

# *It's a Bree*

Windjammer fleet plies Maine's coast in laid-back style

*Story by Hillary Nangle ♦ Photograph by Tom Nangle*



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The Maine Windjammer Association schooner *Ladona* sails by an island as it takes adventurers on a three-night cruise in Penobscot Bay.

Sailing, sailing, over the bounding main. I hum as the schooner *Ladona* skims across Penobscot Bay, the breeze billowing its sails on a warm mid-October morning. Reds, oranges, greens, and yellows fringe the mainland and islands, their reflections shimmering in the ocean waters. The scent of bread baking wafts from the galley. Around me, passengers relax on the deck, some reading or knitting, one painting, others watching for seals and seabirds.

Cruising aboard a Maine Windjammer Association schooner is an adventure shaped by wind and tide and framed by sunrise and sunset. There's little to do and a lot to enjoy on this three-night excursion. Lobstermen hauling traps, seabirds winging by, seals basking on ledges, lighthouses winking, and ferries to-ing and fro-ing vie for attention along with inviting islands and remote fishing villages.

Serious sailors consider Penobscot Bay among the world's best cruising grounds. "Once you're out on the water, you realize that there are hundreds and hundreds of islands," says *Ladona* Captain J.R. Braugh. "The path from one bay to the next is a miracle of geography; all are connected by inland channels. You can leave Rockland, head northeast, tool around all the bays, inlets, and waterways for days, and never see the same thing twice."



Captain J.R. Braugh at the wheel

## A Lady of Distinction

A few years ago, many thought *Ladona* had seen its last sunset. Designed as a private, ocean-racing yacht by William Hand, built in East Boothbay, Maine, and launched in 1922, this sleek beauty owns a rich heritage. "She was a real campaigner in the 1920s, when she participated in a lot of offshore races," Braugh says. "Most famous was the 1923 Newport to Bermuda: She lost on a technicality, but was ahead of the pack."

After stints as a World War II Navy submarine patrol boat and a fishing dragger, *Ladona* underwent renovation for sail-training and was rechristened *Nathaniel Bowditch* in 1971, later joining Maine's windjammer fleet as a passenger schooner. *Ladona's* last owner abandoned it at a wharf.

In 2014, Braugh, along with Captain Noah and Jane Barnes of the schooner *Stephen Taber*, rescued the rotting craft from bankruptcy and began restoring its dignity. "There's a special relationship with any boat you sail," Braugh says. "This one, in particular, has our fingerprints all over it."


Over two years, the trio rebuilt *Ladona* with 21st-century guests in mind. Most windjammers offer cozy camp-like cabins, but *Ladona* steps it up, glamping style. Contemporary amenities include electrical outlets and USB ports, as well as plush bedding and bathrobes. It's an intimate experience: 17 guests can occupy nine cabins that share three heads, two with fancy tiled showers.

"They say boats have souls, and I can still feel the ghosts of the *Bowditch*," says Maureen Reed, who sailed on *Bowditch's* final outing. The Boston-area resident began cruising aboard Maine windjammers in 1999 and also sailed on *Ladona's* maiden voyage. "It has a different feel now, but it's just as homey as ever," she says.

## Good Eats

I quickly get to know my fellow sailors. We range from a young honeymooning couple to retirees and hail from Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Texas, and Maine. Braugh invites us to participate as desired. Many answer calls to help raise and lower sails, and anyone can take a stint at the wheel.

I follow my nose to the galley, chef Anna Miller's domain, and throw any notions of dieting to the wind. Miller prepares three hearty meals daily, most scratch-made from locally sourced ingredients, starting with cooked-to-order full breakfasts: "You're on vacation, you should be able to sleep in," she says. Lunch, served around a large table on deck, is more elaborate. She pulls out the stops for dinner, starting with hors d'oeuvres



When the wind blows, the *Ladona* slices smoothly through the water.

## If You Go

Named for their ability to “jam” into the wind while carrying freight up and down the East Coast, windjammers trigger images of the Great Age of Sail. By the 1930s, the transit tide had turned in favor of steamships and trucks.

Captain Frank Smith looked at the schooners deteriorating in harbors and realized there still might be money to be made by appealing to summer rusticators, city folk yearning to escape the heat and crowds. In 1935, he chartered the 1881 schooner *Mable* and retrofitted it to carry passengers. The next year, he purchased another windjammer and founded Camden based Maine Windjammer Cruises. His success led others to do the same, and now, more than a dozen windjammers call Penobscot Bay home.

The Maine Windjammer Association represents eight vessels, including four designated National Historic Landmarks, offering three- to 10-night meal-inclusive cruises from late May to mid-October. *Fares for most vessels start at \$200 per person per night. (800) 807-9463; sailmainecoast.com. Schooner Ladona fares start at about \$400 per person per night. (800) 999-7352; schoonerladona.com.*

Clockwise from top left: Second Mate Jacob Pepper, better known as Pepper Jack, coils a line; a watercolor by passenger Cathy Martin captures the coastal scenery; two volunteers help raise the mainsail; and passengers dig in to the traditional all-you-can-eat lobster feast.



served with the complimentary wine *Ladona* offers each evening. On this trip, guest Lara Nixon of Bad Dog Bar Craft in Austin, Texas, whips together special punches and cocktails, too.

The wind increases as we pass Pumpkin Island Light, which guards the western end of Eggemoggin Reach, and enter sheltered Buck's Harbor in South Brooksville to anchor. While the crew prepares an all-you-can-eat feast of lobster, steak, and chicken—a highlight of every cruise—we shuttle ashore to mosey the village Robert McCloskey made famous in his beloved children's books *One Morning in Maine* and *Blueberries for Sal*.

## Sail Away

Chilly winds and the promise of rain greet us in the morning. With reefed mainsail, we cruise by Cape Rosier and up to Turtle Head, then ride the tide down Islesboro's west side, past Grindle Point and into Gilkey's Harbor. Despite the rain, most stay on deck to savor the brine-scented air and sea-spray facials.

The *Stephen Taber* joins us at anchor, connected deck-to-deck with lines. After dinner—turducken!—the live entertainment starts. Braugh and *Ladona* First Mate Gus Kodros strum guitars, Barnes grabs his harmonica and shaker, and passengers join in singing along to folk and Americana songs.

On our final morning, the honeymooners alternate steering *Ladona* toward the Rockland Breakwater. We embarked in T-shirts; now, we're layered in fleece and wool. Braugh takes over to enter the harbor; Kodros, in a motorized yawl, nudges *Ladona* dockside, where other windjammers are already shrink-wrapped for winter. We hug, share email addresses, and plan return trips. Braugh thanks every passenger, and as the last one disembarks, he smiles at his crew: "And that's a wrap on season three."

Regular *Northern New England Journey* contributor **Hilary Nangle** writes the *Moon Maine* guide.