Visitors in tow on tour

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ABOARD THE M/V MISSISSIPPI — Most of the time, Tim Millum works without a bunch of people looking over his shoulder. A couple of times a year, he puts up with a crowd of sightseers, some ranking high enough to sport stars on their shoulders, milling about his “office” four stories above the Mississippi River.

Millum, one of the pilots aboard this U.S. Army Corps of Engineers towboat, said the background activity is no distraction.

“I just tune everybody out.”

Using just his fingertips, Millum threaded the 58-foot-wide boat through the river congestion.

A nudge here and a twist there on several controls kept the river’s largest towboat, 241 feet long on the waterline, in the proper channel and away from oncoming ships or moored strings of barges.

Millum even stopped the boat dead in the water and spun 360 degrees to clear tree trunks and other trash jammed under its hull.

The motor vessel Mississippi paused in Baton Rouge on Thursday morning, picked up several dozen local and state officials and continued on a daylong voyage to New Orleans.

This was all part of a ritual sponsored by the corps and the Mississippi River Commission called the “high water” inspection tour.

The annual trip down the river from Cape Girardeau, Mo., to New Orleans gives corps brass and the river commission members a chance to hear about flood control, navigation and environmental problems and sometimes solutions from governments, businesses and just plain folks.

The commission was created in 1879 to oversee work on the Mississippi River and its tributaries from Cape Girardeau to the Gulf of Mexico.

The commission runs a “low water” tour on the Atchafalaya River each fall.

For Capt. John Dugger, turning his working towboat into a giant conference center is just part of the job.

In some ways, it’s less stressful than pushing huge barges loaded with concrete mats, he said. “When you’ve got a tow out there, you’ve got a lot more responsibility.”

Dugger didn’t have to worry about an unwieldy raft of barges in front of his boat, but he did dress up in slacks, coat and tie to impress his guests.

Those guests included staff and members from a raft of levee boards: Atchafalaya, Pontchartrain, both East and West Jefferson and Lafourche Basin.

Representatives from two freshwater districts, Bayou Lafourche and Teche-Vermilion, also were aboard, as were people from the state Department of Transportation and Development, the Louisiana Audubon Council, the Gulf Intracoastal Association and the Lower Mississippi River Valley Flood Control Association, an alphabet soup of names tags thick enough to eat with a fork.

Thursday was one of the few days during the weeklong trip that did not feature a public hearing.

The Mississippi had docked, among other places, in Memphis and Vicksburg to open her plush meeting room for public hearings.

The final hearing is scheduled for 9 a.m. today in New Orleans.

The corps’ new commander of the New Orleans District, Col. Kenneth Clow, used the meeting room’s high-tech audio-video equipment to deliver a short briefing.

With the river cresting next week, “it’s a hot time for flood control on the Mississippi,” Clow said.

He rattled off facts, figures and projections about the corps’ navigation, flood control and environmental restoration work.

The $3 million project to pave and install steps on the downtown levee in Baton Rouge, for instance, is about 35 percent complete and should be finished in December.

Clow seemed pleased with that project. “We’re going to submit this for an excellence in design award in the corps’ competition,” he said.

Judging from conversations that spilled from informal groups clustered in the meeting room or the pilot house, a lack of a public hearing did not keep work from being done nor deals from being cut.