



BARGING THE OHIO

An unlikely cruise through America's backyard • by Jonathan Lerner

I love to travel on water, because I love the “sea change.” That’s the subtle shift in spirit that takes over on a voyage by ship. I used to think that a sea change could occur only on an ocean crossing, where the utterly empty vistas cleanse the mind. But I found otherwise last October on a barge cruise of the Ohio River, during which I was never actually farther from shore than I could swim.

The seven-night excursion began in Cincinnati and headed upriver, stopping at Ripley, Ohio; Maysville, Kentucky; and Huntington, West Virginia, where it turned around and put in at Portsmouth, Ohio, before returning to Cincinnati. This isn’t breathtaking country, but given how long-settled and industrialized the Ohio valley is, the landscape was surprisingly unspoiled—low wooded ridges that were turning fiery colors at the time.

The Ohio was our country’s earliest thoroughfare to settlements west of the Appalachians, so the old river ports where we stopped were all rich in historic architecture and artifacts. Though

trains and trucks have long since taken over the hauling of most cargo, we passed numerous barges—huge, flat things that move with an imperturbable old-fashioned grace. It was the powerful feel of the past from the river traffic and the river towns—a temporal disconnection, rather than a spatial one—that took me out of myself and allowed me to experience that sea change.

Until recently, the only way to travel the rivers of America’s midland was on the paddle-wheel liners of the Delta Queen Steamboat Co., riverborne wedding cakes with historical frills such as calliopes and ersatz Tiffany lamps. But now there’s *(continued on page 157)*

The River Explorer, America’s first cruise barge.

RIVERBARGE EXCURSIONS