

A Trailer-Able Boat—90 Days—and 1,600 Miles of River Boating

By BoatU.S. Trailing Club Member **John Gray**



The Laurie Ann (ITALICS) at a day use dock in Kingston, Tennessee on the Clinch River before heading out for a trip on Watts Bar Lake and the Tenn-Tom Waterway. Photo courtesy of John Gray. The Great Loop covers 7,000 miles in total but most boaters do parts of the loop at a time.

When does a trip officially start? Does it begin when you leave the driveway or pull away from the dock? In the case of our doing a 90-day trip that would include trailering and boating down the Mississippi River, Tennessee River and Tenn-Tom Waterway in our Ranger 25 Tug, the Laurie Ann, the trip would begin months prior with the planning and working the lists. In addition to the river trip, the boat would be towed from its home in Seattle to launch in Iowa and then brought home again from Mobile, Alabama.

We read about America's longest inland boat trip, the Great Circle Loop, that includes the Midwest river system, the Intercoastal Waterway, the canals and the Great Lakes. This is a 6,000-mile adventure that can take months or years to accomplish. Most "Loopers," as these

boaters are called, do the trip in 30-to-50 foot trawlers. Our intention was to do one portion of the Great Circle Loop and to learn if it can be done in a 25-foot trailerable boat.

The answer: Absolutely!

The river trip began after a seven-day road trip from Seattle to Iowa, where the boat was used as an RV to camp in parks and campgrounds. The boat's electrical system was plugged into the campground's system with an adapter and the boat's head and holding tank were avoided. The boat attracted visitors in the campground with the question, "Where are you going?"

Green Gables Marina in LeClaire, Iowa was the selected launch point because of its proximity to Interstate 80 and their enthusiasm to watch over the truck and trailer during the 90-day trip.



As 20-year veterans of boating in Puget Sound, we listened carefully to the local boaters about how to read the river for shoals, how to talk to the lockmasters and towboat captains and the most important remainder: Stay between the red and green buoys.

There was new terminology to learn from saltwater boating to river boating: "Pools" are the lakes formed by the dams, "wing dams" are often underwater walls of rock, jutting out from the shore to channel the river current, "lateral dams" are also underwater walls but are parallel to the shore, and towboat captains will speak about passing on the "one whistle" or the "two whistle."

Did You Know?

At the headwaters of the Mississippi, the average surface speed of the water is near 1.2 miles per hour — roughly one-third as fast as people walk. At New Orleans, the speed of the river is three miles per hour.

Whereas Puget Sound's depth is nearly always in double or triple digits, the river's depth is maintained at a minimum of nine feet. This river trip proved to be the tamest boating that we have ever done with no tidal swing, virtually no current except just downstream of a dam, and the only waves were from the big fast cruisers.

In four days, the Laurie Ann cruised 245 miles down the Mississippi River to St. Louis at nine miles an hour with a one-knot river current—fast enough to cover 30 to 70 miles a day and yet slow enough to enjoy the scenery while burning diesel at the rate of five miles to the gallon.

There were almost no opportunities to anchor on the Mississippi River and though the availability of gasoline was plentiful, getting diesel took planning and sometimes required calling ahead for a fuel truck. Nights were spent at Fairport Landing, Iowa; Fort Madison, Iowa; Hannibal, Missouri and St. Charles, Missouri.

Hurricane Ike came over us as we were docked at Port Charles



The *Laurie Ann* going through the Wilson Lock and Dam on the Tennessee River. Once on the Tenn-Tom Waterway, there are 10 locks to pass on the way to Mobile Bay. Photo courtesy of Laurie Gray.

LeClaire, we did not know if we would ever need the truck/trailer again. We talked about moving it as we went downstream but did not make any plans to do so. When the river was closed to pleasure craft in St. Louis, we turned around and went upstream (against a huge current caused by the flood) and stopped at the closest marina, in Alton, Illinois. On that eight-mile trip, we made the decision to rent a car in Alton and drive the four hours to LeClaire and return. Enterprise had a great 24-hour rental rate. So, the timing went like this on that day: left St. Charles Marina at 8 a.m., got turned back at the Chain of Locks Lock and Dam at 1 p.m., arrived in Alton at 2 p.m., rented a car in Alton at 4 p.m., and arrived in LeClaire at 9 p.m. We spent the night at a motel and the next day arrived in Alton at 11 a.m., pulled the boat at noon just as the ramp was closed by the city workers (they enjoyed watching our show), arrived in Paducah, Kentucky at 5 p.m., spent the night in an RV park on the boat and launched at Kentucky Lake at 9 a.m.

Doing this saved a week of being stranded at a marina and another week of motoring the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers.

For the next 45 days, we explored nearly 900 miles of the Tennessee River through the states of Kentucky, Tennessee and Alabama. There are great anchorages on the river that are found in guidebooks and by conversations with other Loopers. The friendliness and assistance offered by Loopers were invaluable and many are members of the America's Great Loop Cruisers Association (AGLCA) and are identified by their burgee.

The *Laurie Ann* stopped at marinas every three to four days for fuel, water or provisions. It was also an opportunity to tour the local community and sample the local flavors. Extra days were spent in Chattanooga, Tennessee a city that is especially boater-friendly with excellent walking and bike trails and services very close to the marinas.

The marinas at Pebble Isle, Tennessee; Grand Harbor, Tennessee; Joe Wheeler, Alabama; Goose

Pond, Alabama; and Shady Grove, Tennessee provided especially wonderful customer service with information, sometimes a courtesy vehicle and recommendations for restaurants and services.

Of the 37 locks and dams encountered, the tallest were at Wilson and Wheeler Locks on the Tennessee River with each lifting nearly 10 stories. Lockmasters are typically very helpful and will provide instructions on how to use the locks. "Locking down" or descending from one pool to another was far easier on the boat than the turbulence caused when a lock filled with water. Effectively tying a smaller boat to the lock wall to avoid damage is an essential skill that needs to be learned before using a lock.

Cruising in a smaller boat afforded more anchoring and docking opportunities than larger boats had. We anchored in small and shallower coves using a stern-tie technique that is common in Puget Sound and took short cuts through islands marked for small boats. There are many out-of-the-way public docks for launching and day use that are too long for the bigger cruisers on the Loop.

The next chapter of this adventure was the 10 days and nearly 450 miles of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway from near Pickwick Dam to Mobile Bay, Alabama. This route is a combination of a long man-



A tugboat and barge is a common sight for "Loopers." This one passed *The Laurie Ann* on the Mississippi. It's important to establish VHF contact with pilots to determine their preferred course. Photo courtesy of Laurie Gray.

made channel and the Tombigbee and Black Warrior Rivers. This is a very rural area with limited places to anchor and few marinas, but the countryside is beautiful and the people are friendly and helpful.

There are 12 locks and dams to experience; the first six are easily done in one day because the lockmasters of each coordinate the transit of the boaters as a group. Therefore, whether the boater is going eight or 38 miles per hour, everyone in the group is going to travel together.

The advantage of having a tow vehicle nearby was doing side trips.

We did trips to St. Louis, Nashville, Shiloh National Battlefield Park, Columbus, Mississippi and Gulf Shores, Alabama. These side trips enriched the experience of seeing more than just what the river offers.

The *Laurie Ann* did this installment of the Great Circle Loop over 63 days covering 1,600 miles of rivers. Our total cost averaged about \$100 a day which is less than half of what the larger boats spend to experience one of our great boating opportunities. The Great Circle Loop is not only attainable for trailerable boats, the experience is incredible. 🚤

4 THINGS Not to Miss:

On the Mississippi River:

1. Hannibal, Missouri the childhood home of Mark Twain with easy walking tours and nice museums
2. Alton, Illinois for a boater friendly combination of a nice marina, walk-able downtown, shopping and casino
3. On the Tennessee River—Chattanooga, Tennessee, a beautiful, boater-friendly city with a wonderful aquarium, art museum and nice downtown on the riverfront. Walking and biking trails follows and crosses the river.
4. On the Tennessee—Tombigbee Waterway—Beville Lock and Dam has a very nice visitor center and a day-use dock for boats under 25 feet.

When on the River...

Getting instructions and directions from a towboat captain is always done on the VHF radio and on the specific channel for commercial craft in that region. On the rivers, that is either Channel 13 or sometimes Channel 10. The pleasure craft typically starts the radio conversation by hailing the towboat by location on the river and direction ("down bound" or "up bound"). If the name of the towboat is known, prudent skippers of pleasure craft will be scanning the commercial vessel radio frequency and will pick up on the names of the craft in their area, that is always better and signifies that the pleasure craft skipper is more knowledgeable and aware.

The towboat captain will give the instruction on passing and are pleased to do so because they want

predictability of what the pleasure craft is going to do. When overtaking—that is, both vessels are heading the same way—"See you on the one whistle" means to overtake on his starboard side (your port side). "See you on the two whistle" means to overtake on his port side (your starboard side).

When passing—that is, vessels going in opposite directions—"See you on the one whistle" means pass port side to port side. "See you on the two whistle" means to pass starboard side to starboard side.

Skippers then confirm the instruction over the radio with the captain by repeating it. We had these instructions written down and taped near the radio so we could remember them.