

Cruising with Capt. Albert

Aboard the M.S. River Queen



World traveler and international tour guide leader Albert Reitsma put down roots in Washago where he now operates cruises on the Black and Green Rivers.

By Lauren Carter
For The Packet & Times

A long way from cruising the Nile and bringing people by boat into the jungles of Papua New Guinea, former globetrotter Albert T. Reitsma exudes enthusiasm when discussing what some might think of as a very ordinary corner of the planet.

"The confluence of the Black and the Green rivers is absolutely spectacular. It's a sight I (haven't) seen any where else in the world,"

says the 53-year-old owner and operator of Washago Cruise Lines.

Having been around the world and back again, Reitsma knows what he's talking about.

Once a tour guide for the high end company TRAV-COA, the Travel Corporation of America, he's been to Africa some 40 times, the Far East another 60 and claims that the best beaches in the world are on the Fiji Islands in the South Pacific.

He would know.

I think my record of 95 trips to Australia still stands," says the captain of the M.S. River Queen.

But flash back six years ago to a tour taking place in Eastern Europe. It was here that something happened for the man now known as Capt. Albert.

Grown tired of the lonely stream of anonymous hotel rooms that accompanied a life leading international tours, Reitsma realized he needed a change.

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Making the decision to retire, he moved north to the cabin near Washago that he'd bought and fixed up in 1982. Despite the beauty of his surroundings, however, he very quickly grew bored.

So he bought a boat. And despite people thinking he was crazy and locals shaking their heads at his conviction that anyone would want to see their rivers, he began to turn his appreciation of the local waterways into a kind of cottage industry "I've always believed that if you can combine a hobby with making a little bit of money, it's ideal," he says. With the enthusiasm and humour that made him a success at showing Canadians around their own country only two years after moving to Canada from his homeland of Holland, Reitsma plunked the newly-named M.S. River Queen in the water and set about giving tours to area visitors. He chuckles about it now, explaining that as a kid, his father, a well known Dutch architect, wanted him to visit building sites when his dream job was to push people around shallow man-made lakes in a punter, a flat-bottomed, pole guided wooden boat

"Life came full circle," he says, surrounded by masks, sculptures and other artifacts

from over a dozen foreign countries, "after traveling the world."

Fully modern, Reitsma's pontoon boat isn't driven by a pole.

With a sturdy engine, bathroom facilities, on-board refreshments and enough room for up to 12 people, the M.S. River Queen leaves Washago's town docks every day of the week (except Monday) at 1 p.m. On especially busy days, Reitsma adds another two tours. Smart tourists take advantage of the complimentary coffee or tea served to Capt. Albert's clients at Sweet



Retreats before they make their way to the docks.

Once the journey's under way and heading up the main branch of the Severn River towards the Black, Capt. Albert begins telling tales and talking about the history, wildlife and geology of the area.

Having done lots of research on the area, he has lots to say.

"You'd be amazed" he enthuses, "how much history is here including the oldest publicly-owned hydroelectric power dam in the world."

Capt Albert's award-winning hour-and-45-minute-cruises visit this dam.

They've even been known to stumble across a resident moose, providing a purely Canadian thrill to those lucky enough to spot it. Beavers abound in these rivers and Reitsma has used his tourism industry smarts to offer the ultimate Canadian souvenir: sticks marked by beaver bites. Dubbed the Beaverstick and labeled with information about Canada's national animal, the product is for sale on Capt. Albert's boat And for especially eager beavers, further information about the region's natural elements can be found on a guided tour that takes place shortly after the 1 p.m. cruise at nearby Muskoka Wildlife Centre.

Although Reitsma keeps his suitcase packed all winter and jumps on a few last minute sale trips down south — he went to Cuba four times this past winter — Reitsma says he doesn't miss the extensive traveling he used to do. Settled into his role as captain of

the award-winning Washago Cruise Lines, he's happy to spend the summer busy with private Charters, renting his new five-passenger fishing boat, ferrying brides to dockside ceremonies and hosting celebrations and corporate meetings on the deck of the River Queen, not to mention showing visitors from as far away as Japan around our own exotic backyard. And it seems that everyone who's ever taken a trip with Capt Albert is just as happy and just as charmed by the beauty of the Black and the Green.

Washago Cruise Lines offers daily cruises from the village docks in Washago. Rates are: adults: \$16.50, seniors and children: \$14.50, family (two adults, two children): \$55.00. Call 689-0066 or online at www.washagocruiselines.com