Adventure in Basin offers excitement

By CALLIE CABELL
Staff Reporter

Springtime is the best time to discover the fabled beauty and adventure of Louisiana's swampland and you can do so by a readily available boat journey down the Atchafalaya River Basin - one of America's few remaining great wilderness areas.

There awaits different forms of wildlife, plant life and unexpected engineering accomplishments.

The journey begins at McGee's Landing in Henderson where adventurers board the 28-foot passenger cruiser that will take them on a 1½-hour tour through vast wetland just minutes from Lafayette.

Richard and Barbara Hanks, owners of McGee's Landing, have offered the tours every day, except in bad weather, for the last three years and they say that every boat has been filled to its 18-person capacity. Hanks attributes the popularity of the cruises to the fact that "when people think of Louisiana, they think of swamp and this is swamp."

"One of the main attractions is the different forms of wildlife that can be found here in the basin," Hank says. "At various times people have reported seeing bears, deer, turkeys, squirrels, minks, otters, beavers, many different types of fowl and - alligators."

The alligator is the attraction most people want to see - and they're often seen in unexpected places, according to Hanks.

He recalls his first winter at the basin. "The wind was blowing when I saw a log out there on the water. It took me about 40 to 55 minutes to realize there was something wrong. It was floating against the wind. That alligator, he was boogeying on top of the water."

The woodlands, another attraction of the basin, become so full of foliage during its seasonal growth that the sun is blocked out.

In the lower part of the basin, there is moss-covered cypress, willow and oak trees, while parts of the upper basin that once were underwater now have crops planted.

The water hyacinth is brought in by high waters, that's why there seems to be an overabundance of it against the banks of the basin.

One of the more significant features of the tour is a ride under the "Swampland Expressway," the segment of Interstate 10 that crosses the Atchafalaya Basin. Here, viewers get a close-up of how the bridge was built. Construction was an engineering feat once considered impossible.

An alligator sunning himself is one sight adventurers are treated to when they journey into the Atchafalaya River Basin.

During the tour passengers pass one of the oldest oil fields in the South. "This is where much of the experience for off-shore drilling was gained, because most everything is underwater in the basin," Hanks points out.

"All the oil and gas wells in the basin are free flowing, requiring no pumps," Hanks says. "You have a compressor where all the oil and gas from the various wells flow and are combined to be shipped to Baton Rouge to be refined."

The adventure into Louisiana's swampland is a 25-minute drive from Lafayette on Interstate 10. Get off at the Henderson exit and follow the signs to McGee's Landing.

Hank says that the best time to take the tour is in March, April or May. The tour runs every two hours from 7 a.m. until 7 p.m. in the summer. During winter months, it runs between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Charge is $7.50 a person. Call McGee's Landing at (318) 228-8523 for reservations.

Experiencing Louisiana's great swampland wilderness is one adventure everyone should see.