SAILOR'S DELIGHT

LOOKING FOR ADVENTURE? TAKE A CRUISE OFF THE COAST OF NEW ENGLAND.

The schooner American Eagle is eight hours into the 120-mile run from Rockland, Maine, to Gloucester, Massachusetts. We're making good time on a fair breeze when the VHF crackles to life. A small sailboat has lost her mast 30 miles offshore, and her engine is disabled. As luck would have it, I might be about to take part in a real-life rescue at sea.

Captain John Foss glances at his first mate, who plots the stranded vessel's coordinates. Neither man speaks, but their expressions say plenty. There's a chance, albeit a slim one, that we're the closest vessel, and thus obligated by the law and custom of the sea to rush to the rescue. Such an operation would take hours, during which time the remnant of Hurricane Ernesto will continue its march up the Eastern seaboard. If the storm reaches Gloucester before we do, our little pleasure cruise will be anything but.

Our late-summer windjammer trip is a departure from the ordinary. Instead of exploring the Maine islands, we're sailing offshore to the Gloucester Schooner Festival and the week's scheduled highlight, the Mayor's Race. We'll miss some of the dramatic inshore scenery, and we're more exposed than usual to foul weather. So John keeps the American Eagle pointed toward Gloucester and waits. In short order the United States Coast Guard representative announces that he has dispatched a commercial towboat and arranged for a helicopter to keep an eye on the stricken sloop; then he chides her skipper for a host of lumberly blunders. False alarm, I think bitterly. Captain John shrugs happily and scans the horizon.

"Look," he says. "Dolphins!" I scramble for my camera, the missed rescue already a memory.

"Schooner sailing is unpredictable; that's one of the things I love about it," says Jenifer LeClair, a fellow...
passenger who is writing a series of mystery novels set aboard schooners. “Last year we had the good fortune to be caught in a full-blown gale.”

My days are filled with smaller adventures, like furling sails and trading pirate jokes. Windjammer cruises often feel more like extended cocktail parties in which the host never runs out of food or patience. “John is the best,” confirms Bud, a Harley-Davidson enthusiast from Chicago who has logged 12 cruises on the Eagle. “Look at this woodwork. This isn’t just a boat. It’s the man’s living room.”

It wasn’t always this way. The American Eagle was the last fishing schooner built in Gloucester, and she was built for work. Christened the Andrew & Rosalie on June 2, 1930, she fished Georges Bank under sail for 15 years. She got her patriotic new name at the start of the Second World War and converted to diesel power at the end of it. Internal combustion is cheaper and more reliable than sails, and there were fish to be caught. For the remainder of her 53-year fishing career, the Eagle worked as an Eastern-rigged dragger.

John got her in 1984 and spent two years rebuilding her from the keel up, stripping away the rotted planking and replacing it with white oak and other stout timber he hand-picked in the Maine woods. My bunk is wedged against the hull in what was once the fish hold, where two broad strips of Douglas fir tell the schooner’s history. One is bright and broad-grained, the other black with age and scored by the pitchforks Gloucestermen used to sling iced cod.

The deck betrays no evidence of the Eagle’s past hardships; it gleams with fresh varnish courtesy of the crew, who spend their waking hours coiling lines and surveying the vessel
for smudged brass. They’re an impressive lot, book-smart kids from places like Dartmouth who aren’t afraid to work like Gloucester fishermen. Captain John watches them contentedly from the helm, rarely saying a word. He doesn’t have to. When John does open his mouth, it’s to deliver pearls of dry humor and nautical wisdom. I get the feeling that it’s his way of coping, if windjammer sailing occupies the middle ground between a Caribbean cruise and real seamanship, most of us passengers belong on the Love Boat end of the spectrum. The *American Eagle* is an immensely complicated and wonderfully refined machine, and all the things that make her work — dozens of wooden spars, hundreds of lines, innumerable brass fittings — are displayed for us to marvel at. It’s as if we’re living inside one of those cutaway drawings of steam locomotives that we pored over as kids, except that we actually get to play with this amazing creation.

Most of this play involves rising at dawn to haul on lines. The boom and mainsail together weigh a ton, and we hoist them 60 feet up the mast each morning to cries of “Two-six! Heave!” The hand-carved wooden blocks provide mechanical advantage, but the work is strenuous — and thankfully, it’s also optional. Most of us are content to let the sound of the crew swabbing the deck serve as our alarm.

That guilty pleasure, and the intoxicating smell of coffee and fresh scones prepared on a wood-burning stove, soon become my morning routine. Food defines the rest of the day as well. Rick Loalbo is a virtuoso on the ship’s cast-iron stove. Split maple logs go in, and fresh-baked bread and savory roasts come out. In true windjammer tradition, our penultimate meal is a lobster feast we couldn’t hope to finish, our last supper an exquisite lobster bisque.

We arrive in Gloucester early Friday afternoon, half a day ahead of Ernesto. The storm had devastated the Carolina
coast 600 miles to the south, but our interest in it is purely personal: Will we be able to race on Sunday?

The highlight of the Gloucester Schooner Festival is the Mayor's Cup, inspired by the great match races between the schooners of Gloucester and Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, in the 1920s and 1930s. The series was born in 1920, when the rich men vying for the America's Cup delayed racing to preserve their fragile yachts from a mere 23-knot breeze. Working fishermen were scandalized. They clamored for a real race between real sailors, and that fall they got it.

Ironically, our reenactment was postponed a day due to the sloppy weather. True fishermen would be disgusted, but Captain John takes the delay in stride.

So the hardiest among us go antiquing in the rain, while the rest below sea chanteys with our new friend Pete Sauza, who is visiting from the schooner Adventure while it nears the end of a keel-up restoration at the Gloucester docks.

The start of a sailing race is a chaotic spectacle as skippers jockey back and forth to seize the best position. When the competing boats each tower nearly a hundred feet above the water, sporting bright wooden spars draped in canvas and American flags straining to take flight, the scene is dizzying. There's order in this mad visual feast, but I can't discern it. I just soak it in. Suddenly a cannon roars, and we're racing.

The Lettie G. Howard leaps across the line with the weather gauge and a boat-length's lead. John comments on her masterful start, and then proceeds to run down his rival with seemingly little effort. He's paying a bit more attention to the set of the sails, and the crew is working with a little more than their usual dispatch, but there's none of the shouting and flapping of canvas we see when we look over our stern. The Lettie G. is well-handled, but our schooner is a little faster, our captain a shade more savvy. At the halfway mark we have a comfortable lead, prompting John to call for lunch. "We've got to keep our priorities straight," he explains as a simple feast of bean soup, fresh-baked bread, and green salad appears on deck.

We cross the line with a two-minute lead, and we don't stop; John just
turns her down East, toward Rockland and home. The new course puts the warm breeze on the schooner's finest point of sail. A gibbous moon chases the sun away as the American Eagle slashes majestically through the swell, her timbers creaking contentedly with the rhythm of the sea. The diesel will sleep through the night, but those of us who stand watch with the crew are rewarded with a precious few minutes at the helm. It's during this time that a veteran crew member of the ripe old age of 22 confesses that he's never had a better night of sailing. Neither have I.

JEFF MOAG is an outdoorsman and adventure writer who lives with his wife in San Clemente, California. He usually goes to sea in kayaks and outrigger canoes.

**DETAILS**

The Maine Windjammer Fleet includes 12 schooners. Seven of them are National Historic Landmarks, and all are privately owned and operated. Three- to six-day cruises range from $395 to $930 per passenger, with all meals included.

sailmainecoast.com

The American Eagle berths at the North End Shipyard in Rockland, Maine.

schooneramerican eagle.com

The Heritage, built in 1983 by her co-captains Doug and Linda Lee, is the newest schooner in the Maine fleet.

schoonerheritage.com

The schooner Adventure is nearing the end of a two-year hull restoration in Gloucester, Massachusetts.

schooner-adventure.org

**READING**

Rigged for Murder, the first of Jenifer LeClair's Windjammer Mysteries, will soon be published by Durban House.

A Race for Real Sailors is Keith McLaren's historic work about the International Fishermen's Cup races.

A Doryman's Day is R. Barry Fisher's collection of stories about schooner fishing in the early 1900s.

Climbing up and down. Weaving in and out.
Yes, finding the perfect shoes is exhausting.

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