

Sailing Home

Statement from the Crew of the *Avontuur*, on arrival in Hamburg after six months at sea
23 July 2020

We have just returned from six months at sea, sailing 16,782.6 nautical miles on the 100-year old, 44-metre schooner, the *Avontuur*, transporting cargo. For four of those months we did not step ashore.

We all chose to undertake this voyage, but most of us expected it to have ended many months ago. It is challenging to begin summarizing the experience so soon – it will take time for each of us to reflect and gain perspective.

The vision of *Timbercoast* is one of “mission zero”: carrying rum, gin, fairly-traded organic coffee and cacao as well as olive oil under sail between Europe, the Caribbean and Central America, in an effort to reduce maritime shipping emissions. Transporting cargo under sail is not only a cleaner way to transport goods but also raises bigger questions regarding lifestyles of consumerism, waste and the pursuit of endless growth.

This vision brought together fifteen people from six countries – most of who were strangers – embarking on the restored ship’s fifth voyage in January from Elsfleth, Germany. Eight trainees with little-to-no sailing experience and seven professional crew.

We all had plans.

Only one trainee and three of the professionals expected to stay for the full six-month voyage. Others planned onward journeys of exploration in South America; the three-week Atlantic crossing as academic research; completing a feature film script after a two-month leg of the voyage; following in the footsteps of Alexander von Humboldt in Mexico; being joined by a partner for the return voyage.

Half way across the Atlantic, a satellite message reached us with unimaginable news: lockdowns, curfews, food shortages – and border closures.

No crew change, no shore leave, no repatriation.

The scheduled ports of call – the French Antilles, Honduras, Belize and Mexico – were all now under lockdown. They were still open to load cargo with latex gloves and medical masks, but without permission granted to leave the ship.

Where do you go when you can’t go home?

None of us had ever had to face this question. A few weeks earlier, as we began the Atlantic crossing, we rescued sixteen young people who had lived with this question to the extent that it had driven them from West Africa out into the Atlantic in a small, open boat.

You go on.

So we sailed on – and onward – surrendering control. We had to, quite literally, ‘go with the flow’. When there is no choice, you can still decide *how* to respond it.

This also meant accepting that for the foreseeable future our land lives had to be put on hold: lack of income for trainees while at sea meant that bills, rent, taxes could not be attended to. The only constant was fluidity, change: weather, sea, the ship’s course – all contained within the repetitive daily routines of ship watches, helming and endless maintenance.

At sea, there is no internet connection. It is quiet. Between the sea and the sky, without distraction, there has been reflection. Without the input of external images, dreams have run wild, memories have surfaced, imagination abounds. We have not had the noise of news and media, infection rates and casualty statistics. Or fear. We have missed it, or perhaps been spared.

At the same time, we have had very limited connection with those we care about. Six ports, six points of connection in six months.

Nothing happened as we expected. We were all challenged – individually and as a crew – stretched and pushed beyond our perceived limitations. As we began to relinquish some of those expectations, often reluctantly, relationships could deepen.

Living in such close contact, the “social distancing” that was being enforced ashore was unimaginable. For ten of us, our living quarters were the fo’c’s’le, below deck, where privacy consists of a low bunk with a curtain. Personal space is something that you have to invent.

Just as the ship can only be sailed through collaborative effort, we began to accept that we could no longer act purely as individuals. Each of us had to live with every onboard interaction: there is no closing the door or walking away. Consideration, communication, and kindness developed as immediate solutions to tensions. And plenty of humour.

We have learned – by stitching a patch on a torn sail, splicing together a frayed rope, being creative with limited resources – that nothing is ever truly broken. Solutions and innovations abound when your whole world is contained within a steel hull.

We have been wonder-struck on this voyage, repeatedly.

And we have witnessed that which is usually unseen. It has been eye-opening: the innumerable oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, each blazing with light and spewing monstrous flames. The sea illuminated by phosphorescent plankton – sparks, flashes, caught in a bucket on deck, clouds of it in our wake.

Whale blows and sleek backs hinting at so much still unseen beneath the surface. And one night, while becalmed in a deep fog, four Minke whales illuminated only – but completely – by phosphorescence dove back and forth beneath the ship, leaving trails of light in their wake.

An interminable current thick with dead fish, eyes popping, mouths agape, along the Grand Banks of Newfoundland – the wasted by-catch from fishing trawlers. The boat people, a tiny representation of our ongoing human story, and the way their eyes changed once we had hauled them aboard.

The sleepless commercial harbours, ships with unimaginable capacity being filled for days, the surfaces of our white ship darkened with pollution. The complete canopy of stars.

The quantity of our own waste accumulating onboard. The breathtaking green of land seen for the first time after 50 days. The green of home?

We climbed to the top of the main mast, 27 metres above the ship’s deck: a 360° view. Crew below were ants, the ship minuscule, afloat in vastness with a bending horizon.

We had to ask ourselves, what is “home”? How far does it extend? And what are we doing to that home? We couldn’t “stay home” under lockdown, we were at sea, “locked out” of land life.

Are we returning “home”?

When we left Tenerife to cross the Atlantic, carnival’s absurd masks were thronging the streets. Our own masks have dropped, cracked, eroded by the sea air. Now, strangers to this new masked world, we find ourselves where we started, but perhaps see the place for the first time.