Rowing on the river
Kayakers take a Hudson cruise

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On most days, the Hudson River represents a barrier for New Jersey commuters en route to Manhattan, something to get over, go under or zip across on a high-speed ferry.

Yesterday, however, the river became a more leisurely scene as people paddled along on kayaks provided by the Hoboken Cove Community Boathouse.

The guided tours were billed as an opportunity to give people a chance to experience the water as a recreational space and not just a thoroughfare.

"Park space is at a premium in Hoboken," said Sandy Sobanski, the founder of the nonprofit group. "We all could have so much more room to move if we just used the river a little more."

Since many who come out for a ride are novices, the group uses sit-on-top kayaks that are typically larger, more stable and harder to capsize. People generally get about 20 minutes on the water, in a cove area just off Frank Sinatra Park, which is about one block long and three blocks wide.

Boarding the kayaks, passengers on the craggy shore had to be mindful of broken glass and hunks of rusting metal, and once on the water had to contend with some driftwood, floating trash and two families of geese.

"The river still needs work," said Carter Craft, policy director for the Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance. "But, 75 percent of the time, the water is fishable and swimmable. I wouldn't drink the water, but even if you do, you won't necessarily get sick."

And while some might feel the adventurous urge to paddle beyond the designated area, Alan F. Blumberg, a professor and director of ocean engineering at the Stevens Institute of Technology who studies the river currents and operates a Web site -- www.stevens.edu/maritimeforecast -- says that would be a very bad idea.

The Hudson boasts some of the strongest river currents in the world and depending on which way the water is flowing, stray kayakers could quickly find themselves either at the base of the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee or the Statue of Liberty in a matter of minutes.
If a person is inexperienced, "there is no way to successfully paddle against the current," said Blumberg. Yesterday afternoon the tide was low and the current was flowing south at about 2 mph in the middle of the Hudson and about .5 mph closer to the shore. At those speeds, a small craft "could easily be swept away," Blumberg said.

The boathouse has been in existence for five years, but has been forced to rent space on the Manhattan waterfront due to lack of facilities on the Jersey side. Recently, the group was approved for a $100,000 grant from Hudson County to build a new boathouse on the Hoboken side of the Weehawken Cove.

Yesterday marked the first of four river excursions this summer. Other dates include June 24, July 8 and July 21. The group will also hold trips on the Jersey City Reservoir on July 7, Aug. 4 and Sept. 8.

More than 100 people took advantage of the program yesterday, including some as young as 3 years old. Others upon their return to the shore promptly walked to the end of the line to wait for another turn.

Among them were Carol Hanselman of Philadelphia and Natalie Koch of Jersey City, friends who were the first into the water yesterday, riding in a tangerine-colored kayak built for two.

It took them awhile to get the coordination down, but once they got going, they were able to coast around the river with ease.

"It's an amazing way to see the New York skyline," said Hanselman. "It's tough not to be happy out there. It's a great way to spend a morning."

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