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Cruising the 'Back Bay'

Mary Eloise H. Leake for The Times

ORANGE BEACH - The jovial seafarers suddenly become still and quiet. Waiting expectantly, everyone aboard the sleek Corsair, rocking peacefully on the water, intently watches a mother osprey and her lively baby birds nesting high in a tall dead tree.

Here he comes! With a wing span of close to 5 feet, the father brings in some squirming "fast food" supper for mom and the chicks.

Mmmm, now it's your turn to fuel up on freshly caught boiled shrimp and other tasty goodies on the placid waters of Ingram's Bayou, a Gulf sanctuary inaccessible by car.

Do you want to ramp up your summer beach trip?
Are you tired of sun, surf and shopping?
Is your personal yacht out of gas?

Board the Corsair at Bear Point Marina in Orange Beach or Pirates Cove Yacht Club in Josephine. Whether your posse hankers for a beautiful sunrise, a novel lunch or an extraordinary Gulf sunset, Captain Mike Broussard and first mate Roselee Giovino promise an adventurous voyage in and around Bay La Launch and Arnica Bay.

Better than Vegas

In his blue T-shirt, blue-tinted shades and white hat, Broussard figures it took 11,000 man-hours (10,700 his) to build the 65-foot-long wooden Biloxi schooner. The Biloxi native says he laid the keel in October 1976, strategically placed its famous claw-foot bathtub for ballast and launched the slender vessel on June 17, 1978. He started "working" the boat 10 months later by shrimping. Finishing details were completed by May 1981.

With an aptitude for nautical craftsmanship from his Nova Scotian ancestors, Broussard has constructed two schooners, skiffs for museums and boats for family members. The shipwright says his most memorable vessel was a Viking ship with a dragon's head prow and its carved tail the stern post. Its sails were orange and white with vertical stripes.

As the Corsair leaves the dock, Giovino says, "Our cruise today takes you back in time, back to a slower, more peaceful way of life."

Since you may bring additional beverages aboard, she pops up from the galley with crackers and a luscious crab dip with capers to nibble on. Those crabs were caught in traps right off their private dock, she volunteers.

At the helm, Broussard doesn't use the sails often because he would need a six-person crew. Powered by a motor, the approximately two-hour cruise is easily handled by the couple.

Since they had been trawling for shrimp, the captain pulls the net onboard and dumps the catch, keeping the shrimp but tossing the small shimmering silvery fish in gentle arcs - one by one - back into the water, port and starboard.

Already attracted by the trawl net, the dolphins swim much closer, splashing as they jump and dive for the fish. Seagulls also spot the flying fish and swoop down into the exhilarating feeding frenzy.

This is better than any Vegas show.

Then with the crescent moon's added mystique, Broussard cuts the motor. The hyper-wired world stops, and the surround sound ends.

"It's always a pleasure to share our 'back bay lifestyle' with those who appreciate its tranquility," Giovino says with a nod to the captain. This secluded paradise also attracts birders because of its hidden locale.

Licensed to carry only six additional passengers, the Corsair can provide a great escape for three couples, families or a chickfest. Or a savvy place for a romantic marriage proposal or even a small wedding.

Hurricane Ivan, with a dollop of Katrina, precipitated the 'Bama coast's wave of urban renewal. Everything is suddenly so fresh and new.

Developers are working fast: clearing land, building high-rises.

Savor the untouched Gulf's back bay sights and sounds while they're still around.

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