

# FLOAT TRIPS

## Missouri River float trips join St. Charles County wine country menu



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**ST. CHARLES COUNTY** • A Missouri River float-trip business is the latest tourist feature in St. Charles County's wine country, giving metro area residents a closer alternative to smaller Ozarks streams.

Joe Brazil and his wife, Kelly, began renting canoes, kayaks and eight-person rafts to use on the Missouri a few weeks ago as an offshoot of their wine bistro in Defiance.

Brazil said the peace and quiet on the Missouri between St. Charles and Hermann, Mo. — the stretch he's concentrating on — was a contrast to the hubbub on some Ozarks venues.

"It's a lot different float," said Brazil, a St. Charles County Councilman. "There's a lot less traffic. You don't get the hordes of partygoers."

Experts say that although the Missouri is wider and deeper than some other popular float areas and has its own hazards, it is not necessarily more dangerous.

Among Brazil's customers last weekend was Glenn Wenzel, 50, a roofing executive from Collinsville who previously floated at smaller locations such as the Meramec River.

"It's a big, wide, deep river; I was a little nervous at first," said Wenzel, who was among nine people journeying from Washington, Mo., to Klondike County Park east of Augusta.

But he said he quickly became more comfortable.

"It was nice to do more of a steering thing," he said. "You didn't have to paddle a lot."

He said he liked the "wide-open adventure experience."

"There's a lot more water between you and the shore" than on an Ozarks float trip, he said.

Brazil's Missouri River Excursions, which offers day trips and longer journeys, is the latest example of a gradual increase in recreational use of the river in the St. Louis area and elsewhere in Missouri.

He joins Big Muddy Adventures, operated by Michael Clark of Riverview in north St. Louis

County.

Clark has been offering since 2002 trips of varying distances along the Missouri — and the Mississippi River as well. That includes moonlight rides near the confluence of the two rivers.

Clark operates on the Missouri between Rocheport in central Missouri and the confluence, and on most of the Mississippi from Lincoln County to New Madrid in southeastern Missouri.

Then there's the Missouri American Water MR340, a yearly 340-mile endurance race for canoes and kayaks on the Missouri between Kansas City and St. Charles, begun in 2006.

Organizers say 650 paddlers in 400 boats have signed up for this year's event, to be held July 8-11.

Jim Low, a state Conservation Department spokesman who has written extensively about Missouri River floating, said that 15 years ago it was rare to encounter another boat — particularly a canoe or kayak.

"Now you see it all the time," he said.

Low said the Missouri didn't pose more safety concerns than a smaller river or creek.

"There are inherent dangers on any stream you go on," Low said. "There are simply different things you have to watch out for."

He finds floating on the Missouri less stressful because "you have so much time to react" to potentially dangerous situations because you can see them well in advance.

"A barge creates big wakes, but you can see it a mile away" on the wide Missouri, he said.

He also said floaters had to look out for buoys and small dikes.

On the other hand, Low said, unlike on a small winding creek, you won't come around a bend and quickly have to maneuver around a tree that's fallen across the water.

Moreover, Scott Schweiger, an architect from St. Charles County who was among Brazil's first customers, said a paddler on a creek could "bottom out" or encounter rapids.

However, Clark said, Missouri River paddlers and the outfitters serving them need to be prepared for sudden rainstorms and quick rises in water level and outline procedures to deal with those situations.

Pete Tully, who runs a St. Charles County marina on the Mississippi, added that inexperienced kayakers and canoeists would be more likely to panic when overturning in a wide river than they would in a small stream.

Dave Kolarik, a spokesman for the Army Corps of Engineers, said the Missouri River in central and eastern Missouri typically was nine to 13 feet deep in the navigational channel and shallower closer to the bank.

However, he said, the depth can increase to 23 feet in periods of heavy rain.

Not all river trip businesses succeed. Barbara Kieffer of the Lincoln County town of Foley said

her husband opened one a few summers ago on the Mississippi but stopped because of too few customers.

Users tout the unspoiled beauty of the area. Schweiger, 50, who took a canoe with a buddy from Defiance to St. Charles, was surprised that they didn't see many houses and commercial buildings along the river.



“The best part of that is you didn't have to drive an hour and a half” to get there, he said.

Late last month, Lora Taylor, 49, of Dalton, Ga., took a different kayaking route with her daughter and her daughter's fiancé while visiting St. Charles.

“It was easier than I thought it would be,” she said of the paddling required during their 3½-hour trip.

She was also struck by the lack of development within view.

“It was us and nature,” she said. “It looked like you were way out in the boonies.”

## **River trip info**

Operators shuttle customers to drop-off spots, then pick them up.

Renting parties can go on their own or be accompanied by a guide.

Missouri River Excursions prices start at \$75 for a half-day kayak rental, \$85 for a half-day canoe and \$295 for a half-day raft for at least six people. More information is available at [missouririverexcursions.com](http://missouririverexcursions.com).

For Big Muddy Adventures go to [2muddy.com](http://2muddy.com).