



Before the Mast

Aboard the sailing ships of the Maine Windjammer fleet, passengers voyage into America's maritime history - BY MARIALISA CALTA

"WHERE SHALL THE WINDS TAKE US TODAY?" John Foss, captain of the *American Eagle*, likes to pose this question each morning as his 92-foot, two-masted schooner gets under way on Maine's Penobscot Bay. The vessel might skim down Eggemoggin Reach to Cranberry Island—where, in season, the gardens bordering trim clapboard houses are in bloom and the general store sells boxes of blueberries—or swoop over to uninhabited Wreck Island, its pebbly beach littered with bleached mussel shells and lobster claws from bygone clambakes.

Foss, 57, is the owner and skipper of one of 14 vessels in the country's largest traditional sailing fleet: the Maine Windjammer Association of Camden, Rockland and Rockport. Once responsible for ferrying lumber, granite and other goods up and down the East Coast, the fleet is keeping the 19th-century schooner trade alive and well in the 21st. Today, however, the cargo happens to be passengers.

"These boats are still doing what they were meant to do, which is making money for their owners," says Bob Tassi, skipper of the *Timberwind*, a 1931 windjammer that sails out of Rockport. In 1998, Tassi, now 49, abandoned a successful career as a music producer in Nashville, Tennessee, to take a job as a deckhand aboard the *Stephen Taber*. "One year I was at the Grammys, the next I was scrubbing decks for 125 bucks a week," Tassi says. He has never regretted the move.

Today, along with his wife, Dawn (a nurse who doubles as the ship's cook), Tassi takes on 20 passengers a week, sailing three-, four- and six-day cruises from May through early October. Onboard, his 3-year-old daughter, Emily—sausaged into a pint-size red life jacket—climbs in and out of her mother's lap, or helps scrub the deck, her chubby hands clutching the slippery sponge. Will Tassi, age 8, organizes other kids for a swimming expedition off the starboard bow. Dawn, her blonde hair tied in a ponytail, routinely wakes at 4 a.m. to stoke a wood-fired cookstove and start breakfast for guests and crew. Tassi spends his days charting a course, factoring in the effects of weather and tide, and keeping passengers entertained and informed; he looks most content when, sails taut, the *Timberwind* flies like a giant moth across the water.

In the 19th century, thousands of schooners plied Maine waters; the Penobscot River near Bangor was said to be so jammed with boats waiting to load and unload goods that a person could cross the river on their decks. Once steam and rail began to prosper, however, the schooner trade fell into decline: boats were left to rot. As early as 1935, a former Navy seaman, Frank Swift, began an effort to save a handful of the historic tall ships. Today, several surviving schooners date back to the 1800s, including the *Lewis R. French* and the *Stephen Taber*; others, like the *Heritage*, are reproductions of 19th-century vessels, built for the passenger trade as recently as 1983. All are privately owned; nine are registered as National Historic Landmarks with the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Although all the boats have been refurbished, a Maine windjammer was not designed to afford luxurious accommodation—as passengers quickly learn. "There is no way I'm getting on that thing," Martha (Mattie) Mosher, 90, of nearby Hope, recalls insisting in 1941. That year, at the age of 26, she had driven up from New Jersey to take her first schooner trip on the *Mattie*. Cabins in the aging hulk were lit by kerosene lamps and furnished dormitory-style; there

MARIALISA CALTA, who is a freelance writer in Vermont, frequently reports on travel and history.

In coastal Maine (home to the 40-passenger *Victory Chimes* and lobster feasts, opposite), 14 historic vessels maintain a long tradition of hospitality. Several Windjammers (including the *J. & E. Riggis*, below) are especially family-friendly; the crews welcome children.





was no running water. But once aboard, Mosher was hooked. "I woke up that first morning to the smell of coffee and bacon and salt from the sea, she says. "I said 'these are my digs.'" She returned the next year to begin her long association with the *Mattie* (later rechristened the *Grace Bailey*); she met her late husband onboard and was given her nickname there.

The amenities have improved considerably: many boats now have hot and cold running water in cabins; reading lamps; fresh-water showers, even pianos. But inconveniences remain: temperamental toilets, a lack of privacy and cramped quarters. "I have closets that are larger than the cabins," says Nancy Seibert of Camden, who made her first schooner voyage aboard the *Stephen Taber* in 1983. Still, she says, "to be out on the water with no vestiges of civilization, no sounds of motors—except for the lobster boats—the wind providing your power, releases you. You look at life differently." A regular on the *American Eagle*, she lays claim to her favorite berth—Cabin C—where she can lie snug in bed and hear Captain Foss in the galley, reading aloud to passengers: Kipling's *Captains Courageous*, perhaps, or "Good-by, Lobsters" by Maine poet Holman Day.

"It's the third day that does it," says Annie Mahle of the *J. & E. Riggan*, a 1927 oyster schooner. "The third day is when the magic really happens." Mahle, who is a chef as well as a licensed

captain, and who works the boat with her husband, Capt. Jon Finger, explains: "That first day, when people come aboard, their shoulders are up around here," she says, hunching her shoulders up to her ears. "But by the third day, they are here"—she relaxes, tossing back her long, straight hair—"and folks have gotten to know each other; they are teasing, playing jokes, having fun."

The vessels have distinct personalities. The *Stephen Taber*—captained until recently by accomplished singers Ellen and Ken Barnes, and now by their son, Noah—is identified with onboard musicians. Bruce Greenleaf, a frequent passenger on the *Mary Day*, chose it because the rigging—it is the only schooner in the fleet that flies a fore topsail—makes her resemble his grandfather's boat. "It is a way of connecting with my grandfather, a link with the past," he says.



Each captain tells at least one horror story of a schooner misfit: a woman who arrived toting a huge steamer trunk and expecting a "stateroom"; a family who brought a battery-operated TV/VCR aboard; a businessman wedded to his cellphone. But most passengers seem to understand what they are getting into; considering the number of repeat sailors, they don't seem to mind the no-frills aspects of the voyage. "There are two great places to sail in the world," says Foss. "One is the coast of Maine. The other we haven't figured out yet." ☉