

Rowing Tours on Wheels – a turning point for college crews

June 22nd, 2021

Dear Boat Club Captains,

Having been elected boat club captains last summer, you will all have seen the absence of the social side of May Term 2020 and substantially the whole of this academic year disappear at the expense of Covid-19 and lockdown. Rowing has been patchy throughout and major uncertainties remain over the rest of the summer regarding foreign travel. However, there are a couple of ways to salvage something from the summer and lay the foundations for the future:

Henley Royal Regatta

HRR was forced to cancel last year and finally settled on a delayed regatta at Henley this year from Wednesday August 11th – Sunday August 15th. It remains a 5-day event as usual, but it seems highly unlikely that we will see the same number of foreign entries and therefore it appears to be tangibly easier for home nations crews to qualify. I was lucky to be at Fitzwilliam in the early 1980s when a dozen or so college and CUBC crews would qualify every year (noticeably more than Oxford crews); and we had first refusal on accommodation for an VIII each year, but sadly those days have long since gone. The standard is higher today but 2021 presents a unique golden opportunity for college crews to perform well at the regatta and establish a bit of momentum.

And 2022 promises to see a 6-day regatta for the first time, adding another 100 races on the first day, once again creating another meaningful window for Cambridge colleges to qualify once again. This year in particular, with the regatta postponed to mid-August, college crews have an extra 5-6 weeks to train as a crew – as a single-college or combined-crew format – allowing you to push your rowing on a stage and spend more time building those lifelong friendships with likeminded companions.

One last thing that is different at Henley compared with the early 1980s: the Oxbridge college crews then were all men's crews racing in an international regatta mainly aimed at men. Today there are as many events for women as men at HRR, so this letter, a challenge to re-engage with HRR, is aimed at two crews not one in every college: M1 and W1.

Rowing Tours

Some college rowers will have learnt at school and competed at several head races and regattas around the country. But for many students who were novices here, most of their rowing has been done on the Cam. This summer there is a great opportunity to change that once and for all. I have been back on the Cam coaching FCBC since 2014 and have got to know Tony Moule, part-time senior coach at Fitz – but only recently discovered that he also runs a fleet of (sleeper) tour buses for rock

bands, except that rock bands are not touring at present. I am setting up a business for “sports tours on wheels”. So students can tour like rock stars! Why not row on 6 rivers in 6 days – just avoid Saturdays - and again use the summer holiday to deepen bonds with friends as this pandemic finally looks set to release its hold on us all. The past has gone but you can determine, once restrictions permit, what your future holds. Go on a rowing tour of the classic sites in England: Henley, Tideway, row under Clifton Suspension Bridge, row on the sea and around Poole Harbour, row in the depths of the country at Hereford. Or head for the North and Scotland for an adventure.

The tour buses have 14-16 seats and 14-16 bunk beds. Space on board is limited, as is catering and toilet facilities but you have the option of towing a trailer (think horse box, not boat trailer) which means that you could bring bikes and cycle in the afternoon, or bring inflatable SUPs or wetsuits and go canyoning, coasteering, etc.

Colleges all have plenty of alumni rowing in town clubs up and down the country. As an alternative to needing to tow a boat trailer with a minibus, why not get your alumni to arrange access to hire boats in the middle of their fleet, not the best (you’re touring, not racing after all) and not the worst either – just decent boats to explore another river and different river conditions – not all rivers provide the same experience of rowing in treacle that you currently enjoy on the Cam!

And, for those of you with your sights on Henley, accommodation for an VIII there can be a challenge but Tony and I can provide the answer – guaranteed transport and basic accommodation that provides flexibility and beats sleeping in a tent or being spread out between multiple hostelryes.

Call to Action

I hope you each want to have this experience yourself, as well as seize the initiative as outgoing captains and organise your college squad to do one or both of the above. I hope you will also share this letter with all your other club officers, especially those who you think will be leading your club next year, and the squad at large. And in the event that you think you can only fill half a bus or only turn out half a crew at Henley then please get in touch with other captains. I implore you, just don’t let this last academic year at Cambridge – one so compromised by Covid-19 - fizzle away: go out with a bang, one that will hopefully become an annual event, one that brings rowers even closer together in the years ahead. Remember, there’s more time to row outside term than in it: if you want to improve, this is the time to go rowing.

I wish you all well and look forward to hearing from you,

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Typical leather seats in one of several seating areas



Typical bunk beds, top and bottom, left and right