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Spirit of Bermuda

This 118-foot sail-training vessel was built for the youth of Bermuda, but belongs to all who are willing to go to sea

by
Laurie Fullerton

Sail training opportunities on a schooner, when they come along, are tough to turn down.

My long association writing about Bermuda and its sailing programs earned me an invitation this past June to join six professional crew and 18 adults on the 118-foot sloop *Spirit of Bermuda* for the 645-nautical mile Marion to Bermuda race. As a guest journalist, I had the unique chance to learn about both the challenges of keeping a sail-training vessel going, and why it is so unique to be on an offshore trip in a learning role.

The *Spirit of Bermuda* was launched in 2005 at a time in Bermuda when most natives had no practical or romantic connection to the island's long history as a maritime economy, and rarely had a chance to sail or experience life at sea.

Bermuda sloops only existed in paintings, and most locals saw no connection between the seafaring life and their own lives.

A three-masted rig whose lines resemble the sleekest Fredonia schooner, the *Spirit of Bermuda* was designed from an 1831 painting of a Royal Navy sloop-of-war and built of

Douglas fir using the cold-molded technique perfected at Rockport Marine in Maine. Since 2005, through the Bermuda Sloop Foundation, the vessel has provided more than 4,000 young Bermudians life-changing experiences with school voyages, school break voyages and summer overseas voyages.



In 2007, the Bermuda Sloop Foundation was awarded the Sail Training Program of the Year Award by Tall Ships America.

Until recently, the Bermuda Sloop Foundation received government support for its educational programs, but budget cuts now mean that the organization must rely exclusively on fundraising; or to be specific, on philanthropic individuals who want to keep the *Spirit* going.

The sloop's participation in the 36th running of the Marion to Bermuda race was financed by Jim Butterfield of Butterfield & Vallis, and his son, Spencer Butterfield, who are among the individuals in the business community who have stepped in since the government slashed funding. Jim and Spencer made the trip, along with Captain Stuart

Birnie, four professional crew, and the Governor of Bermuda, Sir George Fergusson. Our navigator for the race was renowned sailor Larry Rosenfeld of Marblehead and the rest of our crew were novices and first-time sailors who were employees of Butterfield & Vallis. The majority of the crew — including myself, the Governor and the employees of Butterfield & Vallis — had never made a major ocean voyage.

"I grew up with some of these opportunities to do this kind of sailing, and to be able to offer it to people in our company is a great opportunity. I would love to see more companies do something like this," said Jim Butterfield. "For many of those on our staff, this is the first time they have sailed on a boat like this and it is their first time offshore. Having the Governor on board as well is a treat."

I had expected that we would be shunted to the side because of our inexperience, and it would fall to the crew and captain to take on most tasks, but the truth is we sail trainees did a lot of the work ourselves. We had watch captains who helped, but we were allowed to evolve, improve and participate fully.

In fact, our helmsman at the start of the race, Dennis Bean, came from the accounting department of Butterfield & Vallis. He had never driven a boat before. He took us across the starting line with a remarkable sense of the helm and what needed to be done.

Bean later admitted, "I was one of the last people at work to sign up for this. I was thinking of it more as an experience. It went way beyond my expectations. It became way more than what I thought it would be."

After the start of the race on June 19, we were within

sight of land for the first day as we left Buzzards Bay, passing Martha's Vineyard to port, and seeing New Bedford-bound fishing vessels heading home.

The following day, we left the continental shelf and entered into the true deep. As we approached the Gulf Stream at dusk, a pesky low-pressure system named Bob was far off but still meant we would be having "weather", so we reefed the main sail and prepared for a wild ride.

When the sail trainees were called on deck as the light faded — in Gulf Stream weather — to reef the mainsail, none of us ever thought we would do it so quickly and so well. Much of the voyage went this way. Although we put our trust in the navigator, who chose a route through the Gulf Stream that enabled us to move quickly away from Bob and do well in the race, no one was left 'out of the loop' and the navigator discussed his decisions with all of us.

The Gulf Stream is a virtual river in the middle of the Atlantic, whose waters seem to combine both wild-river rapids and ocean force and height. It is dangerous. The sea has a deep black hue that is ominous. As the sun came up on our

second day in the stream, the warm water gave the black ocean a steamy grey color, but an early-morning school of dolphins — leaping out of the water, soaring over the black blue sea and brick wall-like waves that characterize the Gulf Stream — was a welcome sight. They feed in the warm waters of the stream, and tend to be more playful out in the wild. What a thrill to see the happy faces of dolphins on this bleak-looking sea.

The going was rough through the stream, and both



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abilities and bond with people we had not known at all before. Additionally, the crew has a good touch between being serious, encouraging and fun.”

Arriving at the docks of the Royal Hamilton Amateur Dinghy Club, we all walked to the old colonial building to meet the immigration officials who would stamp our passports “arrived by sea.” I noticed a large sedan with tinted windows and the Government House insignia, as well as a bodyguard, waiting to whisk the Governor away. To us, he had become just George, our shipmate. He had been away from his cell phone, emails and desk for the first time in his long career as a diplomat, and had simply shared his humor and stories with us like a mate.

As we said goodbye to the captain and crew, we were reminded that several of the crew started out as eighth-graders in a school program on board *Spirit*, wide eyed about the ocean and the world beyond Bermuda.

“Before the *Spirit of Bermuda* was built, we didn’t really know that the sea also meant a way of life or career for us,” said Kristen Greene, 21, who joined the *Spirit of Bermuda* alternative education program at age 13.

He has since graduated from high school and the Warsash Military Academy marine program in Southampton, England, and is now second officer aboard the *Spirit*.

“Now, a lot more Bermudians are pursuing this as a way of life and taking opportunities to work in the maritime trades. We still love and honor where it all began for us, as youth on the *Spirit of Bermuda*.”

As a plaque on board states, the sloop was “built for the youth of Bermuda.” But it is nice to know that in a sense the *Spirit* belongs to all of us who are willing to go to sea. ☪

Laurie Fullerton is a lifelong sailor who specializes in yachting journalism, maritime communications and public relations. Her writing appears in SAIL Magazine, Sailing Magazine, Sailing World and a number of major newspapers. She reports on the America’s Cup, and events in Bermuda, the Caribbean and Europe. Her trip on the Spirit of Bermuda was one of the highpoints of her career.