

Sailing the Azores aboard STS *Lord Nelson*

The morning we set sail on the beautiful *Lord Nelson* was picture perfect - the sun was shining, the water was glistening, her majestic sails were filling with wind and murmurs of excitement were heard amongst the crew. Our voyage crew comprised of an eclectic bunch of 50 from various walks of life, some with little or no experience and some who were veterans to sailing the seas. I soon realised that I wasn't just on a sailing adventure, I was on a journey of self-discovery.

The Azores may look beautiful and serene however their seas beg to differ! We endured sunshine, rain, large swells and temperamental winds. Our daily routines consisted of sail handling, keeping watch, 'happy hour' to clean the ship, helping out as mess men and the tricky task of 'learning the ropes'. The voyage was designed as a special whale watching and sightseeing trip so every few days we set foot ashore to explore the stunning sights and wilderness of the Azores. And what better way to see the sights than sailing on board a three-masted, barque-rigged tall ship.

Our crew consisted of people of all physical abilities, and our assisted climbs were like any good story: there were tears of joy, peals of laughter, gasps of anticipation, squeals of excitement and numerous rounds of applause as eight of our brave crew mates scaled the fore and main masts. It was a truly awe-inspiring moment of solidarity as we worked together to assist these brave people aloft, both with and without wheel chairs.

On our last day of this voyage, I was fortunate enough to obtain the responsibility of helming the ship and her crew back into the port of Ponta Delgada. A tricky operation and an individual achievement of which I am incredibly proud.

Our time at sea and our shore visits definitely strengthened the bond between our crew, developing a strong sense of teamwork and interaction between all ages and abilities. I was able to experience firsthand what the Jubilee Sailing Trust promotes through their voyages, as the integration of all people no matter their physical abilities.

Wheelies on the Sea

My voyages taught me to believe in myself and that anything is possible no matter your capabilities. I was inspired by my fellow crew mate John, who shared the traumatic story of how he lost the use of his lower body in a flying accident, finding himself in a wheelchair. His emotional journey of struggles, setbacks, and regaining his independence is one I at first found hard to comprehend. However it was from a combination of his and other crew mates' stories as well as my own Nan's struggle with multiple sclerosis (MS) that I took a special interest in both functioning through a day at sea in a wheelchair.

Simple tasks that we take for granted such as using the bathroom, eating at a table, getting dressed and hauling on ropes became a real struggle in a wheel chair. I was constantly asking questions and learning the "tricks of the trade" to not only manoeuvre my wheel chair but to avoid falling overboard while completing my daily duties. The hardest part of this whole experience was being extremely sea sick for the first time ever!

I was grateful for the amount of support I received from my watch mates during this experience - their job was made a great deal harder with two wheelchair users, especially during our 12:00am - 4:00am watch. I discovered that whether you are able bodied or disabled, it is okay to ask for assistance when the going gets tough. This challenge enabled me to better interact with my crew mates and appreciate everyone's individual strengths and abilities, valuing what one can do and not what one can't.

Sailing to Southampton

The purpose of my second voyage was to return *Lord Nelson* home to Southampton, a passage of 14 days travelling some 1700 nautical miles. A journey definitely not for the faint hearted! In prevailing winds averaging 30 knots and with the ship racing at an astounding 11.4 knots under sail through rain, swells and squalls, there were moments when we struggled to stand, to keep our food down and to sleep. We all asked ourselves why we were doing this during this tormenting weather. But these times also make up some of my greatest experiences of self-discovery and teamwork. I learnt so much about myself, my strengths, my weaknesses, my limitations and my ability to carry on no matter what was thrown at me.

Finally we arrived safely at Southampton to the welcoming sounds of some of the voyage crew's friends and family! A real treat after the rollercoaster voyage we had all endured!

Cultural Experience

During both voyages I was part of a predominately British crew. A mischievous toy kangaroo and several hidden koalas caused amusement on board, as did numerous conversations comparing Australian and British lifestyle, language, music, dancing, sports and food. I indulged in several British delights, including treacle pudding, banoffee pie, flap jacks and Cornish pasties. I sang many a sea shanty and danced many a bush dance, and shared my Australian culture by celebrating Anzac day on board with some homemade Anzac biscuits - a real challenge while rocking and rolling on the high seas! This exchange presented me with a wonderful opportunity to create and maintain the ties between the Australians and the British. I have made numerous new friendships that I am sure will last a lifetime.

It is hard to describe in words the people I have met and the bonds I have formed. It has been an honour and a privilege to be a part of these voyage crews and to hear their stories, and I am in awe of their phenomenal courage and their approaches to life. I have achieved far beyond what I ever imagined I could. This experience has taken me out of my comfort zone, pushed me to my limits and far beyond. I have developed a greater understanding of myself, and of others, have grown in self-confidence and learnt that anything is possible.

I wish that everyone could partake in what I have experienced and meet the people I have befriended. It truly was an honour and a once in a lifetime opportunity that will never be forgotten. I am so grateful to the Australian British Society, Jubilee Sailing Trust, Young Endeavour Youth Scheme and the Australian Sail Training Association for sending me on this amazing adventure! My love of the sea and sailing has only been enhanced by this incredible experience on board *STS Lord Nelson*.