

Going Green...With A Grain Of Salt

Houseboat

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90 Miles South
Adventures on a trailerable houseboat



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HOUSEBOAT MAGAZINE'S
NATIONAL **Houseboat**
EXPO
ON WATER 2009

90 Miles South

Exploring with a small houseboat
By Bob Rubens
Reader Submission



FEATURE

My wife Diane and I enjoy exploring the country. For several years we owned a motor home and spent considerable time driving through the Midwest and Western United States, including Alaska. However, we've recently begun exploring waterways instead of highways. We live in north-central Louisiana, and have launched on the Red River, the Ouachita and the Calcasieu out to the Gulf of Mexico.

Last summer we took a trip down the Calcasieu River, a distance of about 90 miles. This trip can be made in a couple of days, but we actually spent six nights on the water because we took a side trip west on the Intercoastal to Texas and explored many of the bayous along the way. Additionally, we typically only travel at about 10 miles per hour; our boat is capable of moving at three times that speed, but we only push the engine to dodge lightning bolts when a sudden storm comes up.

Our boat is a 30-foot Adventure Craft (adventurecraft.com) with a 135hp Honda engine. It sleeps four, has a head, generator, ship-to-shore radio, A/C, heat, fresh

water tank, black water holding tank, refrigerator, microwave, dual controls on the bridge and in the cabin as well as glass all around, with screens.

We have added extras since our purchase, including matching marine GPS units with depth finders for the bridge and cabin, a 12-volt oscillating fan (similar to those you see on car dash boards) that we use at night, nylon screening attached with Velcro for the bow, aft deck hatches and a macerator pump to empty the black water from the holding tank upon returning home into the sewer. Early on we discovered that pump-out stations are scarcer than fuel stations on the water in the real world.

A note to fellow travelers: the nautical maps we have of the area and the GPS are not up-to-date since Hurricane Rita in 2005. Many of the listed services no longer exist, including the buildings and land in many cases. We have identified many locations with buoy numbers (B00) that were confirmed with our GPS and map.

Getting Started

We began our trip at Sam Houston

State Park in Moss Bluff, La., about 10 miles north of Lake Charles on the Calcasieu River. We like state parks for the security that comes with a patrolled launch site when leaving our truck and trailer for several days at a time.

About eight miles south of the park you will pass through a saltwater barrier. A salt-water barrier is similar to a lock, except it only has one gate. The gate is closed when the tide comes in, but stays open while the tide is going out. The intent is to minimize the amount of salt water entering this part of the Calcasieu River. South of the barrier the river is primarily brackish. When you pull up to the gate, the gatekeeper will open it for you. It only takes a couple of minutes and then it is immediately shut again if the tide is coming in.

Continuing south about another mile after the saltwater barrier you have to wait for a railroad swing bridge to open, as the span is less than three feet above the water. This is the most aggravating part of the trip. The bridge is run by the railroad and the attendant does not monitor the ship-to-shore radio. I usually give a blast

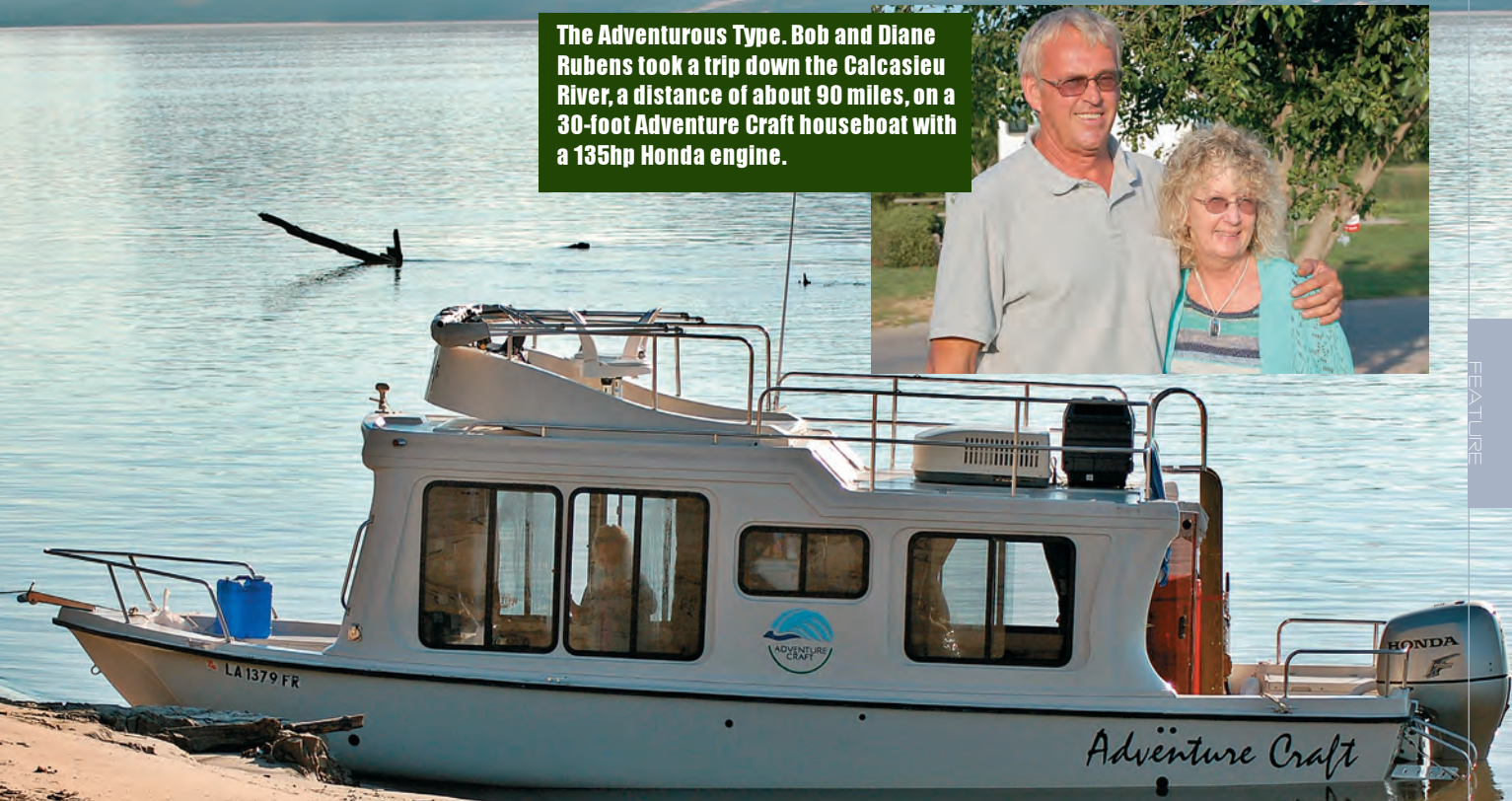


of the horn to announce that I want to pass, because the attendant sits in a little shed at one end of the bridge, and sometimes I think he is sleeping or watching TV.

Beyond the railroad bridge, I-10 crosses over the river and you are in Lake Charles. The eastern shore consists of several casinos on the water with

boat access. We chose to hug the western shore, which is the ship channel, well-marked with buoys and is an average depth of 25 to 40 feet. If one wants to cross Lake Charles, be alert for shallow water. The maps show a depth of five to seven feet, but we have seen seagulls walking in the water in the center of the lake, a good

The Adventurous Type. Bob and Diane Rubens took a trip down the Calcasieu River, a distance of about 90 miles, on a 30-foot Adventure Craft houseboat with a 135hp Honda engine.



indicator that shallow water lies ahead. Shallow water is the rule in south Louisiana, not the exception.

Fuel Stops

When exploring unfamiliar waters, I try to keep the tanks topped off as precaution. The first fuel stop is south of Lake Charles at Nalmar Landing (buoy 121); they sell gas and diesel. Next to Nalmar is the Bridge Marina. Apparently a bridge was formerly here because the approach and 100 feet of concrete span are still intact. The bridge was probably removed to allow large ships access to Lake Charles facilities. Across the river from Nalmar landing is the Port of Lake Charles.

Upon exiting Lake Charles, you will be in the Calcasieu Ship Channel the rest of the way. From this point on, don't be surprised to see dolphins circling the

boat. Initially, their exposed fins made them look like sharks. They often swim in small pods of three or four, and it is a real treat when they jump out of the water and dance on their tails; it's like being at Sea World. The frequency of dolphin sightings increases as you approach the Gulf.

You can also expect to see more commercial traffic on the channel, including huge tankers, shrimp trawlers and barge traffic. The locals call the tugs "tow boats," but I have only seen tugs push, never tow. Why not call them "push boats"?

At buoy 119 you pass under I-210. On your port side will be Prien Lake, which we did not explore, but looks primarily residential and very shallow. At Buoy 112 you will be at Rose Bluff, and the Citco Oil Refinery will be visible on the starboard.

It becomes obvious that the Calcasieu

Ship Channel is man-made, similar to the Intercoastal Waterway. Most of the lakes mentioned in this account are not necessarily entirely visible, as the Army Corps has piled revetments (rock piles) along the canal to help maintain a depth of about 40 feet.

ICW Crossing

Continuing south, buoy 92 will be the Intercoastal Waterway crossing. To the west the waterway will take you to Orange, Texas, about 25 miles. To the east, you have to go around Choupique Island, where a lock awaits you.

We continued south to buoy 81, turning west into a bayou where a small marina was listed on our map. Spicer Bait & Tackle is run by a very friendly family and sells gas and some groceries. The route to Spicer's is lined with shrimp trawlers along the shore in various appearances



During the trip, Bob and Diane Rubens were able to see a lot of unique scenery, including a very damaged region following Hurricane Rita.

of seaworthiness. The trawlers, with their decks below water, look like they have not trawled since Rita came through.

When I saw the trawlers lined up along the shore, I assumed the depth was great enough for our boat, which draws less than two feet of water. Wrong! I steered myself right into an oyster bed that made an awful crunching noise with the prop. Now, being aground destroyed my self-esteem, as instead of appearing as an “old salt,” I was just looking old.

I climbed down the stern ladder to push the bow around to deeper water alone, because there was no way my wife was going into that water. To my chagrin, walking on an oyster bed with bare feet was less than comfortable. Pushing the boat around 180 degrees was no small task while I was sinking in the mud up to my knees and being scratched by oyster shells with every step.

Luckily, a local trawler came and pushed us off the oyster bed. Thanks to this and other similar grounding incidents, I now make sure I am at very slow speed when outside the channel, not only to protect the boat, but also minimize the amount of time spent pushing my boat and feeling oysters between my toes.

From buoy 89 to 60, the channel runs along the east side of Calcasieu Lake. You only see glimpses of the lake when there are passes through the levee and revetments. The channel at this point is teeming with dolphin and shrimp trawlers. If you are inclined to enjoy fishing, many varieties of saltwater fish abound in all these waters south of Lake Charles.

Home Stretch

Buoy 59 marks the end of Calcasieu Lake and the final leg of our journey to the Gulf of Mexico. When you reach buoy 53 you will see a car ferry going back

and forth across the river connecting highways 84 and 27. The State started the free ferry service after Hurricane Rita destroyed the bridge in 2005. At this juncture you can continue south about a mile to the Gulf or take the channel loop on the port side, just past the ferry landing, around Monkey Island and back on to the river in about a mile. I would suggest you take this route because of the view of the many docked ships and trawlers.

You can also buy fuel at a commercial fuel station here named Marsec, about two docks east of the ferry dock. This is not your typical marina fuel station; I found it by asking some of the locals where they got fuel. Even though I found the dock, I was hesitant to tie up, because since September 11, Homeland Security has placed signs on all piers that read, “Warning: trespassing on this property will subject you to search and seizure.”

Unless you have used one of these commercial filling stations before it can be difficult to recognize, as it does not resemble your local gas station back home. I actually passed by it several times looking for it, despite folks describing where it was located, as it closely resembles the petroleum refineries I had been passing all along on this trip. The fuel tanks are all above ground, as most of the land this far south in Louisiana is less than three feet above sea level, and underground tanks would just float out of the ground (a similar concern affects cemeteries).

On this channel loop you will be in Cameron, La., which was 90 percent destroyed during Rita.

Traveling south along this loop you come back out to the Calcasieu River at buoy 50, just a half-mile north of Calcasieu Pass and the Gulf of Mexico. A jetty protects you from the waves and wind coming in from the Gulf. The jetty ends

at buoy 42, and you are officially in the Gulf. As you clear the jetty, to your starboard will be Holly Beach, or at least what is left of it.

This area, which was once lined with cottages (called camps if you are from Louisiana), is now just beach. Nearly 100 percent of Holly Beach was washed off the map during Rita, including much of the land. The land can't be much more than a foot above sea level, and most of the cottages were mounted on the tops of telephone pole-like structures to avoid surges, but the hurricane took out everything.

Our original plans were to navigate 24 miles west on the Gulf to Sabine Pass in Texas, then north to the Intercoastal and back home to Louisiana the same way we came in. However, we saw the 20 mph winds and five-foot waves and common sense came into play. While the boat would probably have been okay, the rough sea would have played havoc with the contents of our stomachs and the contents of the boat cabin in that estimated hour and a half travel time.

Instead, we headed north again on the Calcasieu and turned west on the Intercoastal into Texas to Port Arthur with the goal of returning to our starting point.

Since the described peregrination in southwest Louisiana, Hurricane Ike went through and destroyed most of what I described. This is the same path Hurricane Rita took a couple of years previous. I guess further travels in south Louisiana are on hold, at least for this year. North Florida is on our agenda for November unless a storm hits them this season, as well.

For more information on Adventure Craft visit www.adventurecraft.com

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