

End of the line awaits bateaux

Crews nearing their destination

BY KATHRYN ORTH

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

SCOTTSVILLE — For sale: One 40-foot, flat-bottomed, blunted gondola, used only once. Suitable for James River Batteau Festival, or recycle the boards to build a house.

The gondola, a reproduction of a type of merchant boat used two centuries ago to carry goods down the James River, is one of the boats in this year's festival, an eight-day, 120-mile trip from Lynchburg down the James to Maidens Landing.

The gondola's blunt bow and stern make it different from the larger bateaux. It is also intended just to drift downriver, rather than be poled down by boatmen standing on the walkboards along the sides.

A gondola was originally a one-way boat, intended to be sold for lumber at the end of the journey.

So, true to the boat's history, its builders intend to sell it, and build another for next year's festival. As the bateaux and the gondola make their way down the river, Chuck Modjeski, Bobby Shortridge, and the rest of the gondola crew are handing out fliers offering the boat for sale.

The price is negotiable, they say. They have about \$2,200 invested in the wood. The boat was made from one log, and each board is 40 feet long and 14 inches wide, Modjeski said. It was built by Modjeski, Shortridge and other crew members at Shortridge's Powhatan business, Dreaming Creek Timber Frame.

And then there are the gondola's cedar sweeps, the large oars at the front and rear of the boat for steering. The crew had an offer for the sweeps, but will sell the sweeps only with the boat, Modjeski said.

He said he would not be surprised if someone wanted the gondola for next year's festival. He expected it to be an unwieldy boat but found out differently.

"I've known about these boats for years and been curious about how they handle," Modjeski said. "I thought it would be much harder to handle than a bateau, but it's not."

The crew of the gondola, named the Dreaming Creek Rocket, was enjoying the good weather and good water of the festival but still had to go over the side and push their boat off rocks occasionally.

"That last rapid was fun. It was big and most of the people had to get out and push," said 11-year-old Adrian Vegas, as the crew negotiated the shoals above Howardsville on Tuesday.

Other Richmond area boats also were having a good run. The all-female crew of the bateau Lady's Slipper had the energy to sing as they poled their bateau along, unlike last year, when bailing a leaky boat left the crew exhausted.

The Lady's Slipper crew hoped to see their old boat, which broke up and sank near Wingina last year. There were reports parts of it had been seen below Howardsville, but the crew did not find it by midweek, Capt. Betsy Healey said.

The bateau Lord Chesterfield also reported a good run. The crew on Wednesday numbered only four, although all were seasoned bateau veterans, said Capt.



KATHRYN ORTH

Crew members of the Dreaming Creek Rocket headed toward Howardsville on Tuesday. They intend to sell the gondola after completing their 120-mile trip down the James River.

Will Turnage.

"With a minimum crew, I have learned a lot about using the boat and the crew to overcome the obstacles in the river," he said. The crew had pushed their 6,000-pound boat upstream off a rock, then rotated it in the river

to put it back on course, he said.

The bateaux travel today to Cartersville. The festival ends tomorrow with the late-afternoon arrival of the boats at Maidens Landing in Powhatan County.

• Contact Kathryn Orth at (804) 392-6605 or korth@timesdispatch.com