Marcello, “and we’re working on getting a fleet of ‘pedal’ boats on the water, which hold up to four passengers. Instead of having a flywheel, they have propellers attached to each pedaling mechanism,” explains the former physics teacher. “They’re more like bullets so they’re a little more efficient and move along pretty well. It’ll be yet another option on the water.”



Kayaking is a great way to see Providence from a different perspective and learn the local waterside history. “In addition to being able to rent either single or tandem kayaks, last year we added guided tours. So they have a guide, someone who is well versed in the history of the river,” says Marcello. “Usually the tour itself is about an hour all the way up to the top of the river to Waterplace Park from down here. We start on the Providence River and then move on to the Woonasquatucket and stop just before the mall. Then everybody usually has about a half an hour to make their way back down to the dock at their leisure. It’s just another way to give people an experience they can’t necessarily do themselves. It’s more of an informative and educational thing than just being out on a beautiful day.”

Marcello is very passionate about what he does. “It’s always simply been the greatest summer job. I couldn’t love a job any more. I loved teaching, but rowing is part of my soul. It is what I am supposed to do. And I am very fortunate to be able to do a job that I love as much as I do.”

Regarding La Gondola, Marcello says, "We have 15 gondoliers, including myself, normally four gondolas plus a different kind of Venetian boat called a sandolo. It's a different style of boat that's used, and they're just finishing the maintenance on that one. We already have two gondolas on the water now, and we're hopefully launching gondola three very soon."

COVID precautions are in place. "We've been kind of easing ourselves into the season. Normally we start in early April. We lost two full months with the gondolas. We didn't start until June 1 with Phase 2 reopening." The pace is starting to pick up, though. "The gondolas have been busier. Captain Tom has been getting busier as well. Hopefully that will be an indicator of what the summer could be," says Marcello optimistically. "Definitely not what it has been in the past. We were well aware that would be the case. It's just a matter of making smart decisions. We have the hand sanitizer. The boats are washed more frequently. Paddles as well. Once you're out there, you're already keeping distance. It's more about protecting people on the dock when interacting with us. When groups check in, they're staggered, sending multiple groups down one at a time rather than all together."

Customer service is top notch. The dock crew is very helpful getting you in and out of the sit-atop kayaks. Booking a trip online is easy, and you can always call if you have questions. Rates are super reasonable to begin with, and if you bring back five pieces of trash you can get \$5 off your next ride! I took advantage of this and, 16 hours after my first ride, was back on the water taking the guided historical tour. Marcello, one of several tour guides, gave us the lowdown on Roger Williams, local Native American influences, Revolutionary War tidbits, info on the oldest buildings and the great floods. The ride is relaxed, and there are plenty of spots to take shade if need be. Leave valuables at home or with the dock crew in their bin. Cell phones can be carried in a water resistant life vest pocket. Bring sunglasses, a hat and sunscreen, and water shoes and clothes you don't mind getting a tad wet.

For more information on Providence Kayak, call 401-829-1769 or visit their website, Providencekayak.com. They are located at the Providence Marina, 15 Bridge Street. Contact Gondola RI at gondolari.com, 401-421-8877. Contact Providence River Boat Company at providenceriverboat.com, 401-580-BOAT.