

The Mississippi – Where the River Runs

By Graceann Macleod



The Mighty Mississippi runs from Minnesota all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico, and you could make up a lifetime of vacations visiting the cities along its banks. This year, when my husband and I found ourselves with a four-day travel window, we decided to trace just a short section of it, from St. Louis to Hannibal, Missouri. It was a delightful journey, full of surprises and towns that time seems to have forgotten.

St. Louis – Gateway to the West

We started our journey in the largest of the cities we would visit on this trip – St. Louis, Missouri. St. Louis has an exciting mix of history and modernity; a little something for everyone. Our immediate goal was to visit the Gateway Arch, but we made time to visit Cherokee Antique Row and to stroll along the river. On this hot but gloriously beautiful day, we started early to beat the heat, and got out our little maps in order to find the Antiques District we had read about at our hotel (a modern Holiday Inn built on the foundations and site of an historic stage stop and hospital, maintaining the original building's integrity while providing all the modern conveniences). We found Cherokee Antique Row easily enough and were immediately charmed by the historic buildings and eclectic shops lining the streets. First we visited Hammonds Books, and spent a solid hour there without even noticing the time getting away from us. I bought a couple of books and accessories, and my husband did some note-taking for future shopping. Then we got to see Ruth's Vintage Clothing and Retro 101, and I noted yet again that vintage clothing does not end up surviving long enough for we Women of Substance to enjoy. I did pacify myself with an adorable little hat. I have absolutely no place to wear it, but that didn't stop me from adding it to my collection.

Time was getting away from us, so we determined to get down to the Historic Riverfront and the Gateway Arch. Even though you can see the Arch from almost anywhere in the City, it was more difficult to get to than we thought it would be, due to the number of one-way streets that seemed to be leading away from our destination. We did finally manage to find our way in to the complex, and started our hike.



It had been a very long time since I had visited St. Louis, and at least 30 years since I had been the top of the Arch. I freely admit that when I was last there, I couldn't have cared less about what it represented or the history of its construction – I just wanted to get into the little elevator and get going!

However, I'm now ostensibly more mature, and I was able to appreciate the time and effort



that has gone into this impressive monument.

Higher and Higher

The Gateway Arch was designed by Eero Saarinen and completed in 1965, and I highly recommend the film, "Monument to a Dream," that is shown as part of your Arch Experience. It helps you understand just how complex the project was, especially for a time before computers were in wide use for such undertakings. I'm sure I was shown this film as a child, but what went over my head at the age of six fascinated me now. Also present is the Museum of Westward Expansion which, as the name implies, offers exhibits relating to exploration of the American West, concentrating on Lewis and Clark. After enjoying these offerings, we found that our timed tickets were ready to be used for the

climb to the top of the Arch, and we were quite excited to get a bird's eye view of St. Louis. We lined up for the special elevators, which are actually capsules seating four adults, for the four-minute ride to the top. The marvelous National Park Service rangers have this production down to a fine science, and provide you with interesting tidbits of information while you wait for your ride to begin.

You're the Top

Sixty-Three stories and 630 feet tall, the Arch provides views of Missouri and Illinois that can't be beat. It happened to be a beautiful clear day on our visit, so the panoramic views were stunning. Many photos were snapped as we made our way from one window to the next. I have many phobias but, thank goodness, a fear of heights isn't among them, so I was able to enjoy this experience to the full. You are allowed as much time as you wish at the top, and I believe we spent about 30-45 minutes soaking up the view. After this, we lined up for our return to terra firma via another four-minute ride in those fun and funky elevators.



After some shopping and general exploration of the complex, we headed back out into the heat to walk along the River and to relax on the benches under the trees. The Park Service has done an amazing job in making this a beautiful place to rest and enjoy the view, whether

you are standing at ground level or looking down on the World from 630 feet above.

Moving Right Along Now

We slowly made our way to the car and looked at maps to determine how best to keep the River in view as we headed to our next destination, Hannibal. We decided to stick with State Highway 79, which is part of the Great River Road scenic byway, and connects with the River at various towns. Certainly a more rustic and pleasant view than can be seen as you whiz past on the interstate. It was a gorgeous drive – not always directly on the river, but at various points you get a view that makes the whole trip worthwhile. The highlight of our journey was at Clarksville, right on the River and such a lovely place. Full of artsy boutiques and a stunning riverfront park that provided us with a resting place.

In the Heart of Twain Country

Hannibal, Missouri, where Mark Twain spent his boyhood years, has made its fortune by its luscious location and its legendary resident. As popular as Hannibal continues to be, it still manages to retain its small-town charm. As you wander the streets, you truly feel as if you have stepped back in time. We were visiting in the Autumn and many attractions tend to close by this time, but we lucked out in that the Delta Queen cruise liner had docked for the morning, so the proprietors of the buggy tours and other attractions reopened to accommodate the flock of fun-seeking cruise guests. It was an amazing thing to wake up and look out the window to find an enormous paddle-wheeler out in front of the hotel where previously there had been only River. After our breakfast, we rushed down to the waterfront to have a closer look and to make reservations for our own tour later in the afternoon.

The highlight of our visit was a trolley tour. We traveled to the park where there are panoramic views of the River, and went past several of the most interesting Hannibal sites, including Rockcliffe Mansion and the Twain Boyhood Home complex. Our guide was a marvelous lady who simply screamed “local color,” much to our delight. We loved her. After that, we took another, shorter jaunt on what is called



“The Clopper,” a horse-drawn tour. Pete the Horse is a gentle, good-natured boy (he loves carrots, and his only fear is plastic bags, we discovered) who slowly led us through the old streets, while our guide gave us a wonderful, funny talk about the history of the town. Because the Delta Queen had by now departed, we had the tour all to ourselves and it was bliss.

After a quick lunch, we had a leisurely river cruise which allowed us to sip cool drinks and sit on the deck, watching the bluffs go by while listening to the narration (which, by now, I think we could have done on our own!) It was just what we needed after a morning of what felt like having to be in one spot after another.

We had to leave the River after Hannibal, and make our way due East for another destination, but we so enjoyed being alongside, and on, the “Mighty ‘Mississip.” The history here is right on the surface – no digging required. It was lovely to escape monolithic, big-box culture and relax in towns where people smile and say hello, ask how you are and actually care about the answer. I look forward to exploring another section of the River as soon as I can.

Recommended Websites:

History of our St. Louis Hotel: <http://www.stlouissixflags.holiday-inn.com/about/history.html>

Information on Antiques Row in St. Louis: <http://www.cherokeeantiquerow.net/>

Gateway Arch <http://www.gatewayarch.com/Arch/index.aspx>

Clarksville, MO <http://www.clarksvillemo.us/>

Hannibal, MO <http://www.visithannibal.com/>