



LIFE ON EL GALEON: AN ALMOST SPANISH SAILOR'S LOG

On May 10, 2016, *El Galeon Andalusia* maneuvered her majestic mast beneath the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge and returned to **Port City Marina**, what last summer's crew called the tall ship's "most successful port visit."

Indeed, record numbers of wannabe pirates, history buffs, and tall ship enthusiasts flocked to **Pier 33** to tour the 170-foot replica of the 16th century Spanish galleon.

"We had more than 2000 visitors each of the 10 days we were there," shared Chef David Garcia Gallardo, one of the Spanish crew. "And Port City Marina was very comfortable, with nice bathrooms!" he said, with a laugh. "This is important to sailors arriving in port!"

As a nonprofit organization, the Nao Victoria Foundation sends El Galeon Andalusia around the world, including our Eastern Seaboard, hoping to share Spain's rich maritime history. Tales of Ponce de Leon, port and starboard cannons, and jagged white sails, "ship in a bottle" style were enticing enough; add 20 Spanish sailors and a seasoned female captain, you get Wilmington's most exciting nautical arrival.



Life at Sea

Within minutes, I'd caught *El Galeon* fever. As a writer, traveler, and recently land-locked mountain dweller, my fascination for life aboard that ship spiraled as high as the 120-foot mast. Yes, I was taken with the history, but I was more interested in life aboard, and how it looks on the open sea.

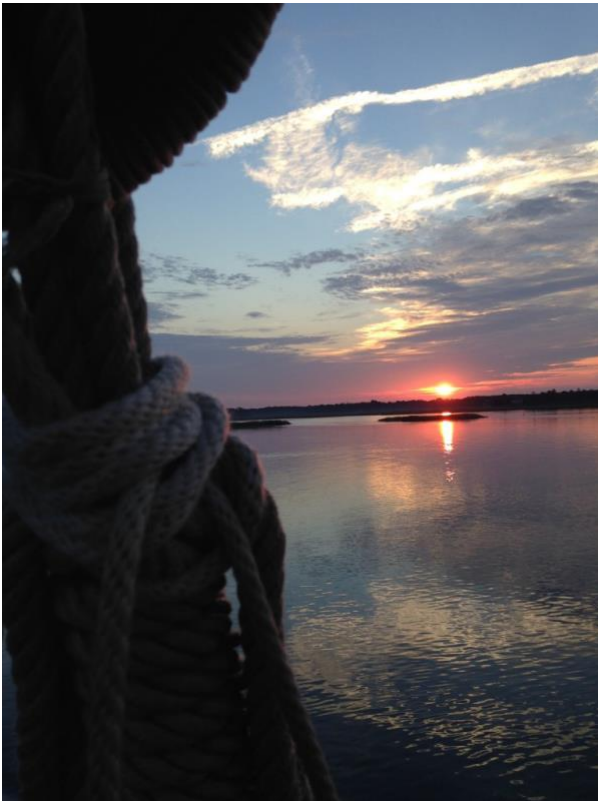
I toured the ship a total of three times, tossing my pigeon Spanish at the patient crew during photo opps and knot-tying practice and eventually, popping my head into the roped off kitchen, where Chef David was stirring a big vat of fish stew.

“Hola! You like?” He gestured around the kitchen. “When are you sailing away with us?” he joked, while somehow predicting the future.

“We are really pleased with Port City Marina,” said Fernando Viola, land liaison and front man for the US tour. “The staff is great, facilities are very good, and the **WHET** organization was very

helpful.” I’d contacted Fernando about doing an article on the ship, knowing he probably expected a piece about structural details, the ship’s background, possibly an interview with the captain. When I told him I wanted to write a ‘day in the life’ story about living and working aboard, he gave me a curious look.

“I must call Spain” and “We let you know” was music to my ears, and I smiled my way back down the gangplank, visions of sailing tall ships dancing in my head.



Sunrise along the Cape Fear

That afternoon, I caught up with David and some crew members at [Front Street Brewery](#), trading slang over a pint or two—the opportunity to practice US English is a major perk for Spanish sailors.

The rain kicked in, and the guys grew starry-eyed at the mention of a nap. When I offered my new friends a bean bag and a couch—your basic hospitality— they responded with disproportionate

enthusiasm, like I'd offered a room at the Four Seasons. To a sailor, I discovered, a couple of hours on a comfortable, stationary surface sounds like a night at a five-star hotel.

"I love Wilmington," said David, clutching the fuzzy pink blanket I tossed at his head. "I go to the Farmer's Market and buy fresh vegetables for our food, and [Java Dog](#) is close by. I take my coffee there," he told me.

"And the city is close enough for going walking and meeting people. They tell me where to go for seafood, or good breakfast...and I learn here, is very important to get a tattoo!" he said, with a laugh.



Chef David on the Bow

Indeed, several El Galeon crew sampled Wilmington's plethora of tattoo parlors. They enjoyed the haunted ambiance of [Orton's](#) pool hall, America's oldest billiards and pool room, and apparently, karaoke at the [Brown Coat Pub](#) was a regular outing. I learned David and Ramiro rode their bikes down Market Street, all the way

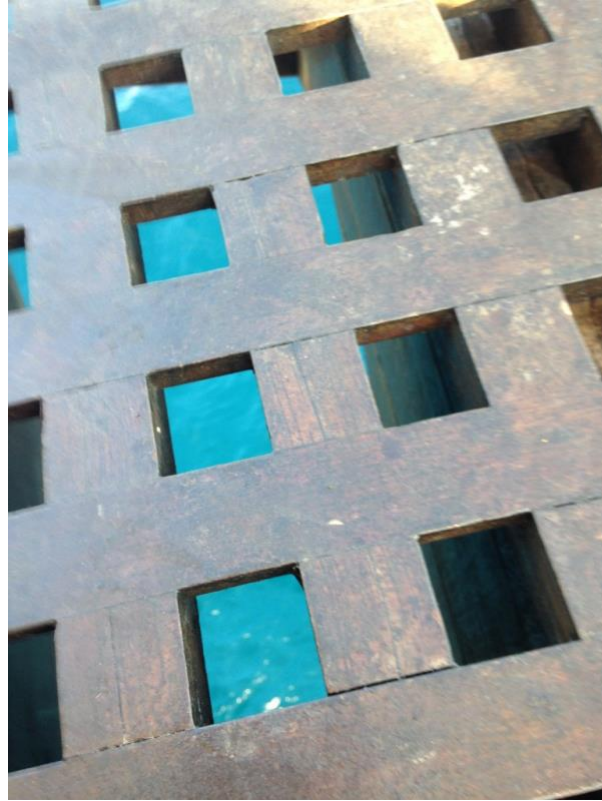
to [Wrightsville Beach](#): “We looked at the map and said, ‘looks like straightest route.’”

As someone who bikes to the beach often, I confirmed it was possibly the worst route, as well, and we shared a big laugh over their tale of “riding down middle of the road till we reach the waves.” .

“It is such a beautiful beach here,” said David.

On Sunday, at that very same beach, my phone rang. Jose Manuel Ambrosio Pozo, aka Kiki, the ship’s crew leader, invited me to sail to Charleston and stay the week—on one condition. “You must be a crew member for this time,” said Kiki, in a serious tone of voice. “This means midnight watch, long hours, help with the ship, whatever is needed. You must do everything like crew.” Claro que si, I assured him. Yes, of course! That’s exactly what I wanted to hear.

I left my afternoon surf session to run home and pack my things. We would leave at 4:45 am, high tide, the following morning, but I was to report to duty as soon as possible.



Through the Cutwater

I laid out my sleeping bag and stored my gear beneath my bunk, then made my way back on deck. I wandered out to the bow and looked around the marina.

The day's last visitors were reluctant to leave and they milled around the pier, waiting on the sunset—just like me, just two days ago.

I was about to become that sailor in someone's photo, I realized, one of the 'exotic' crew aboard that beautiful Spanish ship that once came to town; I'd be that brightly-dressed crew member in the kitchen, or lounging on the cutwater, enjoying places the photographers wished they could go. (In an effort to assist potential Kodak moments, I pushed my pink water bottle off to the side and tried to look as exotic possible.)



River Pilot catches his taxi, Southport

“Jamie,” called Kiki. David nodded in my direction.

“You will help with the defenses,” explained David, pointing over the edge of the ship to the large, heavy-looking fenders, which ease the transition from water to dock.

“You are strong, yes,” said Kiki, with a laugh, and raised his fist in the air. “This will be good job for you!”

* * *

4 am came much too soon, particularly because I’d barely slept.

“You’re excited,” said Skia, one of three, ongoing US volunteers who’d been sailing with the ship. “I didn’t sleep at all my first night!”

Having joined the ship in New London, Connecticut, Skia was sailing for an entire month, and upon meeting me that first day in Wilmington, she tells me, “I knew I spied a good candidate!”

“Defenses” duty involved putting on a climbing harness, and Skia was to become my fender-heaving gura. As a seasoned rock climber, I’d already spied the row of climbing harnesses clipped above the refrigerator. Ship work and rock climbing have some key things in common, and I looked forward to transferring some skills.

I adjusted the harnesses slightly oversized leg loops and reported to the edge of the ship, where Skia and I would climb overboard.



Skia, US Sailor

“The fenders are heavy,” said Skia. “Use your core!” Clipping ourselves into the rigging, we crawled down the side of the ship and out onto a ledge. “If you’re lucky,” she added, “someone will appear to lift them up and over for that final push.”

Sure enough, as my first fender found its way up, up, up to the railing, Kiki leaned over the side and hoisted it onto the deck. “Very nice!” he called, and then cheered, raising his fist in solidarity.

“You look very serious, Jamie,” he teased. “All is OK. *Is perfect.*”

* * *

As daylight colored the sky, we approached the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge, which was raised. but not separated. We pointed our chins toward the towering mast and watched in silent awe as El Galeon squeezed herself beneath the Gateway to Wilmington, like the last reveller beneath a very low limbo stick.

The friendly bridge keepers sounded four horn blasts into the early morning sky, and Captain Rosario smiled. She reached for a handheld horn and tooted three quick replies, then the overhead traffic joined in, beeping us a fond, reluctant farewell.

And so, the adventure began.

.– *Jamie Lynn Miller*



Author at Sea

Discover El Galeon Andalusia at Port City Marina, May 11-15, from 10a-6p. Adults: \$10; Kids 6-12, \$5. For more info, visit: www.elgaleon.org.