

WHERE

SHOPPING, DINING, ENTERTAINMENT & MAPS NEW ORLEANS

Rolling on the River

Behind the scenes on a grand old steamboat



STEAMER
NATCHEZ
PORT OF NEW ORLEANS



Rolling on the River

The steamboat: not just a part of history, but a force that shaped the city itself. A "backstage" tour *By Jil McIntosh; photos by Cheryl Gerber*



“The riverboat was the freight train and Greyhound bus of its day, carrying people and freight up and down the river.”

—Retired *Natchez* Capt. Clarke Hawley

“Assembled there, the people fasten their eyes upon the coming boat as upon a wonder they are seeing for the first time. And the boat is a rather handsome sight, too. She is long and sharp and trim and pretty; she has two tall, fancy-topped chimneys, with a gilded device of some kind swung between them; a fanciful pilot-house, all glass and gingerbread, perched on top of the Texas deck behind them...the captain lifts his hand, a bell rings, the wheels stop; then they turn back, churning the water to foam, and the steamer is at rest.”

Mark Twain wrote those words over 120 years ago. But in New Orleans, history lives in every floorboard, on every narrow street. And it lives at the Toulouse Street Wharf, where the daily cruises of the steamboat *Natchez* could have been Twain's inspiration.

The *Natchez* is one of six steamboats currently sailing the river, and the only one based in New Orleans. She was built in 1975, but her 80-year-old engines, rudders, and 26-ton wheel came from the retired towboat *Clairton*. She is the ninth steamer to carry the name, her pedigree going back to the boat that famously raced the *Robert E. Lee*. This latest *Natchez* also carries a racing trophy—elk antlers on the pilot house—as the undefeated champion in modern exhibition races.

But steamboats were never just about leisure; they played an integral role in U.S. history, right from 1811, when the *S.S. New Orleans* became the first in the Mississippi Valley.

“The Mississippi River was the interstate highway back then,” says retired *Natchez* captain Clarke C. “Doc” Hawley. (At least, he claims to be retired, but he was the first captain to command the boat, and the river is in his blood; he still plays the calliope and provides the cruise's live narration on occasion.) “The riverboat was the freight train and Greyhound bus of its day, carrying people and freight up and down the river.”

Steamboats opened the river to two-way traffic. Previously, freight was carried on unpowered barges. But the Mississippi's current is swift and relentless, and when barges brought supplies from Kentucky, they couldn't return. “So they would sell the flatboats to the wreckers, who would build with them,” Hawley says. “Half the houses in New Orleans are built of bargeboard.”



CRUISE CONTROL

With the Mississippi River at its doorstep, New Orleans offers a number of daily cruise options. Among them:

◆ ***John James Audubon Riverboat***

Hourly, 10 am-5 pm. 569-1480.

◆ ***Paddlewheeler Creole Queen***

10:30 am, 2 and 7 pm; Sunday gospel brunch cruise, 11 am. 524-0814

◆ ***Riverboat Cajun Queen***

11:30 am, 1, 2:30 and 4 pm. 524-0814

◆ ***Steamboat Natchez***

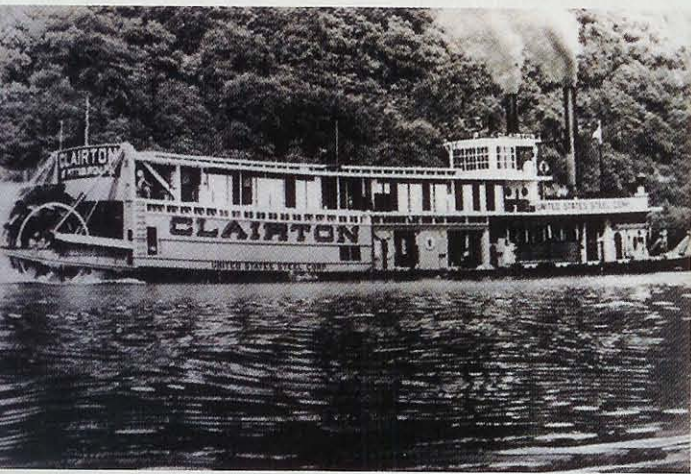
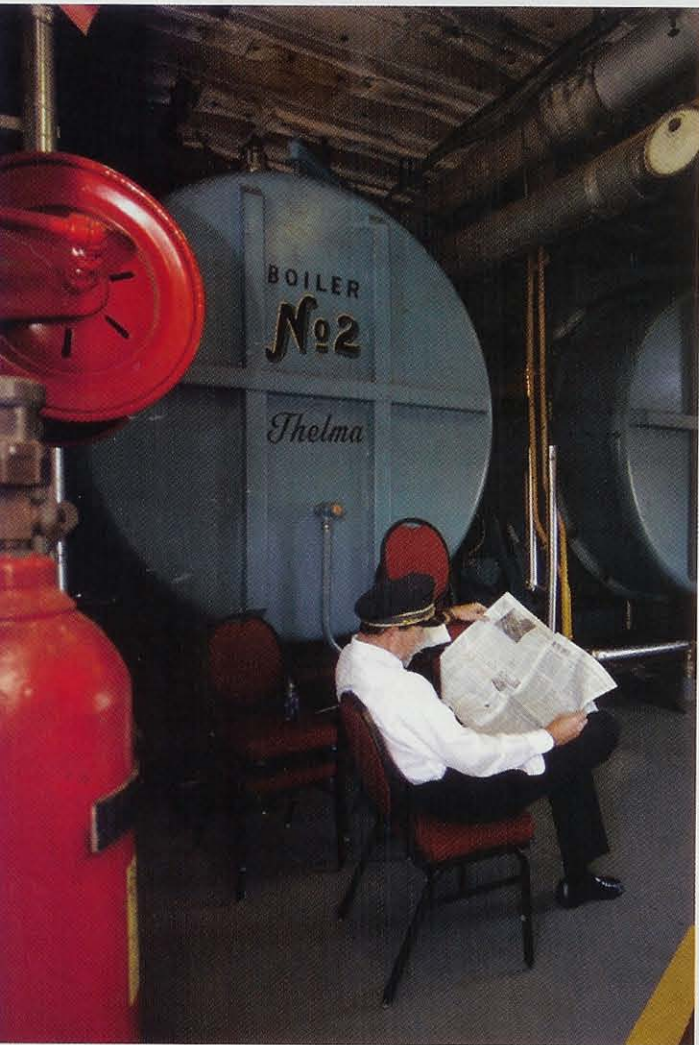
11:30 am, 2:30 and 7 pm. 586-8777.



CLARKE “DOC”
HAWLEY

PILOT TROY DELANEY NAVIGATES THE *NATCHEZ* UP AND DOWN THE TURBULENT MISSISSIPPI. THE BOAT, WHICH WAS BUILT IN 1975, HAS BECOME A SYMBOL OF THE CITY AND A LINK TO ITS PAST.

ROLLING ON THE RIVER



Look at local buildings undergoing renovations—the humidity is hard on wooden structures, so there are always several to view—and you'll see them: hand-hewn boards, twice as thick as usual, often with original bolt holes left in them.

Gradually, steamboats became more lavish, attracting wealthy passengers who rode both for business and pleasure. "They didn't use room numbers, because calling it a 'cabin number' sounded like a log cabin on shore," Hawley says. "So they named each room for a state, and that's where we get the term 'stateroom.' The third deck was the largest, and it was named for the largest state, so every boat's third deck is the Texas deck."

Natchez is an excursion boat; lacking staterooms, she doesn't carry overnight passengers. But she can take up to 1,633 people at a time on an eight-mile round trip featuring indoor and outdoor seating, buffet-style dining, and live jazz.

Through a series of rather dicey circumstances, riverboats also carried—and introduced—New Orleans' music to the outside world.

"In 1916 in New Orleans, we had Storyville, the only legalized area in the United States for prostitution," Hawley says. "But the Secretary of the Navy said that Storyville would have to close, or the navy base would, and the city didn't want to lose that. There were no jazz clubs; the musicians played in the brothels. The steamboats were losing freight to the railroads, and they were starving for business. Dancing was becoming acceptable, and they got the musicians cheap. The music was a hit up North."

Even today, music is everywhere on board. Utilizing their steam systems, the boats carried calliopes to signal their arrival. Now, standing on deck and listening to the instrument—large pipes controlled by a small keyboard—it's easy to imagine the excitement of yesteryear, when the riverboat was the only means to the outside world; people rushed to the docks when they heard the music, waiting for letters, supplies, or loved ones on board. "If the river had a voice, it would be the calliope," Hawley says.

Like her predecessors, the *Natchez* also transformed modern-day New Orleans; almost single-handedly, she revitalized the 1970s waterfront. "No one wanted to come down here," Hawley says. "The Jax Brewery [now a mall] was a bum hotel. She started the riverfront rejuvenation."

Today, her course takes visitors by ancient cotton warehouses and sugar plantations, and the site of the Battle of New Orleans, the last conflict of the War of 1812. Only from the river can one appreciate the fact that New Orleans sits eight feet below sea level—just the top three floors of a five-story building are visible over the levee. And only from the water can one catch a breathtaking view of the city, opening up as the *Natchez* rounds the river's sharpest bend.

Up in the pilot house, captain Steve Nicoulin and pilot Troy Delaney begin docking maneuvers. They have radar, depth gauges, and satellite positioning, but Mark Twain would immediately recognize the rudder levers and brass telegraph. Delaney turns the telegraph to "Slow", and a bell rings.

In the hot and spotless boiler room, a similar bell rings, and an identical telegraph transmits Delaney's orders. The *Natchez* now burns oil instead of wood, heating two 10,000-gallon boilers to run the boat's twin engines. The massive pistons move seven feet with each stroke, releasing an intoxicating aroma of grease and steam. The wheel churns the river, slowing the boat as it reaches the shore.

"The biggest pleasure is in the boat itself," says Nicoulin, who has worked his way up from deckhand in his 29 years on the *Natchez*. Indeed, most of her crew has been here a long time. There is something about the river that grabs hold of you, and won't let go.

The whistle blows, the *Natchez* docks, and the passengers disembark. She will be cleaned and supplied, and then the calliope will play and the whistle will blow, and she will start out again—life on the Mississippi, steamboat style. □

**TOP: TENDING
"THELMA" IN THE
BOILER ROOM.**

**BOTTOM: THE
NATCHEZ'S BOIL-
ERS, ENGINES,
AND PADDLE-
WHEEL CAME
FROM THE RETI-
RED CLAIRTON.**