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SIDE ORDERS

On a Seattle Houseboat Tour, Floating With the Joneses

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Sunday, October 16, 2005; Page P10

WHAT: A one-hour tour of Seattle's houseboat scene.

WHERE: Lake Union, near the University of Washington and slightly north of Pike Place Market.

WHY: So you can see where Tom Hanks was "Sleepless."

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They say there are no stupid questions, so I threw out the question that everyone was thinking but no one was asking: How fast can Seattle's famous domesticated vessels move?

Okay, so some queries aren't so Mensa. Houseboats never leave the city's docks, explained tour guide Jeri Callahan at the start of the excursion, which depart daily from Yale Street Landing Pier. They don't have engines, gas tanks or steering wheels. In fact, they're more house than boat, which is why in real estate parlance they're often called floating homes.



In Seattle, cruise around Lake Union with the Houseboat Lady to see one of the country's largest communities of floating homes, including Tom Hanks's houseboat in "Sleepless in Seattle" (below, in center of photo with flag). (By David Blandford)

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"This is the most desirable way to live," said Callahan, 70, who calls herself the Houseboat Lady. "One of the best reasons to live here is

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that you don't have to mow the lawn."

In Seattle, which is surrounded by large cutouts of water, you can't go too far without having to cross a bridge or skirt a shoreline. So it's no surprise that houseboats in some incarnation have been around since at least the 1890s, when sailors, fishermen and dock workers in Elliott Bay built homes atop floating logs that were turned into rafts.

During the Depression, low-income laborers took advantage of the geography and built or moved into tax-free houseboats, barges or other watercraft. The houseboat population peaked in the 1930s, at about 2,000, but has since dropped to around 500. Still, Seattle boasts one of the country's largest houseboat communities, with the greatest concentration on the east side of Lake Union. Looking from the water, the neighborhoods resemble a Venetian Candyland, with dollhouse-style homes painted lollipop colors, docks that double as sidewalks and canals-cum-streets.

On a drizzly, gray day, four passengers cruised around the lake's edges in an electric-powered boat, listening to Callahan describe the houseboat caste system. At the top are floating homes, which have the same amenities as regular houses, such as flush toilets connected to sewer pipes, electricity, chimneys and landscaping (the trees are potted, though). The older models hover close to the water on cedar logs, the newer ones on Ferro-cement and Styrofoam floats. Less elite are the old-school barges, which sit on hulls, lack engines and a sewage system (toilets are of the holding tank variety), and must be towed from place to place. Finally, there are liveaboards, which are like aquatic RVs and look no different than boats you'd see on a fishing trip.

Houseboat owners of all types accessorize their properties with quirky sculptures, abundant flower boxes and even a towering Native American totem pole. The most famous floating home is the one that appeared in the 1993 movie "Sleepless in Seattle," which is docked off



(David Blandford)

Lakeside Avenue. Early in the tour, we pattered close enough to view its beige exterior with forest-green trim and purple door. Callahan said when the current owners are around, they usually pop out to wave hello. Alas, only the "lawn" gnome was home.

"Houseboaters really enjoy tourists," she said, "as long as they stay on the water."

Of course, if you truly want to stay on the water (i.e., overnight), you

can rent a houseboat as easily as you would a lake cottage. Acadia Houseboat Rentals (206-200-8636, <http://www.seattlehouseboatrentals.com/>), for example, offers houseboats and barges, such as Heart & Sol, a 42-foot custom-design model that has a suburbanite's kitchen and a dot.com mogul's skyline view (rents start at \$190 a night).

The chicest place to live is Roanoke Reef, where price tags are in the seven figures and the homes' square footage exceeds 2,000 square feet. The designs are straight out of Architectural Digest; one was a modern gray box in the Mies van der Rohe style, another had an elegant spiral staircase leading to a rooftop Eden. A home owned by a Microsoft retiree includes a basement and a wine cellar -- with Cousteau views.



(Jeri Callahan)

As Callahan cruised to another section of the lake -- her own neighborhood -- the cute quotient increased exponentially. Pink flamingos. Duck crossing signs. A great blue heron sculpture -- oh, wait, that one's real. The stories behind the front doors were equally colorful, such as that of owners Robby Rudine and Janet Yoder, who designated the area around their houseboat the Sovereign Nation of Tui Tui (it's actually a spot beneath the I-5 bridge). The "country" even has its own stamps and post office inside the Grand City of Tui.

"I love the water," said Ruth Ann Hirsh, a tour member visiting from Michigan. "If I could afford it, I would live like the Houseboat Lady."

Unfortunately, Callahan isn't selling -- but you're always welcome in her neighborhood.

-- Andrea Sachs

*Jeri Callahan's one-hour houseboat tours are offered daily at 10 a.m. or by appointment. The best time to go is April through October. Cost is \$35 per person with a minimum of four people. Info: 206-322-9157, <http://www.discoverhouseboating.com>. General info: Seattle Floating Homes Association, <http://www.seattlefloatinghomes.org>.*

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