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DAY TRIP

On a Hudson River Island, Kayakers Among the Ruins

By RICH BEATTIE Published: July 28, 2006

SPIDER cracks stretch across a dilapidated stone arch with "A.D. 1912" carved into its weathered curves. Paddling under it, a group of kayakers arrives in a quiet lagoon so shallow that every stroke of the yellow paddles stirs up fresh mud. Overhead loom the ruins of an old castle, and straight ahead, a thick, overgrown jungle. It's not much of a stretch to imagine Dennis Hopper appearing, cameras strewn about his neck.



Cara Howe for The New York Times Kayakers paddle to the island for a tour, a round trip of six miles from Cold Spring.

But this heart of darkness scene isn't from "Apocalypse Now" or in any remotely exotic place. It's Pollepel Island in the middle of the Hudson River just 60 miles from New York. Francis Bannerman, an immigrant from Scotland who made his fortune selling military materiel to the American public, built the castle and a house on the island, starting in 1901. All that remain are decaying stone facades overrun with weeds, vines and poison ivy. Today, the 6.5 acres of Pollepel Island are more reminiscent of Angkor Wat than the eastern shore of the Hudson 1,000 feet away.

The island now belongs to New York State and is closed to the public except for summertime tours run by the Bannerman Castle Trust, a preservation group. Some tour groups go over by motorboat from Newburgh or Beacon, but there's a more adventurous way: by kayak from Cold Spring. The five- to six-hour excursion, run by Hudson Valley Outfitters, includes a six-mile round-trip paddle, lunch and a tour of one of the Hudson Valley's historical oddities.

On a hazy Saturday morning this month, red and yellow touring kayaks were laid out on a patch of grass between the Cold Spring train station and the river, awaiting the 13 men and women, ranging from their 20's to 60's and in various states of fitness, who had signed up for the trip. Two guides went through safety instructions and basic kayaking directions, led the paddlers as they dragged their boats over to the mucky shore, and bookended them as they started off.

Trips are scheduled to correspond with the tides. Because this part of the Hudson is an estuary, the tide changes from north to south several times a day. Leaving in the morning, this group paddled with the tide, northward toward the castle, and would catch the opposite tide on the way back.

But while it was a relatively easy paddle, it wasn't entirely peaceful;

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Map: Pollepel Island, N.Y.



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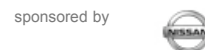
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Cara Howe for The New York Times

On Pollepel Island, Bannerman Castle once housed military items that Francis Bannerman stocked and sold.

Metro North trains ran up the eastern shore of the river, and freight cars rumbled up the west. Powerboats and Jet Skis roared by, leaving bumpy wakes.

Some of the people on the tour had wanted to get a close look at Bannerman Castle after noticing it from Breakneck Ridge, a popular day hike north of Cold Spring with a bird's-eye view of the Hudson. "We've hiked Breakneck several times," said Kip Zahn, who was paddling a tandem kayak with his pregnant wife, Miriam. "We finally said, O.K., we're going to do this."

Sometimes the trips have to be canceled because of rain or wind, but on this July day, the river was calm. A lone bird circled overhead as the group glided past broccoli-shaped trees packed into gently rolling hills. The crenellated peaks of Bannerman Castle's towers came into view and grew larger with each dip of the paddle.

Gary Ferguson, a volunteer island guide, met the tour group as the members pulled their kayaks on shore. He handed out [United Nations](#)-blue hard hats — odd since the tour doesn't go inside the castle or get close enough to be struck by falling debris. "It's almost ridiculous," Mr. Ferguson said, "but the state makes us do it." As the visitors donned the hard hats, curious boaters circled the island in their own boats.

Francis Bannerman was born in Scotland in 1851 and arrived in Brooklyn with his family at the age of 3. Ever the entrepreneur, he started recycling paper and selling rope from the harbor as a young boy; at 14 he founded the company called Bannerman's, buying scrap metal, munitions and subsequently full ships at Navy auction and then selling them for a profit.

The business grew and moved around New York, settling at 501 Broadway in [Manhattan](#). Then Bannerman purchased 90 percent of the military hardware from the Spanish-American War, and the city demanded that he take his arsenal elsewhere. He stumbled across Pollepel Island, bought it, and built the castle for storage.

At its height, Bannerman's published a catalog several hundred pages long. Mr. Ferguson broke out an old copy that showed muskets, drums, spurs, medals and torpedoes for sale. That was just the beginning. Bannerman sold all sorts of old and newer gear: cannons from the Battle of Yorktown, unopened crates of Civil War uniforms and relics from Admiral Perry's expedition to the Arctic Circle. His clients included Buffalo Bill and the young American film industry. In World War I, he outfitted full regiments.

He died in 1918, and though the business lived on through much of the 20th century, Pollepel Island fell into disrepair. Today it is littered with remnants of an empire: an engraved stone pillar directs foot traffic to a moat that no longer exists; stone triangles outline formal gardens long overtaken by weeds; and only part of the Bannerman coat of arms remains visible on the castle exterior.

Both the castle and the house burned in 1969, and the stone ruins are cracked, sagging and hollow. Weeds climb the walls, and trees poke out of windows. The overgrown green, peppered with the orange of a few day lilies, seems determined to retake the entire island. Neil Caplan, who runs the Bannerman Castle Trust, estimates that it would take about \$10 million just to stabilize the structures — an amount the trust hopes to raise.

After a couple of hours on the island, the tour group headed back to its landing place and ate sandwiches and fruit, gazing at the same view Francis Bannerman once had, looking south to the nearly symmetrical hills on either side of the Hudson.

As they shoved off for the trip back to Cold Spring, even the least experienced of the kayakers had found their grooves. "I'm having a great time," said Nannette Furman of Yorktown Heights, who was kayaking for the first time. "But let's hope the waves aren't too strong. I'll change my mind if I tip over." She didn't.

VISITOR INFORMATION

COLD SPRING, about 60 miles north of New York, is accessible by Metro North trains from Grand Central Terminal (\$10 off-peak one-way fare) or by car on the Palisades Parkway and Route 9D.

Bannerman Castle kayak tours are offered by [Hudson Valley Outfitters](#) (866-865-2925; www.hudsonvalleyoutfitters.com) up to three times a month from April into October. The price, \$120

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(half goes to the Bannerman Castle Trust), includes kayak rental, guide service, lunch and the island tour.

Tour boats of Hudson River Adventures (845-220-2120; www.prideofthehudson.com) also take passengers to the island, running Saturdays and Sundays from May through October and departing at noon from Torches Landing in Newburgh, N.Y., and at 1:30 p.m. from Beacon Landing in Beacon, N.Y. A \$40 ticket includes the boat ride and island tour.

For more information on the castle or to volunteer, contact Bannerman Castle Trust (845-234-3204; www.bannermancastle.org).

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