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Luxury living on the water

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By CHRIS NICHOLS

When Esther Zierau and her family began renting houseboats two decades ago, the accommodations amounted to pontoons, bunk beds and maybe a small radio.

More and more, however, much of the Mother Lode's fleet of houseboats has morphed into an armada of floating mansions — complete with private staterooms, spas, stereo systems, DVD players, video games, modern appliances and hefty rental costs.

"I'd take a bare bones boat and give me a price I can afford for the week," said Zierau, a middle school secretary from Pleasanton, as she, her son, daughter and several grandchildren loaded supplies onto the Eclipse, a 56-foot-long luxury houseboat at New Melones Lake Marina.

For five days on the Eclipse, Zierau and her family will pay nearly \$4,800, about six times what they paid 20 years ago, Zierau said.

"It doesn't stop us from coming but the price is prohibitive," said Zierau, who said her family splits the cost of their annual summertime vacation and decided this year to houseboat during the week, when rates are lower.

Employees at several foothill marinas and a representative for a national houseboat rental firm say it's customers who demand more amenities — like optional trash compactors, satellite televisions and intercoms between upper and lower decks.

"It's just a part of our culture, it's how we've evolved," said Darla



Click this picture to view a larger image.

The Escapade is the largest and most luxurious houseboat available for rent at the New Melones Lake Marina.

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Cook, vice president of public relations for Forever Resorts, an Arizona-based company that rents houseboats on Don Pedro and Moccasin reservoirs.

Staff members at several marinas said they've already booked many of their high-end houseboats for the entire summer, with only a few weekends available.

Large families, private businesses and church groups make up most of their business, they said.

More mansion than boat, the 70-foot Millennium is the newest addition to the houseboat fleet at the Moccasin Point and Lake Don Pedro marinas. A five-day, midweek trip on that craft costs nearly \$5,300 but comes with amenities unimaginable when Zierau's family began puttering away summers on area reservoirs.

"If they want all the bells and whistles, we recommend the Millennium," Cook said.

Walt Poole, general manager at Lake Don Pedro Marina, said rentals at his marina are geared toward well-off customers.

While not all adults may need a Sony Playstation or DVD player, they like having the electronic toys for their children, Poole said.

Keith Miller, a member of the Pleasanton family boarding the Eclipse yesterday, said his 5-year-old daughter, Danica, would probably enjoy having a TV on the boat.

But he said there were other options, like a free wireless Internet connection, provided by the Lake New Melones Marina that were "just too much."

"I like the fact that you have a fridge ... you probably don't need two," Miller said, surveying the inside of the vessel. "You need the microwaves. The shower is a little useless."

Even with the myriad luxury items on board today's houseboats, several families yesterday said the time they spend together will be more valuable than any gadget.

Miller said his family brought several board games, like Yatzee and Uno, and would try to keep the television turned off.

One member of another family at the New Melones marina yesterday, Lori Howe of San Jose, said her family would look for simple ways to have fun on the water.

With three dogs, a cluster of fishing poles and a few favorite songs, she said her family would enjoy their trip, no matter the amenities on the boat.

"We could definitely do without those (amenities)," Howe said, moments before boarding an Eclipse. "We've been out camping with

nothing but a campfire and a deck of cards and we've been happy."

Contact Chris Nichols at cnichols@uniondemocrat.com or 588-4585.



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