

## TRAVEL

Mississippi River  
Madness

BY MERLE EXIT

For those of you who have enjoyed a week's venture on a cruise ship, you know that dinner may become a meeting of strangers, who within a few days become members of a newly acquired family. Acclimating from a great vacation may require a much creatable imagination or perhaps just the madness of trying to adapt or relive the experience. In my case I recently returned home from a one-week cruise aboard the grand *Mississippi Queen*, a stately paddlewheel boat, sailing approximately six miles an hour on the Mississippi River from St. Louis north to St. Paul.

It began when I found myself standing in the entrance-way of my dining room for half an hour waiting for a non-existent door to open and anticipating the meal that I will be serving. Where were the other seven people? That first evening I attempted to place my kitties on a chair and tuck a napkin onto their pawsies.

It didn't help. I put out eight place settings each with a photo of one of the other seven members of my newly acquired family. There were Wally and Kit, Lee and her mom Maggie, Pat and David, and Edward, who doubled as my dance partner for the evenings. How can I forget the set of drinking cups that Wally purchased from the gift shop as a token of our shared laughter?

To recapture the experience, my mind drifted into thoughts of taking a Circle Line Cruise up the Hudson and bringing a CD of Bill Wiemuth the fabulous Riverlorian/performer.

Perhaps I could invite Jerry Lewis and Mark Clark, and I would request the latter to bring a caboose from his railroad collection. That would take care of Lewis & Clark and Mark Twain. Am I going mad?

On the trip there were several sessions of the riverboat doing its lock-and-dam thing followed by the sounds of the largest-ever-built calliope. For

the lock-and-dam experiences, at home I tried putting an inner-tube in my tub and sitting on it waiting for the running water to rise to the edge. Once it did, I emerged and played a grand tune on my keyboard while puffing away at the steam rising from a cup of African Redbush tea. Yes, it is madness. There was no way to duplicate such a fabulous trip.

My stateroom had a veranda affording me a spectacular viewing of the port side. But there were several viewing points on the boat to catch a glimpse minus the use of binoculars. The Fall Foliage and bird watching provided much peaceful entertainment.

Each day the Riverlorian would give a lecture on topics to cover many of the ports of call. Alton, IL had the Lewis and Clark excursion. Mark Twain's Hannibal, MO was filled with shops and museums in the downtown area. For a total of \$11 you can go to four museums and the Tom Sawyer Dioramas. Of note is Twainland Cheesecake Company owned by Lynn Carr, with a story of her own.

The tour in Dubuque, Iowa had me visiting the Farm Toy Museum, the movie set of *Field of Dreams* and the oldest restaurant in Dubuque. I should have opted for the port area where I could have spent a few hours at the Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium. La Crosse, Wisconsin had two tours: Taste of Norway and Heart of Amish Country. Taste of Norway brought me to a replica of a Norwegian village, some Norwegian music, and sweets. I guess an hour had gone by since the last meal and we were feeling a little weak.

Red Wing, Minnesota had the best tour, starting with the Hobgoblin Music/Stoney End Harps where we were able to view harps being made in all stages as well as several musical instruments being sold. Stay tuned for a review of an instrument called the Xaphoon, a sax/clarinet-sounding "woodwind." From there it was the Redwing Stoneware Company

followed by the Falconer Vineyards, where I sampled wines and grape wine jelly.

The *Mississippi Queen* provided nightly entertainment beginning with a four-person Vegas type show, a dance and backup band, and a second band that overlooked the majestic paddlewheel. Movies both new (*March of the Penguins*, *War of the Worlds*) and documentary were shown much of the day. One television was tuned to either sports or news. Rooms had two radio stations: news and piped in music. If you didn't feel like attending the Riverlorian talk, you could hear it over the music station.

Having departed from St. Louis, I took the opportunity to visit the Botanical Gardens, the famous Gateway Arch (rode up to the top) and a chocolate store called Bissingers. Great chocolates but Fifth Avenue Chocolatiers tops them.

Back to the boat. On board I had the opportunity to play the calliope and get a certificate to prove so. There was my first pumpkin carving, naming it "Mr. Sippi." I was also invited to the Captain's dinner table. Although I enjoyed the experience, I must admit that I missed my "family." We passed notes to ease the loss. Sitting next to the Captain, my "family" asked if he needed help.

There is no comparison between a Delta Queen Steamboat Company riverboat cruise and one on an ocean liner. Don't expect a young crowd or children, gambling or rock climbing. Do expect serenity and perhaps you will have the ever so joyful Michael D'Eugenio onboard as your Passenger Service Representative to assist your every need. Unfortunately he was unable to stop by my home and recreate my *Mississippi Queen* experience. ▼

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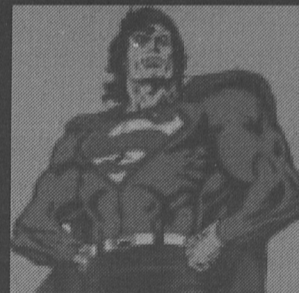
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