

KELLEY PRIEST - AUSTRALIA TO UK - SAIL TRAINING REPORT

Growing up in the most northeasterly corner of the state, travelling to Sydney has always been somewhat of an adventure for me. However this time, it was nothing compared to what was to come in the few months ahead.

I remember it was a Tuesday, walking into an interview to a place I hadn't been, to meet people I've never met before. A panel of five sat before me, representing both the Australia-Britain Society and the Young Endeavour Youth Scheme. Intimidating as it was, I soon found myself giggling off the nerves and trying to impress this wonderful group of people in the hopes of making a dream come true.

Walking out of there with a confidence that could have been higher, I was replaying my choice of words in my head the whole plane trip back to northern NSW.

The very next day I sat exactly where I sit now. An unknown number flashed up on my phone, and to my excitement, it was Richard Tighe congratulating me on being the 2016 Tall Ships Award winner. I froze. I was in shock. I paced. I was speechless. No other words came to mind other than "thank you, thank you, thank you!" STS Lord Nelson, Gran Canaria to Southampton. This was the very next adventure in store for me.

The next thing I know, three months had flown by and I was nervously sitting on that plane bound for the UK. A brief stop in London and then it was down to the Canary Islands and I remember feeling the most anxious I had been in a while at this point. With last minute nerves, I messaged Caitlin Stephenson (2011 Tall Ships Award winner and previous crew mate from Young Endeavour) about my fears of feeling alienated or the worry of being alone, but with her reassurance I had a new burst of energy and a high spirit. Of course I look back now and think what was I even worried about? It just proves what a profound effect these voyages have on you.

Navigating my way around a town that does not have English as their first language was my first challenge of many to come. Making my way towards the marina, a familiar scene caught my eye. With the sights of sails, yards, riggings and lines, there she was...I made a beeline for the magnificent vessel which was to be my home for the next 25 days.



With the sense of familiarity and excitement, I basically galloped up the gangway and was welcomed into the world of the Jubilee Sailing Trust and Day 1 began. It was easy enough to 'spot the Aussie' as I think I recall being the only one rugged up whereas everybody else seemed to be donning their summer outfits. This was definitely the first cultural difference I observed!

The first couple of days we stayed alongside at Santa Catalina while we were briefed on safety and climbing aloft, permanent crew was introduced and a rough itinerary was drawn for the upcoming adventure. My ears prickled and my head jolted in a direction to somebody speaking. There was a certain twang to the voice. "Is that another Aussie?!" I questioned. To my delight, second mate Rob McDonald was from Brisbane and quite quickly I had a sense of familiarity. It was like I had a token from home on board and I was no longer feeling alone. Thankfully I had someone to join me in the friendly jeering and jesting towards the Poms!



It was a Wednesday morning we weighed anchor and set a course headed for the Azores - a whole new world for me as I had never heard of the islands until this trip! Leaving the harbour we were facing 4 metre swells and soon enough, that oh so familiar feeling of queasiness took over. A few hours in and I found myself parallel to the sea. Taken down again by the lethargic hideousness that is seasickness, I knew I would find myself asking, "Why am I doing this again!?" ...The same question I have voiced on each sailing trip I've been on. The dreadful sensation of dizziness combined with dehydration and the fight to keep everything down sucked the energy and enjoyment from me for two days. Overcoming this zombie-like state is a mental and physical challenge and one with no greater sense of accomplishment. Knowing I could push through such times (that seem to last a lot longer than they feel!) I soon felt I would be capable of any challenge Lord Nelson threw at me. Having said that, seasickness is a great icebreaker! I believe the ships doctor and nurse became some of my first friends...

Emerging from the darkness below decks, I spent the next few days in the stunning sunshine that the North Atlantic had to offer. It was a great feeling spending unbroken time with my watch and the others instead of disappearing moments at a time due to sickness.



A strong weather system was ascending and the winds changed just before our arrival at the island destination of Ponta Delgada, São Miguel. With much sail setting and handing and course changes, we anchored just south at Santa Barbara, part of the archipelago, so technically we arrived at the Azores, yay! Sheltering from the winds, some of us took advantage of the lack of motion and climbed aloft to check out the view. Even with the low laying cloud and the whipping wind, it was still a beautiful sight. One thing I realised on this particular climb was my shift in attitude. I remember vividly the first time I was told to climb a mast on a tall ship, flashback to my very first Young Endeavour day. I was a nervous 20 year old, almost chickening out of the experience, anxious shakes through my body and a glass half empty attitude. With bravery, adrenalin and encouraging words from those around me, I very, very slowly made my way up that foremast of the Young Endeavour. Now fast forward to my Lord Nelson days, I found myself first to volunteer to lay aloft, shot my hand straight up at any opportunity and said "I'll do it!" It has been such a jump in self-confidence and certainty and there is no greater feeling than saying you can do something with no hesitation and such grit, determination and assurance. After my bout of sickness, I soon became the cliché Aussie with the "No Worries" attitude.

A two-day stop over in Ponta Delgada was just what we needed to find our sea legs. It was a bit wobbly at first though we managed to explore the island and the wonders that it had hidden. From volcanic craters and hot springs to whale watching and gorgeous Portuguese cuisine, we found two days wasn't enough! We shared some time and experiences in our watch groups on land that made our bonds and friendships even stronger, even if it took a few tequila shots to cure seasickness! Suddenly it was time to leave the amazing Azores, with favourable winds and a good-looking forecast, we spent the next two weeks zigzagging to Southampton.



With constantly shifting winds, we were setting and handing sails numerous times of the day and night in conjunction with the wind. It was strange to think northerly winds are cold considering it's the southerly's that chill us Aussies! At this point in the voyage I'm sure I was up to 7 layers of clothing...

We would spend our watches rotating jobs, acting as watch leader, making tea, finding ways to keep warm, lots of Aussie-British humour and the occasional 3am vegemite sandwich. We were lucky enough to have a representative from ORCA (<http://www.orcaweb.org.uk>) on board, Becky Garrity, so we were always entertained and on lookout for whales and dolphins during our sail, which was successful on numerous days!

We spent days playing games, having banter in the bar, rolling around the North Atlantic, trivia nights, sunbaking (if the sun was out!), attending mess duty, informative talks, happy hour, sail setting, sail handing...soon enough all the days were molding into weeks and before we knew it, we were near the end!

Unaware of what was following us across the North Atlantic, we soon checked the weather forecast and a huge storm cell was forming right behind us, chasing us all the way back to England. Storm Katie was on our tail, 8m swells and pelting hail pushed us towards over the continental shelf towards England to an anchorage in Tor Bay. We sheltered while she passed us with roaring 55kt winds. All I can say is I'm glad we were no longer seasick!



From meeting these people only weeks ago, we shared experiences and memories that made us feel like friends for much longer than just days spent at sea. I learnt an incredible amount off each person and vice versa. Our voyage crew ranged from ages 18-80, and came from all walks of life. We had chefs, doctors, sailors, teachers, nurses, and merchant navy cadets, lawyers the list goes on. To put such a vast variety of people in confined living and varying conditions seems difficult though the friendships formed and memories made will be with me for life. It's what I love about tall ship sailing; you can be total strangers at the beginning and come off with a whole new family.

Sailing across the English Channel into The Solent towards the Needles, with the Isle of Wight to the right and mainland England to the left, it hit me that the 25 days at sea had come to an end.



I had a time of reflection and thought of many things I learnt during my time at sea such as an increased patience, self-awareness and the ability to push through hard times when I'm not feeling 100%. My self-esteem has skyrocketed and has left me believing in myself more, having more self-worth and a greater appreciation for the smaller things in life. I look back to the few hours before stepping on that boat and think what on earth was I possibly worried about? That was the biggest development I found in myself, is to never worry about the unknown. Jump into it because it can turn out to be the best time of your life!



I would like to take this opportunity to thank each and every person involved that made this trip of a lifetime possible for me. The Jubilee Sailing Trust and their permanent crew on the voyage, the Association of Sail Training Organisations, the Young Endeavour Youth Scheme and of course the Australia-Britain Society. I have the greatest appreciation and utmost honour being the Tall Ships Award winner for 2016 and will carry my experiences on board Lord Nelson through life with much respect and pride. If it weren't for the afore mentioned organisations, I may not know what I do now, and I thank you sincerely.

Yours aye.