

Tall Ships 2015: Belfast to Ålesund (Ocean Spirit of Moray)

Sailing in the Tall Ships Races is one of the best things I have ever done. The feeling of being under sail for days on end is like no other – tranquil (or wild), inspiring, and very much alive! This journey has been a challenging, exhilarating and empowering adventure.

I would like to thank the James Myatt Trust for sponsoring my berth on Ocean Spirit of Moray in the Tall Ships Races 2015. I would also like to thank the Sultanate of Oman and Sail Training International for financial assistance to travel to the Race from New Zealand.

Ocean Spirit of Moray is an Oyster 80 ketch operated by Gordonstoun School. Our sailing journey began in Plockton, Scotland and our first major destination was Belfast, the starting port of the Race. I was warmly welcomed aboard Ocean Spirit, and to Scotland, by the friendly crew and trainees. I really enjoy getting to know new people, and I looked forward to making some solid friendships on this voyage.

Life on-board follows a very different routine to life on land. The crew and trainees are split into two groups, Starboard Watch and Port Watch, and we take turns to be on ‘watch.’ The day is split into three four-hour day watches and four three-hour night watches. Being on ‘watch’ involves setting and striking sails where necessary, trimming sails as instructed by the Mate responsible, and taking turns on the helm. The ‘off watch’ crew usually prepares the food, or relaxes and gets some much needed sleep. Each morning, except for during the Race, the entire crew cleans the ship from bow to stern both above and below decks. Our bunks had lee-cloths, which kept us from falling out. We were very grateful for these necessities during the rough weather that we had during the Race.



While I had previously sailed on a ten day youth development voyage aboard Spirit of New Zealand (a three masted barquentine), sailing on Ocean Spirit was a totally new experience for me and involved new skills. Fortunately, we became ‘competent crew’ (passing our RYA certificate) and learnt how to efficiently sail the ship over the course of the voyage. The two crucial aspects of sailing are (1) the sails, and (2) the helm. The correct type and amount of



sail for the wind must be set, and they must be at the correct tension to effectively catch the wind. There are two main ways to helm – based on a compass direction or based on the angle of the wind. I really enjoyed learning how to sail to the wind, and this skill was necessary for the Tall Ships Race where we ended up sailing close haul for a large portion of the journey (around 30° off a headwind). - *Ocean Spirit entering Belfast Lough.*

Plockton to Belfast

On the way down the west coast of Scotland we stopped at Tobermory, Donstaffnage (where the keel was cleaned by divers), and near the island of Jura, before sailing across the Irish Sea to Bangor in Northern Ireland. We saw beautiful lighthouses and castle ruins as we came down the west coast of Scotland. I also loved seeing the green cliffs of Northern Ireland (see photo). My favourite part of this passage was sailing through the tranquil Sound of Mull.



This passage was a good opportunity to get to know everyone well and we built a spirit of teamwork. We also got to know the ship well, practiced a wide range of sailing skills and tasks, and got our sea legs as we undertook a rough crossing of the Irish Sea. Our skipper, Ian, runs a tight ship and we became a very efficient team under his leadership.

Belfast festivities – *Some of the tall ships docked in Belfast.*



The whole city put on a show for the Tall Ships festival. We were berthed in the Titanic Quarter, near the centre of the action. There were around fifty Tall Ships berthed in the harbour, some of them from as far away as Latin America! We got a chance to look around some ships, see how sail training works in different ships and with different cultures, and meet other trainees.

The main Tall Ships activities were the Crew Parade, Crew Party, fireworks and Parade of Sail. The vibrant atmosphere of the crew parade in Belfast was a highlight of my Tall Ships experience. The crews were dressed in uniform or bright costumes, accompanied by trumpets and drums and everyone danced through the streets of Belfast, waving their flags and banners with pride. The parade was followed by a prize-giving, then the crew party.

Belfast also put on various activities which meant the crews could see beyond the marinas, fairgrounds and markets to visit the city's main attractions. As part of the official programme, we got the opportunity to take a bus tour of Belfast and visit the Titanic Museum. I was fascinated to see the Peace Wall murals and hear the stories of The Troubles. I was surprised to hear of lingering political and religious tension (the gates are still closed each night). Belfast felt very safe from a tourists' perspective.

The Tall Ships Race

We sailed for around a day to the beginning of the Race, which was near Portrush. From this position, we could see both Northern Ireland and the part of the Republic of Ireland that is further north than Northern Ireland. We anchored off the coast and had a relaxing night, including some hilarious times flaking sails together. We were treated to a beautiful sunset to finish a beautiful day.



The Race was the first time that we completed the twenty-four hour watch system, and it was strange to adjust to that pattern.

The weather deteriorated quickly and was around a force seven storm (on the Beaufort scale) by our second watch. This weather required greater concentration and developed a strong team as we worked in pairs to control the heavy sails. People began to get seasick.

On our second watch, we passed *Maybe* and *Alexander von Humboldt*. Our third watch (0000-0300) was very cold and wet, and I was quickly converted by our kiwi mate, Luke, to the joys of hot blackcurrant squash.

Twenty minutes after we headed to bed after the fifth watch, we received the 'all hands on deck' call, which led to one of the craziest hours of my life: huge waves crashed over the deck as we struck then set the foresails (interrupted by an emergency strike of the mainsail). Waves smashed on the bow, and the force of the water rushed across the deck and knocked you over.

The storm continued for several watches, accompanied by more hot squash and lots of seasickness from various crew members. By this stage, Port Watch had lost two of our five trainees to their bunks. Mental games and keeping up team morale were very important. It was hard to not be wet and cold, but we could choose not to be miserable. One of my voyage highlights was helming in the storm – strong winds and big waves! It was a challenge to ride the ship down the waves while maintaining the correct angle to the wind.

We slowly made our way up the Minch (inside of the Outer Hebrides) and around Cape Wrath, the most north-westerly point of mainland UK. Cape Wrath is named from the old Norse 'hvarf', which means 'turning point, but ironically is an area of very rough seas. We passed the north of Orkney Isles during our ninth watch, and passed south of the Shetland Islands during our tenth watch. Next stop, Norway! As the storm continued, we had some crazy and physically challenging sailing tasks as well as rescuing the life-raft from slipping out of its cradle. We pushed ourselves to our limits to help each other and still managed to have a laugh together. What a great team! We were placed fourth in Class C at the end of the tenth watch.

We sped across the North Sea, with continued stormy conditions. We saw both Scottish and Norwegian oil rigs as we crossed the nautical border.



We awoke at 0240 to begin watch fourteen; the sun was so high by the time I got on deck, and it was a pleasure to be greeted by a wonderful bright sunrise and hopeful crew.

We crossed the finish line at 0453, and I had the privilege of being on the helm as we did so. I felt so incredibly proud of our journey and was happy to be sailing into Ålesund after a very rough crossing of the North Sea. We discovered that we were the first ship to finish – we had won Line Honours! We were welcomed into Ålesund by a canon and lots of media attention.

Exploring Geirangerfjord

We spent our first night in a small natural harbour. A few of us braved the freezing waters for a morning fjord swim, and we could see snow-covered hills from our position in the water!

We motored down the Geirangerfjord the following day. The only way to describe this place is breath-taking! We passed huge snowy mountain ranges as we glided across calm water. It was a crisp and tranquil experience – no noise but for the rushing of hundreds of waterfalls and the chatter of our crew. We later learned that we came first in Class C – the final results, calculated on handicaps, are only calculated when all ships are finished.

One night in the fjord, the Polish trainees from Frederyck Chopin taught us traditional Polish folk dancing, and the Gordonstoun crew taught them Scottish folk dancing. There was a significant language barrier, but lots of smiling and laughter. Luke and I also taught them the ‘foot-dance’, and we all danced for a couple of hours on the deck.

The Seven Sisters Waterfall – Ocean Spirit of Moray (first in Class C, Line Honours), Frederyck Chopin (first in Class A, first overall), Urania (first in Class D).



Ålesund festivities

We returned to Ålesund with a few days left to explore, eat Norwegian chocolate, and climb Aksla hill. We paraded through the streets of Ålesund with face paint, balloons, banners and chants. The atmosphere at the prize giving was almost electric; everyone had achieved an incredible feat and formed such strong relationships with their teams.



Personal development

Aside from learning skills to become a competent sailor, I also learnt a lot about myself on the voyage. Sail training gives you an opportunity to explore new horizons – both literally and metaphorically. I discovered that there is ‘more in me’ (plus est en vous)! The Race itself pushed my physical and mental limits as we hoisted sails in the dark hours of the night, with rain lashing our faces and waves crashing over the bow and knocking us over!

The voyage developed my confidence in overcoming new challenges, courage in demanding situations, and determination to achieve the team’s goals, whatever the situation we were in. I also discovered an almost boundless sense of enthusiasm for the adventure that we were undertaking, and will take this into my day-to-day life.

This kind of environment builds a strong team and sense of community and companionship. These solid friendships, built so quickly and based on trust and having a laugh in tricky times, are very special to me. Thank-you to all the crew and trainees from Gordonstoun – it was an absolute blast to get to know you and to sail across the North Sea with you. You are all such wonderful people, and I am lucky to have met you.

I am extremely grateful to the James Myatt Trust, the Sultanate of Oman, and Sail Training International for making this trip possible. Thank-you for your generosity and support for youth all over the world to share in this amazing experience that is the Tall Ships Races!

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.