

Houseboat has luxury view of comet

By Mike Dunbar

Bee team leader

If you haven't picked your spot for comet watching yet, here's one you might consider — if you don't mind a few hundred dollars leaving vapor trails as they exit your wallet:

New Melones Lake. Atop a houseboat. In a hot tub.

Sound good?

The folks in tourist-starved Calaveras County hope it does.

New Melones Lake Marina has three 54-foot luxury houseboats — they sleep 14, including four in the "penthouse" on the top deck — that through May 20 rent for \$2,445 a week. If all you want is a couple of days of comet watching, a weekend aboard a luxury liner goes for \$1,320, or \$1,395 for four mid-week nights, said Teri Amstutz, who handles reservations. There are lesser boats available

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at a lower price — all, obviously, include the comet. "This is one of the most spectacular comets of the century," said Jose Olivarez, the astronomy direc-

tor at Chabot Observatory and Science Center in Oakland. The next couple of weeks could provide the best views.

"The climax of Comet Hale-Bopp's performance should extend through the moonlight-free period from March 26th to about April 11th," Sky & Telescope magazine wrote.

Hale-Bopp is around five times bigger than Halley's Comet — the most famous comet to visit planet Earth. Comet Hale-Bopp's last visit was around 4,000 years ago; it's next will be an estimated 2,400 years hence.

It can be seen from just about anywhere for about 90 minutes after sunset or just before sunrise.

On the lake, there are no city lights to dim the view. Even the moon will soon be disappearing

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from the night sky.

Watching over water, with an often-spectacular sunset serving as showy warm-up act, might just be the most dramatic view of the comet around.

"First you have all those oranges, pinks and purples with the mountains in the background," said marketing representative Teri Rogers. "Then, as soon as it gets dark, the comet's there in that wide-open sky. It's incredible."

What do you get for \$1,320? Besides the penthouse and hot tub, there are two staterooms, a

flying bridge, two bathrooms, two refrigerators, a complete kitchen (with all utensils), a slide off the top deck, a fueling-bay for personal watercraft (such as a Jet Ski), a dishwasher, a microwave and a TV with VCR.

But say your comet-watching needs aren't quite so elaborate.

In fact, let's say you want to search for Hale-Bopp the modern way — in cyberspace. Visalia's Central Valley Christian High School has been getting quite a few "hits" on its comet page. Even the Miami Museum of Science and the European Space Organization have paid

visits, said webmaster-science teacher Bill Drennon.

The page helps people pinpoint viewing times and directions from anywhere in the Central Valley. The easiest way to access the page is to call up <http://www.cvc.org> and use the hot link to the comet page.

Speaking of directions, the New York Institute of Photography (<http://www.nyip.com>) has a site that provides instructions on how to take photos.

The Institute tells visitors not to worry about buying or borrowing fancy equipment. A regular single-lens reflex camera

works fine, using a normal (50 millimeter) lens. A tripod for stability is a must, however.

Use a "fast" film, either Fuji Super-G 800 or Kodak Pro 400 PPF. Open the lens to the widest setting and focus on infinity.

Find the comet in the viewfinder and take a series of shots varying the exposure from 20 seconds to 1 minute.

One last tip: Turn the camera sideways so the picture will be vertical.

Now, all you've got to do is make sure that camera doesn't slip off the deck and fall into the lake . . . or the hot tub.