

ASTO/JAMES MYATT INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE 2017

STV ROTER SAND, Ecomaris, Quebec

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I was thrilled to be offered the opportunity to travel to Canada in August as part of the ASTO/James Myatt International Exchange. I've been fortunate enough to do a lot of sailing in the UK, both as a trainee and now as a member of full-time sea staff, but relished the chance to sail with another



Alongside in Quebec City

organisation, on another boat, and especially on a different continent! Quebec has a very proud and unique culture even within Canada, so I knew the experience would be a fascinating one, with the opportunity to learn lots about how sail training is done in a very different environment.

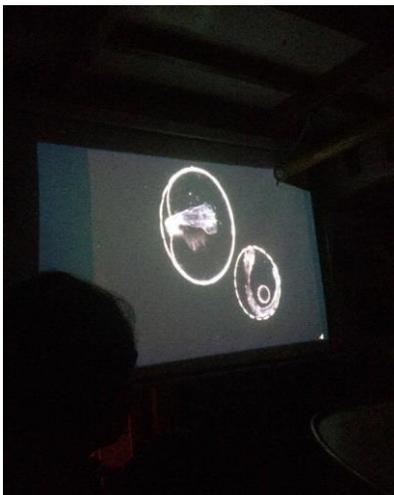
I arrived in Quebec City 24 hours before the ship was due to sail, and was met by the charity's Operations Manager, Lise, who had taken a day off to show me the sights. Together with Pierre, one of the deckhands, we explored Quebec City, one of the oldest in North America; this exploration mostly consisting of trying various local foods and

drinks.

Roter Sand is a 26m gaff ketch, and her 4 full-time crew take 12 trainees to sea each week, typically either Canadian Sea Cadets or unemployed young people. I was sailing aboard one of the few individuals' trips the organisation runs, which are expeditions aimed at educating Quebecois about their environment and maritime heritage.



The cavernous saloon and conference table



Watching an educational film about plankton – in French – on the projector screen

The St Lawrence River forms a unique habitat where it meets the smaller

Saguenay River, and this attracts many species of whale, including the only colony of Beluga Whales outside the Arctic. We were fortunate enough to sail with an expert marine biologist, who delivered several talks on the species we saw, as well as helping us collect and examine samples of plankton from the various places we went to. The ship is perfectly equipped for scientific trips, with a huge central saloon area laid out like a conference room, as well as projector and screen. This allowed us to view videos and slides, as well as connect the microscopes to the projector and meant that the whole crew could engage with the samples and creatures we saw.

Whale watching was a big part of the agenda whilst we travelled, and the rest of the crew spent much of the time taking photographs of the marine mammals that we saw, especially the whales and seals which seemed to be everywhere. Aside from one 17 year old, the other voyage crew were all aged between 40 and 75.



Investigating plankton samples

The St Lawrence has high mountainous sides, and is relatively undeveloped, so the ship only tends to put alongside in Quebec City at the beginning and end of the voyages. This, combined with the extreme tidal flow, meant that a normal days itinerary was a high speed dash under power from one anchorage to another within the space of one tide. At each anchorage, the focus was gathering samples of the water to investigate the type and quantity of plankton. Aside from the plankton, we also had lectures on various aspects of navigational science, and on the geography of the region.

Fortunately, conditions were judged suitable for us to be able to put up some of the sails a couple of times, although to make the schedule we still had to use the engine. The mizzen, however, seemed to be an elusive creature, and stayed firmly stowed for the whole voyage. The ship takes risk management in relation to sailing evolutions very seriously, as the voyage crew are banned from going out on the bowsprit to handle the headsails, and the main drop is handled entirely by the full-time deckhands to ensure none of the voyage crew can be dangerously near the gaff or any ropes as the sail comes down. Similarly, coming alongside and leaving the berth, the voyage crew all sit on the far side of the deck, and the sea staff handle all the lines and fenders. Compared to sail training in Britain, this is a very different approach, but the voyage crew seem to get an awful lot out of the trip either way, and it certainly keeps everybody safe. The most at home I felt was when lifting the anchor, and the whole crew lined up to take their turn winding on the windlass – a common activity to sailors everywhere!



Coming alongside. Voyage crew safely out of the way.

About half way through the trip we were fortunate enough



A lecture on whale species

to anchor in Tadoussac harbour, where we were able to take the tender ashore to explore the 'Marine Mammal Interpretation Centre', as well as take a well earned shower! The town was right on a promontory between the two rivers, and is busy with tourists taking boats out to whale watch, although in the winter the majority of the locals themselves follow the tourists as they leave and move elsewhere to avoid the snows.

The most exciting part of the trip was that, being a Quebecois vessel, the ship is run in French! My French is abysmal, so I relished the opportunity to practice in an environment where French is the primary language. Whilst I was able to dramatically improve my French to a working level, I did struggle a bit with more conversational French. Not having a shared language (older Quebecois don't speak English if they can help it) certainly meant that, whilst we could sail the ship together, it was difficult to engage with the other crew members on a social level. Learning to communicate is a huge part of what a sail training voyage can teach a young person and coming into the trip with such a huge communication barrier only reinforced the importance of communication. It is easy to become isolated, even on a small ship.



Post lunch lecture at anchor.



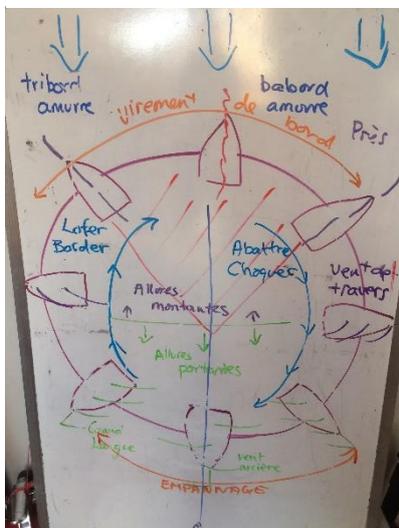
Radio communication exercise

One of the best activities on the voyage was a communication exercise, where the two watches were sent to opposite parts of the ship, and one watch had to describe, via walkie-talkie, a device in their hands sufficiently for the other group to be able to build it. It's one I'll definitely keep in my inventory to bring out aboard Morning Star when we're stormbound!

All too soon, the trip was over and I was on the plane back over the Atlantic. Sail training the *Roter Sand* way was very different to what I was used to in Britain, but it was fascinating to see how, in the end, we are all trying to achieve the same end goals in our trainees. I had a fantastic time in Canada; it was an experience I will carry with me for the rest of my life, and I have learned lessons that I am sure I will draw upon for the rest of my career

at sea.

Points of sail in French!



Sailing down the mighty St Lawrence is a truly once in a lifetime experience, and I would like to thank ASTO, the James Myatt Trust and everyone who supported me and made this incredible adventure happen.

