Here come the TOURISTS

By Melinda Shelton
Advocate staff writer

Imagine walking through lush green grass, taking in the sights at the LSU Rural Life Museum when all of a sudden you happen upon something bizarre, something beyond your experience.

In a small, muddy ditch there’s chicken-inchers or so-tall columns of moist dirt. It looks like it’s been mashed together, but is perfectly straight.

In the middle of this thing is a hole disappearing into darkness.

When you’re from Shreveport, La., a lot of things run through your head.


Does anything live down there? Biege!

A genuine crawfish’s most burrow and an explanation of how it got there — and how they’re everywhere in this neck of the woods.

mentioned Jeanine Gamo, her mother Kay Kinsaid, and son John. Nobody told them crawfish are accomplished architects as well as tasty critters.

The Gamos are among more than 170 visitors who left the Mississippi Queen paddlewheelers on a bright Thursday morning to tour Baton Rouge.

For downtown workers, the sight of the Mississippi Queen — and frequently the smaller Delta Queen — docked on the Mississippi River is nothing unusual.

From early spring through December, the boat stops at Baton Rouge as part of two- or five-night cruises departing New Orleans. Other stops may include Natchez, Vicksburg, Greenville, Natchez, or Memphis.

The paddlewheelers typically dock shortly after 7 a.m. on Thursdays and Sundays, and Baton Rouge beckons the visitors from all over the United States.

Departure is at 1 p.m., accompanied by a calliope blasting out tunes as the boats continue their river journey.

Just what do these “boat people,” as some downtown workers call them, do in Baton Rouge?

A Morning Advocate reporter and photographer met the Mississippi Queen on a recent Thursday morning and followed visitors, eavesdropping on their conversations.

Shortly before 8:30 a.m., tour buses lined up along the River Road levee near North Street.

Three buses, directed by tour guide Harry Laffoon, took more than 100 visitors to French Settlement for wining, dining and Cajun music and dancing.

Two other buses with about 70 people split up and toured Baton Rouge with Lagisappe Tours, sponsored by the Mayor's office.
Tour

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by the non-profit Foundation for Historical Louisiana.

There would be stops at Magnolia Mound plantation home on Nicholson Drive, a riding tour of LSU’s campus, a walking tour of the Rural Life Museum on Essen Lane, a riding tour of Beauregard and Spanish towns and a brief, photo-only stop at the Capitol.

Three hours passed quickly.

The morning started with a delay. An Illinois Central Railroad train blocked passage from the boat to the buses for several minutes.

Then, there was the climb up steep steps on the river-side of the levee, across the tracks and gravel, and down steep steps to the buses.

Many older visitors found the trek challenging, with one woman describing it as “downright dangerous.”

Fleurette Aucoin, tour coordinator for Lagniappe Tours, said paddlewheel visitors at one time had no steps to help them up and down the levee. The dock being planned by the city-parish government is long overdue, she said, and should greatly encourage riverfront usage.

Finally, it was off to see Baton Rouge!

Volunteer guide Gwen Cook was charming, witty, fiercely LSU loyal, and knowledgeable about Louisiana history.

Listen in on some of the visitors’ comments:

“Nice Southern hospitality,” was Jeanine Ganno’s comment when the group was told by guide Nancy Larrowe that they’d be treated to lemonade and cookies after the tour of Magnolia Mound.

“Boo-se-what? How’d you say that again?” asked one visitor as Larrowe explained the use of bousillage — hardened clay mixed with animal hair or Spanish moss — to build walls or fill gaps between logs.

“What’d they do? Go out and shave their horses all the time?” a woman commented after hearing that horse hair was used to cover and stuff furniture.

“It’d be a nice place to die if you’re going to,” a man wearing a Panama hat said as he walked through a room used for birthing and caring for the sick. He particularly liked the antique bed with mosquito netting and large fireplace.

“It’s so beautiful hanging from the trees,” breathed a woman as she listened to Larrowe explain how moss was picked from trees, heated to kill insects, and baled for use in stuffing mattresses or furniture.

“Somebody needs to get in here and weed a little,” an obvious home gardener commented as he walked through the plantation’s garden.

“Why are there so many tree limbs missing?” a visitor asked Cook as they boarded the bus. She explained that violent storms battered the city earlier in the summer, and that the state’s annual average of 60 inches of rainfall already had been met.

“Sixty inches is NORMAL? Shew!” a visitor from Arizona said.

“I guess that’s why it’s so humid here,” her seat partner said.

Few comments were made as the tour continued through the LSU campus, with the exception of a man’s approval of the “Geaux Tigers” sign outside Pete Maravich Assembly Center. “Clever.”

Cook was asked general questions like: “How many people live in Baton Rouge?” “Why don’t you have counties instead of parishes. It’s religious, isn’t it?” “Who’s your governor?” “You said you hope he can straighten out the state. What’s wrong?” “Property tax is HOW MUCH?” “Why are there so many vacant buildings downtown?”

The visitors especially liked the Rural Life Museum, and many positive comments were made about the collection of artifacts, slave quarters, overseer’s house, sugar mill, old church, rose gardens and landscaping.

“We don’t know how well we have it, do we?” said Kay Kincaid to her grandson, John Ganno, 11.

“That’s an old hoop for a hoop skirt, isn’t it?” Jeannine Ganno asked her mother.

“I guess so, but that’s before my time!” Kincaid said, laughing.

“This is really a wonderful museum!” Maggie Dadone said to her husband, George. They were visiting from West Palm Beach, Fla.

“It just wasn’t long enough,” commented Glen Mathousek to his wife, Jeanette, as they boarded the bus again.

A farmer from Cuba, Kan., he especially liked the large collection of farm implements, building tools, machinery and carriages, buggies and old cars.

As the bus returned to the Mississippi Queen, Cook commented on Huey Long, the Civil War, religious influences on Baton Rouge and Louisiana, and Cajun, creole and French cuisine.

But not all of the visitors agreed that boiled crawfish are just too good to believe.

Cook described putting boxes of salt and spices into water, bringing it to a boil and dumping in live crawfish. And then taking the hot critters, tearing off the head, sucking out the spices, squeezing the tail and eating the meat.

One man shook his head, a look of displeasure on his squinted-up face.

“Not me, man. Not me. Just give ’em to me peeled, or shucked or whatever they are.”