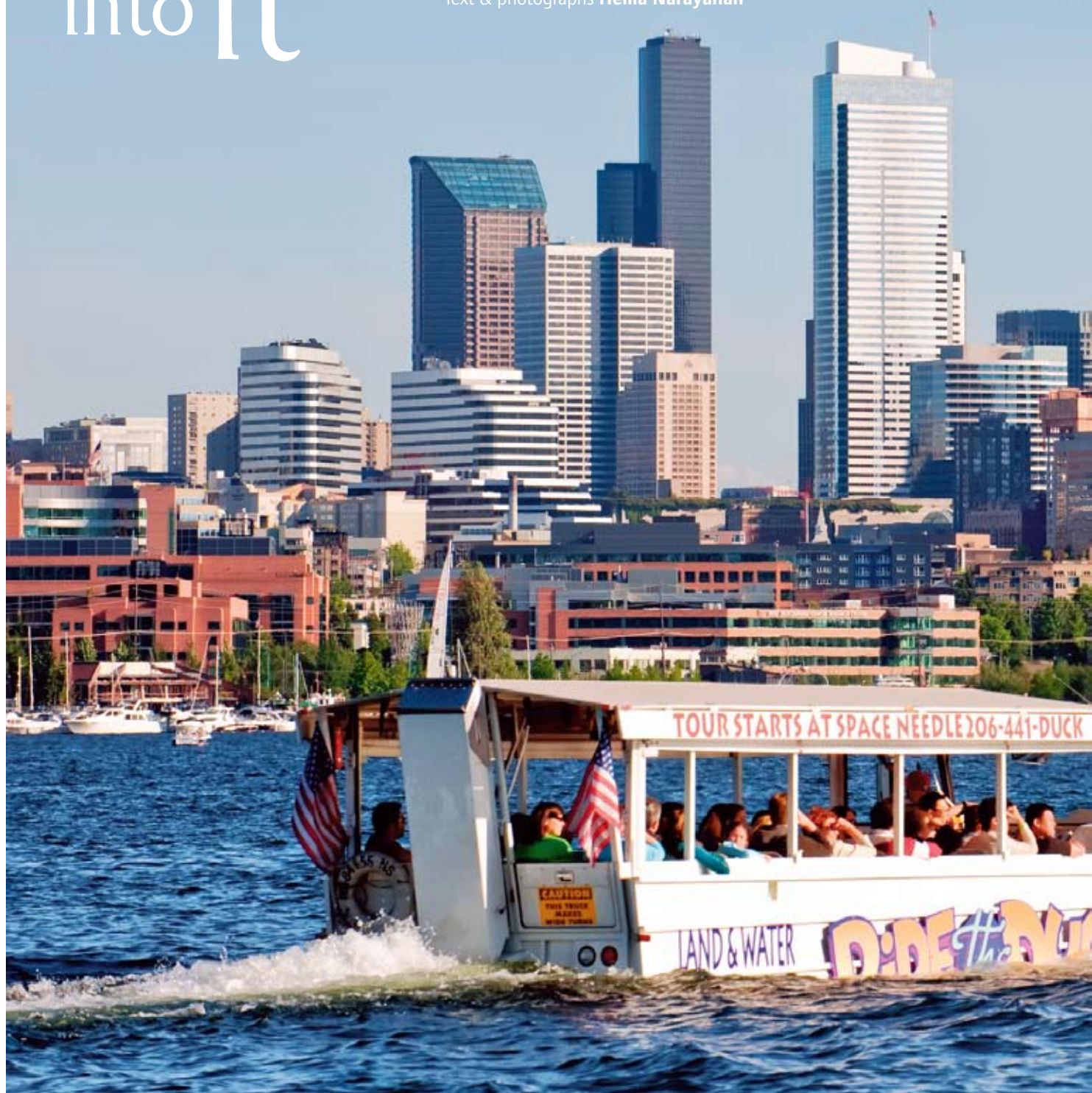


Duck into it

Tired of walking to explore the city? Get on board and waddle through the city's alleys and waterways on a Duck.

Text & photographs Hema Narayanan



“It’s a truck. It’s a boat. Well, it’s a splashing Duck.”

... is a line that is often used to describe Duck Tours to people exploring cities by water.

My chance to take a Duck Tour a few years back had my heart fluttering in excitement. One, due to its unique sounding name and two, because I was unsure if I wanted to sit on a Duck and see the city. A subtle sense of nervousness coupled with curiosity prevailed, as I stood on my first Duck Tour boarding point. And to my disbelief, the experience of a Duck Tour was completely different from what I had expected. It is unique, interesting,

thrilling, and offered through highly innovative means. From then on, I have looked out for Duck Tours each time I visit a new city and have been on three tours in three different countries.

DUKW to Duck

The tours have nothing to do with the eponymous duck. Actually, one gets to tour the city’s roads and waters in a Duck. The Duck (DUKW) is an amphibian vehicle – half truck, half boat – and was used during World War II.

The allied forces during the early days of WWII faced a tactical dilemma – that of unloading cargo or men from their ships at



▲ The Duck tour in Seattle offers a magnificent view of the city’s skyline.

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places where dock facilities did not exist or had been destroyed. The solution was to invent a way to unload cargo and men directly over the waters. A perfect amphibian solution was created then in the form of a vehicle, using old-fashioned Yankee ingenuity, to meet the demands of war. Code-named DUKW, it could run on land and water, hence the name 'DUCK'.

The first ever DUKW was a General Motors' truck enclosed in a watertight shell. It wasn't long before these vehicles went on to play a crucial role in the theatres of the battle. Being a major help in the allied invasions of Sicily and the Pacific, they were also used on D-Day in June 1944 during the Normandy Landings. Around 21,000 DUKWs were manufactured by General Motors. The conversion of WW II DUKWs to 'Duck Tours' means the robust vehicles are used for a fine purpose without letting them rust or remain as museum exhibits alone.

True transformation

One of the advertisement campaigns for the tours reads: "Don't just see Nashville, see her in an important piece of World War II history – a point of interest within itself". The city seems different and more impressive, when seen from a Duck Tour. Perhaps, it could be the mixed experience one gets, of going on roads and water that creates the magical spell.

The tour shows off the splendour of the city, both by road and by water, without having to disembark in between. To a tourist, it's all-in-one entertainment; they can ride or sail as also experience a piece of American history. When I first heard that I can see the city both by land and on water, it was exhilarating. Even after three such Duck Tours, I cannot contain the gush of subtle anxiety when the wheels fold in and the Duck splashes down with a bang into the water.

One needs to hold tight to one's seat as the Duck waddles away. Even as one is getting comfortably cuddled up in one's seat, the Duck decides to go right into the river. Seems like a subtle slide from the outside, but from the inside, one can feel the big splash of the river generated by the Duck.



▲ Above: The Merlion Park in Singapore is a popular spot for Ducks.
Top: A Boston Duck cruises through the Charles River.

All for fun

Will the tourists get wet? Does it even matter amidst the excitement? If it rains, the Ducks are decked with roll-down windows. The ConDUCKtor who guides the tour, is funny. His interesting stories from the past and the present—everything the city has to offer—will keep you engrossed. He has an uncanny knack of making even the shy tourists "Quack" – flapping both their arms to everyone's amusement. Even the onboard PA systems belt out humorous sound effects. Not just tourists, even locals are charmed by the Duck. Some sports teams have their victory celebrations on them. Boston-based sports teams like basketball's Celtics, football's New England Patriots, baseball team Red Sox have celebrated their championship victories by parading through the city on Ducks.

Seems like a subtle slide from the outside, but from the inside, one can feel the big splash of the river generated by the Duck.

Then and now

Today, purpose-built tour buses are created, that resemble the design of the original DUKWs to retain the aura. The operators use a mix of the original and new vehicles. The ones built from scratch use the latest in marine design and safety. Some of them are state-of-the-art vehicles called Hydra Terra (Miami and Portland Duck Tours use these). They have buoyancy foam-filled compartments making the Ducks virtually unsinkable; they remain afloat even with the full engine room flooding.

And then, others picked up the incredible idea and transformed their war transport into Ducks. The Austin Duck was originally an Alvis Stalwart. The Stalwart was used as a British military transport in the early 1960s across Eastern Europe to carry supplies over hard terrain.

Tour operators are replacing original DUKWs with modified or newer ones, as they are easy to operate, maintain and can accommodate more tourists. Most Ducks have been repainted with vibrant colours, with enclosed tops and modern diesel engines, resembling conventional buses. Tours have been customised for different target audiences today, and history, chartered, party or educational are some of the common themes.



▲ The Ducks make a big splash when entering water, so it needs a separate entry point, like this one in Boston.

Not sure why most travel books or tourist guides don't talk of Duck Tours as one of their top 10 things to do. But if a tourist takes just one tour and sets foot on that war craft and experiences the hair-raising splash, the Duck Tour will surely get into his Top-5 list.

Albany, New York

518 462-DUCK (3825)
Boarding: Albany Heritage Area Visitors Center
www.albanyaquaducks.com

Austin, Texas

512-4-SPLASH
Boarding: Visitor Information Center
www.austinducks.com

Baltimore, Maryland

1-877-88-QUACK
Boarding: Duck Central, Light Street Pavilion at Harbor place
www.baltimoreducks.com

Boston, Massachusetts

617-267-DUCK (3825)
Boarding: Boston Duck Tours, Copley Place
www.bostonducktours.com

Branson, Missouri

1-877-88-QUACK
Boarding: Duck Central, Arvest Bank in Branson Landing
www.bransonducks.com

Chattanooga, Tennessee

423-756-DUCK (3825)
Boarding: Chattanooga Duck Tours, 21 West 28th Street
www.chattanoogaducks.com

Fort Lauderdale, Florida

954- 761-4002
Boarding: Beach Place Blvd, the Quack Shack
www.fortlauderdaleducktours.com

London, UK

+44 (0)20 7928 3132
Boarding: York Road, London Duck Tours
www.londonducktours.co.uk

Miami, Florida

1-877-DUCK-TIX/ 786-276-8300
Boarding: Washington Avenue
www.ducktoursmiami.com

Nashville, Tennessee

615-477-5255
www.nashvilleducktours.com

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

412-402-DUCK
Boarding: Station Square
www.justduckyours.com

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

1-877-88-QUACK
Boarding: Independence Mall East
www.phillyducks.com

San Francisco, California

415-431-DUCK
The Anchorage Mall @ the Fisherman's Wharf
www.bayquackers.com

Seattle, Washington

1-800-817-1116 or 206-441-DUCK
Boarding: Across from the Space Needle
www.seattleducktours.net

Singapore

6-33-868-77 (TOURS)
Boarding: Suntec City (Galleria)
www.ducktours.com.sg

Toronto, Canada

Boarding: east of the CN Tower and the Rogers Centre
www.travelandtransitions.com

Washington DC

(800) 213-2474
Boarding: DC Ducks - Union Station
www.dcducks.com