

## Travel



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## Mississippi River: just right for lazing along

By Joy Schaleben Lewis  
special writer

SOME "Huck Finns" arrive in suits and ties; others in bathing suits, worn jeans and floppy hats. They are businessmen, college students, grandpas and grandmas, and families with kids toting fishing gear and inner tubes. All are fabled riverboat capitalists about to experience Old Man River via a houseboat.

Most come from the upper Mississippi River's bordering states — Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota and Missouri — but New Yorkers, Californians, Texans and anyone else who's dreamed of life on the magic Mississippi come for adventure on the mighty river, a waterway with its own temperamental will.

So what if they cannot command a steamboat as Mark Twain did. They can learn to pilot a rented houseboat and cruise the very waters Father Marquette and Louis Joliet did three centuries ago. The beauty of the unglaciated valley flanked with enormous rock formations and brooding bluffs remains as it was then.

Houseboats are for rent at towns along the upper Mississippi. Boatsels, a houseboat marina in McGregor, Iowa, has good bargains for the content with simple, cottage-like furnishings. It's just south of the highway bridge linking Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin and Marquette, Iowa.

"Piloting a houseboat isn't hard," says Bob Brown, a rugged river rat who works at Boatsels. "Push the throttle forward to go ahead, back for reverse. It's that simple," he assures a beginner.

After explaining how the 55-horsepower outboard motor works, he continues: "You can get gas up and own the river. But you've got 50 gallons and that'll take you about 100 miles. Preferably stay within Lock and Dams nine and ten — a 40-mile area. Many say it's the prettiest part of the river. If you get in trouble, we'll bail you out. But if your houseboat is beyond our service limit, we charge a small mileage fee."

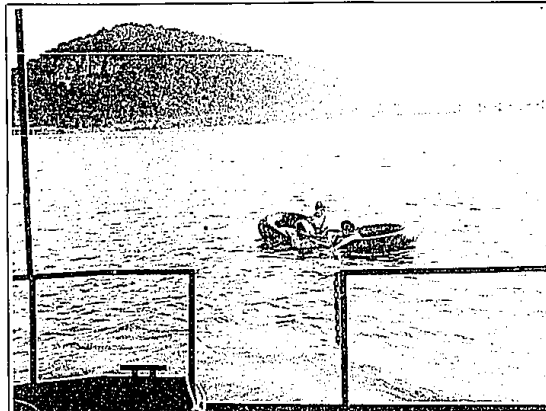
**M**OVING TO the front of the boat to the coveted captain's chair and steering wheel, he says: "Steering's no problem. Even children can keep the boat straight in the channel. It's essential to stay within the marked channel. If you get into shallow water, you could damage the propeller on a submerged stump or wing dam. The black buoys are the low side; red ones, the Wisconsin side."

"Don't travel at night — too dangerous," he warns. "It's best to pull up around four. When you're ready to call it a day, nose onto a sandbar at a right angle. That's so you don't hit a wing dam. You can't see them but they're down the river. You've got two anchors, one on each side of the boat. Secure the anchors by burying them in the sand at a 45-degree angle from the boat. That'll hold you just fine."

**NEXT, BROWN** teaches you to read the navigation charts, then takes you for a practice spin. "Now it's your turn at the helm," he says enthusiastically.

He was right. Even a landlubber can pilot a houseboat. Boatsels' houseboats range from 36 to 52 feet long, are 12-15 feet wide and sleep from four to twelve passengers. They're equipped with a gas stove, sink, refrigerator, heater, running water, eating and cooking utensils, toilet paper, shower, blankets, pillows, life jackets, electric lights, table, deck chairs and charcoal grill.

Bring your own sheets, pillow cases (for sleeping bags), towels, washcloths, paper towels, soap, charcoal, starter fluid, matches and, if you smoke, ashtrays. Mosquito repellent is a must. As



A houseboat vacation on the Mississippi means lazy days and quiet nights and such pursuits as floating along at the same speed your houseboat moves. One of the favored past-times is fishin', even for those who've never fished before.

soon as the setting sun turns the Mississippi golden, mosquitoes delight in joining you for cocktails. Also, flies adore river life. Your boat comes with a swatter, but having a fly strip would be prudent.

**IF YOU** don't bring binoculars, you'll be sorry. They're good for close-ups of what's happening on passing barges, spotting good beaches, zeroing in on flora and fauna, and reading mile markers along the river. It's also a good idea to bring a tool kit — pliers, wrench, screwdriver, strong tape, etc. You'll find that when you beach a houseboat, there's always some water between you and the dry sand. Since the houseboats don't have gangplanks, many people bring a small step ladder or board to use instead of trying to leap to land.

Then there's food. Some people like to prepare meals ahead of time and bring them frozen in a cooler. Others prefer to grocery shop just before setting out on their Mississippi adventure.

The houseboat rent varies with the season, length of cruise and size of boat. For example, rent for a midweek, four-day cruise — from 1 p.m. Monday to 3 p.m. Thursday on an eight-passenger boat is \$500. You can also rent houseboats weekly or weekends from 10 a.m. Friday to 3 p.m. Sunday. The eight-passenger boat for a weekend is \$385. Fuel tanks are filled before leaving and refilled at the renter expense on return.

**AS YOU** take off, Bob Meyers, the owner of Boatsels, has a favorite bit of advice: "Remember, a little common sense goes a long way. For example, never get in front of barges. If you're in their way, they can't stop quickly."

One pleasure you soon discover on the Mississippi is how simple life becomes. It's just you, the boat and that magnificent rolling river — 2,350 miles of it from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. For a choice view of Missis-



Normally a city dweller, 'Cap'n' Bob Lewis enjoys taking the helm of a houseboat as he cruises past colorful barges on the Mississippi.

hull and beach parties in full swing. But come 10 or 11 p.m., boaters invariably retire to let lapping waters lull them to sleep.

**THOUGH THE** Mississippi is muddy in appearance, everyone swims in this section of the river. What's super fun is to cut your motor and drift downriver with the four-mile current. You throw in your inner tubes, plunge into the refreshing water and float downriver at the same speed as your boat.

It's only swimming from ashore that you really feel the current. If you have young children, have them swim on the northside of your houseboat. That way they're confined and you won't find yourself chasing south along the beach to retrieve a child not strong enough to swim against the current.

Even if you're a non-fisherman, you'll probably enjoy throwing in a line. Kids and adults alike are thrilled to catch northern crappies, walleyes, bass, sunfish and catfish, just some of the 37 species in the Mississippi. Some houseboaters rent a 14-foot aluminum fishing boat and tow it so they can get into the shallow sloughs and backwaters to explore the islands and fish.

The weather is unpredictable. The Mississippi can be still and sun-drenching hot for days. Then, within an hour,

**R**EMEMBER, the steeper the beach, the easier it is to pull out the next morning. If a beach is too flat, your motor could get caught in shallow water as the river drops during the night.

Six miles south of McGregor there's a popular beach on a large island on the west side of the channel. It's across from Wyalusing State Park on the Wisconsin side. In high season, you may find houseboats and speedboats all



sippi life you bask on the cabin's roof-sundeck. If you're lucky, you may spot an eagle soaring among the high sandstone bluffs.

The upper Mississippi — all of the river north of St. Louis — is a great pleasure boating area. Besides other houseboats cruising a leisurely six miles per hour, you see canoes meandering by lotus lilies in the back waters, rowboats anchored at favorite fishing spots, speedboats towing sliders, sailboats — some on their way to the Gulf — and those wonderful, old-fashioned paddlewheelers loaded with the waving tourists.

**BUT UNFORGETTABLE** are the enormous linked barges — some three football fields long. Strong towboats push their cargoes of oil, coal and grain up and down the river day and night. Don't be alarmed if at night a bright light suddenly bursts through your cabin windows. It's only a barge's searchlight sweeping from bank to bank.

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