

COOL CATS

Ahoy, Kitty

AMERICAN BOBTAIL GUSSIE LIVES A LIFE OF LEISURE ON THE MARY DAY SCHOONER.



FRESH FISH, SOFT SEA BREEZES, craggy shorelines and more than 90 feet of deck space to roam under starlit skies is everything the most pampered cat could dream of, but only a few felines have made that dream a reality.

Cats have a long history aboard ships, with duties ranging from official mouser to comfort cat. Besides being excellent mousers, cats were thought to predict weather and, depending on their moods, control it. If a cat went overboard, it was in a sailor's best interest to ensure she found her way back on board. If he failed to, it was believed, the cat could create a ship-sinking storm in retribution.


Meet Gussie

Although only a select few felines are destined for life aboard ship, 6-year-old American Bobtail Gus Hodgkins can lay claim to this life of luxury.

Gussie, as she is affectionately referred to, lives on the Mary Day, a Maine Windjammer, with Captains Barry King and Jen Martin. In addition to the captains and five loving crewmates, Gussie shares her life with up to 30 passengers and a rambunctious yellow Labrador Retriever puppy. Together they sail the Maine coast for four- to six-day cruises during the cool Northeastern summers.

Built in 1962, the Mary Day schooner has had a long succession of ship cats. The tradition began with the original owners of

Gussie relaxes aboard the Mary Day schooner (pictured at right).



Cats have a long history aboard ships. Gussie's main duty is to keep the passengers comfortable and content.

the boat and a very friendly feline known as Stump. When King and Martin eventually purchased the *Mary Day* in 1998, they adopted Chakra, a cat who came to town on a catamaran and lived aboard several different boats for many years. Chakra became well known for chasing ducks *into* the harbor and, because she swam like a dog, often arrived home soaking wet.

Gussie is Chakra's successor and her alter ego. She hates water, despises the winds that ruffle her fur and prefers to sleep the day away rather than chase ducks.

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The captains discovered Gussie at the local animal shelter and named her for a man who worked Hunnewell's Beach lifesaving station.

Legend has it that her namesake, Gus Hodgkins, saved a group of sailors from a schooner that was stranded on the ledges in a river. While saving the crew, he heard the cries of a cat and immediately rowed back out to the vessel through the deluge of rain and wind. He chased

the unfriendly feline from stern to stern until he finally captured him. With the cat stuffed in his coat, Hodgkins rowed back to the beach and the cat, soon to be known as Hunney, took up residence with his savior for the rest of his days. King and Martin have always been intrigued with nautical history and named their cat in honor of this amazing man.

A Typical Day Aboard

Life aboard ship means busy days and, despite obtaining her obligatory 16 hours of sleep, Gussie leads a full and busy life. Morning comes early for both the crew and cat, and all are up by 5 a.m. for coffee. As the crew relaxes, Gussie excitedly makes the trip aft to the galley with Martin for her morning can of cat food. An expressive cat, she holds nothing back as she prances along the top of passenger cabins, clinking the skylight covers, as Martin shushes her and moves on tiptoe down the deck. After a thorough post-breakfast cleanup, Gussie heads back to her cabin and warm bed while the crew begins the day's work.

Gussie selects her napping places

according to the weather conditions. If conditions are less than perfect, she heads aft for calmer quarters, but in nice weather, she prefers to stay near the bow, letting the gentle rocking and soft sea breeze lull her to sleep. Like any cat, Gussie knows the best place to be at any given time.

During the afternoon, she visits passengers by peeking through the screened skylights of their rooms or relaxing on deck under the warm sun. Once in a while, she sashays through the main salon and makes her presence known to her 30 shipmates, particularly if there's a fire crackling in the woodstove. Then, as darkness falls, Gussie quietly patrols the decks. She particularly enjoys listening to the seals bark and watching the porpoises play near the schooner as the boat docks in the early evening hours and the crew prepares for dinner.

She accompanies Martin as they make the evening rounds, walking the passenger



companionways, checking the bilges and inspecting the heads and anchor. After the watch, Gussie enjoys testing her boundaries by sneaking a drink from the water barrel — a strictly forbidden practice. This nightly ritual always results in a stern verbal warning, whereupon Gussie jumps down from the barrel and sulks as the captain makes her way to bed.

Within a few minutes of the crew's retiring, the clattering of the cat door can be heard as Gussie makes her way down

the ladder and into the Captain's bunk for the remainder of the evening. It is here where she lies undisturbed and listens to the ocean waves lapping against the bow.

After a week at sea, Gussie returns home for a day or two of mousing on land and, with King and Martin's help, reading her fan mail. Then it's back to the schooner for the next cruise. Her official job at sea is to keep the passengers comfortable and content. It's a job she does well and often behind the scenes. A quiet, shy cat, she is perfectly content with a pat on the head and hearing any of the comments that follow her around, which often include, "What a sweet and beautiful kitty." 🐾

Stacy Mantle is a freelance writer who resides in the deserts of Arizona. She shares her home with 14 cats, 2 dogs and a very understanding husband. You can visit her at her website, www.PetsWeekly.com.

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