

By Katherine Rodeghier

NEW SHIP REVIEW

On first sight, the *American Duchess* charmed me with her white, wedding-cake exterior adorned with gingerbread trim. The big red paddlewheel on the back paid tribute to her steamboat lineage, a descendant of the legendary vessels that began plying the Mississippi River two centuries ago.

But inside, this offspring flaunted her 21st-century flair. The 37-foot ceiling in the Grand Lobby and Bar made me gasp, as did the colorful, curvy Murano glass discs over the long bar and entrance to The Grand Dining Room, the Austrian crystal chandeliers dangling between a broad, double staircase and the cozy lounge chairs clustered around a white baby grand piano.

Launched last year by the American Queen Steamboat Company, the bright and airy *Duchess* more closely resembles a contemporary boutique hotel than an antebellum steamboat.

Her spaciousness carries over in staterooms, especially four loft suites, a first on an American river vessel. My river butler, the gracious W. Gerard Williams, showed me how to operate a remote to open the drapes on the two-story windows so I could enjoy river views from the lower-level sitting area or bedroom upstairs. Loft suites have balconies, two bathrooms, two flat-screen TVs,

sofa bed and dining table for four. Three owner's suites and two deluxe suites contain similar furnishings.

The company originally touted *American Duchess* as an all-suite steamboat, but brochures have backed off that claim. The biggest class of accommodations, outside veranda suites, still ranks as roomy by steamboat standards, but what brochures initially described as interior suites now list as interior staterooms.

Stately Queen and Young Royal

On my cruise up the Lower Mississippi River, the *American Duchess* landed next to sister steamboat *American Queen* in Natchez,

A MODERN DUCHESS



Mississippi. The nation's largest river steamboat with a capacity for 436 passengers, the *Queen* observed her 23rd birthday in 2018. The 166-pax *Duchess* turned 1 on August 14, 2018. When one sees the boats side-by-side from the riverbank, the difference between them isn't obvious aside from size. Inside, though, the *Queen* resembles a grand dame of steamboating: furnishings reminiscent of the antebellum South, smaller staterooms with some opening onto the deck, lower ceilings.

She offers two seatings for dinner compared to open seating on the *Duchess*. With six decks, the *Queen* has room for facilities the *Duchess* does not: a small spa, plunge pool and outdoor grill. Her calliope adds an old-timey ambiance.

The two reminded me of Britain's queen and its newest royal: Queen Elizabeth II radiates regal stateliness, American Meghan Markle stylish panache. Curiously, if you launch an Instagram search for "American Duchess," the steamboat gets far fewer hits than Prince Harry's bride, now the Duchess of Sussex.

Like Markle, the *American Duchess* comes from humble beginnings. The company bought the former Isle of Capri riverboat casino docked in Bettendorf, Iowa, stripped it down and rebuilt it from the hull up as the luxury *Duchess*. Captain Randy Kirschbaum, an Iowa resident, remembers. When he interviewed for his job, he was asked if he had experience operating steamboats on the

Mississippi. Not only did he, he knew the *Duchess's* predecessor in particular. He served as standby captain on the Isle of Capri, ready to navigate it onto the river should the casino have to leave the dock in an emergency.

When creating the *Duchess*, owners hoped her modern decor and amenities would draw travelers younger than those who book the *Queen*. Not yet. *American Queen* Purser Cynthia Goldstein said the average age of her passengers is 75. *Duchess* Hotel Manager Ed Jenkins told me the average age on his vessel hovers in the low 70s. In her first nine months of operation the *Duchess* drew a large number of passengers who had cruised on the *Queen*, he said. This repeat business may have skewed passenger ages higher than

The 166-passenger *American Duchess* graces the Mississippi River with her regal bearing and contemporary flair. Most cruises last nine days.

Grand paddlewheeler departs from old-fashioned steamboat decor





Motorcoaches gussied up in steamboat decor take *American Duchess* passengers on shore excursions.

anticipated during the *Duchess's* nearly sold-out inaugural year.

Passengers come from across the U.S. as well as abroad. I met folks from England, Australia and the Cayman Islands drawn by the romance of steamboating on the Mississippi and stories of the American South and the Civil War.

Superb Storytelling

Those stories come alive on trips ashore. Hop-on, hop-off motorcoaches, cleverly painted to resemble steamboats, take passengers on included shore excursions in every port as well as premium excursions at additional charge in most ports. Along the Lower Mississippi I toured antebellum plantation mansions, Civil War sites, museums and small Southern towns known for history, hospitality and shopping opportunities. Each night a map and description of the next day's excursions came tucked inside the *River Times* program of activities delivered to staterooms.

Passengers taking hop-on, hop-off tours

select a time for departure and print boarding passes at a kiosk onboard. Local guides on the coaches give commentary between stops where passengers may disembark and reboard later. Sandwich boards mark designated stops for coaches circulating every 15-30 minutes.

To provide passengers with background on ports as well as stories, statistics and trivia about the river, the *Duchess* employs a "riverlorian," a river historian who gives river chats and conducts question-and-answer sessions. Our riverlorian, Mike Chapman, used his background in theater and education to both entertain and inform.

Lesson No. 1: The *Duchess*, like most riverboats, is a boat, not a ship. No. 2: The ramp used to disembark and board at landings isn't called a gangway but a stage. The term dates from the days when showboats landed along riverbanks, played a calliope to draw a crowd and performers walked out on the gangway—er, stage—to give onlookers a taste of the entertainment onboard.

Chapman talked in detail about the history of steamboating, floods and other disasters on the Mississippi, river navigation rules, the building of the longest levee system in the world, and the geography of the Mississippi River and its tributaries. He talked about the *Duchess's* fully functional paddlewheel and three Z-drive motors as well as her speed, stated in miles, not knots, per hour. The *Duchess* cruises at between 10 and 14 m.p.h. but can go much faster as she proved this year. In her first entry in the annual Great Steamboat Race on the Ohio River, she won by accelerating to 22 m.p.h. in the final minutes. Passengers who want to learn more about steamboat navigation may arrange a tour of the pilot house.



Katherine Rodighier

Riverlorian Mike Chapman and guitar made from scrap salvaged from the old *Mississippi Queen*



American Queen Steamboat Company

The River Club & Terrace is an alternate dining spot with some seats overlooking the paddlewheel.

Dining and Entertainment

Chapman also served as stage manager for after-dinner performances in the Show Lounge. Three talented singers and dancers, backed up by an accomplished house band, put on shows with themes ranging from movie tunes and river songs to a sock hop with passengers coaxed onto the dance floor.

After the show, the band set up in the Lincoln Library to entertain night owls. During the day, the library has books and board games to loan and becomes a venue for bingo and other competitions, receptions and meetings, such as a military veterans gathering.

As on most cruises, the daily schedule on the *American Duchess* had nary a dull moment. We had a bourbon tasting, scavenger hunt and movies. Passengers can check out binoculars to scan the riverbank and bicycles and helmets for exploring in port. There's a small fitness room and a business center with two computers and a printer. Free Wi-Fi is available throughout the boat,

though service is slow and spotty.

The Grand Dining Room has open seating; passengers can choose to sit alone or join others. The elegant space spans the width of the boat with two-story windows on either side. The River Club & Terrace, with a few outdoor seats above the paddlewheel, becomes an alternate dining spot at night at no additional charge, reservations required. Wine and beer are included with dinner in both venues. Menus feature continental favorites—filet mignon, scallops and rack of lamb—and regional dishes. On the Lower Mississippi, we had shrimp, gumbo, Mississippi mud pie and more. A country club casual dress code applies at dinner: no shorts, hats or T-shirts. Both restaurants also serve lunch and break-



American Queen Steamboat Company

Two-story Loft Suites are among the most exclusive accommodations on the new *American Duchess*.



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Wine and beer are included with dinner in the sumptuously appointed Grand Dining Room.



American Queen Steamboat Company

Hand-blown Murano glass discs decorate the River Club & Terrace, the smaller of two restaurants.

AMERICAN DUCHESS FACTS & FIGURES

Company: American Queen Steamboat Company
Built: 2017
Country of Registry: USA
Gross Registered Tonnage: 3,560
Length: 314 feet
Beam: 100 ft.
Draft: 8.5 ft.
Speed: average 10-14 m.p.h.
Passenger Capacity: 166
Normal Crew Size: 90
Nationality of Crew: USA
Staterooms: 83 ranging from 180 to 550 square feet, including four, two-story Loft Suites, a riverboat first. Veranda Suites with balcony, the most common category, are 240 sq. ft., 330 ADA. Interior staterooms measure 180 sq. ft., 200 ADA. The pair of two-room Deluxe Suites with balcony are 450 sq. ft., while three, two-room Owner's Suites measure 550 sq. ft. (as do the Loft Suites). Queen beds in all staterooms can be reconfigured as singles. All have Keurig coffee maker, mini-fridge, flat-screen TV, safe and turndown service. Commodore Services in Loft and Owner's suites include early boarding and the attentions of a river butler.
Public Rooms: Show Lounge, Grand Dining Room, River Club & Terrace, Perks snack bar, two bars, Lincoln Library.
Facilities/Features: Four decks, passen-

ger elevators, air-conditioning, free Wi-Fi, pilot house tours, sun deck, business center, small gift shop, fitness center, bicycles and helmets for passenger use, a fleet of motorcoaches for excursions. No infirmary; some crew members trained as EMTs. Smoking restricted to designated areas.
Money Matters: Onboard purchases charged to passengers' accounts. Gratuities automatically charged at \$17.50 per person per day, 15 percent added to bar charges. A beverage package is available. Airport transfers not included; passengers make their own way to a pre-arranged hotel where they check in for the cruise the day before embarkation.
Dress Code: Country club casual
Itineraries/Fares: In 2019, the majority of *American Duchess* cruises will be on the Lower Mississippi with a few on the Upper Mississippi, the Ohio, Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. Most cruises last nine days including a hotel stay before embarkation and range from \$2,399 to \$9,499. A few 6-, 16- and 23-day itineraries are scheduled. Pre- and post-cruise itineraries available.
For More Information: Contact your travel agent or American Queen Steamboat Company (Cruise Travel Magazine), 222 Pearl St., New Albany, IN 47150; call 888-749-5280 or log on to www.aqsc.com.

fast. Perks, a serve-yourself snack bar, fends off between-meal munchies.

Room service is available around the clock in all staterooms. Passengers in loft and owner's suites have a river butler who not only arranges in-room dining but delivers pre-dinner canapes and after-show sweets. I always looked forward to seeing what Gerard had brought me when returning to my suite. As I roamed the *Duchess's* spacious public areas, he seemed to appear out of nowhere to show me to my table at dinner and arrange for reserved seating in the Show Lounge.

Butlers also will pack and unpack luggage, polish shoes, facilitate laundry and pressing services, and make dinner reservations. They are part of the Commodore Services on all three American Queen Steamboat Company steamboats: the *Duchess*, the *Queen* and the *American Empress* in the Pacific Northwest. In 2019, the *American Countess*, another former gaming vessel, is scheduled to join this royal family. **CT**