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COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: The rice fields of Arkansas are amazing and underappreciated

Campbell Vaughn Columnist

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East bound and down (minus a load of Coors beer) was Part Two of my buddy Jeff and my adventure traveling from Denver to Augusta a couple of weeks ago.

For a recap, day one started in Colorado and headed east to tour through Kansas seeing windmill farms as far as the eye could see. The windmills were hard to miss considering they are close to 5,000 of them and they are 400 feet tall.

Day two led us through the Ozark mountains, which was a quite the scenic stretch. And on day three we eased into the flat lands of the Mississippi delta.

Our final resting place for day three's travel was the home of the blues and Elvis -- Memphis, Tennessee.

Coming out of the Ozark's into the flat lands, we saw miles and miles of farm land. The cotton was easy to spot as was the corn and soybeans, but the yellow fields of rice were what I considered the showstopper.

Being an Augusta boy with rolling hills, I wasn't used to seeing rice fields. What we saw in this area west of Memphis was loaded with them. And to be more specific, 1.4 million acres of rice fields are scattered throughout Arkansas. The Natural State produces over 40% of the United States' total rice crop. In comparison, Georgia's largest crop is cotton at 1.1 million acres cultivated.

The reason for all the Arkansas rice is the land is flat, the climate is mild and there is an abundance of water.

Rice is a unique crop because it is a semi aquatic plant that can handle saturated soils where traditional crops cannot. Most of the time the fields are planted in March, grow to 3-4 feet and at 120 days is ready to harvest. Traditionally the fields have levies that allow the rice to stay flooded and sustained at 2-4 inches of water for the growing season. This method prevents soil erosion, improves the quality of water and creates habitat for wintering and migratory fowl. As a matter of fact, 35% of the food resources available to these birds in the U.S. comes from cultivated rice fields.

Harvesting rice is another interesting process. The fields are drained and have to dry some after the 120 days of growth to get the combines into the rice paddies. On the ride through Arkansas, Jeff and I saw a bunch of track-driven combines and tractors which makes a sense because they can handle the saturated soils without being bogged down like tire vehicles tend to do. I can't imagine how hard it would be to get a \$1 million dollar combine stuck to the axles out of the middle of a 50-acre field in the middle of nowhere. There isn't enough chain west of the Mississippi to fix that problem.

Campbell Vaughn: Windmills made a 'big' impression on recent road trip through Kansas

The staggering fact that I found draw dropping about the Arkansas rice production wasn't just the 1.4 million acres of rice fields, but that each acre averages a harvest of 7,500 pounds. Get your calculator out and blink your eyes a little bit to get used to seeing the numbers on your calculator. The amount of rice produced is 10.5 billion pounds of rice. That's the weight of two Empire State Buildings.

Worldwide the average person eats 148 pounds of rice each year which means Arkansas can feed rice to over 700 million people annually. In the U.S., the average person consumes about 25 pounds of rice which would feed 420 million Americans. Since the U.S. only has 330 million people, we are going to have to started finding more recipes for rice to help those poor farmers in the "Natural State" move some product.

Traveling is so much fun when you can see what is happening in other parts of the world. Even if the Arkansas rice fields are only 650 miles away from home, there is a whole lot going on that I had never considered until I get out to see it myself. Next year, I am thinking of going to see some of those 10,000 lakes I keep hearing about in Minnesota. Maybe I will try and wet a line, too.

