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CRUISING the COAST

Three Days Sailing on the Victory Chimes, America's Windjammer

BY CRAIG ROBERT BROWN
PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER REIS
THE WIND takes the sails, it sounds like a giant shaking out its laundry. My arms quiver from hauling "the throat," the rope to hoist the sail. I'm facing the back, or stern, of the Victory Chimes, a 132-foot, three-masted schooner that's part of the Maine Windjammer Association's fleet of eight operating vessels, five of which, including the Chimes, are National Historic Landmarks. I'm one of 20 passengers set to embark on a three-day excursion through Penobscot Bay, and wind willing, see what this historic vessel can do. The rope is heavy in my hands as we drift toward the mouth of Rockland Harbor.

"Ready on the throat!" calls the first mate. She's centered on the Captain's Deck, her brown hair lightened by the sun. Her eyes shift between opposite sides of the schooner, building tension between the lineup of the volunteer crew.

Behind her I see Captain Paul DeGaeta at the helm, his face shadowed by a large straw hat, watching us. Or watching the water ahead of him. I can't tell through his sunglasses. Either way, his gaze makes me tighten my grip.

"Ready on the throat!" I squawk back. I find my footing on the deck; my bare feet slide around in a hastily tied pair of Vans sneakers. Sweat beads on my brow. My elbows rattle as I squeeze the coarse rope.

"Ready on the peak!" the first mate calls to the opposite side of this 114-year-old leviathan.

The other volunteering passengers, six in all, call back that they're ready. The rest watch us from benches in the center of the deck sipping lemonade and iced tea out of paper cups. Now I worry about the older gentleman behind me. I look over my shoulder at him. He squints in the sun and looks back at me and shrugs, as if to say, there are other ways you could thoroughly embarrass yourself.

The rope starts coming at me quick, passing through my hands like slick horse braids. I go along with it; one hand over and one hand under. I smile and look up as the sails of the Victory Chimes rise in bloom like petals on a magnolia tree.
It's a true labor of love that only a dedicated crew would bust their humps so that we can sip wine and tan our necks.

HE’S THICK, the Victory Chimes; thick wood walls and hull crafted by skilled hands at a Delaware dock before her launch in 1900 (then known as the Edwin & Maud). She carried lumber before scouting for Germans in the Chesapeake during WWI. After the war she was converted to a passenger boat and served as a respite for war-weary veterans looking to forget what they’d seen the last time they went off to sea. By the 1980s, the Chimes spent winters sitting in Minnesota snow before the founder of Domino’s Pizza purchased the ship and christened her Domino Effect. As luck should have it, the pizza tycoon brought in Captain Paul for his advice and to oversee the Chimes’ restoration. In the 1990s, Captain Paul and Captain Richard “Kip” Files, a Maine native, made the risky purchase of the derelict old boat, renaming her Victory Chimes.

As part of the Maine Windjammer Association (MWA), the Victory Chimes relies on her cargo—that would be guests—to keep her sailing strong. Of all the ships in the MWA’s fleet, the Chimes isn’t the oldest, but she is the biggest, able to carry 40 passengers plus crew. Her size has given her the distinction as the largest passenger schooner in America, and she can be seen on the Maine state quarter.

Today she doesn’t look a day over 100. Fresh coats of paint, cream-colored, yellow, and red, accent the dark wool of her deck. Each spring the crew works tirelessly polishing the brass, repainting and staining, cleaning her from top to bottom. It’s a true labor of love that only a dedicated crew would bust their humps so that we can sip wine and tan our necks.
T’S NOT AS GLAMOROUS as it looks,”
matters Nick Totaro, the second mate. 
Like any job it has its valleys as well as 
its summits, he warns. Totaro is stocky 
with a thin beard. His head is as bright 
as a tomato from the afternoon’s sun. 
He’s sailed for the last three years on 
the Chimes and spends his winters in his 
home state of Florida working on boats. 
He tells me that the nice thing about 
the crew of the Chimes is that they took 
him even though he had no knowledge 
of how to sail or crew a ship.

“Don’t tell me this,” I warn. “Otherwise, I won’t get 
off the boat when it returns to dock.” I’ve longed for 
this type of adventure since I was a boy, growing up 
in a beach town, waiting for my call to sea, doing what 
Totaro does. Now as an adult, I cherish the solitude 
and simplicity of passenger life aboard the Chimes, 
lounging on the deck as lazy harbor seals peek up at me 
through glassy water.

Totaro laughs. It’s hard work. I realize, watching 
him and the rest of the crew day after day—one eye 
on the passengers, the other watching the rigging, 
or the harbor, or the bow and stern of the ship. His 
constant moves even as we speak, bundling rope, 
checking the rigging’s tension. It seems the only 
time he rests is when he’s asleep, and even then he’ll 
have to wake up at some point in the night for his 
two-hour deck watch.

And sleep comes quick onboard the vessel, even 
for a passenger, quicker if you’ve been working all 
day. Evening is somewhat of a reprieve for the crew. 
They drop anchor in the late afternoon in a cozy harbor,
and the passengers retire to the mess hall where we eat 
family-style around two tables, the ringing and call for 
the meal lines us up like greedy buggars as we make 
our way down the stairs one at a time.

Out at sea we eat like pirate kings. Breakfast is 
served in heaping piles on tin platters: eggs and 
bacon the first morning, wild Maine blueberry 
pancakes with sausage the second, and eggs benedict 
with ham the third. At night we eat lobster, coleslaw, 
and corn on the cob, or ham by the pound with 
never-ending servings of potatoes and carrots. After 
dinner there is lemon-poppy cake, fresh strawberries, 
whipped cream, and golden cakes with cranberries. 
All the food made from scratch by our cook, Pam 
Sheridan, and all of it delicious.

After supper there’s little to do besides watch the 
sunset. Andrew Culhane, a young deck hand and 
one of Sheridan’s assistants, sits on deck as the sun 
begins to set and lulls us gently into the night with his 
guitar, playing classics like “Brown Eyed Girl” and 
contemporary tracks from Noah and the Whale as well 
as Vampire Weekend. Nights are filled with low-hanging 
stars—the Milky Way so low and rich you could gather 
it up and pour it into your morning coffee.

Wish you could jump aboard?

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Head | Rigging | Tacking | Helm | Knot
--- | --- | --- | --- | ---
Toilet | Masts and lines for the sails | Zigzag pattern to sail into the wind | Steering wheel | Nautical mile, the measure of speed a vessel is traveling

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ON THE THIRD DAY, the wind is beating the Chimes’ sails and Captain Paul is tacking her through Penobscot Bay. We’ve cruised by Vinalhaven, Deer Isle, and just come off docking in Stonington. In my cabin, sitting on the top bunk reading when I feel the vessel tilt to the left. Outside the porthole, the water races by. I run up to the deck and marvel at the full sails pulling us through the thoroughfare. I go onto the Captain’s deck to get a better view.

“I want you to take the helm,” the Captain calls over to me, but I lose his words in the wind. He signals me to come over.

He steps to the side with one hand lightly guiding the wheel. He nods. I stand behind it and take the wooden pegs into my hands as he lets go. He tells me when to turn and how many times. His voice is calm.

I turn the wheel over until it slows and then I turn it again until it won’t. The tensions and the weight of it allow me to feel the ship’s size as it tacks in the wind. Beneath my feet I can feel the body of the ship move; the wood feels as though it’s bending, arching like a porpoise. The ship is alive.

We peak at about 7.4 knots (8.51 m.p.h.), I’ve overheard the crew say the Chimes can max out at ten, which may not seem like much on land, but cutting across the surface of the Penobscot Bay feels as perilous as driving on the Autobahn. Windjammers with even one more mast than the Chimes can cruise at 16 knots and have a tragic history of giving up the ghost before reaching their destination. Take the Maine-built four-masted schooners Frank A. Palmer and Louise B. Cray, whose remains lay entangled with one another at the bottom of the sea off Massachusetts’ coast since colliding in 1902 and taking the lives of 11 men.

Back on deck my legs and arms are jelly from the thrill of guiding this beauty through cool, Maine waters. Most of the passengers are milling about, sipping wine or reading. I head down to my cabin and close the door and sit on the stool in my room to look out the porthole. For a minute I let the smell of the cabin take me in; salt air embedded in ancient wood from the turn of the century. The water chops along in blue and grey and it seems as if we’re traveling at light speed.

On the last day, as the passengers gather a final time on the Chimes’ deck, we watch as she saddles up to the dock. We all hesitate to be the first one off the boat, but eventually, one by one, we leave. In another life, perhaps a braver one, I would run toward the mizzenmast, taking rope in hand and securing myself to its thick trunk. I would shout: “Sell my clothes! Kiss my mother! Tell my girl I’m sorry, but I’m married to the sea now, and she is a cold and beautiful thing!” Because this grand sail—even in just three, four, or five days—is one that defines a summer and sticks with you like salt air in your sweater.