

## How We Got to St. Louis

As a result of having taken the Road Scholar trip on the paddle boat up from New Orleans to Memphis back in April, my e-mail inbox was flooded on a nearly daily basis with flyers from the American Queen people. They were trying to sell Jere and me a new voyage on one of their ships. These junk e-mails could usually be ignored and disposed. However, in May, very soon after we got back home, there came one with the banner headline TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE. Naturally, being one of the cheapest men in the world, I discussed with Jere this offer of the American Countess paddle boat trip up from St Louis to Minneapolis at the end of July. How could we resist, even though it was clearly NOT a Road Scholar trip? So we decided *to do it!*, seeing if we could survive as regular passengers, not affiliated with a sponsoring group like the Road Scholars or Overseas Adventure Travel.

So my first chore was to see how I could use up some frequent-flyer miles to get to St Louis and back from Minneapolis. I obviously didn't want to make this sudden extra vacation trip any more expensive than it need be. The night before the boat sailed on July 26 we were to stay at the Hilton Hotel By The Ballpark. OK, we concluded it was wise to arrive in St Louis to check in on the afternoon of July 25. To do that, should we fly from Santa Fe or from Albuquerque? From Santa Fe there was an American Airlines flight at 6:30 AM, which would be possible to get us there around 2:00. For reasons that are now obscure to me, we opted instead to drive down to Albuquerque the Sunday afternoon before, to take the Monday 6:01 AM flight, also AA through Dallas-Fort Worth, to arrive around 2:30. OK, good enough, and I was able to use up some credit card airplane miles to pay the fares. Thus we would be staying over at a motel that would also store our car for the time we were away, saving a little money on parking. Of course.

So, we got to La Quinta motel that Sunday afternoon, had a light meal at Applebee's across the street. We hit the hay early for getting up at 3:30 AM, to take the motel's shuttle to the airport at 4:15 AM. All according to plan. HOWEVER, when I checked e-mail at 3:35, I found a message from

American Airlines saying that they had *canceled* the connecting DFW to STL flight, no reasons stated. To get us to St Louis they proposed that we instead take their 1:41 PM puddle-jumper flight to Austin, and from there on to STL to arrive at 8:41 PM that evening!

Not knowing what better to do, we still took the motel van to the airport at 4:15 to see what better, if anything, could be arranged. We arrived among a sizable crowd of young Puerto Rican kids who were also on that 6:01 AM flight, but connecting on elsewhere than to STL. The lady at the AA desk was unable to find anything better than the Austin thing, and she had no idea why the flight from DFW was canceled. A phone call with a far-away AA agent, finally returned, *also* had no better way than Austin. On his part, he said that the Dallas to St Louis plane was “broken” – and I agreed, that we didn’t want to fly on a broken airplane. (We never did find out the real reason why that flight was canceled.)

So, we waited for seven hours at the Sunport to board the flight to Austin at 1:41 PM. In the meantime I called the Hilton to say we were going to be, hopefully, arriving at their hotel around 10:00 PM. No problem, they said. And apparently there *wasn’t* a dinner meal we were supposed to have attended that night. We’d be there in time for the scheduled breakfast and check-in the next morning.

I also called ahead to the American Queen people to tell *them* of our changed arrival time. Also, no problem, they said. Oh, *by the way*, had I seen the e-mail that *they* had sent out on July 23? No, I hadn’t. It said that, because of a bridge closure and a broken Z-drive, the Countess was going to sail from Burlington, Iowa, about four hours north of St Louis at 6:00 PM Wednesday, instead of 5:00 PM on Tuesday. They would get us there by buses and we would skip Hannibal altogether. And, because of the paddle boat’s reduced power, it would be *pushed* (i.e. “assisted,” their word) all the way to Red Wing, Minnesota by a *tugboat* named the Peggy Louise.



Did we want to change our travel plans? No, thank you.

Anyway, we did arrive at the Hilton by 10:00 PM Monday night, thanks to a surprisingly easy taxi ride from the airport. For what it would have been worth, we would have saved a lot of money and time if we had known of the cancellation *before* we left Brookdale on Sunday. We *could* have left leisurely on Monday morning for the Albuquerque airport in time for that afternoon flight to Austin.

## **And How We Got Home**

At the time I set up the faulty American Airlines flights to St Louis, I found that there was a very convenient Delta flight direct from MSP, Minneapolis-St Paul, to Albuquerque, getting us there in the early afternoon of Tuesday, August 2. That I immediately glommed onto for our return. And I was also able to use up a lot of my frequent-flyer Delta miles that I had no easy way of otherwise using. Great! Who knew it could be so easy?

Well, it wasn't so easy. On May 28 Delta informed me that they had canceled that direct flight altogether. Without loss of my frequent-flyer miles, they were happy to route us home to Albuquerque by way of Los Angeles and then on to Albuquerque by 5:01 PM! Which would put us in the air for a lot longer than any reasonable person would consider reasonable. Actually, that wasn't Delta's *first* choice – they wanted us to go through Atlanta instead, which would have gotten us home earlier in the afternoon. But that choice involved flying from MSP at 9:00 AM, which would have been very difficult. The Countess disembarked from Red Wing about an hour or more from the airport. Their bus to the airport was to leave at 8:00 AM, i.e., too late to make that flight

After checking to see if there was some other way home, such as by United (for which I *didn't* have any frequent-flyer miles), we decided to go with the Delta's plan via Los Angeles. We landed at LAX about on time, in a very busy terminal with a longish walk to the next gate, a very tight connection. And somehow we boarded the Canadian Regional Jet for ABQ even ahead of most of the other passengers. Was it because of our gray heads of hair? And flew about on time.

On landing and picking up our two checked roll-on bags, it was supposed to be a simple matter of calling up the front desk at La Quinta, about 5 minutes down the road, to be picked up to get to our car. Not quite so simple, as no one had come for us in the half hour after I called. So we punted and took a taxi to La Quinta for a mere \$10 – so much for the saving on our parking fee.

During the wait for the La Quinta van I had called the Brookdale kitchen to have two take-out suppers available for pickup, hopefully by our arrival there by 7:00 PM. Driving through a small rain squall we got to the Dining Room as the girls were closing up. No packages to pick up! “We must have thrown it away when you didn't come.” Nuts! By now Jere was so exhausted that it didn't really matter if we ate or not. Well, not so dire after all. On returning the lock-out boxes to the front desk, I found Tim had left the takeout boxes there with Gary for my pick-up at 7:00; Gary just forgot to mention that when I checked us in. We ate that night's boxed suppers for lunch the next day.