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Virtual Voyage: The Tennessee River

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Take a trip along the beautiful Tennessee River.

By Pierce Hoover

It's early October, and after making your way south from the Great Lakes by way of America's inland river system, you turned upstream on the Tennessee River. You enjoyed a five-day layover at Green Turtle Bay (greenturtlebay.com) in Kentucky's "land between the lakes" region and then followed the meandering course of Kentucky Lake. The longest reservoir in the eastern United States, the Tennessee River brought you some 185 miles south and east through wooded and pastoral landscapes punctuated by small riverfront towns like Saltillo, Perryville and Clifton.

A string of barges exits the Pickwick Lock when you arrive. With no additional commercial traffic in sight, locking through is a relatively quick process. By happy hour, you've secured your reserved slip on the recently renovated D-dock at Aqua Yacht Harbor (aquayachtharbor.com) and are looking forward to a dip in the pool, followed by dinner at the Cafe St. Clair.



Historic Side Trips N 34.993/W 88.250

Today's shore leave will provide some historical perspective on the central Tennessee River. Rent a car and head over to the Shiloh National Military Park. The site of one of the hardest-fought battles of the Civil War, the 4,200-acre park now encompasses the historic battlefield, a cemetery and Indian burial mounds from a lost pre-Columbian people.

From the park, it's just a short drive into Savannah, Tennessee, for a dose of maritime history at the Tennessee River Museum (800-552-3866). For a more contemporary take on local history, finish up by heading to nearby Adamsville, home of the Buford Pusser Home & Museum of Walking Tall fame (bufordpussermuseum.com).



The Upstream Option N 34.787/W 87.674

Many of the pleasure boats that stop at Aqua Yacht Harbor are headed for warmer climates by way of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. This 234-mile route connects Pickwick Lake to the Warrior-Tombigbee River system, and hence the Gulf of Mexico.

But for now, your route lies to the east; you follow the Tennessee River for another 50 miles to the town of Florence, Alabama, and the landscaped shores of Florence Harbor Marina. This full-service marina offers complimentary shuttle service into downtown Florence, but tonight, you opt for a short walk to Dale's Steakhouse, which remains a local favorite.

The following morning, you leave early to take on the Wilson Lock. With a normal lift of 95 to 100 feet, it is the highest single lift lock east of the Rocky Mountains. Following extensive reconstruction efforts over the past year, the main lock reopened last August, and the long delays associated with the renovation.

Upstream of the lock, what would normally be an uneventful cruise on Lake Wilson becomes exciting when radio chatter warns of the downstream passage of the Delta Mariner. At just over 300 feet in length and 80 feet wide, the Mariner is the largest vessel operating on the Tennessee River, transporting Delta IV rockets from a United Launch Alliance assembly plant in Decatur to launch facilities in Florida and California.



A Looper Reunion N 34.813/W 87.328

After the 15-mile run across Wilson Lake, you pass through your second lock of the day at Wheeler Dam and then steer left for First Creek and Joe Wheeler State Park Marina (alapark.com/joewheeler). Here, the docks are filled to capacity with cruising boats flying

the distinctive burgee of the America's Great Loop Cruisers' Association (greatloop.org). These folks have come for the Association's annual Rendezvous & Reunion. Like you, they've registered well in advance for this three-day event, which is part instructional seminar, part boat show, part social gathering and all about the cruising lifestyle.

In the morning, you plan to attend some of the formal presentations that will provide valuable tips on cruising the southern portions of the waterway, as well as information on the new Harbor Hosts program, which connects first-time cruisers with veteran loopers familiar with any given cruising area. The social highlight of the week will be the Looper's Crawl, where cruisers open their hatches to each other and share the high and low points of their chosen vessel.

By week's end, you will depart for a return trip to Pickwick Lake with a head full of newfound knowledge and an address book loaded with new friends.

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