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Hovercraft heaven

City dubbed 'Hover Haute' for week

By Matt Miller/Tribune-Star

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Goran Jurum came from Croatia to be in Terre Haute for World Hovercraft Week and Sunday's cruise down the Wabash River.

It drew Owen and Lynn Ellis from Melbourne, Australia, even though the trip took about 24 hours.

Bob Rennick spent about 30 hours on the road coming from a town within Ottawa. His road directions software got him a little lost in upstate New York, but he said it was worth it to get here.

Others came from Japan, Sweden, Italy and France to be in Terre Haute this week. So why make the trip?

One answer would be to associate yourself with an entry in the Guinness Book of World Records.

With about 50 crafts gathered in Fairbanks Park on Sunday morning, the hover-lovers established a new world record for the largest gathering of the crafts, said Chris Fitzgerald, chairman of the 2002 World Hovercraft Championships.

They congregated in Fairbanks for the beginning of a two-day cruise on the Wabash River. The trip kicked off the week's events, which will include the world championship races at Wabash Valley Family Sports Center and an attempt to break a world speed record on a hovercraft in Fairbanks Park.

After coasting past river towns, including Montezuma, Perrysville, Covington and Attica, they stopped in Lafayette for rest before returning to Terre Haute today.

For Rennick, however, the week isn't about the record. In a word, it's the camaraderie. Hovercraft enthusiasts love being with each other and love to help each other out, he said.

"At competitions, they'll help each other out right until the last minute," he said. "Until they get on the track."

That's also why Steve Wilkins has been attending rallies every year since he began working with hovercraft.

"The most enjoyable part of hovercrafting is hover buddies," he said over the din of roaring two- and four-cycle hovercraft engines warming up before the race.

Traveling from his home in Celina, Ohio, to Terre Haute for hovercraft events also means he gets to see his sister. He arrived Friday evening for dinner and bowling in Clinton.

"They treat me like royalty," he said. "I always enjoy coming over here."

And so does Ellis, who traveled from Australia to Terre Haute for the third time. The Terre Haute people's love of hovercraft amaze him.

"I've never seen so much public support on a grassroots level," said the 30-year hovercrafting veteran. "It's just what we want to see. In a huge city you'd never see that."

Andy and Lynn Tirums drove 350 miles from Cookeville, Tenn., to check them out personally before Andy begins to build one.

"It's kind of cool," Andy said, watching the drivers make last-minute checks to their crafts before embarking on the cruise.

Doug Breneman isn't looking to build a hovercraft, but the two-cycle motors are similar to an old motorcycle he's planning on tinkering with. He was impressed with some of the "trick exhaust systems, which is what I'm lusting for."

Just from being there, he could notice differences between designs from America and overseas. He admitted the crafts were "nifty," but he wasn't about to switch from the motorsport he loves.

"Now if we could just get some [of these] folks over to motorcycle racing," he said.

Mayor proclaims city's new name - Hover Haute

The 2002 World Hovercraft Championships isn't being held in Terre Haute; it's in Hover Haute. At least for a week.

Mayor Judy Anderson proclaimed the city's new name, active only during World Hovercraft Week - Sunday through Sept. 22.

The city's new alliterative name draws attention to the national championships in a unique way, she said.

The name was coined while Anderson chatted with a patron of Crossroads Blues Fest. Initially, the proclamation was supposed to honor the week, but Anderson decided to use her administrative power a little differently.

"I guess that's in our power to do that, so we did it," she said.

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