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Shasta Lake caters to nautical adventurers

By Jane Daye/Special to The Reporter

Vacationers clamber onto piers nestled in a cove surrounded by tall Douglas firs. They stow the food and personal gear and shove off under cloudless blue skies.

They have come from all over the country for a remarkable vacation experience - cruising Shas Lake in a houseboat.

Approximately three hours from Vacaville off Interstate 5 is Shasta Lake, the largest man-made reservoir in California. When full, its 365-mile shoreline, with hundreds of bays and coves, exceeds that of San Francisco Bay.

Around the lake are resorts with rental cabins, trailer parks, motels and campgrounds. And there are marinas, 11 in all, 10 of which rent commercial houseboats for a few days or by the week.

Although each houseboating vacation is unique, they all have one thing in common, said Steve Barry, president of Holiday Harbor Resort and Marina.

"Once you try houseboating for just a few hours, you will be addicted," he said. "You will want to come back year after year."

For those who have never piloted a boat, but are intrigued by the idea of a houseboating vacation Barry is reassuring. "Don't be intimidated," he said, "It is as simple as turning the key."

Potential houseboaters, he added, should also know that there is virtually no seasickness on a slow-moving, stable houseboat. It's a safe vacation experience.

"Everyone keeps an eye out for everyone else - no matter what marina you are from, even for a tow in, we all help each other."

The lake is also monitored by a sheriff's patrol boat and the U.S. Forest Service.

Houseboating on Shasta Lake is a wildlife adventure, according to Barry. "You will see deer, breeding eagles, osprey, fox, the occasional cougar and even a bear or two. The highlight of your vacation is the opportunity to sit and enjoy all of the wildlife that you wouldn't see elsewhere."

Barry recommends planning ahead - like a year.

Holiday Harbor's boats are designed to sleep six to 16 people. This summer, the rate for a seven-night trip ranged from \$1690 to \$4390. There is a substantial discount for off-season rentals and shorter trips.

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"New customers tell me that they can't possibly spend seven days on a houseboat. But after trying it for two or three days, they usually come to my office and want to extend their stay," said Barry.

Some renters are so enthusiastic that they become houseboat owners.

George Thompson, 75, originally from Portland, Ore., is a regular on the lake. After years of renting houseboats, he built his own.

"I kept coming down to the lake and looking at all of the different boats," he said. "I drew up own plans and started putting it together. Now, I keep adding stuff to it." This year he added canopy on the top deck.

"I love the trees, mountains and sunshine," he said. "I read a lot, tinker and go hiking. There is always something to do on the lake. When it gets hot, I just jump in. Sometimes I spot for the waterskiers."

Jones Valley Resort is home to the newest, most upscale boat on the lake. It took a special transportation exception to bring the boat from Canada to Shasta Lake because it is 6 inches wider than those previously allowed.

"The extra half foot allowed us to put a hallway along both sides of the boat," said Michael Ha general manager of Shasta Lake Resorts which owns Jones Valley Resorts.

The boat is designed with four master suites, all with direct access to a head. It has a sunken kitchen and even a hot tub on the upper deck.

Every boat in the fleet has a slide into the water.

The resort makes every effort to make sure the houseboaters are comfortable with their craft said Han.

"Our staff will stay with you, as long as it takes... we want you to get out there to see this beautiful country."

Han suggests making a reservation as far in advance as possible and, if boats are all booked, to on a cancellation list. Rates this summer ranged from \$3100 to around \$6,000 per week.

Avid anglers would appreciate Han's private fishing hole. In a corner of his office, he has a removable panel in the floor so he can fish while working on his computer. His office sits direct over the lake which has trout, bass, salmon, catfish and sturgeon.

Sarah Cheechov, 9, of Vacaville, was at Shasta Lake recently taking a tour of different marina and their houseboats.

"I like them," she said. "They are a house on top of a boat - you can even go swimming! I would really like to go on one for vacation."

For more, contact Bonnie Sharpe at the Redding Convention & Visitors Bureau, 1-800-874-756 or visit www.visitredding.org or www.shastalake.org