

Sailing Sydney Harbour

 New South Wales
There's no place like it



Ahoy me Aussies, this trip's a must

Volunteers and old salts alike relish sailing on this restored barque, writes **Briar Jensen**

“EMERGENCY exits are that-away,” quips our briefing officer, pointing over the gunwales.

Yeah, right, assuming we can find our way through the maze of ropes and rigging to jump over the side. But I’m sure it won’t come to that.

I’m on Sydney Harbour aboard the tallship the James Craig, a restored 19th-century barque – which for those in the know is a merchant sailing ship with three or more masts, with the front two masts squared-rigged and the mizzen – or aft mast – both fore and aft-rigged.

For the uninitiated, it’s an old-fashioned sailing ship with a hell of a lot of funny shaped sails – with weird names like topgallant and spanker – and a hell of a lot more ropes.

Part of the Sydney Heritage Fleet, the James Craig is one of only four remaining operational barques in the world and the only one regularly sailing with passengers. I’m on one of her fortnightly sails on the harbour, which includes morning and afternoon tea and a “sailor’s” lunch.

Having seen pictures of her heeled over, under full sail, I’ve taken a precautionary sea sickness tablet to ensure I don’t lose my lunch. But it’s gloriously sunny with, disappointingly, hardly any wind. Given the James Craig weighs 1500 tonnes, it takes more than our gentle 10-knot breeze to fill the sails and power her 55m iron hull through the water.

Built as a bulk cargo carrier in Sunderland, England, in 1874, she was designed to handle heavy weather sailing and rounded Cape Horn 23 times before being sold to a New Zealand company for the trans-Tasman route. After being used as a coal storage hulk in Tasmania she was eventually scuttled in remote

Recherche Bay, where she rusted for the next 40 years.

Prompted by possibly losing the hulk to the San Francisco Maritime Museum, which was showing interest, the Sydney Maritime Museum acquired the remains in 1972. The restoration took 30 years, \$17 million and thousands of volunteer hours.

Although now fitted with two 400hp diesel engines, she still needs a tug out of Pyrmont’s Wharf 7, where she towers over her mate, the Bounty. Motoring under the Harbour Bridge, Captain Peter Cole gives instructions to the Officer of the Watch who shouts them to the helmsman, or in this case, helmswoman.

Mary, who joined her husband as a volunteer crew member after she retired five years ago, just loves being at the wheel. “It’s a fantastic feeling helming down the harbour, especially under the bridge,” she says.

All 45 crew, smartly dressed in blue, are volunteers – a mix, from crusty old salts through to enthusiastic teenagers. There are ex-maritime

workers, including the captain – who before becoming a business analyst was a submarine officer – but plenty of corporate types too, like Chantal, 25, who says the James Craig attracts all ages, both sexes and many nationalities. “Age and sex are no barrier to climbing the ratlines,” she says.

She’s right. As the captain calls for the sails to be readied, there’s a flurry of activity as crew members of all ages eagerly clamber up the ratlines and out on to the yards, mandatory safety harnesses clinking as they clip and unclip their way up.

I watch with a pang of nostalgia and twinge of jealousy, remembering my time on a square-rigged schooner, where, as a 16-year-old, my favourite spot was on the yards, unhindered by a safety harness.

With sails readied, willing guests were conscripted to haul on the sheets (ropes) – it looks hard work, so I hide behind my camera. After much grunting by the conga line on the rope, the first sail is up – just 20 more to go. But because of insufficient wind, it’s decided not to bother with them all, just enough for us to get the feel of canvas flapping overhead.

It’s hard to believe the James Craig sailed with a crew of only 12, especially

Wish you were here

The James Craig sails fortnightly from Wharf 7 at Pyrmont, Darling Harbour, on a Saturday or Sunday, and for special harbour events. Boarding 9.30am, return 4pm. \$205 a person (\$160 June to September) includes morning and afternoon tea and lunch. Next sailings: August 23, September 6 and 19. She is open for guided tours at the wharf most days between 10am and 4pm.

See www.shf.org.au for details or phone 9298 3888.

History

Read *The James Craig Story*, by Jeff Toghill and *All Hands on Deck: the restoration of the James Craig*, by Michael York, both available at the Australian National Maritime Museum shop. See www.anmm.gov.au.

in the mountainous seas and howling gales of the Southern Ocean. It must have been a tough life.

As we cruise the harbour, Alan Edenborough – one of the original salvage crew – gives a riveting history of the vessel and its restoration.

Chatting with the volunteers is half the fun and it’s inspiring to be among so many people who are passionate about preserving our maritime history – and willing to speak weird nautical terms like “wearing ship” and “squaring yards”. The James Craig is well loved and sail days like this help

pay for her ongoing maintenance.

“Aussies should be proud to have such a grande dame on Sydney Harbour,” Captain Cole says, and it appears they are. The James Craig attracts plenty of attention as we sail among ferries, yachts, power boats, cruise ships and kayaks, some of which come alongside for a closer look.

It’s a fun way to take a maritime history lesson, (at least on a fine day) and no one needs to use the emergency exit.

The writer was a guest of Sydney Heritage Fleet.



ALL HANDS: Guests hoist the James Craig’s sails (top) using its maze of ropes (left) as it sets sail.

Pictures: Briar Jensen, Sydney Heritage Fleet