




Boaters cross Lake Michigan on a historic ship.

By Jana Smith

 ne summer, my dive buddy and I took a trip across Lake Michigan on the *SS Badger*, the last and only coal-fired steamer in North America.

We took this trip for several reasons: to avoid driving through Chicago, which is especially difficult towing a trailered boat; for fun because I've never been on a cruise before; and because it might be our last chance to ride aboard a coal-fired Great Lakes steamer.

The night before, we went down to the pier to watch the ship come in. That's really the only way to get pictures of the whole ship.

The next morning we arrived almost two hours early. Since we were the only car with a trailered boat, we were asked to pull up in a separate lane with the tractor-trailers. We spoke with the driver of an amazing rig built to carry windmill parts

from their manufacturer to their destination.

Loading commenced an hour before launch time. They began with the cars, each driven into the stern by ferry personnel. They drove in and turned around the first cars before parking them inside the ferry. Then they backed in the remaining cars. A ferry operator backed in my dive buddy's vehicle with his boat attached and handled it with ease.

When a driver backed up the wind turbine semi with its four pivot points, it looked like he was trying to push a rope, but he did an excellent job. The only thing owners could drive on were motorcycles. Quite a few came aboard as it was the week before the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. I stood next to one motorcyclist, who said her group had arrived at 0600 to be first to drive on.

I enjoyed the relaxing ride. The steam engine was so quiet you could barely tell it was running. The day was calm with few ripples on the water. Feeling the boat move when walking around seemed a little disconcerting without the cues that indicate you're on a moving boat. First we roamed the ship, investigating the lifeboats, cabins, the head and the ship's other amenities. The ship has a full kitchen, and the crew prepare breakfast and lunch while underway. For much



P/C Jana Smith, SN, of Michigan's Dearborn Sail & Power Squadron/9 on the loading ramp at the SS *Badger's* stern where the cars are being loaded

of the trip, we sat outside on the large bow and enjoyed the sunshine, watching gulls and herons fly by.

Built in 1953 as a part of the railway system, the ship also had luxury accommodations for passengers. When use of the railway system declined, the *Badger* was sold in 1983 to the Michigan Wisconsin Transportation Co. When the company went bankrupt in 1990, the SS *Badger* looked fated for the scrap pile. Luckily, Ludington businessman Charles Conrad purchased the ship, rebuilt the storage hold to accommodate taller trucks, refurbished the passenger areas and re-opened for business in 1992. Thousands of people, cars and trucks have used the ferry since then.

The SS *Badger* was registered as a historic site in 1997. With the combination of its two four-cylinder engines and four Foster-Wheeler D-type coal-burning boilers, it has been designated a mechanical engineering landmark by the American Society of Mechanical Engineers.

Our arrival at Manitowoc, Wisconsin, was exciting but smooth. As soon as the ship docked, the cars were driven off and parked in a row so passengers could reclaim their vehicles. As we waited for ours, we saw the World War II-era submarine USS *Cobia* on the other side of the river. That would be our next stop.

We had a knowledgeable tour guide for our tour of the sub, and the maritime museum was a pleasant surprise. For me, the highlight was the triple-expansion steam engine of the SS *Chief Wawatam* railroad ferry. It had been set up to go into motion, which was a truly awesome sight.

So ended a meaningful and fun trip, one that may not be possible in the future, but one that will stay in my memory forever.

For more information on the ferry, go to ssbadger.com. ☺

*Author's note: With environmentally friendly updates, the last coal-burning ship on the Great Lakes will continue ferry service and release no ash into Lake Michigan. The *Badger's* new digital combustion controls have reduced the amount of ash produced by 15 percent. Using a new collection conveyor system and four containment bins, ash is moved from the bow and aft boiler systems to one of four bins on the car deck. The ash is removed while the *Badger* is docked at Ludington.*

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