

**California Weekend Getaways**  
**Week of June 13, 2004**  
**Column No. 04-02**

## **Houseboats: You feel like a king**

**By CARY ORDWAY**

One never forgets the first time – on a houseboat, that is. It has to be considered one of life's precious moments when you come on board your own 40-foot boat, crank up those growly engines and cast off for parts unknown.

It's almost like you want to run up to the front of the boat, position your arms like wings and yell out something like "I'm the king of the...." – well you get the idea.

Having graduated later to driving yachts in Puget Sound, we realize now our houseboating experience was a relatively simple, low-risk way to sample big boating. There is a minimum of fuss, complete on-the-spot training and, for crying out loud, the marina operators will even take your boat in and out of the docking area if you still feel a little uneasy about having anything near your boat other than water.

Back when we began houseboating in the mid-80's, we used to refer to the experience as driving your RV on the water. Today, with a trend toward larger boats and much more luxury, it's more like taking your whole house on the water. Who would have thought they would start building hot tubs, home theaters, satellite TV and radio, and multiple bathrooms (critically important, trust me) into boats you can park anywhere on the lake or river?

Of course all those distractions come in handy when you load up the boat -- as most people do -- with friends, relatives and anyone who will pay a few bucks to offset the cost of renting your boat. Sometimes as many as 14 people may be staying on a boat and, as one marina operator explained, not all such unions stand the strain of a week in close quarters:

"It doesn't happen very often," says Yvonne Cantrell of Houseboats.com, "but we have seen a few boats come back early and drop some of their passengers off."

Moral of the story: Choose your boatmates carefully. The kids will be fine because they'll spend all their time in the water anyway. The wife or husband's okay, too. Close friends usually are fine if you've pre-qualified them with another overnight trip. Inlaws may be questionable.

The burning question for a lot of people is whether they need boating experience to go houseboating. A lot of houseboaters have experience with small boats but about 30 percent have no boating experience at all. However, customer surveys show that a high percentage of those non-boaters have brought along someone with boating experience.

(Please refer to choosing boatmates above: if the inlaws boat, they have permission to come aboard).

The other important question, of course, is why? It may be a lot simpler – and cheaper -- just to pack up a tent or two and park you and your family by a lake someplace for a week. But houseboating is special. The houseboating experience is part travel, part leisure and part adventure because the lake or Delta always looks a little different from the next camp spot. Each place you beach your boat you'll find a completely different place to explore with entirely new memories and photo opportunities.

Getting back to the RV analogy, the allure of houseboating really is similar. The freedom of choosing a different port of call each night – or several in any given day – brings spice and variety to your vacation experience. And driving that big boat through those waterways and along those shorelines is like playing ferryboat captain when you were a kid. The water activities are endless – especially if you bring your ski boat or rent one from the marina – while hiking and exploring also are a big part of your houseboat vacation. And, of course the non-stop barbecues put those pounds back on just as fast as your many activities will burn them off.

All this fun does have a price tag and that price can vary tremendously by season, the area you're visiting, size of boat and the number of people on your trip. Not counting fuel costs, and figured at maximum occupancy, Cantrell says the prices range between \$21 per person per night for a six-person boat during winter months on the Delta to \$71 per person per night for a large fully-equipped 14-passenger boat that is booked for summer on Shasta Lake.

In California, there are numerous lakes and waterways where you can find houseboat rentals, but a larger selection of marinas can be found at Shasta Lake, Trinity Lake, New Malones, Lake McClure, Don Pedro Lake, and the California Delta.

### **Shasta Lake**

If you've ever driven to Oregon, you've probably driven right through the Shasta Lake area, a houseboat haven popular with visitors from all over the West Coast. The lake is surprisingly warm in the summer – 77 degrees on average. In addition to water activities such as water skiing, jet skiing and parasailing, the lake also is known for good fishing. Altogether, the lake has 375 miles of shoreline in a picturesque mountain setting.

### **Trinity Lake**

This quiet, secluded lake is located just to the west of Lake Shasta. The mountain scenery is spectacular in the Salmon-Trinity Primitive Area, which covers 283,000 acres. The lake has 145 miles of shoreline. Air temperatures can reach into the 80s and 90s while the water temperature can get up to the 80s. The fishing is great – you can catch smallmouth and largemouth bass, catfish, kokanee and rainbow and brown trout.

### **New Melones**

If you are looking for a more remote houseboat experience, New Melones is one of the state's newest lakes and is located in California's Central Sierra Gold Country. The lake was first filled in 1983 and offers 12,500 surface acres of water as well as more than 100 miles of scenic shoreline. Anglers consider New Melones one of the best for trout, bass, crappie and catfish. Wildlife is also abundant onshore.

### **Lake McClure**

Lake McClure is just downstream from the Yosemite Valley and offers 7,100 surface acres as well as more than 80 miles of scenic shoreline. Another lake known for excellent fishing, anglers catch trout, blackbass, spotted bass, crappie, bluegill and catfish. Wildlife such as eagles, heron and hawks are highly visible. Lake McClure is surrounded by the Gold Rush towns of Jamestown, Coulterville, Mariposa, Sonora and Columbia (an 1860's state historic park).

### **Don Pedro Lake**

Near Lake McClure is Don Pedro Lake, about 35 miles east of Modesto. It is the fifth largest reservoir in California and altogether boasts 13,000 surface acres. The lake is 26 miles long and features 160 miles of shoreline.

### **The California Delta**

In Central California, the California Delta attracts visitors year-round. This fresh-water system of waterways is comprised of agricultural islands that actually sit below sea level, but are protected by a system of levees. Five major rivers flow into the Delta, including the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers. One website refers to the Delta as a "Huck Finn kind of existence" with historic river towns that are little changed from the Gold Rush era. The Delta includes more than 1000 miles of waterways. There are draw-bridges that open to allow boats to pass through, and you can share the waters with ocean-going vessels, sailboats and paddle boats. The Delta boasts excellent fishing in spring and summer.

The area is easily accessed in Sacramento or Stockton – where Old Town and the Stockton Waterfront, respectively, offer visitor attractions and restaurants. Geographically, the Delta is also convenient for many San Francisco Bay area residents. It's therefore a busier place than most California houseboating options and has more than 100 marinas and waterside resorts plus 50 boat launching facilities.

### **At a Glance**

**WHERE:** In California, you'll find houseboating lakes concentrated mostly in the central and north central parts of the state. Most offer spectacular scenery, whether from the foothills or the mountain ranges of Northern California.

**WHAT:** Houseboats offer a glimpse into the world of big boating and are a great vacation option for families and those searching for something a little unusual, but still relatively close to home.

**WHEN:** The Delta offers a year-round experience, while other locations generally highlight late spring, summer and early fall. Prices are highest in the summer, lowest in winter. The spring and summer shoulder seasons offer a lower price with still-reasonable weather.

**WHY:** Houseboating is part adventure, part recreation and combines a camping-like experience with luxurious amenities.

**HOW:** There are several marinas and companies statewide that offer a variety of houseboat experiences. For an overview, go to [www.houseboats.com](http://www.houseboats.com) and [www.houseboatrentals.com](http://www.houseboatrentals.com), or do a Google search for houseboats and the location you are considering. For general information by phone, call 877-468-7326.

*(For more information on travel in California, please visit [www.californiaweekend.com](http://www.californiaweekend.com))*