

Feature Articles

Cruise the Columbia River

Time travel on the waterways of the Pacific Northwest in the wake of explorers Lewis and Clark

By Craille Maguire Gillies with Photography By Patrice Halley



"Don't be afraid to ask me anything," says Captain Pat over the roar of the diesel engine as he pulls out of Clarkston, Washington, and guns it toward the neighbouring town of Lewiston, Idaho. At the helm of a 13-metre aluminum jet boat that pumps 60 tonnes of water under its belly every minute, the captain's mission is to pilot us up the Snake River through the placid waters of incongruously named Hells Canyon. "We get some funny questions," Pat Schweiger continues, his voice projecting through a speaker system, his eyes shielded by aviator glasses. "My favourite is, 'How old is a deer when it turns into an elk?'" He pauses for effect. "We're still working on that one."



Click map to enlarge
See the National Geographic Sea Bird's route on the Columbia River. (Map: Steven Fick/Canadian Geographic).

Once a week, Beamers Hells Canyon Tours makes the 92-year-old mail run through this gorge, where bighorn sheep seem to outnumber people 10 to 1. In addition to delivering mail, Captain Pat skips about 100 sightseeing trips every year. "If you poke around here as much as I have, you'll find seashells, fossils, all sorts of weird stuff," he says as we zoom past bright red swathes of young sumac and corrugated basalt ridges. At one point, he pulls the boat close to shore to show us the faint markings of petroglyphs on an algae-covered rock face. Geologists reckon they are about 6,000 years old.

It's day three of a languid seven-day Lindblad Expeditions cruise, and we are on a side trip to a spot that even our yachtsized ship, the *National Geographic Sea Bird*, can't reach. Departing from Portland, Oregon, we are sailing 1,440 kilometres, mostly on the Columbia and Snake rivers; much of the way, we have Oregon on one side and Washington on the other, as if they're a pair of fraternal twins. Our route retraces the journey American explorers Lewis and Clark took in the early 19th century — back when the salmon numbered in the millions and these rivers were, as our on-deck naturalist, Berit Solstad, puts it, very different.

We are travelling more comfortably than Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, of course. No campfire cookouts of fried squirrel like the grub Lewis raved about in 1803. Our dinners are leisurely three-course affairs with local salmon one night, halibut another, washed down with pinot gris from the Washington vineyards we sail past. But the trip is also an education in how these rivers have changed since President Thomas Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark on the 28-month exploration that opened up the Pacific Northwest. Massive dams such as the Bonneville (made famous by early employee Woody Guthrie, who wrote songs such as "Pastures of Plenty" to promote it) transformed the Columbia from an unspoiled outback to a hydroelectric superpower, with the attendant perks and perils.

Our side excursion through the more pristine Hells Canyon makes it easier to imagine how the Columbia might have looked had the industrial era not arrived on its shoreline. It is late fall and the trees have turned fluorescent yellow. In one peaceful spot, a white-haired man in hip waders holds his fishing pole high overhead with balletic control. Occasionally we pass vacation homes, even an Arabian horse farm, but mostly the canyon is quiet and unpopulated. Were it not for the jet boat and the clicking of our digital cameras, I could picture the place as it was just after Ice Age floods carved this canyon.

"On the left we have some really interesting formations," Captain Pat announces, pulling me out of the past. Passengers swivel in their seats, cameras poised. "We call them *rocks*." They are, in fact, basalt columns formed by volcanic eruptions millions of years ago. On one such "rock," an osprey glowers down at us.

The sun was low in the sky on the Saturday afternoon two days earlier when we left the marina in Portland, and soon it was dark. We quickly reached the city's double-decker Steel Bridge, its frame etched against a charcoal sky. An Amtrak train rolled over and was gone. Cars zipped along the highway bordering the river. Briefly, there was traffic in almost every direction.

After the train passed, the bridge lifted and we slid under. All was quiet save for the ambient chatter on deck and the white noise of water as it scoured the side of the ship. A flock of Canada geese skimmed the river, flying downstream as we sailed upstream. They arced over a ridge in a line — not a V — and were gone.

For much of our journey, a dialectic formed in my mind between the industry of the river and the surrounding, almost Martian hillsides, a mottled high desert produced by volcanic flows and the crunching of tectonic plates. I had embarked with the idea of sailing into the wilderness — a naive notion since the Columbia is, in reality, a marine superhighway that feeds Oregon's biggest port. Fourteen dams span the width of its main branch. Interstate 84 runs alongside much of the cruise route. As we passed through eight locks on our way up and downstream, the natural and the manmade were rarely out of sight. On one side were hills quilted with vineyards; on the other, the neon signs of service stations and fast-food restaurants. We often travelled neck-in-neck with transport trucks until they disappeared around bends in the highway.

Before heading below deck the first morning for a buffet breakfast of eggs, sausage and pancakes, I glanced starboard and saw a handful of white wind turbines sitting like sentinels on the top of a ridge, their blades slicing through low-lying clouds. The windmills here are largely symbolic; the dams on the Columbia's main stem produce an average of 9,570 megawatts of power, more hydroelectricity than any other single waterway in North America. In the early 20th century, power-hungry aluminum factories and canneries popped up along its banks. You can see the round vat-like buildings of former maraschino cherry plants in Astoria, Oregon. These days, Google has two data centres, each the size of a football field, in The Dalles, Oregon. Computer servers, it seems, are the new aluminum.

By day four, we have made our way through Washington wine country up to Clarkston and turned around for our descent. We had passed through at least one lock overnight. I know this because I woke at 5 a.m. to the sound of metal bumping against concrete as deckhands tied the boat to buoys. I crawled back into my warm bunk in a tidy, narrow cabin and pulled up the covers.

An hour and a half later, I re-awake and discover that we are nestled in a bay, the sun round in a cloudless sky. A GPS screen in the lounge reads out our coordinates; another tiny box announces "ETA: never." It turns out to be a quirk of the satellite map, but it says something about life on a river. From the moment we embarked, time seemed to pause, giving us a sort of spatial weightlessness, even as we are in perpetual motion.

By now I have eased into the rhythm of cruising, which includes de rigueur pre-dinner cocktails and brief lectures by the onboard historian and naturalist. My mornings usually start with a double espresso while reading the news, a printout digest of the *New York Times'* top stories that comes in by satellite. Keeners go up top for a short outdoor stretching class as the sun rises over the mountains. After breakfast, cruise director Jen Martin lays out the day's schedule, which typically features an hour or two off the ship, be it kayaking in a deserted bay or driving to the infamous scablands of Washington or mountain biking into the town of Hood River, Oregon. It is a balmy, dry November and I take to tanning on the deck with a macchiato and a novel. There is no need to see as many sights as I can, like a weary tourist in a new city — the ship brings the scenery right to me, a real-time nature documentary.

At Lower Monumental Dam, however, with calm water and no tugboats in sight, we enter the lock in three Zodiacs for a close-up view, the cruise ship following behind. Onshore are grain elevators of wheat bound for Asia. We bob at the water level, says drop over 10 minutes from 164 metres to 133 metres. Two engineers peer down at us from high up and Solstad, the naturalist, drops, "We're like rubber ducks to them." When the guillotine doors of the lock lift, we are met with a spray of water as we breeze through the opening back onto the river.

The benefit of retracing our route is that on the way back we can see the scenery we had passed during the night on our journey upstream. "Take a look out the window," says Martin after we pass into a lush, wetter landscape west of the Cascade Mountains. "There's something you haven't seen in a long time. Trees."



Watch writer Craille Maguire Gillies and photographer Patrice Halley capture this story on the Columbia River.

That evening I head to the bridge to hang out with the *Sea Bird's* captain, David Kay, and his first mate, Lucy Boyce, a red-headed Alaskan who grew up on fishing boats with her father. She started as a deckhand and worked her way up the ranks. Her task this night is to navigate yet another lock, this time in a darkness so black all I can see are the blinking lights of the ship's navigational equipment and lights from the monolithic dam in front of us.

The boat clicks along at 11.8 knots, but it feels like slo-mo. Boyce's eyes flicker between instruments. "This is speedy for us," she says cheerily as John Lennon sings "Imagine" on the radio. Boyce sails the *Sea Bird* toward the famous Bonneville Dam, where the lockmaster is waiting for us. "I've got the back door open and the green banana for you," she says, "he radios. The deckhands report our position back to Boyce: 10 feet, 5 feet. Then, "You're about five feet anaerobic on now." Chief, backs up. Piloting even a small ship takes such focus that the world beyond the shoreline virtually fades out of existence, a form of active meditation.

The captain hangs back in the shadows of the bridge, quietly observing as Boyce maneuvers the ship into the lock, a small triumph for a young sailor.

"You be careful going downtown," the lockmaster says as we depart.

"Will do," Boyce replies. "We'll see you on the flipside."

We arrive in Portland before dawn on day seven, a Friday. The darkened city seems to float by us. The river is calm and quiet, but the city is already glowing with the taillights of cars and trucks moving along the bridges and highways like toys in a child's model town.

I stand on the deck and stare up at the stars. Soon it will be light, the city will wake from its slumber, we will disembark, and time will start up again.

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