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Paddlers explore islands, deal with towboat wakes

SECOND IN A SERIES of articles on a Mississippi River canoe trip from Natchez to St. Francisville, La.

As we paddled down the Mississippi, we paused here and there to check out the sights, such as a monstrous cypress log which our guide, John Ruskey, clambered onto, and a creek flowing into the woods through fields of yellow rocket wildflowers where we all explored.

Exploring is a big part of the fun in canoeing the Mississippi River.



LEATHER BRITCHES

ERNEST HERNDON

Ruskey pointed out features of interest like the Ellis Cliffs and St. Catherine Creek National Wildlife Refuge.

The river turned flat calm. Ruskey estimated that 75 percent of the time the Mississippi River is benign. Other times it can be extreme, so it pays to be prepared.

Two days before I joined the group, violent storms swept across the river south of Vicksburg, catching Ruskey and his crew a mile from their intended campsite. The wind swung the 30-foot canoe sideways and pushed it well off course before the paddlers regained control. A man with them in a sea kayak sprained his thumb and had to bail out of his boat.

Everyone got to shore in a cold, driving rain. They got a fire going and were soon warm and cozy.

Ruskey said the biggest practical threat on the river is sunburn. He recalled a German client who suffered heat exhaustion when he ignored Ruskey's advice to rest in the shade on a broiling summer day.

We pulled over at a small cove on an island to make camp. In lower water there would be a mile-wide sandbar here, but now it lay under cold brown water.

There was plenty of dry ground, however. Dewberry vines blanketed the sandy soil among groves of trees. Wild hog wallows, trails and tracks were everywhere. Geese honked at us for disturbing their sanctuary.

The crew quickly built a fire and set up the camp kitchen, a huge metal box that opened out into a cupboard. Chris "Wolfie" Staudinger cooked up a pot of rice and a veggie stir-fry that made me think of Thai cuisine, all cooked in cast-iron pots on the fire.

Afterward, several of us walked across the island to watch the sunset from a sandy point. The sky changed from orange to rose-pink as a disgruntled flock of geese floated in midriver waiting for us to leave.

We eventually obliged them and returned to sit around the fire drinking ginger tea. Wolfie made it by slicing up a whole ginger root into an enamel kettle and boiling it for a while. For the rest of the trip he left the root in there, replenishing it with hot water as needed. It was especially good with honey.

We swapped outdoor stories as a beaver slapped the water offshore, expressing its own displeasure at our presence. It seems wildlife also believe in property rights.

Mockingbirds awakened me from a cottonwood tree beside my tent. A fire was already kindled. Beside it stood kettles of coffee, ginger tea and hot water.

Ruskey played and sang Delta blues on a guitar while the crew cooked up a giant



John Ruskey mans his 'river office,' above. Below is a viewof the Mississippi River from the author's tent.



'It struck something so deep within me I can't seem to divert my attention from it. It's made me happier than any other landscape.'

John Ruskey
Mississippi River guide

tled in Clarksdale and opened Quapaw Canoe Co.

"It struck something so deep within me I can't seem to divert my attention from it," Ruskey said of the Mississippi. "It's made me happier than any other landscape."

He went on to become an internationally recognized authority on Mississippi River paddling and has been featured in National Geographic, Outside and Readers Digest magazines, among many others. He's formed a nonprofit organization, the Lower Mississippi River Foundation, to promote and preserve the river, and hosts a student apprenticeship program known as the Mighty Quapaws. He has taught workshops on building dugout canoes as far away as Washington State. He's written articles, blogs, and a book about his Missouri River trip. And now he's hard at work on the River Gator website, charting the Mississippi from St. Louis to the Gulf.

It seemed odd that Ruskey was putting so much effort into a project that he makes freely accessible to the public.

"It's in the spirit of the river," he explained. "It's our river. It doesn't belong to anyone."

Elliott and his passengers Josh and Christie Hall left us at Waterproof, La., since they had an appointment to keep. Our 30-foot wooden canoe, the Grasshopper, drifted on.

To our east, bald eagles circled. Ruskey and his crew were adept at spotting any form of wildlife — beaver, hog, osprey, deer — or unusual feature of the terrain or forest.

We passed the mouth of the Homochitto River, but a towboat between us and it kept us from venturing up it. After lunch we rounded Jackson Point. This felt like home territory for me now.

We stopped at a high grassy knoll to camp. Ruskey set up his "river office" — solar-powered laptop computer, maps, camera. He wasn't just sightseeing but carefully recording every feature of the river for his River Gator project.

Brax Barden brought back the intact skeleton of an 8-point buck, probably wounded during hunting season and never found.

While supper cooked, I sat on the bank over the river basking in the cool afternoon air, the sounds of birdsong and rushing water, the scents of woodsmoke and wildflowers, the pale sunlight shining through thin gray cloud. Logs drifted by, fish stirred the wa-



Towboats push barges against the current in the Mississippi River. Below, after-noon sunshine brightens trees beneath a stormy sky.



ter, and towboats glided past in the distance.

I heard a splash as Ruskey jumped in the river. He swims in it daily, and has swum across the whole thing more than once. He even takes his 6-year-old daughter, Emma Lou, on these trips, and she, too, loves to swim in the river.

We ate spaghetti and meatballs and chatted by the fire. I fell asleep to the splash of the river where the current met the eddy line 150 yards offshore.

Friday was going to be a big day for me personally because we would be floating past areas that I have covered for this newspaper for 35-plus years. Usually I drive to those areas from the east. Now I would be canoeing past them on the west side.

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NEXT: Familiar territory.

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