

# Sailing tall

The romance of tall ship sailing on the St. Lawrence

*Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover. —Mark Twain*

**A**nchored in the St. Lawrence River, I am clipped to the fore mast of the Caledonia—a 245-foot square-rigged barquentine. This is my first tall-ship climbing experience. I debate stepping over to the highest yard. After some coaching from sunstreaked crew members, I bend my head, manoeuver my body through some rigging, hold my breath, and take the step. I look around at the expansive view: Parks Canada's Grosse Île winking at me in the distance and the historical St. Lawrence River that led de Champlain to Québec stretching out all around me. I look way down, and wave at the crew and passengers. I cannot stop smiling.

Earlier that week I pull into the Québec City port to embark on a seven-day tall-ship voyage: a Sunday afternoon in mid-July and the morning's pounding rain has eased off into a misty grey. My cab driver asks, "You get to sail on that?" I nod. "You lucky girl." Even in the veil of grey, the first glimpse of the Caledonia exceeds my expectations: so of another world, conjuring the images of Conrad, Melville and O'Brian. Her mystique is evident throughout our entire voyage: people point, try to get as close as they can, smile, and ask questions. Above deck, the ship's masts and sails boast old-world charm; the lower deck is modernly detailed: cabins, dining and bar area with clean lines; sleek lighting fixtures; fresh photography and a cosy, well-stocked library. After a tour and a lunch of grilled-mushroom sandwiches and squash soup

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with zucchini flourishes, the guests (there are 11 of us) undergo a safety session, and by late-afternoon, under a grey wig of midsummer cloud, we slip out of port. I'm already at ease and feeling slightly aristocratic. Ships like these are living beings, full of life and memory, with rhythm and a balance of their own. I am thankful we are sailing on a river with gentle motions that rock me to a comfortable first night's sleep.

After a few days of life on board, I have seen where sky and sea meet, colourful ports like Tadoussac and L'Anse St. Jean that glow with the graceful self-confidence that comes with age and beauty, the jutting, swirled rock faces of the Saguenay fjord, pods of beluga whales dancing beside the ship, and, of course, the crew performing its own dance: coiling and cleating ropes, hoisting sails, climbing and sliding on the rigging to loose and furl the squaresails, standing watch and tendering passengers by zodiac. The land lubber in me is quickly fading away, and I begin to believe that the Québécois landscape, colonial history and culture should only ever be visited by tall ship along the river that has, for so long, held it and nurtured it.

"You're witnessing a historic voyage: cruising the St. Lawrence on a tall ship with passengers," laughs the ship's Chief Officer Aaron Dickson one evening during "happy hour," just before the fresh halibut dinner. A lantern and ropelight illuminate the railing on the upper deck. Most of the guests gather here: some chatting, some enjoying beer or wine, some pensive, looking out into the distance, and nearly everyone snacking on the salmon-cheese wraps and "vegetarian" caviar. "Seriously, no one else is doing this kind of sailing on a river in North America, probably in the world," continues Dickson, who left a commercial freighter for the Caledonia. "I'm here because it's such a unique experience. I grew up sailing: it's in my blood; it's what I love."

No matter where we anchor, the Caledonia's tall masts are easily seen, lending weight to the illusion of being in a more romantic time. After 32 years at sea, Captain Peter Pedersen is on "vacation" from his regular

cruiseline job and couldn't resist the romance of being at her helm. "This is an experience where you step back in time. It's from a different era. It's a romance. She's alive. You won't experience any thing like this with a power-driven vessel." And on a sun-drenched afternoon, it is determined that the winds are right. It's the moment we've all been waiting for: the hoisting of top sails and the main sail. The ship's bosun Nick Tobone kicks into high gear, conducting the movements of the crew like a symphony. Guests are invited to join. "Everyone is working as part of a team," explains Captain Pedersen. "We try not to have a divide between guests and crew."

Harnessing the wind, we sail.

Later that evening, a fellow passenger, McGill professor Denis Tremblay, is still visibly excited about the afternoon's sailing. "When we passed Tadoussac with full sails up today I felt about six inches taller. I was so proud." If the sea gypsy Bernard Moitessier's philosophy that a sailor's joys are as simple as a child's is true, then perhaps on land it is easy to sometimes forget life's simple pleasures. Maybe as a small remedy to daily stressors, we should all take some time out to go to sea. ●

DENIS TREMBLAY

## + if you go

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