

Kayakers in the wake!

Romance, great food, history combine aboard Columbia Gorge sternwheeler

Story and photos by Tracy Beard

Each year thousands of people flock to view the Columbia River Gorge. Tour buses filled with sightseers travel I-84, hikers traipse up and down trails along the hillsides and boats float back and forth along the waterway. I have hiked many of the gorge trails, and visited most of the waterfalls by car. In July, my husband Steve and I viewed the river and savored dinner aboard the Columbia Gorge Sternwheeler. Cruising on the Sternwheeler is a fun, relaxing and educational way to see the area.

The Columbia Gorge Sternwheeler and four other vessels are run by American Waterways, Inc. (AWI). AWI is also known as Portland Spirit Cruises, which is named after their flagship yacht the Portland Spirit. AWI is a locally owned and operated family/employee business founded in 1991. The company aimed to be the first dinner boat to give each party its own private table, live entertainment and fresh cuisine prepared aboard each ship. Providing this level of service was no simple feat in 1994, but it was AWI's mission to deliver excellence in river dining. And they did it.

The Columbia Gorge Sternwheeler was built in 1982 and launched in 1983, and in 2006 AWI entered into a long-term contract to operate the vessel in and out of Cascade Locks, Oregon. Between the years 2007 and 2015, the company invested additional funds into this division of the business and added the Locks Waterfront Grill, located adjacent to the Sternwheeler's dock.

Steve and I boarded the Sternwheeler on a glorious summer evening in July. The ship was built to replicate the Bailey Gatzert, a famous sternwheel steamboat that ran up and down the Columbia River and Puget Sound from the 1890s to the 1920s. We boarded at 5:30pm and were photographed and escorted to our private dining table on the second floor next to a window. Once seated, our server, Alaya, asked if we wanted a cocktail. Both the second and third



The Dalles. Delicious focaccia bread arrived at the table. I know it was delicious because I went to take photos for a few minutes and when I returned, only one of the five pieces remained. Although I did get to eat one piece, Steve enjoyed the bread immensely. As we continued up the river, a server delivered salad plates topped with mixed greens, cucumber slices, grated carrot and a yummy lemon basil dressing. Alaya approached the table and asked which of the four entrée choices

we would prefer.

We had not traveled far when the captain announced we were turning about. Within a few minutes, we were moving back toward the Bridge of the Gods just outside of Cascade Locks. Over the loudspeaker, the captain shared several morsels of history surrounding the river. We passed docks where the Native Americans fish with large hoop nets. We learned about the seven miles of rapids that forced Lewis and Clark to portage their boats and supplies. The captain explained how the dams worked and how the rapids have now disappeared due to higher water levels. He described how once a natural bridge was formed across the river that is now replaced by the Bridge of the Gods.

Dinner arrived and I feasted on herb-roasted beef tenderloin with a rich demi-glace, roasted red potatoes, broccolini and carrots. Steve enjoyed baked Columbia River steelhead topped with fresh gremolata and paired with a medley of five grains and a mix of asparagus, yellow squash, red onion and red bell pepper. Both dishes were well prepared and appetizing.

After our entrees, we ventured out on deck to take in more scenery. The captain had turned the ship around again, and we were headed back toward the dock. The light breeze was invigorating, and we made our way to the top deck for a better view. We walked to the back of the ship to take photos of the paddlewheel and were shocked to see two single and



one double kayak surfing the waves created by the wheel. The riders put their paddles in the water to stay within the wake, and they matched our speed. It was fascinating to watch. The nose of each kayak was underwater, and the rear was raised up

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decks boast well-stocked bars. Steve opted for the Captain's Manhattan, a libation made from Maker's Mark bourbon, sweet vermouth and a dash of bitters. I ordered the Portland Mule made with Portland potato vodka, muddled lime and ginger beer served in a classic copper mug. Both drinks were tasty and refreshing.

Just a few moments after 6:00pm, the vessel pulled away from the dock. Powered by a magnificent red paddlewheel, we cruised upriver toward

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Sternwheeler *cont from 11*

on the following wave. It looked like a ton of fun, but I don't think I would want to paddle back after the exhilarating ride because they followed in tow for quite a distance.



Back inside, a rich and decadent cheese-cake topped with a berry sauce awaited us. Diners can choose from three other desserts and pay a nominal fee for one of those offerings; but Steve and I both love cheesecake, so there was no need to make another selection.

We pulled up to the dock in Cascade Locks at 7:54 p.m., and the gangway opened just after

8:00 p.m. It was a perfect evening and a delightful way to view the gorge.

Portland Spirit Cruises has many options. The downtown Portland Spirit offers lunch, dinner, brunch and sightseeing cruises amongst other festive trips. Bookings are also available for private events on either the Willamette Star or Crystal Dolphin yachts.

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Ads removed for Archival purposes

If You Go: Follow Tracy's footsteps onto the Sternwheeler and savor a brunch, dinner or sightseeing cruise with a fantastic new perspective of the Columbia River.

Operating in Cascade Locks, Oregon May-October; in Portland Nov-April.

Sunset Dinner Cruise from \$60

Champagne Brunch Cruise from \$56

Landmarks of the Gorge Cruise from \$98

Sightseeing Cruises from \$28

For more information: 503-224-3900

www.portlandspirit.com/sternwheeler.php



courtesy photo



By Tracy Beard

PROVISIONS

ALONG THE TRAIL

Grilled Asparagus Cobb Salad

3 large eggs
5 Tbl extra virgin olive oil
1 ¼ tsp white wine vinegar
¼ tsp Dijon mustard
¼ tsp sugar
Salt and pepper to taste
½ tsp chopped garlic
½ Tbl chopped chives
½ Tbl chopped parsley
1 lb. large trimmed asparagus
2 heads chopped bib lettuce
4 slices prosciutto
1 chopped avocado
3 oz. crumbled gorgonzola

Cover eggs with water in a small saucepan. Bring to a gentle boil and boil 10 more minutes. Drain and place in cold water. Peel and quarter once cooled.

Mix 3- ½ Tbl. oil with vinegar, Dijon, sugar, salt, pepper, garlic, chives and parsley. Whisk until emulsified.

Drizzle asparagus with remaining oil and grill on hot BBQ until crisp-tender.

Place parchment paper on an old cookie sheet. Lay prosciutto on the parchment. Cover with an additional piece of parchment and top with another cookie sheet or pie pan (something that will keep the prosciutto flat). Place prosciutto and pan on the grill. Check often. Once the prosciutto begins to crisp, remove top pan and parchment. Flip prosciutto over with tongs and cook until crisp. Serves 3

Assemble salad for a picnic or decorate on a plate. Drizzle with dressing.



Tortellini Caprese

24 fresh or frozen cheese tortellini
12 sweet grape cherry tomatoes
24 small basil leaves or 12 large ones torn in half
24 toothpicks
¼ cup Olive Garden or your favorite Italian dressing

Place tortellini in boiling water and cook according to package directions until al dente. Place cooked tortellini in cold water. Drain when cooled.

Wash and cut grape tomatoes in half width-wise. Wash basil leaves.

Skewer one basil leaf followed by one tortellini and half of one grape tomato. Place on a platter or in a container to take on a picnic. Drizzle with dressing. Keep refrigerated until serving.