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The Floating Opera

A Journey of Discovery

The **schooner *Bagheera*** may be a familiar sight on Casco Bay, but did you know she leads a secret life moonlighting as a seafaring **science classroom**?

BY PATRICIA PIERCE ERIKSON



EACH SUMMER, crowds flock to Maine State Pier to admire *Bagheera* and *Wendameen*, the handsome, two-masted wooden schooners moored here. While many embark on day sails with Portland Schooner Company, few know that *Bagheera*, a 72-foot schooner designed by John Alden in 1924 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, doubles as a floating university classroom. When the winds and schedule are favorable, she becomes the temporary home and lab for students and professors from Saint Joseph's College's Environmental Science Semester, carrying the crew Downeast for two weeks to study climate change and glacial geology, field methods, marine ecology, and oceanography.

One bright, blustery morning, our team of students, scientists, and crew departs Portland Harbor and crosses Hussey Sound, passing far beyond the waters where the day-sailing tours travel. Most of the students have never set foot on a sailboat deck



before. Today we begin a two-week journey to the shores of Vinalhaven.

Captain Sean Canniff scans the sea, the deck, the sails, the passengers, the horizon. "Ready about!" he shouts.

"Ready about!" crewmember Lindsay shouts back.

"Helm's a-lee," Capt. Canniff calls, turning the wheel. Sails deflate as the bow of the black-hulled beauty crosses the wind. With a thunderous pop, the boom swings over to starboard and everyone shifts to a stable position as the port gunwale is lifted high above the water. With the islands behind us, we head eastward into the vast ocean for our first research stop.

Cruising north along the coast, Capt. Canniff glances at the Garmin plotter.

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HIGH SEAS

There's a shallow ledge underneath us. That's why these lobster pots are clustered here." He gestures at the colored buoys apparently bobbing in the middle of nowhere. "Nasty things. You don't want to get tangled in them."

The students look around. Beyond this zone there are no lobster pots, no lobster boats. While the ocean appears to surround us with sameness, the chart—and the lobstermen—say otherwise.

Tonight, we'll hunker down for the night in a gray-shingled cabin on a small island ten miles out to sea. *Bagheera* cruises back and forth in the small cove, trying to drop anchor. The crew will keep watch over the schooner in four-hour shifts through the night.

Sleeping gear covers the cabin floor. Cooking equipment and coolers teeter in mounds on the cabin porch. Two students—Leia and Avery—are assigned to tonight's kitchen duties. Avery likes to enter cooking competitions, so he's rummaging through the spices.

Leia looks out at *Bagheera*, secure in her anchorage in the cove. "What would we do if she weren't there in the morning?"

The next day breaks murky and gray. Mercifully, *Bagheera* is still in sight. Once we are under way, the Captain sails directly to the first research location of the day: Monhegan Island. The students arm themselves with small, yellow field notebooks with waterproof pages.

Leia carries the CTS sonde—a tube-shaped, electronic multi-sensor probe—up from below decks and hands it to Ben and Joe.

"I'm going to lay out the sonde cable first." Ben stretches the electronic data cable along the deck to untangle it. "Hey, this is just what the crew does with the rope!" The crew doesn't even flinch at this flatlander use of "rope" instead of "line."

"We need two people recording data:





temperature, pH, and dissolved oxygen," says Dr. Teegarden.

Danielle and Emma crouch close by so they can hear the readings over the wind. Ben feeds the sonde cable over the port side, then looks back. "How deep am I now?"

"You're only at 1.2 meters, 13.48 degrees. Salinity is 32.12. Dissolved oxygen 95.2, pH 8.06."

Ben runs more cable through his fingers, lowering the tube deeper.

On the starboard side, Emma hands a Van Dorn sampling bottle to Olivia, who lowers it into the water. They lean in to pull up the first sample.

Dr. Teegarden looks at the seawater in the bottle. "What do you see?"

"A lot of things floating. Wait! Are they floating or swimming?" Leia asks.

Olivia grins. "They're swimming! They're copepods!"

"These are the bugs of the sea," Dr. Teegarden confirms.

The students are directly in touch with the most precious foundation of the ocean's food chain, pulled up with their own hands.

Meanwhile, Capt. Canniff watches the wind and currents, his attention never waver. Occasionally he becomes more animated as the sea and sky reveal their secrets. Clouds are gathering.

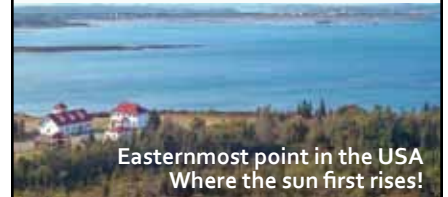
After a while, the students tuck away the equipment and hunker down to scribble in their notebooks, focused on their findings. The wind intensifies and sprays seawater onto the whiteboard, the field notebooks, and everything in between. The sky darkens as *Bagheera* heads into a growing wind. Students pull wrists further into raincoat sleeves and hoods further over faces. Sheets of rain pelt down from an iron sky. Those on the starboard side brace for a downward plunge, and silver-green sea water pours over the starboard gunwale. Jess and Olivia scream in unison, then explode

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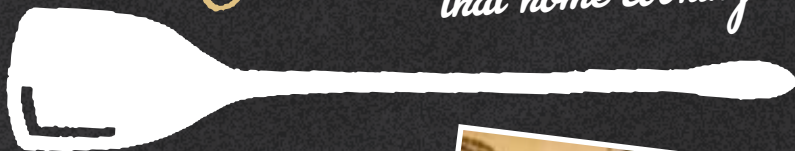
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HIGH SEAS

into laughter. The port-side students look over their shoulders and smile. They'll have their turn when we come about. The bow plunges again.

"Carousel ride meets surfing!"

Jess shouts.

Again, seawater engulfs feet and ankles on deck. The next research stop is going to have to wait for calmer seas.

Capt. Canniff checks the sails, the chart, the currents, and the students. He finds them all with feet braced against the bulwark, elbows interlocked, smiling.

Although this feels like an amusement-park ride, there are no seatbelts here. But the students have each other, a diligent crew, and watchful professors. The depths of the ocean are no longer blank, but populated, variable, alive beneath *Bagheera* as she cruises along the coast from island to island, back into a time when sailing ships ruled the sea. ■

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