Serendipity Princess preparing for the fall

By Evan French

The crew of a 265-passenger triple-decked paddlewheeler is gearing up for autumn, when they’ll start making fall colour cruises along the Trent Severn Waterway. Spending the winter in Midland, the Serendipity Princess has now made her way up through the waterway, across the marine railway at Big Chute, and up to Port Severn, where she’ll meet tourists eager to get a snapshot of beautiful fall colours along the system starting Sept. 26.

Elaine Willison, boat operations manager for Midland Tours, said the ship’s paddlewheel is just for show — since it is actually powered by diesel — but that doesn’t take away from the beauty of the trip, which starts and finishes at Lock 45, chugging down to Big Chute in between.

“We offer 2-1/2-hour cruises,” she said, and added the ship’s been making these trips for around 17 years, giving guests a close-up peek at cottages and islands along the route.

“We basically just promote it for the fall colour tour,” she said.

Although the ship is capable of carrying 265 people, numbers are usually limited on the fall tour to ensure there is enough room on the lower decks for everyone in case the weather turns foul.

“We go rain or shine as long as we have enough passengers, so we try to make sure there aren’t people up on the top deck getting wet,” said Stephanie Weissflog, an inside sales rep for Midland Tours. “So probably about a hundred people.”

Willison said her favourite part of the trip is the marine railway, a huge carriage mounted on rails to carry large ships over a stretch of granite, one of only two of its kind in the world. Engineers opted to use the railway temporarily while they built a lock, but when they realized it was an effective barrier against sea lampreys, they decided to leave it.

“It makes it very unique. Many people don’t even realize what it is,” she said.

When the ship was acquired many years back, the amenities were revamped to accommodate full-course dinner service and bands for entertainment.

While it will be another month or so before the leaves undergo appreciable colour change, the ship will be making lunch and dinner cruises in the meantime.

“Weissflog said repairs made at Big Chute this year now allow the ship to get up to Port Severn. It’s a tight route, since the canals of the waterway aren’t very wide, giving passengers an intimate cruising experience.

“They put a lunch cruise on it or a dinner cruise with live entertainment,” explained Weissflog. “It’s a beautiful tour.”