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A Modern Duchess

By [Katherine Rodeghier](#)

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Paddle wheeler departs from old-fashioned steamboat decor

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



The American Duchess is the newest vessel of the American Queen Steamboat Co. It launched in August, 2017. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

But once 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 in 2017 by the American Queen Steamboat Co., this bright and airy Duchess more closely resembles a contemporary boutique hotel than an antebellum steamboat.



Two-story loft suites on the American Duchess are a first on a vessel cruising an American river. Photo by American Queen Steamboat Co.

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.

Stately Queen and Young Royal

On my cruise up the Lower Mississippi River, American Duchess landed next to sister steamboat, American Queen, in Natchez, Miss. The nation's largest river steamboat with a capacity for 436 passengers, the Queen launched in 1995,

It carries nearly three times the number of passengers as the 166-passenger Duchess but observed 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, 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. Like Markle, 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. Capt. 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.



Mirrors and Murano glass discs add a modern touch to the bar in the Grand Lobby of the American Duchess. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

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 motor coaches, 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.



Oak Alley Plantation in Louisiana, famous for its live oak trees, is one of the premium excursions on the American Duchess. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

Passengers taking hop-on-hop-off tours select a time for departure and print boarding passes at a kiosk on board. 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 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 river banks, played a calliope to draw a crowd and performers walked out on the gangway — er, stage — to give onlookers a taste of the entertainment on board.



A stage, not a gangway, frames a sunset on Mississippi River on cruises on the American Duchess. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

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 paddle wheel 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 mph but can go much faster. In the annual Great Steamboat Race on the Ohio River, she won by accelerating to 22 mph in the final minutes. Passengers who want to learn more about steamboat navigation arrange a tour of the pilot house.

Dining and Entertainment

Chapman also served as stage manager for after-dinner performances in the Show Lounge. Three talented 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.



Live shows are held nightly aboard the American Duchess in the Show Lounge. Photo by American Queen Steamboat Co.

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 veteran's gathering.

As on most cruises, the daily schedule on 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 paddle wheel, 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.



Menus on the American Duchess feature continental dishes as well as regional favorites. Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

Both restaurants also serve lunch and breakfast. 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 canapés 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 Co. steamboats: the Duchess, the Queen and the American Empress in the Pacific Northwest. In 2020, the 245-passenger American Countess, another former gaming vessel, is scheduled to join this royal family.

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