Racing aboard the Great Lakes schooner Denis Sullivan
Participants do the jobs that 19th century sailors did as this replica navigates Lake Superior’s unpredictable waters.

By Karin Winegar, Special to the Los Angeles Times

Reporting from Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.—

At dawn on the dock, a few sailors kiss spouses and dogs goodbye. Then we muster on the quarterdeck: 17 crew (nine volunteers and eight professional sailors) ranging from a 19-year-old South Carolina college student to a 76-year-old Michigan farmer.

I have cruised the South Pacific, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean on the most luxurious ships afloat and have been crew on sailing and racing sailboats for decades in inland lakes, the Great Lakes and the Caribbean. As a volunteer on a tall ship, however, I knew I’d have a rare chance to learn classic skills and be part of a genuine adventure. I was leaving private staterooms, spa treatments and five-star table service far behind. Now I would sleep below decks in a narrow bunk, stand watch, eat shoulder to shoulder and scrub the galley afterward; it sounded grand.

Our ship is the Denis Sullivan, the world’s only Great Lakes schooner, and we’re heading out in a tall ships’ race from Duluth, Minn., to Sault Ste. Marie, about 370 miles. It is a sunny, humid day in August, but I have brought foul-weather gear, long johns and a watch cap as protection from Lake Superior’s notorious storms and chill.

In the 19th century, ships like the Sullivan were the freight trucks of the Great Lakes. Thousands of them hauled wood, iron ore and fish. Now they are at the bottom of a lake or long since broken up. Five years and a million volunteer hours in the building; this handsome replica was launched in 2000 as an educational vessel and flagship for the state of Wisconsin.

Capt. Tiffany Krihwan, a petite blond with cropped hair and freckles, is dressed for the day in a puka shell choker, khakis and a red "Seas the Day" T-shirt. The woman the crew calls "Tiff" announces man overboard, abandon ship and firefighting drills: "If there’s a fire, we fight it. The longer it burns, the less ship we have. This water is 44 degrees; the best hope you have is the immersion suit. Better yet, don’t fall in.

"When we wash the deck, if you don’t close my hatch, I will dump water in your bunk. Also if find a bunk light on, you lose your light, and you’ll have to do a dance or skit — I like show tunes." Then she adds a daily refrain, "Don’t put toilet paper in the head," followed by, "Remember, have fun!"

The round, low call of a conch shell rises through the galley hatchway where, to the strains of U2 and Benny Goodman, ship’s cook Angela MacIntyre has made breakfast. We fuel up, and we need it: Muscle moves this forest of wrist-thick lines and massive sails. Krihwan shouts commands; the crew echoes in “callbacks” communicating the length of the 98-foot deck, out to the tip of the 39-foot bowsprit or up three of the more-than-70-foot masts.

Nate Bray-Marks, the ship’s chief engineer, pink faced and with a touch of Jack Black’s manic jubilance, seizes lines surely and swiftly.

"Tiff, which headsails do you want up?" he shouts.
"All of them," she yells in return.

A dozen hands join him on the halyards as he bellow: "Haul away together: Two-six! Heave! Two-six! Heave! Ziggyzaggy, ziggyzaggy, oy oy oy!"

The Sullivan carries 10 sails used in combinations tailored to wind velocity and direction. This morning, with good westerlies behind us, we put up everything, including the raffee, a batwing-shaped sail unique to Great Lakes schooners.

"Ready on the throat, ready on the peak," Bray-Marks yells as we grasp lines to alternately hoist the inner and outer edges of the sail. "Throat! Peak! Throat! Peak! Get strong! Dig in and hold! Sweat it!" (Make it even tighter.) That's well." (Stop.)

The Sullivan's sails up and trimmed, we watch our rivals, including the Pride of Baltimore II with its distinctive raked masts, the Europa flaunting about 20 sails, and the Roseway, distinguished by its tanbark (red) sails.

"Two steps back! Fire in the hole!" comes the word and the ship's cannon sends a gratifyingly loud salute echoing cross Superior Bay.

"Whose butt are we gonna kick today?" Bray-Marks calls out.

"Niagara's!" we roar back, eyeing a nearby square-rigged brigantine with gun ports.

While some crew handle sails and the helm, others scrub decks, wash dishes and clean the head. It’s "like doing chores on an amusement park ride," says Becka Hopkins, a college sophomore. She has studied seamanship under the American Sail Training Assn. and was a deckhand from Bermuda to Charleston, S.C., aboard the tall ship Virginia.

Joe Ewing, Sullivan's volunteer coordinator and education officer, is aboard for the race. He helps teach youngsters about the Great Lakes ecosystem in trips for schoolchildren.

"They tie knots, raise the sails, take lake water samples and peer at benthos — microorganisms on the bottom," he says. "They learn to use a Ponar grab sampler [a metal box with jaws] to scoop up creatures such as worms and larvae and get a gander at invasive threats such as zebra mussels and Caspian quaggas."

During longer trips, passengers learn deeper lessons about the sea, themselves and other cultures, Ewing says. "At home, many of them have to have the latest video game and every comfort. Out here they change. On our trips to the Bahamas, kids see how happy people are without electricity or running water."

I'm part of the 11 p.m.-3 a.m. watch, standing on the foredeck as the masts inscribe arcs on the stars accompanied by the occasional faint thrum of distant freighters. The Big Dipper spills light on the Pleiades, massive cumulus clouds open and close like stage curtains, a meteor sparkles past Cassiopeia and rakes the forestay. Before me a sliver of moon rises, a shimmering shade of antique rose, and phosphor winks in rushing bow waves. Then spotlights pierce low clouds to the north, a wavering band of silver, purple and palest green: The Northern Lights dance above us.

Morning finds us passing the Devils Island light of the Apostle Islands, and we have not kicked Niagara's butt: It is 19 miles ahead. Europa, however, is on our starboard beam.

At midday, a green-purple fist of a thunderstorm bears down on us, the wind kicks up to 35 knots (10 knots is about 11 1/2 mph) and brings cold, stinging rain. With Krihwan shouting commands, the ship heeling sharply, we race to reduce sail, secure lines and put on foul-weather gear.

Isle Royale is somewhere to port, and the Keweenaw Peninsula is visible to starboard; some of the crew are playing the violin and ukulele. Two weary sparrows rest on the lines, and the German-accented voice of Europa's captain sputters from the radio.

At 6 p.m. we muster to the aroma of ginger, coconut vegetable stir fry and rice.

"We have wind 10 to 15 knots, the winds will be 25 knots from the west tonight, but let's keep the topsails up unless it gets really bad," Krihwan instructs.

The Pride of Baltimore II radios during mess, and the captains swap news. Ours signs off with "Nighty-night. We love you."
Now I share the 3-8 a.m. watch with Jeffrey Hicks, a retired Milwaukee theater rigger. We attempt to recall the words to "White Cliffs of Dover" as we balance on the foredeck, spotting 1,000-foot-long freighters. At dawn in mid-lake, the Europa is silhouetted against the red bands of sunrise, and a tiny brown bat hurtles aboard and crawls under a hatch cover to rest.

A stiff wind rises behind us, the Sullivan surges to 12 knots, the following waves higher than our stern, white caps tumbling alongside. It's going as fast as it has ever moved, and we grin at one another and take turns at the wheel. Hours early (although still behind Niagara), we shoot into Whitefish Bay, where the doomed Edmund Fitzgerald lies somewhere beneath us. To port, the sunset picks out the tawny headlands of Canada, the skyline pricked by wind turbines. To starboard, a deep, summer green forest slopes to the sapphire water.

At the Soo Locks wharf, spectators call out questions, take photographs and look at us with envy. We have set a schooner record of 50 hours for this trip. More than that we have had a rare chance to live a tradition and traveled with grace and excitement through great beauty.

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