

Hanging onto the Yardarm: The journey of a lifetime

As I cling to the ropes attached to my safety harness, the deck of the *HMS Pelican of London* rises and falls far below me. There's no crow's nest on this ship, only a small wooden platform on which I keep my feet firmly planted as the ship pitches and rolls.

Down on the deck, the constant motion sends people staggering about, but strangely enough from up here the rocking seems less intense; peaceful even. To the starboard side, the dark Irish coastline looms on the horizon like an oncoming storm, while to the port there is nothing but the vast grey-green ocean that stretches as far as the eye can see.

I only have a moment to take in the view, though, as there's work to be done. Along with a few other crew members, I step onto the rope hanging beneath the topmost yard – the horizontal poles that the ship's sails hang from – and shuffle along the rope until I reach the very end. Once in position, I begin to untie the knots holding the sail in place. I'm suspended directly over the water, but I know that should I fall, my harness will catch me. This is what it's like to be on a voyage with Sail Training Ireland.

Sail Training Ireland internationally supports training vessels, helps to preserve the maritime heritage of the country, and often acts as a starting point for marine employment. However, their main focus is to aid the development of young people through their programmes – voyages on sailing vessels and tall ships.

They also include people with physical and intellectual difficulties, and run many programmes specifically aimed at them. A common phrase used to describe the voyages is “life-changing,” and having undertaken one myself, I now see why that is so often used.

I took part in the Asgard Armada voyage with two of my friends at the end of the summer, aboard the tall ship *Pelican of London*. Before this voyage, I'd never even been away from home by myself for longer than a weekend, and I'd had a fear of large boats since I was a small child.

Still, I reasoned with myself, I now sailed dinghies in Dingle Bay every week. Surely I'd be fine on a larger boat? As it turned out, that wasn't quite the case.

In my entire life, I have never had an experience quite so physically and mentally challenging, so exhausting, and, ultimately, so rewarding.

At the start, I was completely overwhelmed. We all had our Watch Groups, with whom we stood watch on deck for hours at a time, day and night. Our sleep schedules were disrupted by the watches, and as for space, I was crammed into a tiny cabin with five other trainees, in a bunk not much bigger than a kitchen cupboard. We all battled seasickness and tiredness, our hands grew sore from hauling on ropes, and as for personal hygiene... perhaps the less said the better.

One night, I remember waking up to find myself practically standing on my head against the wall, as the ship keeled over. Soon after, it was my Watch's turn to go up on deck for a two-hour shift in the pouring rain. Not to mention the day the shower in our cabin overflowed, flooding the place with foul-smelling water. I rediscovered my fear of boats; my friend discovered his fear of heights climbing the rigging.

But I don't regret a second of it.

While the experience may have been tough, we got through it, and as the voyage went on, I saw the good moments more. I remember climbing the mast, plotting the course, steering the ship through the night. I remember water-fights with other boats, the crew throwing buckets of water over us before we jumped into the freezing ocean off the coast of Kinsale. I became closer to some of the other trainees in nine days than many people with whom I've been in school for four years.

But memories aren't all that come from a Sail Training Ireland voyage. When on a ship, you learn teamwork, self-confidence, time management. Your work ethic is heightened, and your social skills dramatically increase.

Oh, and my friend with the fear of heights? He overcame that by volunteering to climb the mast at every possible opportunity.

In my opinion everyone can benefit from a Sail Training Ireland voyage, even if they hate boats - just like I did. While the seas may be rough, there's always a safe harbour beyond the storm, as was proved to me both figuratively and literally. Hanging above the sea from the topmost yard, as the ship pitches below, is an experience that will never leave you.