ROW YOUR BOAT

An afternoon gliding along the **Charles River** fulfills a native Bostonian's dream BY MICHELE MCPHEE

COURTESY COMMUNITY ROWING

→ AFTER A NIGHT at the Hotel Commonwealth — the gorgeous landmark boutique resting spot in Boston's beloved Kenmore Square—I came away with an awakening: I would have made a bad-ass coxswain.

For starters, I can swim, and swim well. I love the Charles River, otherwise known as that "Dirty Water" made famous by The Standells' 1966 hit song. I'm also a native Bostonian, and that includes my accent. An uptight columnist for the *Boston Globe* once wrote that my voice sounds like I am screeching from the third-floor porch of a Revere *triple-deckahh*.

In other words, I have all the trappings of a coxswain.

The word coxswain means "boat servant." Cox derives from cock, a type of boat, and swain is a servant. Technically, a boy servant. But, no matter.

My alma mater, UMass Boston, was built on a former landfill, and as someone who might have obtained a few college credits for "life experience," the idea of rowing on the Charles River felt very Ivy League.

I checked into Boston's Hotel Commonwealth, conveniently located across from Boston's Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, for its "Rowing on the Charles River" overnight package. The hotel rooms feature views of Fenway Park.

The day I arrived, Red Sox fans filled the lobby. The 20-year-old luxury hotel occupies a block that was once home to Boston's most celebrated music scene, with clubs like the Rathskeller, affectionately known by locals as "The Rat." Today there is a cool pub scene. Cornwall's, across the street from Hotel Commonwealth, is a favorite amongst Boston University students. Nearby Cask 'N Flagon is where you'll find your hardscrabble pre-game Red Sox crowd six-deep at the bar.

But I was not coming to party, I was coming to row. The package includes a personalized experience with experts at Community Rowing Inc., the oldest public rowing facility in North America. This is where some of the most talented oarsmen in the world train, many of whom have taken part in the world's largest regatta race, held every year in Boston: The Head of the Charles.

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The "Rowing on the Charles River" package is for rowers of all athletic abilities, including zero ability me, and can accommodate two people in a double scull, which is what my friend Betsy and I opted for. Larger groups (think bachelorette party), are welcome to climb into a larger barge that fits 12. The Community Rowing folks have enough seats to host 48 guests.

It's meditative watching rowing crews glide across The Charles' grimy waters in beautiful unison, and the oarsmen make it look easy. But, as I soon discovered, it is not easy. However, it is exhilarating, and an experience that anyone visiting Boston should not pass up.

The Hotel Commonwealth's rowing program begins in April and runs through November, and it was a beautiful fall morning when I showed up with Betsy, who had rowed before. Our instructor, a college rower herself, didn't go easy on us. We got the full experience, which included hauling the double scull down to the dock and flipping it into the river, which is harder than it looks. Trust me. But the hardest part is getting in. Or, in my case, rolling in. Betsy, on the other hand, expertly squatted and stepped into the seat and strapped in. Me? Let's just say it wasn't so elegant.

However, it was amazingly fun. After some practice under the windy conditions, which led to some unintentional circling, Betsy and I got into a flow. It felt like magic. The Charles River that I had only viewed from its bridges and banks my entire life was an unforgettable sight to behold at water level. As we rowed, I near-terrorized Betsy by singing in my deaf in one ear voice "Love That Dirty Water."

Two hours later, we rowed back to the dock, exhausted, but still buzzing from the thrill. *hotelcommonwealth.com* P

BOSTON COMMON
The Commonwealth Hotel (bottom) features Red Sox-themed rooms overlooking Fenway Park. Across the street from the hotel one can find a bevy of bars such as Cornwall's (left). The Standells' 1966 hit (below) is a nod to the Charles River.

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