



# CRUISING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF LEWIS AND CLARK

An American Queen Voyages  
paddlewheeler plies the Pacific Northwest  
rivers navigated by the Corps of Discovery.

*by Katherine Rodeghier*

No Champagne toasts, lobster dinners, or comfy beds awaited Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in 1805 as they began the last leg of their journey to the Pacific Ocean. But I traced their route while enjoying these and other creature comforts aboard *American Empress* as it cruised the Snake and Columbia Rivers across the Pacific Northwest.

After the Louisiana Purchase roughly doubled the size of the United States, President Thomas Jefferson was keen to learn what lay there. He entrusted Meriwether Lewis with leading a team of explorers. Lewis recruited friend and fellow military man William Clark as co-captain of what became known as the Corps of Discovery.

The expedition set off near St. Louis in May 1804 and returned more than two years later. The story of Lewis and Clark's exploration ranks as "*The Iliad and The Odyssey of the American West*," said Laurence Cotton, the *American Empress* "Riverlorian."

### FIRST ENCOUNTER

*American Empress* catches up with the explorers at the confluence of the Snake and Clearwater rivers. Here, two cities straddle a state line: Lewiston, Idaho, and Clarkston, Washington, named for ... guess who?

My cruise embarked in Clarkston for the westward voyage. Nine-day itineraries operate from early spring to late fall aboard the 217-passenger paddlewheeler operated by American Queen Voyages. The Lewis and Clark story unfolds in presentations on board and shore excursions.

A Clarkston guide recounted the crucial first encounter between the Corps and the Nez Perce nation of Native Americans. The explorers spent 11 days crossing the Bitterroot Mountains, the most difficult part of their journey. Starving and dehydrated, they suffered from frostbite and exhaustion. "I have been wet and as cold in every part as I ever was in my life," wrote Clark in his journal.

They stumbled upon the Nez Perce and asked for assistance. Should they help them or let them die? A female elder urged her people to do them no harm. They fed them, sheltered them and nursed them back to health. Had they not cared for the Corps, the expedition might have ended there.

### NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE

I learned more about the Nez Perce in a film and exhibits of artifacts at the Nez Perce National Historical Park. Back on the *Empress*, a citizen of the Nez Perce nation portrayed tribal culture through song, dance, and storytelling.

Throughout their journey, Lewis and Clark encountered as many as 50 tribes and received help from more than two dozen. Cotton passes around a peace medal Lewis presented to them. An engraving of Jefferson appears on one side, the other depicts two clasped hands and a tomahawk crossed with a peace pipe.

One reason Native Americans accepted the Corps was the presence of Sacagawea and her baby. A citizen of the Shoshone nation, she was the wife of French-Canadian fur trader Toussaint Charbonneau. Both acted as interpreters for the Corps. Clark wrote Sacagawea "reconciles all the Indians as to our friendly intentions."



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Left clockwise: Jose Gil - stock.adobe.com; Katherine Roddeghier (x3) Right: American Queen Voyages



*American Empress* has 9-day itineraries on the Snake and Columbia Rivers from early spring to late fall.



Crown Point, Vista House, and the Columbia River Gorge

## Early pioneers on the Oregon Trail stopped here because the mountains and steep canyon downriver made travel by wagon impossible.

### ON TO THE COLUMBIA

The Corps passed through the Columbia River Gorge, where flowing water cut through the Cascade Mountain Range. Rapids made that journey treacherous. I enjoyed smooth cruising as *American Empress* negotiated locks at eight dams: four on the Columbia, four on the Snake. The elevation changes 738 feet, more than eight times the lift of the Panama Canal.

Rapids were especially dangerous at The Dalles, a French term meaning “the flagstones,” named for the large basaltic rocks that create obstacles in the river. Early pioneers on the Oregon Trail stopped here because the mountains and steep canyon downriver made travel by wagon impossible. Some loaded their possessions onto rafts for a hazardous journey through the Gorge.

Their story is told at the Columbia Gorge Discovery Center & Museum in The Dalles, Oregon. I was fascinated by exhibits devoted to the geology of the Gorge. During the Ice Age, huge glacier-bound lakes in what is now Montana repeatedly broke through ice dams, sending waves up to 1,000 feet high surging west. These Missoula Floods carved the gorge and left deposits of nutrient-rich soil responsible for the fine Oregon and Washington state wines I sipped on board.

The Dalles marks the eastern gateway to the 85-mile-long Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, where I saw some of the 77 waterfalls on the Oregon side alone that give this stretch of river the nickname “Waterfall Alley.”

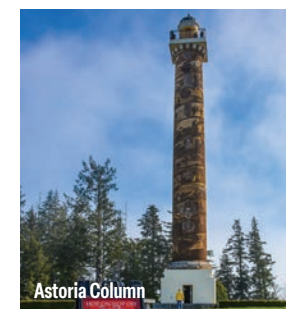
For another perspective, I joined an excursion along the Historic Columbia River Highway to Crown Point scenic overlook. We had a view of the gorge 693 feet below, Vista House (a 1918 rest stop on the National Register of Historic Places), and 620-foot Multnomah Falls, the tallest in Oregon.



Cape Disappointment lighthouse



Mt. Hood



Astoria Column

### ARRIVING AT THE PACIFIC

In Astoria, Oregon, my motorcoach climbed a steep hill to the Astoria Column for views of the Columbia River, the Coast Range of mountains and, in the distance, the Pacific Ocean. Murals on the 125-foot-tall column depict the region’s history, especially the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Mariners call the mouth of the Columbia “The Graveyard of the Pacific” for the bar of sand and silt the river drops as it enters the ocean. The Columbia River Maritime Museum shares harrowing stories of river-bar pilots guiding ships through the passage and rescuing crews from shipwrecks.

A shore excursion travels to Lewis and Clark National Historical Park along the lower Columbia River and Pacific Coast. The Corps spent 10 days searching for a winter camp in this area. After rejecting Cape Disappointment on the north side of the river, they moved to the south bank and promptly planted the U.S. flag at what became Fort Clatsop.

The Corps remained for 106 days, all but 12 rainy. When food ran short, they hunted elk and deer and ate roots and tubers, then gladly departed on March 23, 1806, for their return journey.

At the end of its westward cruise, *American Empress* doubles back, too, but only a short distance to Vancouver, Washington, where I crossed the Columbia to Portland International Airport for my flight home. Once airborne, I could look down on the river and ponder the many hardships faced by the Corps of Discovery more than two centuries ago. ●



Left: Bob - stock.adobe.com Right: American Queen Voyages (x4)