

**BELOW:** Travelers can ride what Mark Twain called “Floating Palaces” from Le Claire to Dubuque and back again along the Mississippi River. **RIGHT:** This easy-going riverboat cruise delivers up-close views of river wildlife with minimal work. A great way to relax in nature—and in style.



# The River Rolls On By

The drama of the Mississippi River unfolds before passengers kicking back on a lavish Victorian steamboat.

**T**he foamy water's edge peels away from the hull of the riverboat *Twilight* as it chugs steadily against the current of the fourth-longest river in the world. On the *Twilight's* 166-mile journey on a stretch of the Upper Mississippi from Le Claire to Dubuque, the wide brown horizon is broken by quiet dramas: the scanning flight of an eagle, the stark silhouette of an old iron bridge, a hulking barge drifting toward the Gulf of Mexico.

Mark Twain called these classic three-story affairs with rounded stern and ornate fancywork "Floating Palaces." Operators in the 1800s deforested whole riverbanks to fuel the popular cargo haulers.

Today, on the *Twilight* built in 1987, passengers watch America's revitalized river from the fantastic comfort of a deck chair or a lush Victorian salon.

## IT'S SO WILD!

A group from Ohio drinks bloody Marys in the *Twilight's* full bar and discusses what's rolling by outside their window like a slow-paced documentary film—except that it's live, and there are snacks and meals of chicken, fish and prime rib.

"I didn't know the river was this big!"

"I didn't know it would be this dirty."

"It's not dirty! There's been a lot of rain."

"The countryside is so peaceful. It's so wild!"

It's a largely senior crowd on this two-day trip that begins in the early morning in Le Claire, where Buffalo Bill Cody was born and the History Channel's *American Pickers* revived the river-town economy. The boat chugs upriver to the Port of Dubuque, home of the National



Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium, where passengers disembark for an overnight at the Grand Harbor Resort and Waterpark. In the morning, after time to sightsee in Dubuque, the *Twilight* makes its slow return to Le Claire.

For entertainment, there's bingo, a Mark Twain impersonator and spectacular wildlife. Sixty percent of all North American birds use the Mississippi River basin as their flyway—that's 326 species, many of them heading north during the spring season. On its journey, the *Twilight* passes 13 eagle nests and a good portion of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge.

In other words, wise travelers bring binoculars.

Sparkly speedboats shoot like arrows through the current. The occasional river shanty makes a last stand on the water's edge. The *Twilight* passenger's journey is a mellow one. Sloughs and backwater nurseries shelter fledgling birds. They give way to sandy beaches, wide-open lake-like vistas and 600 tiny islands. A fiery array of hickory, oak, walnut and cottonwood trees brighten up the view on water the color of church-basement coffee.

# Lost In Iowa

The three-story riverboat has a deck on every level for lounging, and guests are invited to visit the riverboat captain to get a taste of the pilot's life—and Captain Kevin Stier's vast knowledge of river lore.





# Lost In Iowa



Such a civilized way to travel through tranquil waters.

“Once, up north on a lock, the river was almost five miles wide, and a big storm blew in,” says entertainer Mark Arnould, who plays folk songs on the *Twilight*. “I could just see it coming at us. This craft is built so well that we just pulled up to a sandbar and I kept right on playing, watching that storm come in.”

The *Twilight* plows past several buoys. The voice of riverboat Captain Kevin Stier comes over the sound system from the captain’s nest. Sometimes Stier points out an eagle’s nest or a great blue heron. Maybe he’ll note that the river bottom is composed of sand—its muddy color the product of the streams and tributaries that feed it.

This time, he says that the buoys indicate a shallow point along the river. “This is Cordova Slough, a natural crossing for early settlers and Indians,” he says.

For hundreds of years, Native Americans used the river for trade and travel, crossing at its many shallow areas.

In fact, in the 1800s, steamboats rarely survived longer than five years because sticks or rocks ripped open the wooden hulls. It wasn’t until the 1930s, when the Works Progress Administration installed the lock-and-dam system, that the Mississippi River’s main channel had a regulated, steady depth of at least nine feet.

## A LIVE ECO-DRAMA

The *Twilight* passes a beach created by dredge sand. On summer weekends, Stier points out, islands like this are generally flocked by kids lounging near beached Waverunners and family boaters breaking for picnics. Today’s guests are a flock of Canada geese and a bald eagle that’s just snagged a fish.

“It doesn’t have its white head or tail yet,” he says. “They don’t get those markings until their fifth year.”

The views can get pretty dramatic. Past sightings include a bobcat lounging on a log, a huge fish drowning



LEFT: For the overnight stay in Dubuque, passengers make their own itinerary, from shopping to historical walking tours. On board, and always within inches of a lounge chair, passengers enjoy an amazingly relaxing journey. Most passengers overnight in Le Claire before the trip begins, and there are some memorable dinner options, including the newer Crane & Pelican in a renovated Italian-style house overlooking the river. On board, food is served often in the ornate dining room of the *Twilight*. RIGHT: Main Street in Le Claire has become a shopping destination for antiques, in part thanks to the History Channel reality show *American Pickers*, whose Antique Archeology store is based there. BELOW RIGHT: Riverboat staff on the *Twilight* are helpful and outgoing. Passengers can get as close to deck work as they want, here observing a lock.



the eagle that caught it and a deer swimming near an island.

“I love it,” says R.J. Coker of Knoxville, Tenn. “I’m going home to read *Huckleberry Finn* again.”

Stier notes a canoe passing by.

“It’s amazing how many people we see every summer paddling or taking a raft all the way from Minneapolis to New Orleans,” he says. It’s a two- or three-month journey. Once the *Twilight* rescued a swamped kayaker on his way to the Gulf of Mexico.

The scenery changes like that—sometimes subtle, sometimes striking. More than 400 white pelicans line up near one of the two locks the riverboat navigates. Their population has swelled in past years. “I saw six white pelicans in 1990,” Stier laughs. “Now we have 2,000 pelicans in a 10-mile radius of Lock and Dam 13” above Clinton.

The pelicans delight the two young passengers

on the boat. This isn’t a particularly kid-friendly trip—no children’s games, lots of sitting still—but there are family-pleasing aspects. The well-mannered and accommodating crew serves kid meals. Another crewmember hangs out at the boat’s edge, braiding giant rope bumpers to protect the hull from dock damage.

Stier encourages passengers to come up to the pilot house, where he stands at the wheel in his linen shirt, cargo shorts, tennies and handlebar mustache. He lets one of his young visitors stomp the whistle, then gives her a seed for a cultured pearl: freshwater native mussel shells that are sliced, cubed and rounded before being implanted in a marine oyster to process.

#### EVER-CHANGING RIVER

A group from Tennessee dominates the deck chairs on the hull, submitting entirely to the *Twilight’s* demand that you just sit back and watch the river. The boat passes

# *Lost In Iowa*



Making its way through Lock and Dam 13 above Clinton, the *Twilight* passes through the 110-foot wide, 600-foot-long lock while Captain Kevin Stier narrates. It's a fascinating "stair-step" up and down the river. The ship also navigates the lock at Bellevue and travels past Bellevue State Park.





# Lost In Iowa



flooded wild rice fields—fodder for migrating birds—then rolls by underground bunkers at the former Savanna Proving Grounds, built in 1917 to test cannons and used over the years on secret operations, much like the Air Force's Area 51.

Jim and Pat Welch of Decatur, Tenn., sit side-by-side, holding hands and marveling at what they've seen from the comfort of the *Twilight*.

"I'd like to drag a big catfish outta here," muses Jim.

He says he's impressed by the captain's navigation—the river is vast beyond their expectations and seems to be ever-changing.

"The river takes away and it adds back. I bet there's new stuff growing here every week," Jim says.

He's right. If the riverboat ride is a documentary, the movie is different with each journey, each passing season, every shifting current.

Stier points out a few stumps in the water where an island stood until just two years ago. "Nature is constantly

tearing an island apart, or moving sand from one area of the river to another," he says. "It's always changing."

A storm brews up ahead. The sky has turned a pale shade of gray, the water choppy. But the *Twilight* rolls on, solid and steady, as the passengers watch the latest scene develop in the reel of drama that is the Mississippi River.

## TRIP NOTES

***Twilight Riverboat.*** Two-day, 166-mile overnight cruise, including all meals, activities and lodging. End of May through October. \$329 double occupancy, \$369 single, children 10 to 14 \$189, under 10 \$159, kids 3 and under free. Sign up for the mailing list for e-mail updates and special rates. **800-331-1467; [riverboattwilight.com](http://riverboattwilight.com).**

## ***National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium.***

Recently expanded to a second building with saltwater and conservation exhibits. Admission charged.



**OPPOSITE:** Passengers enjoy sunlit views of Iowa shoreline from the decks. The vast Bellevue overlook as viewed from a hill atop Bellevue State Park. Popular with passengers, the famed Fenelon Place Elevator in Dubuque was built in 1882 and is the world's shortest, steepest scenic railway. **LEFT:** A population of white pelicans—hundreds of them—has grown along the stretch of river the *Twilight* travels. An old iron railroad swing bridge adds to the river's many charms.



350 Third St., Port of Dubuque, Dubuque.  
**563-557-9545; [mississippirivermuseum.org](http://mississippirivermuseum.org).**

*The riverboat leaves early in the morning, so it's a good idea to stay in Le Claire the night before so you don't miss embarkation. Below, a few things to do while you're in a town that's lived up considerably in the past few years:*

**Comfort Inn & Suites Riverview.** Not directly on the river, but a nice overlook view atop a hill, with a pool and continental breakfast. Doubles from \$85. **563-289-4747.**

**Holiday Inn Express Le Claire.** Right on the river—request a room with a patio or balcony overlooking it. Pool and continental breakfast. Doubles from \$139. **563-289-9978.**

**Crane & Pelican Café.** An 1800s restored brick building with an interesting menu including homestyle and

heirloom recipes plus vegan options and a garlic salad so strong that it burns going down—in a good way.  
**[Craneandpelican.com](http://Craneandpelican.com); 563-289-8774.**

**Faithful Pilot Café.** Fine dining on the river, serving dishes such as ginger-soy glazed salmon and black-pepper-crusted duck breast—plus a solid wine list.  
**[Faithfulpilot.com](http://Faithfulpilot.com); 563-289-4156.**

**Antique Archaeology.** In a town with many antique shops, this is the famous one: home of the *American Pickers* television show, often with a star from the show signing autographs. **[Antiquearchaeology.com](http://Antiquearchaeology.com); 563-289-1530.**

**Buffalo Bill Museum.** Buffalo Bill and Native American memorabilia and more. Tour an original 1800s steamer. Admission charged.  
**563-289-5580; [buffalobillmuseumLeClaire.com](http://buffalobillmuseumLeClaire.com).** 🐾