

## LOCATING LOTUS LAND

Glenna Holloway

In his wanderings, Odysseus met the lotus-eaters, the Lotophagi, and legend said that other men who ate the seed and drank the juice of their rare flower would lose all desire to return to their own homelands.

The magic persists today if you can find the source. Most people have never seen the North American lotus, Nelumbo lutea, although it's our largest native flower. Most people who have seen it feel it's also our most beautiful.

The best place to find lotus in great quantities is Reelfoot Lake in the northwest corner of Tennessee near the Missouri and Kentucky borders. They bloom in profusion from mid July through August.

Reelfoot has long been a Mecca for anglers. Many fishermen claim they make their best hauls near certain lotus colonies. Others call nelumbo a nuisance plant like



water hyacinths, and insist it's bad for the most desirable kinds of fish. Naturalists have discounted any adverse effect on fish or fowl. Growing numbers of visitors come not to fish at all but to see the lotus.

There is a wealth of wild life and wild beauty in and around the lake including turkeys, deer and a multitude of song birds and waterfowl. It's one of the best places on the Mississippi flyway for watching flamboyant wood ducks. Reelfoot is seldom crowded except on peak weekends. Even then it's easy to find an isolated spot if you fancy a solitary wilderness experience.

The intense blue lake was formed by a prolonged series of earthquakes in the winter of 1811-1812. It was a dramatic upheaval felt as far away as New Orleans. It radiated through the Mississippi valley and sank an ancient cypress forest which the river filled. Because the area was so sparsely settled, there was little loss of life. Chickasaw lore says the name came from a chief with a deformed foot and a peculiar gait who was called Reelfoot. He stole a forbidden bride from another tribe and the earthquake was caused when the Great Spirit stomped on Reelfoot as punishment. Less imaginative versions tell of the natives' reeling walk when continued tremors swept the area.

The newly renovated R. C. Donaldson Museum on Highway 22



is a good place to begin a Reelfoot vacation. The exhibits are excellent, including a working seismograph measuring the earth's internal movements. The history of the lake's violent birth to the present is depicted, and friendly rangers answer questions and provide maps. The boardwalk behind the museum affords shady strolling and intimate views of the water and majestic trees.

Huge bald cypresses frame the basins and wade out from the undulating shoreline. (They're called bald because, although classed as an evergreen, they drop their needles in autumn.) The famed Reelfoot boats ply the blue in search of crappie, bream, largemouth bass and catfish. Dale Calhoun still builds the boats by hand as his father did and his father and grandfather before him. Designed to handle the snags of sunken cypress that still lurk only inches below the surface, it's called a "stumpjumper." The motor's propeller is protected by a steel shield, and the boat's fiberglass-coated cypress and oak construction is designed to slide over the jags without turning over. For the uninitiated it's an unnerving ride the first time, especially with the resounding thumps on the hull relayed ominously through your soles. But faith wins out and once you're among the lilies or a crappie grabs your bait, the worry ends.



It's advisable to take your first trip across the lake with the park naturalist aboard a large pontoon boat to locate the masses of lotus. Very few flowers can be seen from the shore. The ranger's patter is not only informative and interesting but you'll be officially invited to pick a lotus or two. In other state or national parks, you're warned not to touch the flora. At Reelfoot you may boldly take samples back to your room.

The center of the flower is filled with gold stamens curving tightly over the pale yellow platform that will later turn bright green, form holes across its surface and become a woody brown seed pod the size of a teacup. After the ivory satin petals drop, you'll still have an almost indestructible keepsake to add to a dried winter bouquet.

The guide will demonstrate how Indians used the latex sap from the plant's stem as sewing thread and a catfish fin bone as a needle. Indians also wore the enormous leaves or pads as sun hats. They dried the seeds to pound for flour, and toasted them like nuts. You'll probably be offered a taste.

Choctaws called the lotus "yonkopin." Most botanists say the lotus is related to the water chestnut or chinquapin. Whether plant lover or camera buff, prepare to be enchanted. But be forewarned-- like Odysseus, the very sight of them

can make you forget about going home.

The nearby towns of Tiptonville and Samburg offer motels, cabins, campgrounds, trailer hook-ups and a several types of food services. Southern fried chicken, fresh fish and country ham dinners with biscuits are easy to find and easy on the budget.

For convenience, comfort and rustic charm, it's hard to beat the state operated Airpark Inn. It has double rooms or suites, each with its own balcony over the water. There's also an all-weather airstrip and a good restaurant. Toll-free number for reservations is 1-800-421-6683.

Other lodging arrangements may be made with: Samburg Motel, Samburg, TN 38254, telephone (901) 538-2385 (evening) -(901) 538-2483 (day); Boardman Resort, Hornbeak, TN, telephone (901) 538-2112; Gray's Camp, Tiptonville, TN 38079, telephone (901) 253-7813; Eagle Nest Motel, Box 8, Lake St., Samburg, Tn 38254, telephone (901) 538-2143.