Traveling across the Atchafalaya Basin by automobile one gets a glimpse of its lush wilderness. Traveling through it by boat, you begin to appreciate its rich ecological diversity. But it’s when you soar above it by seaplane that you catch a glimpse of just how big the place is, how much of it is still truly “wet and wild,” and why it is deservedly called one of the last great wilderness wetlands in North America.

Paul Fournet Air Services, based at the Lafayette Regional Airport, has just begun offering one-hour “Bayou Basin Air Cruises” for tourist and native alike — typically a flight into the middle of the basin, then tracing northward along the Atchafalaya River toward Interstate 10, and a brief landing alongside a sun deck anchored along a willow-and-cypress-draped channel to let the tourist hear and smell and see what the basin is really like.

Tourists can also choose to put down at Henderson and taxi up to a waterside restaurant there, to taste the basin’s bounty as well. The tours were begun in response to a growing number of inquiries to the charter service for quick Atchafalaya tours for tourists who had heard about the wilderness and wanted to see it, but who were on limited schedules, according to Fournet vice president John Smith. They are flown by experienced, bilingual pilots such as Andrus Kibodeaux, knowledgeable about the basin flora and fauna.

The one-hour air cruises are available at $90 per person, with a two-person minimum. Trips depart from and return to the Lafayette Regional Airport. They are made in a four-seat amphibious Cessna aircraft capable of setting down on practically any of the larger channels in the Basin for a closer look at the wilderness there.

“With the growth in the tourism business in Lafayette and Acadiana, and the growing interest in the Atchafalaya Basin, it seemed like a natural extension of our services,” Smith says.

The air charter service was founded in 1952 by Paul A. Fournet, a World War II veteran and P-38 photo reconnaissance pilot. Since that time, the one-man operation has grown to become the largest charter operation in Louisiana, now offering more than 12 types of aircrafts for charters to any location within the continental U.S. and Mexico.

For further information, call 237-0520.