

Cruising on the Hartford Belle

By DAVE MORAN

Special to courant.com

July 20, 2007

The Hartford Belle, an excursion boat that takes passengers on a leisurely, relaxing 90-minute narrated sightseeing tour of the Connecticut River, provides the perfect opportunity to cool off and calm down on the water.

The day I cruised on the Belle was hot and muggy, but the sky was overcast and gray, and only seemed to grow darker and more foreboding as the boat pulled away from the dock. I was worried that the sky would open up at any moment and drench us all, or that my afternoon sightseeing excursion would be marred by dark clouds and a leaden horizon.

It was going to take one mighty calming boat ride indeed (and possibly a trip aft, to the bar area in the stern of the boat that I'd been eyeing since I stepped on board) to set me right again.

Happily, my fears turned out to be unfounded. The weather more than held out, even cleared some, for the duration of our trip, while the gentle, rhythmic rocking of the Belle seemed to cause all my qualms and uncertainties to drop away.

The friendly crew of the Belle beseeches all passengers to "leave your cares behind at the dock!" And they just might be on to something.

There is something so indescribably peaceful about being on the water. I admit that I zoned out a little as we cruised upriver past the blue dome of the Colt Building and under the Founders Bridge, where ranks of fishermen stood on the shore, calling and waving greetings to us as we passed. It might not have been the mighty Mississippi, but I got the same feeling that afternoon as I did the first time I read "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" back in high school. This was a different part of Connecticut's capital city, even a different aspect of life, than I was used to seeing.

Our captain was busy explaining over the PA system the significance of many of the landmarks we passed, but I wasn't listening. I was content just to be out on the water, watching the scenery slowly go by as a cooling breeze off the water provided a much-needed respite to that day's stifling heat.

We then headed downriver, toward Wethersfield Cove and eventually back toward Charter Oak Landing.

I was surprised when we made approached the dock because it seemed as if we'd just pulled away from it moments before--but I was even more surprised when I looked down at my watch and saw that a full hour and a half had elapsed. And that I hadn't even needed to stop off at the bar...

Oh well, maybe next time.

The Hartford Belle departs from Charter Oak Landing Wednesdays through Sundays at 1 p.m., 3 p.m. and 5:15 p.m. The 5:15 p.m. cruise, where beer, wine, cocktails, sodas and snacks are available for purchase, also docks at Mortensen Riverfront Plaza at 5:30 p.m. to pick up passengers. The cost is \$17 for adults, \$16 for seniors, and \$9 for children. There is also a 45-minute "brown-bag" lunch cruise on Thursdays at noon, but that departs solely from Mortensen Riverfront Plaza downtown. The Hartford Belle's summer schedule runs from late June to early September, with a truncated fall schedule continuing from there until the end of October.

More information about Hartford Belle cruises can be found on its website, www.hartfordbelle.com, or by calling (860) 665-9428.