



# VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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## The Beauty In Our Backyard

Matt Knott, President and CEO  
River Riders

As president and CEO of River Riders, Matt Knott has 22 years of experience in the outdoor adventure industry. In 1994, he started as a raft guide at River Riders while attending Shepherd College, where he majored in business administration. In 1998, after four years as a river guide, 24-year-old Knott was given the opportunity to purchase River Riders from its previous owner.

He holds memberships in, and attends annual conferences for, most major industry associations including the America Outdoors Conference, IAAPA and ACCT. For 11 years, he has held a leadership role with Jefferson County River Rescue, and is a rope and swiftwater rescue technician through West Virginia University. He has maintained his Emergency Medical Technician B Certification since 1995.

Knott has twice been appointed to the West Virginia Whitewater Commission, the governing body of whitewater rafting for West Virginia, and currently serves as budget committee chair.

He also serves on the Jefferson County Board of Zoning Appeals and the Jefferson County Convention and Visitors Bureau, and is president of the Harpers Ferry Merchants Association.

River Riders began simply, as the idea of a couple guys in the early 1970s who visited Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, and recognized its beauty and opportunity. River Riders grew from that idea and a small operation out of the back of a pickup truck to the operation it is today, serving 90,000 visitors annually from a site near the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers.

Harpers Ferry has long been a tourist destination, from the time of Thomas Jefferson. The beauty of the two rivers joining and cutting a gap through the Blue Ridge Mountains on the way to Washington D.C., is a spectacular sight. There is no better way to see it than from those rivers.

In 1994, I began as a guide, under the watchful eye of the then-owner and his son and daughter-in-law. There were 10 employees and an equal number of rafts and canoes. The company had one bus, one van and one truck.

Two years later and with a college degree in-hand, I still couldn't let go of raft guiding and often went back to River Riders as a weekend warrior. That same year, at the age of 24, I purchased River Riders from the previous owner, and my then-fiancée and now wife, Laura, and I started the journey we are still on today.



That first summer was a wild ride. The year prior, the business had approximately 4,000 guests, and we worked quickly to make changes that would improve business operations and guest experience.

The business grew quickly from there, with 50 to 100 percent growth several years.

After the first 10 years, with the help of many excellent long-time employees and managers, we started looking for other areas where we could expand the operation. In 2009, we purchased property that included a neglected campground and reduced the time of our guests' bus ride to an access point on the Potomac River from 30 minutes to five. We have continued to maintain and develop that property over time.

In 2010, a neighbor, who was a real estate broker and developer, approached us about property he owned nearby. He sold us the first five acres





that year, which included the house that he lived in and the house where he was born, located next door. River Riders, which started on only an acre-and-a-half, was growing.

The following year, River Riders brought in Beanstalk Journeys from North Carolina to build a zip line canopy tour for us on 31 acres that included our river access and campground.

That same year, we purchased 35 more acres from that real estate broker/neighbor and opened two vacation rental homes.

A short time later, we opened our second zip line operation, the Harpers Ferry Adventure Park, which is a 60-element high-ropes adventure course. We later expanded it to 108 elements.

In 2014, we contracted with Skyline Adventures to build our high-speed Superman Mega zip line. We also added utilities and cabins at our campground. During the winter, we renovated two buildings for our summer camp operations and canopy tour base of operations.

Through more than a decade of upgrades and expansion, we had been looking at the Cliffside Inn Hotel, located next door, first making an offer (unsuccessfully) in 2000. By October 2015, we were able to make that purchase and have since renovated much of the hotel, including guest rooms, the lobby, fitness room, tavern and more. It was converted to a Clarion Inn in May 2016.

Earlier this year, we opened our third vacation rental, located in the middle of our site.

Today, River Riders offers rafting, tubing, kayaking, canoeing, stand-up paddle boards, zip line canopy tours, aerial adventure park, biking, camping, vacation rental homes, food and hotel lodging. We are transitioning into River Riders Family Adventure Resort, with the long-term goal of being an all-inclusive family resort where people can go to spend quality, fun time with their families in the outdoors. With a primary focus on safety, River Riders has always strived to listen to our guests, hire staff who have a great attitude about serving others and provide a remarkable experience to our guests.

We look forward to serving your family in the future, and introducing you to the beauty in our backyard. ▾