Seeing the Basin by boat

Visitors get chance to view the changing Atchafalaya

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HENDERSON — Visitors to the Atchafalaya Basin — especially those who venture into the basin by boat — get the opportunity to experience firsthand the ever-changing swamp and its abundance of wildlife.

And a midsummer tour particularly can be rewarding because of the representation of virtually every color of the spectrum and the presence of many things exposed because of the low summer water level.

Several organized boat tours are available throughout the basin, and in the Henderson area, along the basin levee, there is Basin Boat Tours at Whiskey River Landing, operated by Dwight and Terry Angelle. Also nearby is Atchafalaya Wilderness Tours.

Dwight Angelle conducts the tours for his family operation, and visitors are taken on a wide sweep of the basin in the Henderson area. On a comfortable, 18-passenger tour boat, Angelle maneuvers through the basin, pointing out sights along the way.

"This time of the year there are literally acres of water hyacinths covering the water's surface, their brilliant flowers reflecting a variety of hues of purple and blue.

Angelle, sometimes speaking in French and sometimes in English, explained to a group of tourists that the hyacinths were introduced to Louisiana decades ago by Japanese visitors. The water plants were so successful, he said, that "they took over and now the state sends out people two or three times a week but they can't kill them all."

As the bottom of the boat scraped against a hidden cypress stump, Angelle said that the timber industry all but wiped out the majestic trees during a widespread logging effort 60 years ago, leaving behind many stumps. Over the years, the trees once again have made a comeback.

As the boat floated under the spans of Interstate 10, Angelle pointed out the water marks on the massive concrete pilings that show the varying water levels in the basin.

"This (1-10) was started around 1969," he said, again breaking into French for his tourists. "When fishermen get caught in a thunderstorm, they run to this and lie about the fish they've been catchin' and drink a couple of beers."

The tourists also were told about the disappearance of Pelba, a basin community that thrived in the heart of the Atchafalaya more than 60 years ago.

"All that remains of the community are pilings from the Southern Pacific Railroad, according to Angelle. Around 1927, a devastating flood hit the basin, he said, and wiped out the homes, fish warehouse and other buildings once located in what was Pelba, which also was called Lake Pelba.

"My father was born and raised in Pelba, " Angelle said. "He said the water'd be two, three, four feet over the tracks and the train would chug-a-lug through with one of those braces on front."

As the tour ventured deeper into the basin, the presence of the oil industry — another facet of the area's life — became apparent.

"That's Marie," he told the tourists. "She's a good fisherman, but she drinks a little too much. She'll be out there all day long, just fishin' and drinkin'."

As the boat got nearer, the visitors snapped pictures and shared laughs. Marie, sitting in her wooden bateau with poles, bottles and an ice chest, was nothing more than a clever creation from moss, old clothes and rubber boots.

As the tourists disembarked, Angelle said he varies his tours and includes examples of seasonal activities such as crawfishing. His tours normally are provided seven days a week at 10 a.m., 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. each day, and reservations can be made by calling (318) 228-8567.

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Pilings from the Southern Pacific Railroad are all that remain of the Basin community of Pelba, which was devastated by a flood around 1927.
The trunk of this willow tree has grown around a still-used pipe.