

My Windjammer Vacation

We are under sail! Four of them to be precise. It is a perfectly beautiful day following a miserably cold and rainy boarding last night. I feared my cold, wet feet might never get warm (as was the case the first night I camped at Camden Hills). But my cabin in the ship's bowel was quite comfortable, even though the cabins are unheated save for what your own body supplies. I soon warmed up and knitted a few rounds before going to sleep.



After blueberry coffeecake on the deck at 6:30 and a hearty breakfast in the galley at 8:00, the crew called for all able-bodied hands on deck and we hoisted the 2 largest sails. These were raised individually with about 6 "heavers" on each side. One side raised the throat or the mainsail (the part attached to the mast) and the other side heaved the rigging that raised the peak of the sail. After the mainsail is up we turn around and use the same process to raise the foresail. It was wonderful to be under sail and leaving the scenic harbor of Camden, Maine for 5 days on the sea.

Long before the "Bucket List" became the



phrase for "things to do before you die" I had my own to-do list, and this adventure took root in

my mind several years ago. I wanted the

experience of being on the ocean with nothing but wind power to move the vessel. So on a Wednesday in October at about 1:30, with my Mitsubishi Raider loaded with a little gear for camping and sufficient clothing to suffice for 11 days of travel and sailing, I headed off. My first stop was to visit old friends and spend the night in Columbus, OH, but the next morning by 11:00 I was really on my way and heading up I-71 to get on I-90 at Cleveland.

I-90 is a continuous toll road across New York, and as much as I'd prefer to NOT pay a toll, the bigger annoyance is the effort it takes to exit and re-enter the highway. If you aren't content with the gas stations and eating establishments located at intervals inside the toll area, you will waste a lot of time and gas to get off and find something on your own. So I stuck with the toll road until I realized my initial campsite goal was too far to make before dark. Being considerably further east, it was getting dark about an hour earlier than in Indiana.

So I got off near Seneca Falls and settled in at Cayuga Lake State Park for the night. The park in on the largest of the Finger Lakes and there wasn't a lot to it besides a campground on the west (255 sites with 3 being occupied that night) and a beach area on the east side of a state highway.

Part of the appeal of purchasing a small pick-up was that I intended to use it as a camper and this one came with what I call a "lid" over the bed.



I had made a screen to keep out mosquitoes, as I intended to sleep with the tailgate down and the lid closed. There appeared to be plenty of room to do this, yet the part of me that is a little

claustrophobic had intervened to keep me from ever getting in and actually pulling the top all the way down. It was a lovely, warm night and I was sitting up, reading by flashlight (postponing the inevitable) when I heard animals engaged in a pitched battle just outside my truck. It started in the bushes but continued across the back of the truck, just a few feet from where I was sitting, and it was quite startling and attention-getting. Within seconds, I overcame my hesitancy to be in an enclosed environment!

I had come through Seneca Falls too late the day before to explore any, but I could tell it was a lovely, former mill town, and so I drove back to it in the morning to have a look around. It turns out to be the birthplace of women's rights and there was an historic site and museum. But not being the sort who thinks my female rights have



been particularly thwarted, I didn't look it up. But I would have liked to have spent more time just exploring the town. It was picturesque with the old Seneca Knitting Mill on the Seneca canal.

I decided to take a little detour from I-90 and travel some on U.S. 20. The map indicated that it was a scenic highway. I

had an idea to take it all the way to Albany, NY. But after 2 hours of incredibly beautiful hills, lakes, valleys and quaint towns, I realized that if I had any hope of making it to Camden, ME,



I'd best get back to I-90, and I found I didn't mind the toll nearly so much.

Basically I drove; around Albany, around Boston and made it on to the right entry and exit ramps--no thanks to the Eastern drivers. They must all take aggression pills before they start their commute. I did make Camden Hills State Park, very conveniently located just a few miles north of Camden. It was just dark when I put my screen up and settled in for the cold night—someone the next day said it was in the 20's.

On Saturday, I explored Camden. The town's commercial heyday was cut short by the building of the rail roads. Before the railroads, freight was moved by ship, Maine was the most



prosperous state in the nation and Camden was a shipping and boat building center. The town has many, great, old houses and mansions, the most famous being White Hall. If you can remember the old movie Peyton Place, it was filmed in Camden because of all the beautiful homes. Most have been turned into B&B's or Inns.

The railroads might have caused the complete decline of Camden, but this was averted when it was discovered by vacationers many years ago. The ship captains' mansions became inns and the little town continues to attract visitors.

Camden was the devil for this Mid-westerter to drive through. Streets are narrow, crooked, steep, and evidently eastern pedestrians were never taught to stop, look both ways, wait for traffic to clear, then cross the street because the

pedestrian is king here. At intervals there are white paint blocks on the street and if a pedestrian looks like he is about to cross, traffic halts. As a pedestrian myself, I once waved a driver to go on through, but this act of kindness was not appreciated at all. With obvious aggravation, she waved at me to get on across.



On Saturday, I had driven up to Mt. Battie, from which there are nice views of Camden Harbor and

beyond. I had read about two other hiking trails that were supposed to lead to nice views of the sea that I intended to climb on Sunday afternoon but Sunday was a rainy, gloomy day. So

instead, I attended a Baptist church service in a 200 year old church, and in the afternoon I did some exploring around the outskirts of Camden and came across a nice lake and



the town of Rockport Harbor. There were partially restored lime kilns and a nice park there. There was a little section of sandy beach—the only beach I saw in Maine. I made a sandwich lunch for myself down by the harbor as did several other visitors. We had been invited to board our vessel at 5:00 on Sunday, and being anxious to see it, I drove back to Camden.

I believe boarding the Mercantile was a shock for all of us. First of all, about half of us had reservations for 2 other ships, but being late in the season, all the reservations they had were

combined onto the Mercantile. Some were not too happy with this arrangement, and two couples, decided not to continue.

I was shown to my cabin, and while I was not expecting a suite, I had not dialed down my expectations quite far enough. The cabins were located in the three hatches and reached by going backwards (they were very strict about this) down ladders. My cabin, irregularly shaped in every way, consisted of a double sized bunk that was sort of sunk back into a low-ceilinged cubby hole. There was enough space to stand erect

in about 4 square feet of floor. The closet consisted of 3 pegs on the wall, and some open space under the bed and at the end of the bed where items could be stuffed. The



berth was comfortable and made up with fresh sheets, and a green and navy striped, Hudson Bay wool blanket. The cabin was tiny, but not unattractive, with wood paneled walls and ceiling. The advantage of being tiny was, that even though there was no heat in the cabins, they were so little that your body heat did a nice job of warming them up. Once I got used to the idea, I loved it!

The “head” (commode) aspect took a little more getting used to. There were 3 heads for the 18 passengers and 5 crew members. Two of the hatches have their own head, but my hatch used the head located in the kitchen/galley and was also used by the crew. Getting there meant climbing my ladder, taking one step, turning, and descending the galley ladder. This head was located about 3 feet from the dining table with a bi-fold door, that offered privacy from direct view, but little else. Farewell to bathroom

modesty. (It is amazing what you can get yourself to do when there is absolutely no other option.) “Flushing” was accomplished by operating a foot pedal (this lets in the water) while moving a lever back and forth about 10 times until the stool is cleared and fresh water is standing in the well. I soon figured out that my bunk was separated from this head by a piece of 1” paneling which acted to convey the sounds of all head activity directly into my cabin. I could always tell when the crew was getting ready to go to bed. Fortunately I am a sound sleeper.

The first night after leaving Camden, we had lobster on the beach with corn on the cob. Appetizers were fire roasted hot dogs, chips and dip, veggie tray and grapes. Having no utensils at all, we were shown how to get at the lobster meat by the break-apart method. Frankly, I have yet to discover the lobster mystique. It always seems that I never make any headway masticating it. I chew for awhile, then give up and swallow. The part in the claw, was tender, but small.

Getting to the beach from the schooner was somewhat exciting. We anchored the



Mercantile, let down the yawl boat and descended a rope ladder into the yawl, a sturdy boat with an inboard motor and wooden tiller that took us near to the shore. The captain seemed intent on loading as many passengers as possible into it. We had 14 the first trip and towed the small row boat, named the Pequod, with the cook and food. We couldn't beach the yawl because of the motor and rocky shore line,

so after the captain got as close as possible, we walked through the tippy Pequod to get to the shore. Because of shortened daylight hours, we didn't do much exploring on the island, but I did walk along the shore and picked up some interesting shells.

The sails come down each evening, and we helped to furl them on top of the mast as the crew lowers the sail. In the morning we helped pull up the anchor. Nothing is motorized on these schooners. Water pump, bilge pump, anchor pulling, raising the yawl, sail raising and lowering are all accomplished by man power.

As the anchor is being pulled up, the huge chain is arranged in heavy wooden box. As with most things on board, there is a particular way to do it, and I helped with this a couple times.

There is a pitcher pump from which comes drinking water

and water for washing up (each person is issued a wash basin). If you want to add hot water to it, the cook always has tea kettles of hot water on the stove. We were invited to bring soft drinks or alcohol (in moderation) and they had coolers with plenty of ice to store it. Just before dark, the crew would set out about a half dozen kerosene lanterns to help us know where the steps were and one was hoisted up one of the masts.

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stiff breeze that day and in the afternoon, 5 other schooners hove into view. We had quite a race, several of us tacking almost in unison. The crew was excited saying it was the first time it



had happened this year. It was a beautiful sight to see nothing but sea and sailing ships.

I was working pretty seriously to finish knitting a sweater that I had wanted to get done before the trip and was determined to finish in time to wear on the boat. Otherwise there wasn't a whole lot going on to occupy us, besides all the good conversation, and mealtimes that we looked forward to. The day began with coffee cake at 6:30 am, the cook having gotten up at 4:30 to start the fire in the wood stove and make it. Breakfast was at 8:00 in the galley. The noon meal was taken up and set out on the hatches; then supper was served in the galley. Only the cook's part of the galley, and a short entry area had enough headroom to stand. We ate, often leaning back against the side of the



ship, with heavy wooden beams overhead and reminded each other continuously to "watch your head" when someone stood up to leave.

The food was not fancy, but very well prepared and plenteous. I think my favorite meal was the

night we had New England boiled dinner with melt in your mouth brisket roast, potatoes, cabbage, a good salad and strawberry short cake with real whipped cream. This was whipped by hand of course, and was served without adding sugar. One day we breakfasted on blueberry pancakes with real maple syrup, and had oatmeal one morning with toppings of raisins, brown sugar or maple syrup (real), chopped pecans and more. The last night we had a "meat feast". A grill was attached to the rail to hang out over the water. Steak was grilled and there was also bar-b-que chicken and ribs, all excellent. There was always a fresh made dessert. One day it was Zucchini Chocolate Cake. It was very good; sort of a Death By Chocolate concoction. Our young chef accomplished all this great cooking with a big wood stove and a piece of counter top about 24 X 18 inches in size. He also kept coffee brewing at all times and tea kettles of hot water for washing up or tea. Dish pans of hot water were brought up onto the hatches and the passengers washed and dried the dishes after each meal.

Besides the captain there were 4 crew members, a cook and a cook's helper. They seemed to truly enjoy each other and even the cook would come up on deck to help out with some sailing tasks. In spite of it being October in Maine, and there were some very cool days, none of the crew, save the captain ever wore shoes.

Three days out we made our way to a village with a boat-building school we had hoped to visit, but it turned out to be closed for the season. However, two of our passengers, who had signed up for just a 4-day cruise, were taken to shore and someone from Camden picked them up. The evening anchor was in a harbor with a lobster fishing village and a lighthouse within walking distance. Somehow I managed to miss getting in the boat to go to shore, so I worked feverishly on the sweater and by the time they returned, I was wearing it. When they saw me in the sweater, they all cheered. It was not my best knitting effort, but the passengers and crew seemed to think it was an amazing

feat, and as it seemed to be getting a little chillier all the time, I was happy to have it finished.

The next day was colder and very clear. We tended to find more excuses to sit in the galley with the wood stove. On this cruise, land, in the form of tree-covered, rocky islands, is never out of sight. I was a little disappointed that we never were out on the open sea, but it was just gorgeous. The other thing that is never out of sight is lobster traps. We traveled for five days, and always, there are lobster markers in view. I don't know how many places are left on our planet that appear to be in pristine condition, but after sailing for several days around these Maine islands the word "pristine" is what came to mind.



The last full day out, Captain J.R. asked if I wanted to take the helm. I did, but the breeze pretty much died as soon as I was in control. He pointed me toward a landmark on a distant island and told me to keep the Mercantile pointed at

it. It is not like driving a car. I zigged and zagged my way forward. Before one of the crew took over, the Captain talked me through one tacking turn, but there was scarcely enough breeze to make the sail come around.



The Mercantile, built in 1934, has no auxiliary power of her own. But when the wind gives

out, or when entering or exiting the harbor, the yawl boat is lowered and secured to the back of the boat and becomes our auxiliary power.

The 18 passengers were made up of a diverse mix of careers, social strata and hometowns. They were from Florida, Georgia, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Montana, California, Arizona and Indiana. There were 2 engineers, 2 nurses, a policeman, a refinery worker, a secretary, a homemaker and a coal miner. Believe it or not, one of them was on kidney dialysis. This plucky couple just brought the solution along and retired to their cabin a couple times a day to do the dialysis. They were all very nice people, and I truly enjoyed getting to know them.

But as all good things come to an end, on Friday we returned to Camden, unloaded our things from the ship and were soon landlubbers again. I have written honestly about my cruise and I'm sure parts of it may not sound entirely appealing. But it was a marvelous little adventure, and I would go back in an instant.

By 11:00 I was heading south toward Boston and trying to decide if I was just going to retrace my route to get home or see something different. Seeing something different won out. I went home via the southern route on I-88 and I-86. It is not so direct and probably added an hour to my time, but it was a good choice. If I ever knew, I had forgotten what a beautiful state New York is. My routes were filled with mountains of trees that were autumn colors, finger lakes and quaint villages.

I decided to stay in a motel my last night out. A real shower seemed like it wouldn't be a bad idea. Of course, I hadn't planned in advance, and it was too dark to do much shopping around. I stayed in a Holiday Inn in Owego, New York for \$110.95. I'd like to say it was worth every dime, but really, it kills me to spend that kind of money to sleep.

In the days before I left, I wondered how I would like driving by myself on a 2-day

journey, but I can honestly say that in the morning, when I walked out of that Owego Holiday Inn, I could scarcely wait to get back in the truck.