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## [Richard Harpham](#)

Member of the New York State Spare Seat Expedition

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# Paddling The Erie Canal, 15 Miles Or More A Day (PHOTOS)

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The 363 mile long Erie Canal represented a major feat of engineering brilliance, heritage and enterprise at the time of its construction that took just seven years and was finished in 1825. Two more iterations followed from Dewitt Clinton's original canal to the significantly bigger waterway of today, 37 meters wide at 3.7 meters deep. The Erie Canal provided a major arterial water network and transport system into the interior of the United States for trade and commerce. The reference to 15 miles or more relates to the distance covered by the mules pulling the barges each day. The New York State Spare Seat Kayak Expedition has created a challenging adventure to kayak from the original Erie Canal Commercial Slip in Buffalo, close to Niagara Falls, more than 500 miles to the Statue of Liberty, New York City.

The plan is to kayak along the Erie Canal to Albany and then join the Hudson River and paddle down to New York in just 21 days. The Spare Seat is the brainchild of two adventurers, myself, [Richard Harpham](#) from Great Britain, and [Glenn Charles](#) from United States. Glenn and I are no strangers to adventure having covered over 20,000 miles of human-powered travel between us by kayak, bike and canoe. Our journeys have been independent to date although we met almost three years ago in remote wilderness whilst sea kayaking the Inside Passage from Vancouver to Glacier Bay, Alaska. Since then Glenn has sea kayaked the Eastern Seaboard of the U.S. and cycled 7,000 miles around the States. I've completed a number of trips including canoeing the Yukon River and cycling and kayaking from London to Marrakech.

We are paddling two NDK Triton double sea kayaks and each have a "spare seat" in our kayaks. The spare seats offer the opportunity for different people from all walks of life, different backgrounds and with their own unique stories to join the Spare Seat Kayak Expedition.

"One of the most exciting elements of this particular adventure is the opportunity to connect with local communities and for people to join us," Glenn says. "In this way we know our destination but we don't know how the story will end and who will be in the Spare Seat."

The journey started in Buffalo on May 1 with the launch being attended by congressmen and other dignitaries to wish us safe travels. We were presented with a flask of water from the Buffalo River to reenact the "Wedding of the Waters" when Dewitt created a marriage of the waters by transporting and pouring water from Lake Erie into the Atlantic via the Canal. We then paddled down the Buffalo River and turned into the Erie Canal at Tonawanda. After months of planning the Spare Seat Kayak Expedition is underway, the kayakers are set free and muscles fire into action for long days of 35 miles of effort.

The route takes in so many small villages and towns that originally sprung up to service or benefit from the Erie Canal. Villages including Lockport, Medina, Holley, Brockport, Fairport and many more to follow are nestled on the banks of this iconic waterway. Arriving by human-powered kayaks sets the tone for the visits and creates significant excitement and interest. Each community has responded to the I Love NY call to action, and the Spare Seat Kayak team have been treated to incredible pride and amazing hospitality at every destination and stop.

This initial article is intended to set the scene of the adventure currently taking place. Already there have been so many "Forest Gump" moments where random people have joined the Spare Seat Kayak Expedition. Casey, six months after open heart surgery, joined the team on one day and then returned the next day in between household chores and picking his son up from lacrosse. Rick Smith, owner of Silo City, the huge grain silos in Buffalo, joined the team a couple of days later to paddle the stretch from Medina to Lyons. The team have experienced almost 20 different people in the spare seat, with others bringing a seat such as a kayak or canoe to paddle for a day. Some were even ready to stand: Local entrepreneur Cody White of Finger Lakes Paddleboards joined for the day in two different locations to be part of the story.

It has been so very humbling to experience and witness such excitement and support from the local communities along the Erie Canal. Their sense of civic pride, can do attitude and heritage is inspiring. Already we have been stunned by the range of activities on offer, heritage and history and the potential for this world-class water-based resource.

The team hopes as they continue their human powered adventure towards Albany and onto the Hudson down to New York City that other people and communities will continue to support them. For more information then please visit [www.thespareseat.com](http://www.thespareseat.com).

*All photos courtesy of Glenn Charles.*

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