

Halfway there: Windjamming on Maine's Penobscot Bay

By Robert Oakes

Whenever Captain Dan Pease of the coastal schooner Lewis R. French utters the words "we're halfway there," I have learned that it's best not to believe a word of it.

You might hear him shout out, "halfway there," while the crew, comprised mostly of paying passengers, is hauling rope to bring down the foresail, even if the task has only just begun. He might slyly reply with a twinkling eye, "we're halfway there," when someone asks how long to the day's destination. Even while attempting to keep the fidgety group gathered together for one final photo before we disembarked on our last day, Captain Dan called out above the crowd, "we're halfway there."

"I don't know why I say that," I heard him explain to no one in particular. "It just comes out."

Of course, when you go out sailing Maine's Penobscot Bay aboard one of the Maine Windjammer Association's fleet of historic schooners, there's never really any *there* to be halfway to. Sure, there are ports of call: quaint old harbor towns, some which feature restaurants, shops and inns and many populated by folks, like lobstermen, who still earn their living from the sea. And there are thousands of fir-lined, rocky islands of varying shapes and sizes rising up from the water or looming through the fog. Some are home to hardy islanders, some feature summer cottages, others play host to the extravagant mansions of the newcomer rich and famous. And many remain untouched, home only to ospreys and eagles. But when we left the French's homeport of Camden early on that first gray and rainy morning, it seemed our only certain course was simply to depart. We set off to catch the wind and to follow where it and the weather wanted us to go.

"We're just out sailing; no big deal," said the captain as he stood at the wheel in his bright yellow rain slicker, his impossibly long beard bejeweled with tiny drops of rain. "This is what it's all about."

And that it was. Aboard the French, I found no casinos, no all-night eateries (we ate just three hearty meals each day prepared in the galley by the ship's cook—and that was plenty), no hot tubs, poolside bars or

fitness centers complete with running track (we got plenty of exercise hauling the massive ropes that draw the anchor and raise the sails). There were no glitzy song and dance extravaganzas (the stage show consisted of Captain Dan sitting atop the galley hatch reading old sea shanties by the glow of lantern light). The cabins had no balconies, no radios and no TVs; the one shower aboard was located in a small closet on deck next to the "head" (that's "toilet" for the landlubbers). There wasn't a single duty-free shop, nightclub or video arcade for the kids. In fact, except for the captain's teenage son, Joe, there weren't any kids.

With all of these usual cruise diversions unavailable to me, what I was able to find, instead, was a true adventure, one that submerged me in an atmospheric experience and put me in touch with the ancient art of sailing. Aboard this creaky but cozy old boat, I felt closer to the wind and water than I could ever be on a luxury cruise liner that towers like a skyscraper on the sea. When the sheer force of the wind sometimes sent the



Photo by Robert Oakes

boat heeling sharply to one side, the frothy, sun-speckled water came up over the sidewalls and slicked the wooden planks underfoot. Whenever the wind shifted just so, I heard the sound of flapping canvas sails overhead as they fluffed, followed by a



Photo courtesy of The Maine Windjammer Association

sudden silence when they caught the wind full-on and billowed.

The captain and his first mate, Garth, worked the sails and rudder, responding to the wind's will with an ease that belied their mastery. Their rapport—not only with the elements but with one another, too—was a joy to watch. It seemed to me a picture of that timeless relationship between old teacher and young apprentice, made even more poignant when I learned that Garth is to become the ship's captain next year following Dan's retirement.

There were friends of the captain onboard with us, too, some old and some new, adding a feeling of familial warmth. In fact, though we passengers came aboard as complete strangers, there was such a friendly feeling on the boat that it wasn't long before we were acting like a family. Everyone helped with the tasks of preparing food and cleaning up after meals. At night, many of us would gather by the warmth of the wood stove in the galley to read or play board games as the boat gently rocked in the water. But of course, as with any family, togetherness could sometimes be too close for comfort. At night, some of us became painfully aware of our shipmates' sleeping habits, particularly the snoring. The walls were paper-thin between the cabins, and *everything*—even whispering—cut through. It was all taken in good spirits, though. There was no mutiny and no one was forced to walk the plank. Still, I was glad that I had remembered to pack a pair of earplugs!

But it was also at night that I experienced some of the most quiet and

meditative moments out on the water. Each night, we anchored in a peaceful harbor. At 10 o'clock, quiet hours began and a hush fell over the top deck. As the moon rose up over the bay, its light would dance and shimmer on the tiny waves in the water. That combined with the silence in the air had a mesmerizing effect. It inspired reflections of the day's adventure and thoughts of what would come. Some were so enchanted by this magical moonlight, they brought their bedding up on deck and slept there all through the night, stars and night above, deep dark sea below.

In the morning, when the sun peeked through the tiny porthole in my snug cabin, just above the bunk, it woke me from a sleep more restful than I ever thought I could have in a little wooden box. I climbed up the ladder outside my cabin door. Others were up on deck already, taking in the warm morning sun. A feeling of anticipation was in the air. It was to be another beautiful day on the open bay sailing ever closer to our destination. *And just where was that again?*

"We're halfway there," said Captain Dan as we picked up another strong gust.

The Maine windjammers operate from May through October. Cruises are still available for September and October, and reservations are now being accepted for next year. For more information about windjamming off the coast of Maine, contact the Maine Windjammer Association by calling 1-800-807-WIND or visit www.sailmainecoast.com. For information about Maine travel packages or TripTiks, contact your local AAA Auto Travel Department.