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River cruising: American Duchess paddle wheeler departs from old-fashioned steamboat decor

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Posted 3/23/2019 7:30 AM



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The American Duchess lands in Natchez, Miss., on cruises along the Lower Mississippi River.*Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier*

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.

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.

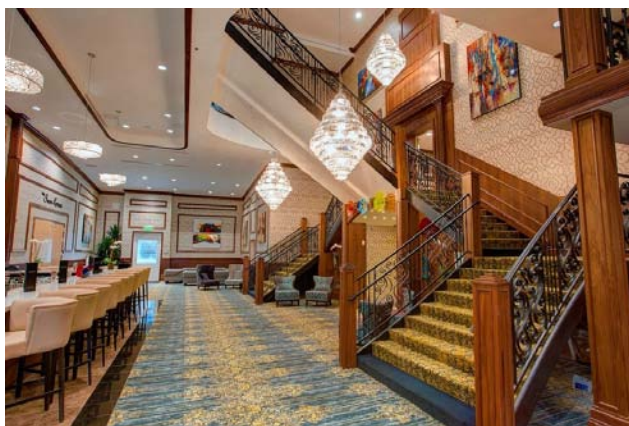
Launched in August 2017 by the American Queen Steamboat Co., this bright and airy Duchess more closely resembles a contemporary boutique hotel than an antebellum steamboat.

Her spaciousness carries over into the 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.

Duchess also has deluxe staterooms, owners suites and interior staterooms. The biggest class of accommodations, outside veranda suites, ranks as roomy by steamboat standards.

Stately queen and young royal

On my cruise up the Lower Mississippi River from New Orleans to Memphis, American Duchess landed next to sister steamboat, American Queen, in Natchez, Mississippi. The nation's largest river steamboat with a capacity for 436 passengers, the Queen observed her 23rd birthday in 2018. Observed side-by-side from the riverbank, the difference between the Queen and the 166-passenger Duchess 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 ambience.



The Grand Lobby and Bar on the American Duchess has a soaring ceiling and modern décor unlike her sister steamboats. - Courtesy of American Queen Steamboat Co.

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, the Duchess of Sussex. 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 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 décor and amenities would draw younger travelers than those who book the Queen, but both draw primarily senior citizens. 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.



The intertwined branches of live oak trees stand out on the grounds of Oak Alley Plantation, visited during a premium excursion on Lower Mississippi River voyages of the American Duchess. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

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 an additional charge in most ports. I toured antebellum plantation mansions including Oak Alley and Nottoway, largest antebellum mansion in the South; Vicksburg National Military Park where a bloody battle marked a turning point in the Civil War; museums and small Southern towns known for history,

hospitality and shopping opportunities. Local guides give commentary between motor-coach stops where passengers may disembark and reboard the vehicles circulating every 15 to 30 minutes.



American Duchess Riverlorian Mike Chapman shows passengers an Outcaster guitar made from scrap salvaged from the former Mississippi Queen steamboat. - Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

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.

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' 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 mph and 14 mph. Passengers who want to learn more about steamboat navigation arrange a complimentary tour of the pilot house.

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 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.



Motor coaches in steamboat décor take American Duchess passengers on shore excursions. - Courtesy of American Queen Steamboat Co.

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, though reservations are required. 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. 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' 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, American Countess, another former gaming vessel, is scheduled to join this royal family.

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American Duchess

Statistics: Launched in 2017; four decks; passenger capacity 166 plus 90 all U.S. crew members.

Staterooms: Ranging from 180 to 550 square feet. Queen beds in all staterooms can be reconfigured as singles. All have Keurig coffee makers, mini-frig, flat-screen TV, safe and turndown service.

Itineraries and fares: In 2019, the majority of American Duchess cruises are on the Lower Mississippi with a few on the Upper Mississippi, the Ohio, Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. Most 2019 cruises last nine days and range from \$2,099 to \$9,499 depending on date and stateroom category. A few 6-, 16- and 23-day itineraries are scheduled. Fare includes motor-coach excursion in each port, one night hotel stay prior to embarkation, all meals with complimentary wine and beer at dinner, room service and nightly entertainment. Airport transfers and airfare not included. Pre- and post-cruise itineraries available at extra charge. Gratuities automatically charged at \$17.50 per person per day, 15 percent added to bar charges.

Details: American Queen Steamboat Co., (888) 749-5280, aqsc.com

- Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by the American Queen Steamboat Co.

<https://www.dailyherald.com/entlife/20190323/river-cruising-american-duchess-paddle-wheeler-departs-from-old-fashioned-steamboat-decor>