Headline: History, hospitality come to life on river cruise

Deckhead: American Cruise Lines shines spotlight on Volunteer State

People seem surprised when they learn I started at AAA as an insurance agent and transferred into the Travel Agency, but with my positive, outgoing personality, it seemed like helping our members plan their dream vacation was a better fit.

My bucket list has taken me to cold destinations like Iceland and Alaska, but my most recent travels were on two contrasting River Cruises: a Viking cruise in Europe, and an American Cruise Lines’ voyage on the American Serenade.

The Serenade is American Cruise Lines’ newest ship and holds 185 passengers. We were the 12th sailing on a repositioning cruise from Nashville to Memphis. The clients were mature, active and repeat cruisers.

My balcony cabin was spacious, and I was impressed by the two-room, ADA-accessible and single cabins that I toured. The ship is cashless. My trip included a two-night, pre-cruise stay in Nashville, transfers to the vessel, guided tours, unlimited wines, beers & spirits, and Wi-Fi. The nightly entertainment varied and included country, bluegrass and an American Idol finalist.

Days at sea were packed with Bozo Bingo (any false call out and you don a clown’s nose), presentations by naturalists and historians, cooking demonstrations and trivia. My favorite onboard experience was the dining. I was assigned a personal chef, Chef David, the first day because of my specialized diet, and he served me throughout the cruise. He even packed my lunch for our excursion days.

Our pre-cruise stays in Nashville were at the famed Gaylord Opryland Hotel, with nine acres of indoor garden atriums, waterfalls, pools and themed restaurants. We attended a performance of the Grand Ole Opry and went downtown to Honky Tonk Highway on Lower Broadway to hear the live local music. The next day, we toured the Parthenon in Centennial Park on our way to the ship.

While onboard, we sailed the Cumberland, Tennessee, Ohio and Mississippi rivers. The most unexpected experienced was Kentucky Lake, a navigable reservoir that was created in 1944 for flood control and hydroelectric power. It’s also a recreational area with speedboats, jet skis and sailboats.

The Tennessee ports of call were fun and historical. In Clarkesville, I took the morning Biscuit Bake-Off excursion that included lunch and Bluegrass music. Each team received their own biscuit recipe; Paula Deen’s won.

In the afternoon, I toured the historical Fort Defiance Civil War Park and Interpretive center. At the next stop in Dover, I did the working farm, a national recreational park, where I fed a hog, rooster and hen.

In Kentucky, my favorite town was Paducah. In the 1990s, the city decided to reinvent itself and offered discounted housing to artists. **Paducah is now a vibrant art scene, where 50 murals adorn the city’s walls.**

**The town also is home to the National Quilt Museum, with more than 500 quilts on display. We disembarked in Memphis. For our tour, we could upgrade to the Graceland Experience excursion, or tour the National Civil Rights Museum,** where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. The Museum was fascinating and presented a comprehensive overview of the American Civil Rights Movement from slavery to the present. Later that day, I toured the iconic Beale Street.

Nothing is comparable to touring our American heritage, and the staff onboard the ship and their service was unsurpassed. It was a trip not to miss!

Cutline: PERFECT SETTING – Watching the sun set behind the hillside adds to the serenity of an American Cruise Lines vacation. Image: Ed Schmidt. AAA.

Mug shot

Ed Schmidt