

2008 Inflatable Riverboards Comparison

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Testing the Inflatable "Riverboards" on the market right now

So you're thinking the idea of a lightweight, easily stowable / packable / rideable riverboard sounds good, and you're on a quest to get one. You've heard that there are such things as "inflatable riverboards", so you're curious. You want to know more.

Well, good thing you're here then! =)

There are only a handful of inflatable boards on the market, and of those, only 3 make the cut of even being safe in a river. Those three are the Mean Monkey Adventure Board, the NRS Rescue, and the Surfster J-Bay.***

We also tested the Surfster Blade Pro, which is an inflatable bodyboard meant for use in the ocean, and while it most likely is great fun in ocean waves, our testers didn't think it made the grade for whitewater.

At the bottom of the list lies the NRS Manta, forlorn and rejected. Having tested the Manta 2 years ago in a Class I+ (is there such a thing?) and determined then that it was more than worthless, it was actually dangerous (we'll get to that), we decided to give it another shot. The Manta didn't do anything to change our minds. Don't use it on the river (very slick, very squishy, very small, etc etc).

(***We cannot vouch for the NRS Big Sur Riverboard, because it just came out this week, with no prior notice to anyone in the industry. However, it looks almost identical in size, shape, and design to the Surfster J-Bay - which came out as an ocean bodyboard / snow sled in 2006 - with the exception of it being black and gray in color.)

{youtube}eZXUS7Dau9c{/youtube}

Grading the Inflatable Riverboards (Scale of 1-5, with 5 being the best)

Mean Monkey Sports "Adventure Board"

The Mean Monkey inflatable board is brand new for this whitewater season and is sure to be a quick favorite of raft guides and recreational boaters. It's made of raft material, it stows flat, and it's flat when pumped up, so it's easy to slap into the bottom of a boat and leave it pumped up for a spontaneous jump onto a surf wave in the Grand Canyon or for use in a contact rescue scenario after your buddy's raft dumps the whole gang.

Buoyancy - 4

The ratio is pretty good, but the Mean Monkey gets its stability not from a ton of air but from the extra width, which produces a lot of surface area. However, unlike the thicker NRS board, because the Monkey is pancake-thin it can still knife through holes fairly well, and it does surface fairly quickly.

Control - 3

The Monkey is almost too thin, because if you turn sideways to the current and use it as a shield, you can practically become like a knife in the middle of the river (see video) and it will surf on a boil line without any effort. Otherwise, because it is lightning quick with all the surface area and slick bottom, the control is good - it's a fast board if you know where you're going.

Durability - 5

Easily the toughest inflatable board we tested.

Made out of durable raft material with ridiculously strong glue and drop stitching, it'll take a beating and retain the air.

Beauty - 2 (but the production models have not hit the market yet)

We've gotta give it a low grade based on the prototype we were testing, but the production models will look much more polished and more colorful, as well as being ergonomically pleasing.

NRS "Rescue Board"

The NRS Rescue is similar in size dimensions to the Mean Monkey, but it's ridiculously thick, which makes it more like an air mattress than a riverboard. Just because you have a D-ring on the front of a "board" does not make it rescue-worthy.

It performed ok in our tests, but we have used boards in the past with a similar buoyancy to weight / size ratio, and the first big Class IV hole you hit with that thing you will regret, because it will simply stick in the hole, leaving you to hold on and get thrashed with it, or swim away without it.

Possibly it could work for someone over 225lbs, but that just ups the danger of a puncture, and from our experiences with the NRS Rescue the past couple of months, the air bladder is not all that strong to begin with. The last thing you want to be doing is swimming with 5 feet of nylon and rubber clinging to you like an underwater sail.

Buoyancy - 1

The buoyancy ratio is all wrong - it weighs only a couple pounds, has a huge surface area, and because of its thickness it has probably 2x the buoyancy of a standard riverboard. Not a good combination, as anyone who has taken an overly buoyant craft into an overly large hole can tell you.

Control - 2

It does great if you're going straight and have no side currents - but because they put the "pontoons" on the bottom of the board at the back (yeah, we tried that several years ago - big mistake), it catches every little current. Trying to cross an eddyline with those pontoons dragging underwater is not easy or fun.

Durability - 2

The nylon outer is pretty tough and tear resistant, but the inner bladder apparently isn't all that tough, because we've seen several develop slow leaks after some regular use.

Beauty - 4

Hey, it looks finished... It only comes in one color, but it's a bright, eye-pleasing color, with highly visible screenprinted "RESCUE" on the sides. Which is misleading, but at least it's bright and visible.

Surfster J-Bay "Inflatable Bodyboard"

The Surfster J-Bay is an evolution of their ocean bodyboards, with the addition of wing-like hip support and a tougher exterior hull for use in any kind of water and on snow.

Buoyancy - 3

The J-Bay is a much smaller board than the Mean Monkey or NRS Rescue, so of course it was much less buoyant. But, it still had probably 120lbs of floatation, which is as much as some of the popular hard-shell riverboards on the market. Less buoyancy is not a bad thing when the board only weighs a couple pounds, because then the weight of the rider can propel it through holes.

Control - 2

Because of the smaller size and lower buoyancy, the J-Bay does ride lower in the water, creating more drag. Thus you go slower, and have to work a little harder to hit the lines you want in the middle of a rapid.

Durability - 3

The bottom of the J-Bay is a thicker material than the NRS Rescue, but not nearly as thick or tough as the Mean Monkey. We scraped it on some sharp rocks to see if it would tear, but it simply left a scratch mark. But after 10 miles? Or 3 months? The jury's still out. It feels well constructed, but remember it's made for the beach and for snow, not getting pummelled against sharp rocks in a violent river.

Beauty - 5

The J-Bay looks cool - it has graphics, colors, it's a pretty cool shape, it even has "SURFSTER" embossed into the foam on the front of the board. Pretty freaking cool. It only comes in one color this year but it's definitely eye-candy.

CONCLUSION

We're not going to lie to you - we dislike inflatables immensely as anything more than a fun Class II and maybe III "play board". We've ridden every type of riverboard design / hydrospeed / inflatable / inner-tube / etc the past 15 years, and we've taken most of them into water they probably shouldn't have been in. Inflatables are probably the least safe of all the options, for a number of reasons. Here are just a few:

- they easily lose air, have a high threat of puncture
- they're very bendable (a soft hull means less control)
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- they're prone to wrapping on rocks or other objects
- hydraulics eat them up because of no weight and high buoyancy
- inflatables usually are difficult to stay on top of because of slickness and design flaws

This is not similar to the differences between hard-shell kayaks and IK's, which both can be used in big water. This is us saying, "inflatables increase the danger level of the sport of riverboarding, and they do it unnecessarily by adding risks that are product related, not river related."

If you have some experience, taking some of these boards on a Class II / III run will probably be ok. If it's your summer stow-away in your vehicle "just in case", and you're comfortable reading water and self rescuing, we won't stop your fun.

And some of these inflatables can be fun if you like Class II / III whitewater, if it's big fluffy wave trains, if the hazards are minimal. Just please recognize the dangers before you use them, and think about what you will do if / when any of those things were to happen.

DISCLAIMER

Riverboarding as a whole is a dangerous sport. Never ride beyond your ability, never ride alone, always wear a helmet, pfd, and fins, always dress for the temperature of the water, and if you choose to use an inflatable board, do not take it in anything bigger than a Class III, and that only if you know it well. Face Level is in no way responsible for your actions, and you may have different results that we did with these boards.

Be safe, have fun, and keep an eye out for the newbies in your group - because the sport's growing and there are lots of newbies joining the flow! =)