

Delaware: Source to Sea

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It was the worst campsite I had ever bedded down in, and that's saying a lot. Located along the Delaware River in the industrial outskirts of Camden, New Jersey, a city that I was warned not to camp near, my site was disgusting. It was wedged between an oil refinery and a parking lot, directly under a freight train trestle, and was littered with trash, broken bottles, and roadkill. There were only a few modest bushes to hide my tent behind. I would have kicked my grandmother for a better, safer site. Even the bums' shantytown I had passed a few miles back upstream even seemed appealing. Life was not good where I was, which was 300 miles from the source of this river and sixty miles from the sea.

Life had been good during the preceding ten days. On October 16, I stood on top of a 2,700-foot hill in Upstate New York with the front wheel of my mountain bike pointed south towards the ocean. The first twenty miles of the Delaware River being too narrow and shallow for my solo canoe, I pedaled next to the river to the tiny community of Bloomville and put in there. With a duffle bag containing 25 pounds of food in the bow and my dry bag in the stern, my seventeen-foot boat was trim and neat. I hoped to complete the 360-mile trip in less than two weeks. With a successful source to sea run, I would be at two rivers down, three to go, towards my quest, which was to paddle the five longest rivers in the Northeast.

Soon I learned of the Delaware River's Napoleon-esque attitude. The Delaware knows it's not the longest river in the Northeast (that's the Susquehanna), nor the most well-known (that's Hudson). To make up for its lack of stature and status it delivers difficulty. The upper section possesses twisting stretches with strainers, the midsection is home to rapids, and the lower section from my Camden campsite to the head of Delaware Bay is most difficult, known for its strong tides and winds.

As I hid in my ramshackle Camden campsite on October 25, I prepared myself for the final sixty miles. It would be a supersized game of cat and mouse – me in my little canoe avoiding 600-foot-long vessels that draw forty feet of water and put out six-foot-tall wakes. I would also have to evade speeding motorboats, circumnavigate enormous ports, and deal with tides that change four times daily. As I packed up camp the following morning, I peered at

vessels cruising up and down shipping lanes, as if they were trolling for me. I felt overwhelmed. There was really nowhere to go but downriver. I prayed for this damn river to finally end.

On October 28, it did end. I pulled into Fort Mott State Park, New Jersey, incredibly thankful that I didn't get yanked out of my boat by a sweeper, swamped by class III rapids, or smashed by 30,000-ton vessels. It didn't take me long to start thinking about my next river trip, where I knew the camping would always be better than what I could find in Camden.