At right, water taxi makes a delivery to a passing ship.

For a short time, this summer morning, all is quiet. The dock next to the Jax Brewery is relatively empty. There's music coming from across the gang plank, only the squawking of terns shows stirring around the deck.

That won't last long.

The daily ritual goes on for the past 15 years and is asnumerous. One by one in small groups, they come, charting and filling the New Orleans air with talk of how long the trip is. Can they spare the time? Should they go now or stop by the Quarter and go later in the afternoon?

The boarding group under the blue awning grows larger, until at 3:15 p.m., something happens. The steam calliope begins to play forth the strain of "Walking For the Robert E. Lee," and the gate opens. Clutching their cameras and bags, they file past the attendant who takes their blue tickets and gives a brief warning to "Keep your step, especially if you're in heels."

"These people are all different," says one crewman, as he tears tickets. "It's a melting pot every day. There's the business guy in the brown suit and the one in the hot pink and green jeans."

From New Orleans to New York and beyond, they come this grandiose riverboat steamship, The Natchez, to experience the sights and sounds of their home city, an enchanting, characterful city of history and literature, like Mark Twain's Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer.

In time, every time, the huge decks are crawling with passengers, like ants marching across the well-oiled grain. Cameras start clicking. T-shirts peel off, sunscreen bottles pop open. And through it all, the calliope plays on.

The tourists like Pam Smithen from Boston not much beats "seeing the Crescent City's other side."

"I've seen your Bourbon Street at night," she says. "It's like it. Now it's time to see your river the right way."

There's something else, too. The

Natchez: rollin'-rollin'-rollin' on the river

By MADLynn LOVE

The Natchez passes by the St. Louis Cathedral.

What's available:

Want to take a ride on a riverboat? At least five cruises are offered in the Baton Rouge/New Orleans area. They range in length from one to 4 hours.

Cajun Queen leaves from the Central Louisiana District (Poydras Street Wharf) in New Orleans. Two cruises are offered, a 4-hour riverboat cruise from 10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m., and a 5-hour harbor cruise. The 4-hour harbor cruise departs at 7 p.m.

New Orleans has over 10 million visitors a year. This riverboat trip is just one of the many attractions in the city. For more information, visit www.neworleans.com.
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the Mississippi. The Gulf is actually 110 miles down the winding Mississippi River. It's only 44 miles across land.”

The tour follows the muddy Mississippi for only a few of those 110 miles down river. When the banks go into the sameness of thick green foliage and trees, The Natchez makes a slow and graceful turn and heads upstream, hugging the Algiers bank of the river for the return trip. The tour proceeds as far as the site of the 1984 World's Fair, now the large shopping center called Riverwalk, and returns to the dock.

In the process, history and industry pass by. There's the Jackson Barracks, one of the most important groups of antebellum buildings south of the Mason-Dixon line — where both Robert E. Lee and U.S. Grant were stationed during the Mexican War; the home of Domino Sugar, where thousands of tons of the sweet stuff are granulated and refined every year; the site of the Battle of New Orleans; the Henry J. Kaiser Co.; Mobil Oil, where crude is refined into seven grades of petroleum.

Ever present is the muddy Mississippi's bustling river traffic. Ships, some near as big as the Queen Elizabeth II, carry barges and containers. Blue, orange and red boxes, recently unloaded, stand waiting on docks. Soon they'll end up as trailer trucks on U.S. highways. Merchant ships make their returns from such faraway places as South Africa and Belgium. Water taxis — the only way on and off passing ships — take out customs agents, deliver river pilots, re-stock groceries.

The bright red paddlewheel, meanwhile, continues to churn, just as it has since The Natchez was christened in 1975.

Since that time, the sternwheeler has carried thousands upon thousands of passengers, proof that the public hasn't lost its fascination with steamboats and river life.

Tourists like Don Walker from Arizona think it isn't likely to happen any time soon. “There's just something about it,” he says. “It's kind of hard to explain, but there's a kind of power here that lures you — the churning paddlewheel, the churning Mississippi. You can't get that everywhere.”