THE ATCHAFALAYA RIVER: THE RIVER GATOR’S BEST ROUTE TO THE GULF

303.7 OLD RIVER LOCK AND DAM: ENTRANCE TO THE ATCHAFALAYA RIVER

Go main channel around Shreve’s Bar for access to the Atchafalaya River, your best route to the Gulf of Mexico. Also: direct access upstream to the Red River, Ouachita River, Bayou Bartholomew, and all other tributaries upstream. Access to the Three Rivers WMA, Red River WMA, and Lake Ophelia NWR.

Fork in the Road. Gulf-Bound Paddlers: here is where you must make your final decision about industry or wilderness. Go right through the Old River Lock & Dam to get to the wild Atchafalaya River. Or stay on main channel Mississippi for the industry. You will be fine either route. If you have gotten this far, you have obviously learned how to paddle the river in all conditions. Still, one way might be torturous, and the other a peaceful culmination of all of the beauty you have experienced so far. The road not taken. The choice is yours. Make it, and don’t look back.

The 150 mile long Atchafalaya River makes for an enticing alternative for paddlers who want to avoid the heavy industry awaiting them below Baton Rouge. Imagine paddling down the richest and largest river swamp in North America as opposed to paddling down the busiest and largest inland port in the world! Unless you are dead-set committed to the traditional Mississippi route, most paddlers would do best to take the Atchafalaya route. Paddlers can enter the Atchafalaya Canal right bank descending above Shreve’s Bar at mile 304 through the Old River Lock and Dam. The Atchafalaya is a distributary of the Mississippi and Red Rivers. One third of the average daily flow of the Mississippi passes down the Atchafalaya, which makes it the shortest big river in America. At nearly one-million acres, the Atchafalaya Basin is North America’s largest riverine swamp. It contains monstrous ecosystems of marshland, bottomland forests, lakes, bayous, and estuaries. The Atchafalaya (Native American for Long River) offers a baseline for big river health and ecosystem vitality. The Atchafalaya Basin is a key estuary for nesting, breeding, and migration of 250 bird species, 60 species of reptiles & amphibians, and it is also the life-support system for close to 100 species of fish. One of the most profound aspects of the Atchafalaya River is its ability to improve water quality as the river runs its course to the Gulf. (Its muddy deltas are examples of how the Mississippi River should be working below New Orleans, but isn’t because the Mississippi River water is not allowed to filter through the brackish wetlands, having been cut off by levees and canals) The disappearing coast of Louisiana is being saved along one of the Atchafalaya distributaries, called Wax Lake. The Wax Lake channel is creating a totally new delta as the sediments of a nation fall out of the muddy flow and congeal to form fresh land.

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