

TRAVEL

PROWLING
THE
CALIFORNIA
DELTA
REVEALS A
DELICIOUS
KIND OF TIME
WARP

LAZY DOES IT

By Janet Fullwood * Bee Travel Editor

Dave Hines was conducting the grand tour by seaplane. We had just flown over this mansion that looked like a palace in the Tules when he banked the little Cessna to starboard and gestured to the view that came up under the wing.

There, 700 feet below us, a flock of snow geese were sitting on a lake, enjoying a rest stop on their spring migration. The plane's shadow raced over them, swift as a raptor, and the birds responded on reflex, rising as one and flying away in a happening, synchronized cloud.

DELTA VIEWS

The first of two parts



There are two ways to explore the 350-square-mile Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta: by road and by water.

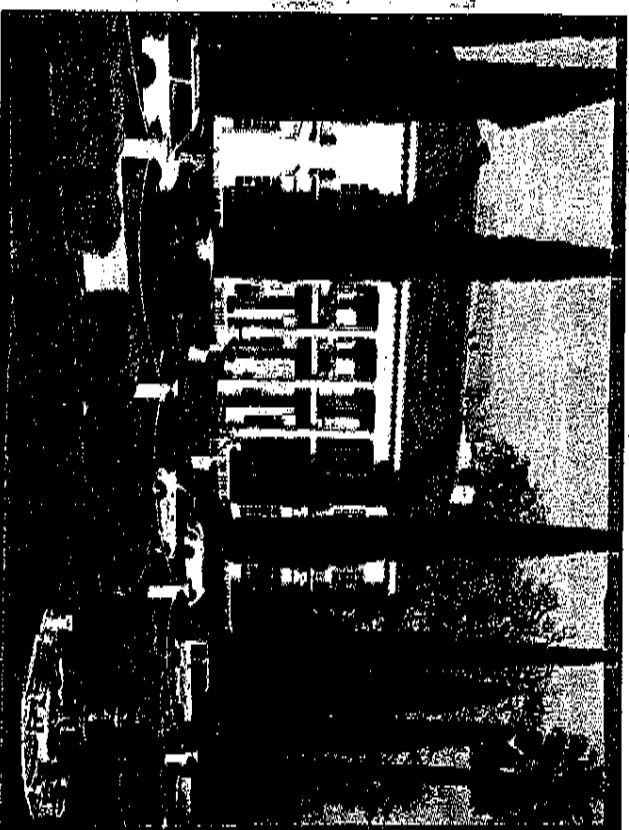
This week, we introduce some of the places to go and things to do, for visitors using wheels. Next Sunday we explore a corner of the Delta by houseboat.

Hines grinned broadly at the elegant sign, and straightened the plane's wings.

The four-seat craft with the fat pontoons and the words "Bigfoot Air" on the side continued on, flying lazy curves over the patchwork of islands, rivers, channels and sloughs that make up the 350-square-mile Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

This aerial perspective was a revelation:

Here were marinas by the dozens, boats by the thousands, RV parks, mobile home parks, houseboat communities, waterfront restaurants, roadhouses, bridges of ingenious design. We flew over two river crossings still serviced the old-fashioned way, by ferries, and looked down on vast agricultural tracts and



Janet Fullwood photograph

Above, the Grand Island Mansion, a 58-room villa dating from 1918, is one of the Delta's best-known landmarks and a favorite venue for weddings, parties and Sunday brunch.



Bee photograph/Chris Crowell

The Crowdad festival in Isleton is one of the Delta's biggest events.

Please see DELTA, page J7

Delta: Boat not needed to sample waterways'

With 1,000 miles of navigable waterways and more than 500,000

acres of farmland reclaimed from the marshes years ago, the Delta is at once a watery playground, agrarian empire and political hot potato. Boaters and fishing enthusiasts have long been seduced by its rural charms. But while water is at the core of the region's recreational appeal, you don't have to own so much as a rowboat to enjoy this overlooked nook of our own Northern California back yard.

Just ask Ramona and Jack Stevens of the Bay Area, who, on a sunny April afternoon, are contentedly anchored out at a picnic table on a swath of brilliant green grass behind the levee at Westgate Landing, a San Joaquin County park and anchorage.

"We just like to fish and loaf," the retired construction worker said, speaking for many of the boatless folk one sees tooling around the Delta. "We come out here a lot on weekends. It's not that far, but it seems like it."

Of the checkerboard of parklands that provide public access in and around the Delta, the largest is Brannan Island State Recreation Area near Rio Vista. Its 300 acres hold 100 campsites, boat docks, a fishing pier, showers, swimming beaches — and lots of shade on blistering summer days that are redeemed, in the evenings, by that famous Delta breeze. Quite different in atmosphere is Cosumnes River Preserve, about 10 miles south of Elk Grove off Interstate 5. The preserve, which features walking trails, a visitors center and a variety of interpretive programs, includes some of the last Delta wetlands still in their natural state, and is a haven for birds migrating along the Pacific Flyway.

For kayakers and canoeists, there's solace to be found in the

Delta's quieter backwaters, including shade-dappled sloughs with names like Snodgrass, Sevenmile and Disappointment. Board sailors, on the other hand, flock to the open waters of Sherman Island, near Rio Vista, for the brisk, reliable winds that have made this a mecca for aficionados of the sport.

For those tied to their wheels, more subtle delights are to be encountered by cruising what Delta historian and writer Hal Schell calls the "asphalt sloughs," narrow ribbons of tarmac that ride the tops of the levees, looking down on fruit orchards and vineyards, farmhouses and fields, and passing through a collection of shady villages that look more Mississippi than California.

All of that aside, the Delta boasts enough seasonal events — and memorable restaurants and saloons — to provide excuses for years worth of leisurely Sunday drives.

I caught up with Schell at one of those restaurants early on a Sunday morning. Wimpy's is a Delta classic, a big, old, two-story wooden place specializing in hamburgers and other straight-ahead American food. The mustard-color structure sits on a curve in the South Fork of the Mokelumne River, just 5 miles from the interstate, but in another world. Schell, who has been gunkholing around these parts for going



Bee photograph/Hector Amezcua
"Zippi," a.k.a. Andy Swan of Sacramento, entertained at last year's Courtland Pear Fair. The 28th annual event returns July 23.

on three decades, sports a full white beard and wears an arsenal of Nikons slung over his shoulders like handoleers. That he looks a bit like Papa Hemingway is not entirely coincidental: The writer has been cultivating tales — five books and hundreds of articles' worth — about the Delta ever since he came back from a stint in Spain and washed up on Lost Isle, a favorite haunt of Delta boaters, in the early 1970s.

The sun glistened on the Moke as we chatted over coffee in the second-floor restaurant. At the next table, farmers wearing caps advertising heavy equipment dug into their bacon and eggs. Every few moments a boat gargled by, stirring up the swallows that live in mud nests under the bridge at the restaurant's edge. At the dock a black dog dozed while a man gassed up a jet ski. Nearby, a passel of kids was playing on the roof of a houseboat.

Everything in the picture fit the description Schell gave of the Delta's unvarnished appeal.

"It's the lackadaisical-ness of it all," he said, "and the diversity. The Delta is slow, unpretentious. It's lazy. People don't come here for the slick stuff like where they live, I don't think. They come for this," and he knocked his knuckles lightly on the table, then turned palms up and gestured around.

On the Web site he maintains for the California Delta Chambers of Commerce & Visitors Bureau (www.californiadelta.com), Schell outlines driving itineraries intended to introduce landlubbers to the region. "One of my favorite drives takes you over two ferries, past the Grand Island Mansion, along Steamboat Slough and through a number of towns," he said. "You can do it in a couple of hours, or take all day . . ."

I took all day, with Nicky Suard as a guide. Suard is an attorney by training, but she's hardly the desk-bound type. "I was born boating, I guess you could say," the petite blond mother of two related as she steered her minivan onto the

J-Mack, a CalTrans-operated cable ferry that crosses Steamboat Slough between Ryer Island and Grand Island, about 36 miles south of downtown Sacramento. A warm breeze ruffled our hair as the craft began its three-minute trip between levees.

"Whenever I come into the Delta, I feel like it's the 1940s," Suard said, regarding the landscape with affection. "There's such integrity here." Suard is now a Delta business owner, having two years ago purchased Sang Harbor, a marina and campground that she is fixing up and gearing toward families. "It was the dream that became a nightmare for a while," she admits.

The tidy little resort, built around the beached hull of a 19th century dredge called the Golden Gate, is on a spit of land in historic Steamboat Slough, once a shortcut for sternwhealers and sidewheelers traveling between

Please see DELTA, back page, J8

Continued from page J1

some incredible homes. Hines put the plane down on the Sacramento River at Rio Vista, just south of the tall, silver lift-bridge that became a national icon back in 1965, when a lost whale called Humphrey swam under it and into fresh water where he didn't belong.

"So," the flight instructor asked, peeling off his headset, "what do you think of our Delta?"

□ □ □

Delta: Six small cabins on wheels

Continued from page J1

Stockton and Sacramento. The fuel-hungry boats burned tons of the cottonwood and oak that grew on land long since surrendered to the plow. When the light is low, you can squint through the tules and almost hear their shrill whistles; see their churning, gingerbread ghosts.

Snug Harbor has waterfront RV sites, a swimming beach, a three-bedroom rental house and something new to the Delta: Six "park model RVs," best described as 369-square-foot cabins on wheels, sit just steps from the decks where guests park their fishing boats and runabouts. Sward is calling these cute-as-a-bug shakers "Snuggle Inns," and they are proving immensely popular.

Snug Harbor is one of few places in the central Delta to provide overnight accommodations for those traveling without tent or RV. Outside the cities, the region has only a handful of bed-and-breakfasts, motels and cabin places. The housekeeping cabins at Vieira's, on the east side of the Sacramento River between Isleton and Rio Vista; and the tidy, knotty-pine cabins at B&W Marina, on Brannan Island Road, are especially in demand.

"In spring and fall most of the guests are here for the fishing, while in summer it's skiers and people just out for the pleasure," said B&W's Joan Deak, whose family has run the place for almost 30 years. B&W, along with nearby Korth's Pirate's Lair, date to the early, post-World War II days of Delta tourism. Both are on the Delta Loop, a 10-mile drive around Andrus Island (on Brannan Island Road) that leads past dozens of marinas and other businesses. The loop is signed on both ends with fishing buoys and the hulls of old boats. You can drive it in half an hour - or get sucked in all day taking in the scene at bar/restaurants that range from the decidedly funky River Rat to the decidedly upscale Riverboat II.

Our drive also took us by the Kyde Hotel, a big, hot-pink, 1920s-vintage place on the Sacramento River just south of Walnut Grove that offers 32 hotel rooms and does a roaring business in Sunday brunch. That Tara-esque place I'd spotted from the sky turned out to be the Grand Island Mansion, a 58-room, Italian Renaissance-style villa built in 1918 for Louis Myers, a local orchardist, and his wife, who belonged to the family that founded Weinstocks department stores. The mansion today specializes in Sunday brunch (reservations recommended), wed-

dings and other fancy affairs. Two limousines and a fleet of highly polished classic cars were out front when we passed by, and the people milling about were dressed in tuxedos and gowns.

The Grand Island Mansion is on Grand Island Road, just a short detour off Highway 160, the narrow, winding, north-south thoroughfare through the Delta. Heading south from Sacramento on a leisurely drive, you can zigzag back and forth over the Sacramento River and assorted sloughs using swing-bridges, drawbridge and ferry. Each of the towns on the route has a distinct history tied to the two things that still make them tick: agriculture and boating.

First - almost swallowed now by the south Sacramento suburbs - comes the blink-and-you'll-miss-it burg of Freeport, which got its start during the Gold Rush as, well, a free port. Across the river and down a ways is pretty little Clarksburg and the shell of the now-closed sugar beet refinery that for years defamed its economy. Farther on are Courtland (which bills itself as the "pear capital of the universe"), Hood, Walnut Grove and Isleton, villages of weathered buildings that have yet to be gussied up for tourists.

The most distinctive community along the way is also the smallest. Locke, home to perhaps 150 souls, is the only rural community in the country built by and for Chinese. Although the rickety, two-story buildings on the main street look older, they date only to 1916, when the town came into being after the Chinese district in next-door Walnut Grove burned down.

The picturesque hamlet, which boasts a small museum and several shops, is hopping with tourists on the weekends, sluggish as a slough during the week. Its best known establishment is Al's Place, a restaurant also called, without malice, Al the Wop's. Al's specializes in steaks, Italian food, Tuesday-night lobster dinners and a dark, slantily-floored ambience. Its most memorable feature is the collection of dollar bills on the ceiling.

OK, so just how do they get up there? "I'll cost you a dollar to find out," proprietor Steve Giannetti says, launching into the spiel he delivers a dozen times a day. He takes my dollar bill, pulls a silver dollar from the register, sets a thumbtack atop the coin and wraps the bill around it, tack point sticking out the top. Then, with a confident underhand, he tosses the package toward the ceiling. The tack sticks, the silver dollar falls back into his hand and - *voilà!* - another dollar bill on the ceiling.

Sward and I had lunch at The Point in Rio Vista, a waterfront restaurant whose menu is as diverse as the boats - oceangoing freighters, sailboats, ski boats, million-dollar yachts - passing by the windows. Salmon with spinach and tomatoes over angel-hair pasta with vodka pepper sauce was one of the day's selections. The monte cristo - a deep-fried club sandwich, french fries on the side - was another.

We were heading out when something by the door caught my eye. An ordinary diner chair, red upholstery, chrome frame, set by the wall with a sign above it: "John Travolta sat in this chair July 4, 1997."

The restaurant's Sharon Myers, coffeepot in hand, stopped by to explain.

"He flew in to pick up a classic '57 T-bird from Rio Vista Ford," she said, pointing to a framed photo collage depicting the actor and the vehicle. "He ate here, and we set his chair aside just as a joke. "When couples come in and see it," she continued, "the men shrug and say, 'Big deal.' But the women - the women sit on it and wiggle around and go 'ooooh!'"

She wiggled a bit to illustrate, almost spilling the coffee.

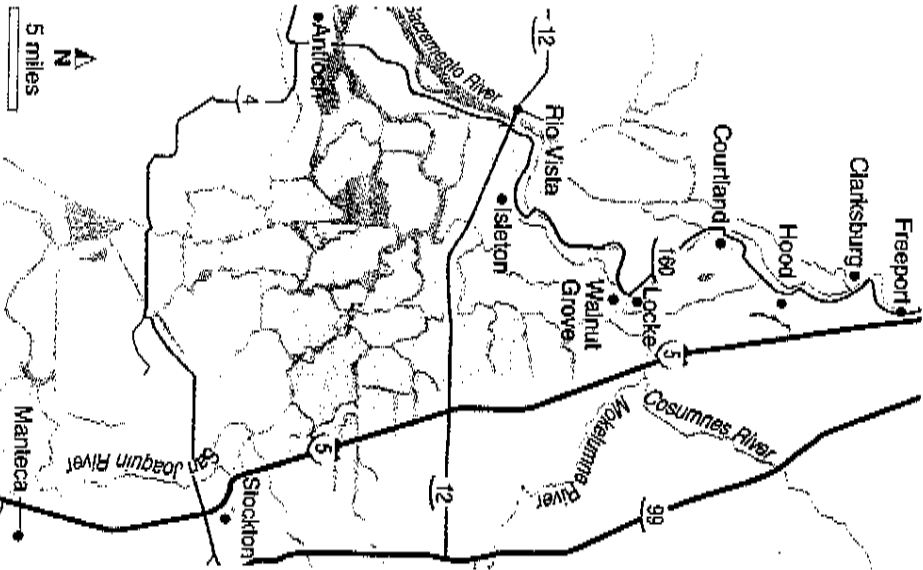
Aside from Stockton and Sacramento, Rio Vista, population about 4,000, is the biggest town in the central Delta. It sits on the Sacramento River just where the ocean-bound flow starts to get big, swift and serious. Yet the town itself isn't nearly so big-boned as its setting.

You know a place hasn't yet become jaded by tourism when a resident driving down the main drag sticks his head out the car window and hollers to a pedestrian: "Hey, are you a tourist?"

Must have been the camera. "Er, I guess so," I answered back.

"Aw-right!" the driver yelled, shooting me a thumbs-up as he drove away.

Rio Vista may soon see its character changing. If all the new housing developments on the drawing boards come to fruition, the population will jump from 4,000 to 25,000 in a dozen years or so. For now, though, the town seems stuck in a delicious kind



at time warp. The neon signs on the faded pastel buildings downtown bespeak the 1950s, as does the proud bridge, built in 1957, that takes Highway 12 over the river.

A half-hour walkabout is enough to soak up the ambience of the place. The building with the colorful mural on the side is Hag's Bar, sponsor of the big bass derby held every October. Just beyond, on the waterfront, is a granite monument to the sage of Humphrey the whale. The little history museum on Front Street was closed when I passed by, and the bright-red Wee-Wee wagon was parked and unlabeled. But Taqueria Mexico had a lot of patrons, even though it wasn't lunch time, and just down the way I glanced in on some wholesome-looking teens flirting over sodas at the Pizza Factory.

Also on Main Street is Foster's Bighorn, a restaurant and saloon whose walls are covered with more than 300 animal trophies collected on several continents by the establishment's original owner, Bill Foster. His exploits are outlined in framed articles along one wall. The stuffed menagerie includes humongous fish of several species, a snow leopard, a hippopotamus, cheetahs, assorted moose, elk and antelope — even an elephant head and a giraffe from the torso up.

All those dead heads and glass eyeballs gave me the willies, but the locals at the bar seemed oblivious to their stares.

When you hang out in the Delta, I was coming to learn, you see and hear about all sorts of things that are purely Delta-esque: Fishing derbies, chili cookoffs, festivals celebrating fruits, vegetables and crustaceans, naked Sea-Doo races, poker runs, Lost Isle, fireworks extravaganzas, guys with helpads on their houseboats.

And pretty soon, you find yourself plotting your next trip back to this place where time runs slow and nobody gets on your case for being lackadaisical.

Sac Bee 6/11/00

Delta delights fill the summer

Bee News Services

Summer is high season in the California Delta. A sampling of events:

■ **Isleton Crawdad Festival**, Friday through next Sunday. The Delta's biggest festival attracts more than 100,000 people to sample crawfish, kick up their heels to Cajun music, and more. Free. (916) 777-5880.

■ **Concert series, Suisun City Marina**, Friday evenings and Sunday afternoons most weeks in summer. (707) 429-2628.

■ **Wednesday Night Under the Stars**, June 21, July 19 and Aug. 16. Rio Vista, Farmer's market and street fair. (707) 374-2700.

■ **Hilton Fireworks Extraganza**, July 2. Mandeville Twp. Hotel magnate Barron Hilton throws this annual event, which features fireworks shot from a barge and attracts more than 3,000 boats. For details and possible date change, watch the Web site www.californiadelta.com.

■ **Brentwood Cornfest**, July 7-9. Parade, crafts, music, wine-tasting; \$5 general, \$2 seniors and students. (925) 634-3344.

■ **Behel Island '50s Bash**, July 15-16. Includes some 500 classic cars, sock hops, music, dog show, boat display and more. Free. (925) 634-3220.

■ **Delta Big Dog Toys for Tots Scavenger Hunt**, July 23, Happy Harbor; \$25 per person, includes dinner. Bring a new toy that will be donated to the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves. (209) 474-3227.

■ **Courtland Pear Fair**, July 23. (916) 775-2000.

■ **Frank's Cove Summer Poker Run**, Aug. 2, Frank's Marina, Bethel Island. Entry includes T-shirt, breakfast, dinner, cash prizes, party. (925) 684-2886.

■ **24th annual Crawdad Races**, Aug. 14, Mossdale Marina. Friendly wagering. Live music and fun. (209) 982-0512.

■ **Suisun Harbor Bike Races**, Aug. 20, Suisun City Marina. Hundreds of participating cyclists of all ages. (707) 429-2628.

■ **Behel Island Triathlon**, Aug. 28. Supports Contra Costa County Police Athletic Association. (925) 634-3220.

■ **Lost Isle Labor Day Weekend**, Sept. 1-4. World-famous Maritime Party. (209) 948-4135.

■ **Annual Harbor Days Festival**, Sept. 2-3, Suisun City Marina. Bathub derby, carnival, music, food. Sunday Dixieland Festival. (707) 429-2628.

■ **Delta Big Dog Poker Run**, Sept. 11. Seventh running of popular event will be limited to 400 tickets. First place will be \$1,000. (209) 474-3227.

■ **Pittsburg Seafood Festival**, Pittsburg Marina, Sept. 9-10. Family-oriented event includes entertainment and offshore boat racing. (925) 432-7901.

Information courtesy California Delta Chambers & Visitors Bureau.

Travel wise: California Delta

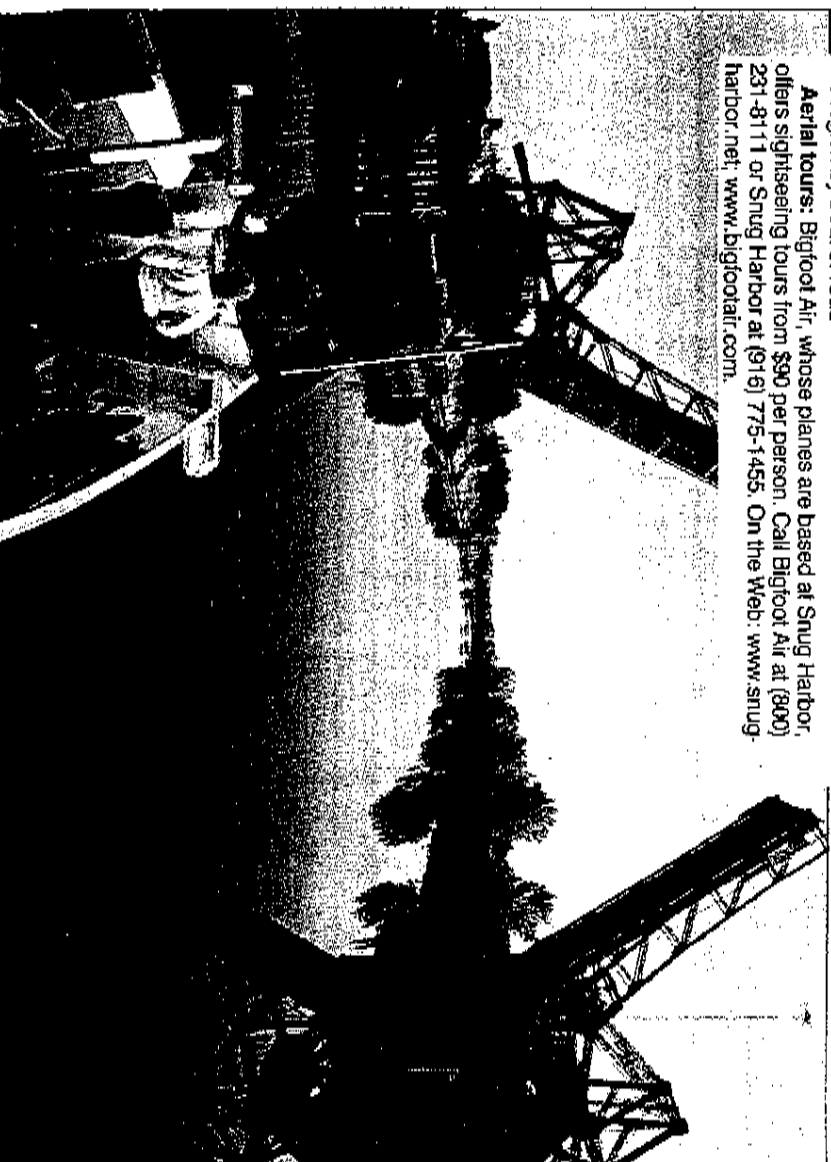
Information: The California Delta Chambers & Visitors Bureau publishes a visitors guide with information on everything from boat rentals to marinas, wine tours, diversion tours and events. It's available from Delta shops, marinas and visitors bureaus, or on request from P.O. Box 6, Isleton, CA 95641, (917) 707-5007. An extensive Web site, www.californiadelta.com, carries the same information and more.



Bee photograph/Crisis Crowell

Both the publications and the Web site are produced by Delta writer and historian Hal Schell, whose definitive volume "Cruising the California Delta" is available at regional marinas and bookstores. Schell's Delta Map and Guide, which sells for about \$2-\$3, is a useful tool for exploring the region by boat or road.

Aerial tours: Bigfoot Air, whose planes are based at Snug Harbor, offers sightseeing tours from \$90 per person. Call Bigfoot Air at (800) 231-8111 or Snug Harbor at (916) 775-1455. On the Web: www.snug-harbor.net, www.bigfootair.com.



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▶ FROM THE TRAVEL COVER

*Delta Finns
Houseboat Party*

Huck Finn never had it so good: Prowling the Delta by houseboat

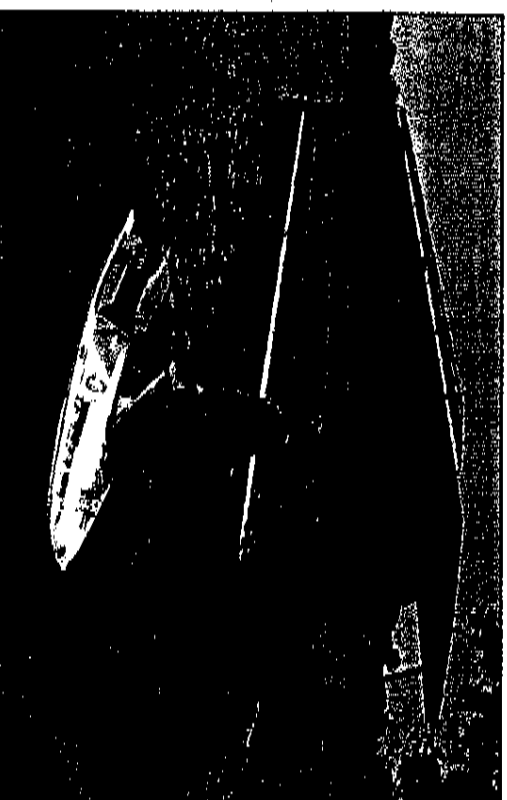
By Janet Fullwood
Bee Travel Editor

STOCKTON — They handle like hippopotamuses, consume more gas per mile than an SUV and cost a pretty penny for the weekend. But there's nothing quite like a houseboat for R&R in the California Delta.

With 1,000 miles of waterways weaving a liquid web around some 58 Delta islands, the region is a prime venue for living out those Huck Finn fantasies.

Surrealistic: One hour you're cruising a narrow slough overflowing with lush, jungle-like vegetation and reverberating with bird calls; the next, you're sliding between decidedly monotonous levees covered with decidedly unscenic riprap. Yet whichever part of the region you choose to cruise, there are discoveries to be made — quiet anchorages and fishing holes, wildlife sightings, water-skiing grounds and a plethora of restaurants, bars and marinas.

See **DELTA**, page J6



Janet Fullwood photograph


When home is on the beach, then there's nothing like checking out the neighborhood with a jet ski.



Janet Fullwood photograph

With watchful parents nearby, houseboatna kids cool off by jum-

DELTA VIEWS
The second of two parts



There are two ways to explore the 350-square-mile Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta: by road and by water. Today we explore a corner of the Delta by houseboat.

*www.southernriver.net
www.californiariverdelta.org*

Delta: Three-day houseboat rentals click with the .com crowd

From page J1

Like boating in general, houseboating on the Delta is enjoying a renaissance, says Andrew Smith, who manages the fleet at Herman & Helen's Marina on Eight-mile Road west of Stockton. Most popular are three-day weekend and five-day midweek vacations.

"We're definitely seeing a trend toward shorter vacations, especially with the current self-employment craze," said Smith, a

lawyer by training who traded that profession for an outdoor life and "an office that floats."

To accommodate the portion of its clientele with more money than time, H&H recently expanded its fleet with two top-of-the-line Odyssey houseboats. Their long list of amenities includes rooftop hot tubs, flying bridge, fireplace and private staterooms. The pricey vessels sleep 15, rent for \$2,275 a week-

end in summer - and, Smith said, already have found a following among the Bay Area dot-com crowd.

The other boats in the H&H fleet are less audacious but still comfortable, ranging from 35 to 56 feet long, with berths for six to 14 passengers.

My family recently joined two others aboard a 52-foot boat for a first foray into Delta waters. Our older-model craft featured a full

kitchen and living area, two bathrooms, four built-in bunks and three convertible sofa beds. It had a gas grill on the bow deck, a lounge area at the stern - and a broad, flat roof that doubled as a sun deck.

Before handing over the keys, Smith provided detailed instruction on driving, turning, anchoring and docking the craft. "Think of it as a large beast swinging its tail around," he said, and that

proved an excellent analogy.

Houseboating on the Delta differs from houseboating on a lake because the Delta has tides and currents to contend with, as well as narrow channels that can be blocked by snags and debris. Wind also can be a factor.

Other than that, Smith advised, "There are two basic approaches. One way is to cruise around, burning up fuel, seeing things, stopping at different marinas and restaurants. Another approach is to go somewhere, anchor out and sit or fish from where you are."

Armed with tide tables, a map, a weekend's worth of food and four boys ages 7-13 (packing enough restless energy to propel the boat on their own), we pushed off on a northerly course up Potato Slough. A stiff wind made navigation dicey. Standing on the houseboat roof, I looked over the levees and counted a dozen swirling black dirt devils rising up out of the surrounding fields.

Weather conditions and a late start combined to make our first day out a short one. After only an hour or so of cruising, we pulled in for the night at Westgate Landing Park & Anchorage, a protected cove just north of Tower Park, the Delta's biggest marina. For a while, we had the 22-slip docking facilities all to ourselves. Campground host Doyle Imo drove up in an electric cart, just as I was dropping our \$10 user fee into the payment box.

Imo calls this San Joaquin County park, which also offers 14 campsites for RVs or tents, "one of the best-kept secrets in the Delta."

particularly fond of the facilities, he said. "And we're starting to see more kayakers from the Bay Area; they camp here and go up into some of the quieter sloughs."

A little while later, as dinner sizzled on the grill and the boys came in shivering from their swim, another boat pulled in. Soon we were chatting with Tom Wigham, Bill Spangler and Rene Gibber, who run the Delta branch of Tow Boat U.S., an emergency service for boaters.

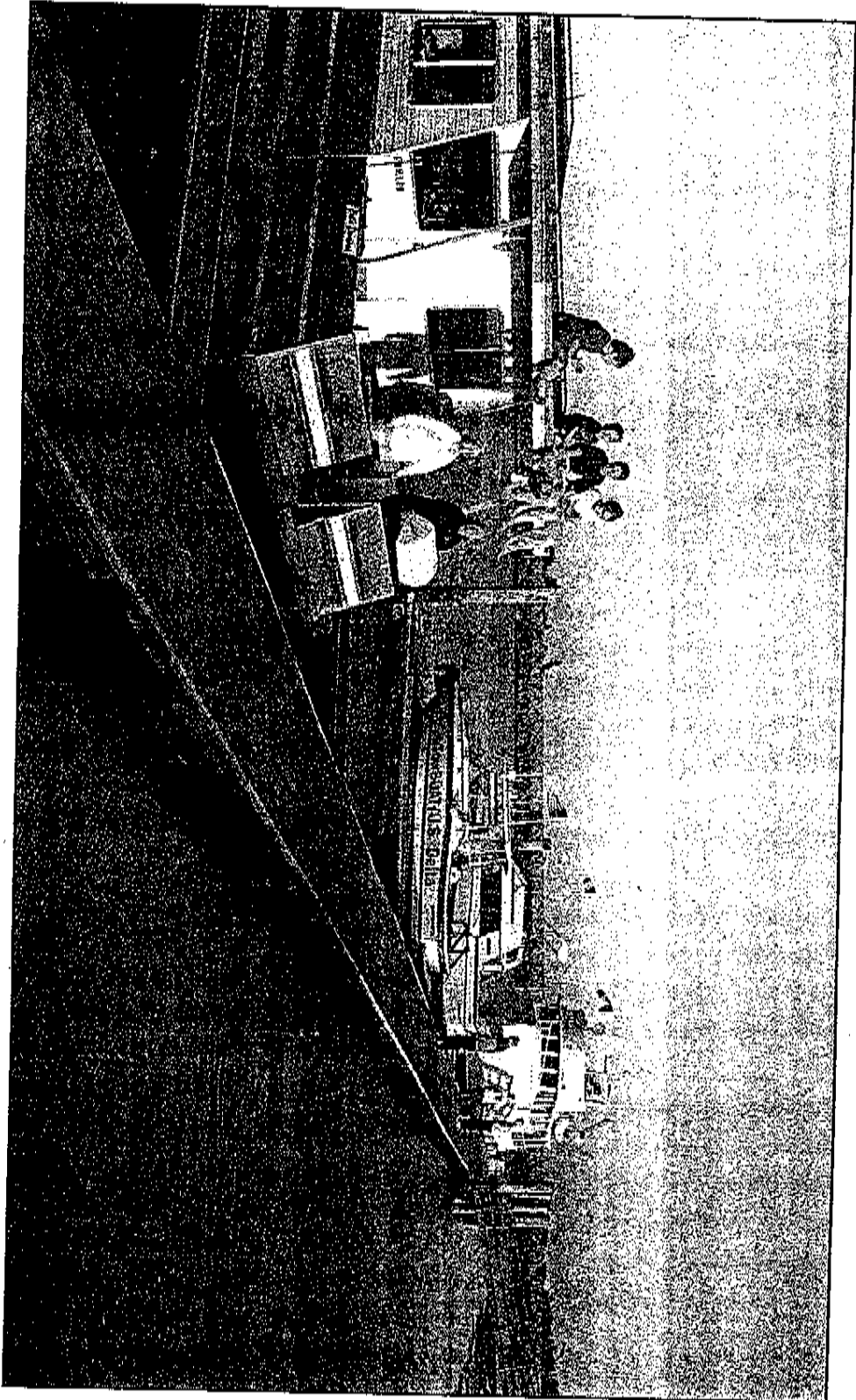
"It's a membership organization that works the same way an auto club does, except that we're on the water," said Wigham, who with his full white beard looks every bit the sea captain.

Rescuing boaters who get lost, run aground or run out of gas is the team's specialty.

"This area is especially heavy with vacationers who don't know their way around," Wigham said. "They get into trouble, and they panic. They think they're totally isolated out here, with no services."

"Actually," he added, "you're not totally isolated out in the Delta. It just feels like it - in a wonderful way."

Morning dawned so still that the only ripples on the water around us came from a vee of downy ducklings paddling behind their mother. Shortly after the sun cleared the horizon we made a pot of coffee, fired up the boat - which was named Swallow, after another common Delta bird - and started a leisurely cruise up the South Fork of the Mokelumne River. At a big, rambling restaurant called Wimpy's we stopped



Janet Fedwood photograph

The houseboat docked one night at Westgate Landing Park & Anchorage.

Delta: Jet ski reservations quickly jettisoned

From page J6
 pick up a playtoy: a Yamaha WaveRunner, delivered by Water Fly's Mobile Jet Ski Service. The company's J.D. Costell cited operational instructions while our four boys — all too young to ride without an adult — looked on in eager anticipation. They're not dangerous in themselves," Costell said of the mean marine machines. "They're just like a car or a boat or anything else: You have to use caution." I was of mixed mind about renting the WaveRunner: Their noisy and polluting two-stroke engines, after all, have led to their banishment from Lake Tahoe and elsewhere. But within minutes of climbing aboard, I had a vivid understanding of their appeal. These things are fast, agile — and tons of fun. For the rest of the day, various adult-child pairs from our party swapped off for short, exploratory cruises away from the mother ship. We spent most of the day about three hours away from where we'd started, tied to a tree at one of the Delta's favorite anchorages. The Meadows is a lazy, green, leveed slough within walking distance of the hamlet of Locke. Despite its proximity to civilization, however, it feels miles, decades away. This area — also called Delta Meadows — is one of few pieces of the Delta still in something resembling its natural state. Historically, the entire 350-mile region gaining Northern California as a wetland subject to seasonal flooding. Its waters ran clear, their courses clearly defined. Starting during the Gold Rush and continuing into the early 20th century, the salt marshes were dredged, drained and leveled for agriculture. Meanwhile, hydraulic mining activity in the Sierra sent tons of silt into the watershed, rerouting rivers and causing problems with flooding and heavy-metal pollution that exist into the 21st century.

Today, almost half the water that flows into the Delta is diverted to the thirsty cities of Southern California. Ecologically just a shadow of its former self, the Delta is under pressure from all sides. Water rights, introduced species, declining fisheries, sinking farmlands, saltwater invasions and flood control are just a few of the issues at hand.

In the Meadows, and all along neighboring Snodgrass Slough, you get a feel for how it used to be before man started meddling. Cottonwood, oak and willows dapple land and water with shade. Tule marshes provide cover for otter, beaver and birds. Frogs croak, crickets chirp, ducks quack and cottonwood duff drifts like snow at the shoreline.

California's Department of Parks and Recreation has recently acquired much of the farmland in the Delta Meadows area and is formulating plans for a new state park. Meanwhile, a contingent of boaters who've been spending summers here for years are anchored out for what might be their final season.

One of them is "Ranger" Rick West, who in late April had already claimed his usual spot up-slough in the deep green waters of the Meadows. Home base for West is a new, 1,070-square-foot houseboat called Cloud 9.

West has been spending summers on this slough since 1973, he said — and he's hardly the most long-term resident.

"Don and Pat White will bring in their boat Ba-Ba any time now, and this will be their 45th year," said the pony-tailed boater, attended by three bouncing black labs called Sadie, Delta and Midnight. "There are people here whose family members have been coming for 50 years ... it's been exactly like this for a long time."

Most years, West said, about 30 boats anchor out here for the season. Holidays and weekends might see that number double. The main attraction: a simple,

convivial lifestyle unencumbered by rules or regulations.

"It's kind of like a bunch of people tied up in a pond and everybody floating around and talking to each other," West explained of how boaters spend their time here. "The lifestyle is very relaxed. We do a lot of socializing."

Our day in the Meadows was as mellow as West's mood. The adults read, explored the footpaths that Meadows regulars had built on land and took turns on the WaveRunner, while the kids ran in endless circles from the water to the roof of the houseboat, where they jumped into the water again.

Come evening, we voted to go to a restaurant rather than cook another meal on board. Destination: Giusti's, a popular eatery about an hour's cruise back south.

Fortunately, there was room — just barely — at the guest dock for our 52-foot behemoth. Wild roses spilled pink bouquets of welcome over the ramp leading up the levee to the restaurant.

Giusti's proved a dark, warm, welcoming womb of a place that's been in the same family since current owner Mark Marias' grandfather started it in 1912. The first thing to notice upon entering are the hundreds — maybe thousands — of caps hanging from the ceiling in the bar.

"Farmers started leaving their hats, and we started collecting them and putting them up there," Marais explained. "Now people bring them to us and we add them to the collection. It's been going on about 15 years."

The menu has been pretty much the same for that long, too: Dinners are served family-style, with a big bowl of minestrone and another of salad brought to each table to be passed around. Entrees include pastas, fish and some of the best steaks this side of heaven.

By the time we lumbered back down to our boat, dusk was fall-

ing on the Delta. We played it safe and spent the night right there, tied up at Giusti's guest dock. Dawn brought a view of the Miller's Ferry Bridge reflected in water that was as smooth and silvery as a mirror.

The cruise back to Herman & Helen's was leisurely and relaxing — if not as exciting as the kids would have liked. I took the helm for awhile, settled into the pace and wished the weekend didn't have to end: In 48 hours, we'd seen only a tiny portion of the Delta.

"Every time you come down to the Delta, it's different," I remembered Wigham saying. "You can go around for days and not come back to the same spot twice."

I, for one, was ready to go around some more.

For more information:

Houseboats, ski boats, patio boats and fishing boats can be rented from several locations in the Delta. Call the Delta Houseboat Rental hotline, (209) 477-1840, to request a comprehensive packet of information. Costs range from about \$150 up to \$800 a day, depending on boat type, season and length of rental. Information on things to see and do in the Delta region is available on the Web at www.californiadelta.com.

Water Fly's Mobile Jet Skis can be reached by calling (916)207-2161. Rental prices start at \$90, delivered, for two hours of use.