

Riverboat Twilight

It's a Great Way to Cruise the Mississippi

Laughter and excitement radiate from passengers boarding the Riverboat Twilight on the second day of a Mississippi River cruise.

The Twilight's whistle blows, then water churns as the riverboat is backed away from its overnight dock in the Port of Dubuque. It takes a sharp starboard turn to point downstream toward its home in LeClaire, IA, a distance of 83 miles. The onboard calliope bursts into song, playing an old-fashioned tune as the boat glides under the Julien Dubuque Bridge.

"We love every minute of it," says a passenger seated on the second of three decks near the gaily blowing, triangular blue flag. The United States flag waves freely at the stern. Coiled ropes are carried on the lower deck, along with a pendulous ship's bell. Tucked in the rafters, weathered orange life vests contrast with the Twilight's cheerful white and blue.

Most of the passengers explored the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium this morning after spending the night at the Grand Harbor Resort & Waterpark. They admire the river glistening in the sun beyond the ornate white railing. A sense of joy and adventure is in the air.



by Pamela Brandt

“We’re getting underway now for our return journey back downriver,” the voice of Captain Kevin Stier resounds over the loudspeaker. “It’s going to be another picture-perfect day.”



The Twilight and Her Captain

Powered by a modern diesel-electric engine, the Riverboat Twilight was designed to replicate the glorious steamboats of a bygone era. She was constructed in 1986-87, with the metal framework and decks built in a Louisiana shipyard. The walls, doors, and ornate detailing were added next, and Stier himself installed the scrollwork and gingerbread trim.

“When I was building it, I never even dreamed of owning her,” he recalled. Since 2006, he and his wife, Carrie, have owned and operated the Twilight.

Watching the Captain at work as he leisurely spins the old-fashioned pilot’s wheel while cruising the main channel, anyone might get the impression his job is easy. After all, he’s mastered the art of enchanting his passengers with informative stories as he navigates the ever-changing Mississippi.

In actuality, he served a six-year apprenticeship to become a riverboat pilot, and then qualified by taking a Coast Guard exam. He previously operated the Julia Belle Swain out of Peoria, IL, as well as the Diamond Jo out of Dubuque (in the days when it was a floating casino). He currently serves on the Upper Mississippi River International Port District Board, and is

a past president of the Passenger Vessel Association.

Throughout today’s cruise, Captain Stier narrates a wealth of interesting information about the river and the communities it flows through. Sometimes he’ll slow the Twilight for a closer view of a pelican rookery or an eagle’s nest. A college degree in zoology and botany from Western Illinois University helps him to interpret and appreciate the river’s natural landscape. Today, recognizing a great blue heron standing in the shallow water at the shoreline patiently fishing, he calls the long-legged waterbird a “reincarnated riverboat pilot.” Apparently, those who find their calling on the river may seek to remain here forever.

Victorian Riverboat Style

When lunch is announced, passengers retreat to the air-conditioned dining parlor, where ornate ceilings, stained glass, brass wall sconces, and Victorian gingerbread trim are reminders of the steam boating pleasures of the past. Even from inside, one gets a sense of the rolling river. Daylight pours through multi-paned windows that are bordered on the exterior with shutters of brilliant blue.

Each meal originates in the boat’s kitchen below the waterline and is transported to

The Value of Riverboats

The riverboat industry has a positive economic impact on the Dubuque community. According to co-owner Carrie Stier, the Riverboat Twilight has carried an average of 5,800 passengers per year to Dubuque since it began docking here in 2005. This adds up to approximately 50,000 people that have visited our city due to one riverboat.

Its passengers have spent over 23,000 room nights at the Grand Harbor Resort & Waterpark, and about 90% of them visit the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium. Passengers also explore and shop in downtown Dubuque and the Cable Car Square area, admiring the Tiffany windows at St. Luke’s Church, and visiting area businesses such as Stone Cliff Winery and the Diamond Jo Casino.

Other riverboats also use the Port of Dubuque for dinner or sightseeing cruises, such as the iconic paddle wheeler, Spirit of Dubuque, which makes its home in the Ice Harbor. Passengers who arrive via the Celebration Belle, which operates out of Moline, IL, spend an overnight at the Dubuque Holiday Inn.

Overnight stays at local hotels add to hotel/motel tax revenues. According to Jenny Larson, Budget Director of the City of Dubuque, half of this money goes to the Dubuque Area Convention and Visitors Bureau to promote tourism, and the other half is spent on general property tax relief. In fiscal year 2013, Dubuque collected nearly \$2 million in hotel/motel tax revenues.

In addition to bringing economic benefits, riverboats enhance our community in other ways. “If you have ever been down to the Port when any of the riverboats are docked there, you know what a visual impact this makes on the City,” said Carrie Stier.



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Wildlife on the River

The Mississippi River and its floodplain are home to a diverse population of living things.

At least 260 species of fish, 25% of all fish species in North America, live in the Mississippi River.

40% of the nation's migratory waterfowl use the river corridor during their spring and fall migration.

60% of all North American birds (326 species) use the Mississippi River Basin as their migratory flyway.

At least 145 species of amphibians and reptiles inhabit the Upper Mississippi River environs.

Source: National Park Service – www.nps.gov/miss/riverfacts.htm

upper decks by a dumbwaiter. Wearing the Twilight's signature blue, members of the busy serving crew joke with patrons they've already gotten to know by the second day of the journey.

"We have a good crew," says co-owner Carrier Stier, along for today's cruise. She usually stays onshore, booking passengers and coordinating the vehicles needed to shuttle both luggage and crew members to and fro, performing the logistic miracles that make each cruise a success. "I drive the deck – he drives the boat," she remarks with a smile. Operating a riverboat takes both types of expertise.

When lunch is finished, passengers again trickle outdoors. "I'll quit boating when it stops, and not before," says a woman with her sandals off, relaxing with her bare feet up on an adjacent deck chair.

"I live a very busy, fast-paced life, so this is a nice change of pace," says another passenger, who hails from Nebraska.

"I've met people from all over the world doing this," says the Captain, recalling an

English lord who took the cruise a few years ago. People from more arid regions are especially smitten by the river because their mental vision doesn't match its reality. "There's no water like this in Wyoming," he says, remembering a couple from out west. "They were just in awe of it."

The River Journey

We float swiftly past long barges tied to shore, or are sometimes outraced by speeding pleasure crafts. At the sandy edges of river beaches, people in shorts or swimsuits spill out from pontoon boats, waving greetings toward the riverboat.

Some Twilight passengers excitedly move from vantage point to vantage point, relishing the view and taking pictures. All that's really required on a Mississippi riverboat cruise is to appreciate a tranquil day on the river.

At Lock and Dam #12 in Bellevue, IA, the Twilight must stop and wait for a barge to lock through. When a long barge is uncoupled and moved through the lock in stages, it can be a slow process. To make the delay scarcely noticeable, the Twilight's onboard gift shop doors are opened to those who wish to browse the clothing, hats, coffee mugs, books, or other souvenirs offered there.

For those who patiently remain seated during locking, the captain's voice again comes over the loudspeaker. He explains that, due to a bend in the river and a strong outdraft, a tricky maneuver is about to be performed by the pilot of the exiting barge.

The lock and dam system serves as a "water stairway," allowing river traffic to go up or downstream while maintaining a nine-foot navigable channel.

When it's the Twilight's turn, a pair of crew members wearing sunglasses and brilliant orange life vests hurdle the railing. They perch on the outside lip of the lower deck as the huge water gates slowly close and the water level is lowered. Then the opposite gates of the lock open, releasing the riverboat downstream. We wave goodbye to the few spectators who have been observing the locking process from the shore and the Twilight smoothly veers toward shore to take on its entertainer. The gangplank is dropped so he can board, and within minutes, we resume our journey.

It isn't long before the ringing of guitar strings can be heard. The sun gains in intensity as the Twilight follows the twisting Mississippi. Sunnier parts of the deck shift around, although plenty of chairs are available for passengers to seek a shadier veranda. Lemonade, water, ice, and an open bar are available inside just a few steps away.

Up In the Pilot House

Adventurous passengers may climb the narrow stairs to visit the Captain high up in the pilot house at any time except during locking. Captain Stier scans the route ahead, spinning the wheel to make slight adjustments to the boat's course. Between monitoring an overhead instrument panel and responding to the ship's radio, he is happy to answer questions about the finer

points of barge operation, or translate the thick dialect of tugboat talk.

The Captain watches a screen that he calls "a GPS on steroids" to monitor the speed and coordinates of other watercraft. For safety's sake, large boats heading downstream with the current have the right of way, thanks to a law passed in the 19th century after an accident near Lanesboro. Pleasure boaters and fisherman typically get out of the way of the Twilight "unless they've had too many beers."

He points out barges filled with limestone, or with even heavier frac sand, recollecting how the low water levels during the 2012 drought impacted the barge traffic. The drought also brought mystery to light by revealing the wrecked remains of a wooden-hulled, 19th-century steamboat. The captain points out the general location of the wreck, now hidden again under water and shifting sands. In this unpredictable river, shorelines change. Flooding is responsible for much of a shorelines transformation, especially sandy, treeless banks. Floods took nearly 150 feet of land from Sabula, IA eroding it downstream in the strong currents of the high water.

"This is where you've run off to," says a passenger entering the pilot house. He has discovered a lost friend sitting and listening



attentively. “This is where all the action is,” responds the listener.

The Hidden River

From our vantage point in the pilot house, as the Twilight passes close to a massive piling that supports a railroad bridge, the river can feel treacherous. Early this spring, a barge hit the railroad bridge at Sabula, stalling river traffic until the damage could be evaluated. The Twilight has never been involved in any sort of accident, but the captain recites ominous place names, such as Tete Des Morts (“heads of death”) Creek, or Dead Man’s Slough.

He has witnessed a rising public consciousness of the value of the river, remembering the bad old days when the water stank with garbage. “It was a totally different ‘normal’ in the way people thought about the river back then,” he says. Lately, he’s been seeing swimming herds of deer, proof of the river’s good health. Once he even saw a pair of mountain lions drinking at the shore.

As we pass Pelican Island, dark-colored cormorants perch motionlessly on bare trees. Over the past few years, this island, visible from the main channel, has becoming a nesting site. It’s too late in the season to see pelicans nesting, but on other journeys, the Captain has seen newly hatched pelicans take their first foray into the water as their parents teach them how to fish.

Suddenly, as if they have been expecting us, a flock of ring-billed gulls circle behind the boat, calling raucously from the air. The crew throws them a bird buffet of leftover

crackers, creating a photo opportunity for passengers who hurry over with their cameras.

Just above Lock and Dam #13 at Fulton, IL, the river is five miles across. With no road to overlook the vista, our vantage point is the only place to appreciate the vastness of the shimmering Mississippi.

“Right now, we should be in pretty good shape for the next lock and dam,” predicts the Captain. “The boat that was there just left.” Sure enough, the Twilight floats straight through without delay.

Before we know it, dinner is announced, and we retreat down the narrow stairs and inside to the dining area, once again bustling with happy voices.

“We eat all the time,” says one passenger, pretending to complain. She and her husband received riverboat cruise tickets from their adult children last Christmas. “It’s been very enjoyable. Relaxing.”

A Golden Evening

By now, the tone of daylight has changed with the water’s hue slowly transforming from grey-green to golden. The low light of early evening accents the dark coolness of the river’s forested edge. A hundred years ago, this scene was far different. Due to steamboats’ endless appetite for firewood, the trees surrounding the river were clear-cut for miles and miles.

“What’s neat is that you can go all the way from St. Paul to St. Louis, and all these hills are covered in trees now,” says Captain

Kevin. “We’re doing it right,” he says. “We just have to make people see how cool it is out here.”

The journey is winding down, and we leave the captain to his work. As the Twilight approaches her home dock in LeClaire, she picks up speed. “She wants to get home,” says Carrie, with mischief in her voice, “like a horse that sees the stable.”

The shorelines streak by, and before we know it, the Twilight is secured to the “City of Baton Rouge,” a former car ferry with engines removed that now serves as a permanent dock. Passengers rise with reluctance, find jackets, cameras, and binoculars, and prepare to disembark.

We file past the Captain and crew, sharing handshakes, goodbyes, and hugs. It’s a mixed feeling to have reached the end of this Mississippi River cruise experience. For the captain and crew of the Riverboat Twilight, another day will bring another journey. As Captain Kevin Stier says, “There’s a lot of pretty river to explore out there.”

To learn more about the Riverboat Twilight, visit www.facebook.com/TwilightRiverboat or www.riverboattwilight.com. Contact Riverboat Twilight by calling (800) 331-1467 or emailing info@riverboattwilight.com. ♦





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