The Bark Europa on the open seas of the Atlantic. A crew of French, American and Canadian adventurers and many of them Acadians are aboard the ship as it retraces the route taken from France to Nova Scotia in 1604.

The Bark Europa

The Acadians set sail again from Le Havre, France — just as they did, four centuries ago.
Editor's Note: In 1604, 400 years ago, the first of what would become the Acadians sailed from Le Havre, France, for the French colony in Canada, where they would found Acadia on the wind-whipped shores of Nova Scotia. To commemorate that historic anniversary, freelance travel writer Todd Jarrell conceived of the voyage of the bark Europa, recreating the sailing of those first Acadians from the Old World to the New. Jarrell has spent much of the last seven years sailing on tall ships and chronicling his adventures for National Geographic.com, BBC Radio and CNN Travel. In this and stories that will follow, he chronicles the sailing of the Europa, timed to arrive in Nova Scotia's Bay of Fundy in time for Congrès Mondial Acadien 2004, set to begin July 15.

Buzzing with anticipation for a trans-Atlantic crossing, 40 soon-to-be Acadian sailors mill on the deck beneath the soaring 10-story masts of the tall ship Europa. Colorful courtesy flags ripple in the maze of rigging overhead like splashes of stained glass; the crew seems a small congregation in a cathedral of the sea.

Strangers only last week, they have gathered in the French seaport of Le Havre from Louisiana, New Brunswick, Texas and Nova Scotia. They sail to honor their ancestors, who 400 years ago would embark from this port to become the first European settlers in Canada, the first to farm those fertile fields—the first Acadians, or Acadiens.

On less than one month's notice they have shut down their lives in the "normal" world to sail an ocean and share in some of their forefathers' experience. Here are people who honor their heritage by putting themselves on the line in a similar fashion to those few intrepid ancestors, for the ocean has not adjusted to modern times. The waves may be just as high, the waters as cold, the winds as fair or foul. The work of the square rig sailor has changed precious little in four centuries.

The Acadians, men and women, range in age from 15 to 74 and their array of expertise and life experience is formidable. But today they will begin to add to those skills as they slip the mooring lines from this quiet quay and make sail for Nova Scotia.

Europa has more than 200 lines to work her sails. Each has a name and a purpose and must be learned by the crew. All crew will work in the watch system and be trained by Europa's professional crew. Here, the learning curve is near as vertical as the masts.

This crew has crossed an ocean already on this trip, hermetically sealed in jumbo jets, arcing great vapor trails across a blue Atlantic sky like chalk lines pointing to their cultural origin. Few peoples can say with such certainty the place and time their ethnic heritage began. But in 1604, when Pierre du Gua, Sieur de Mons, ordered his anchor pulled from Le Havre's harbor mud and turned his two small vessels toward the New World, he kindled the spirit which we see today in the Acadian crew of Europa.

Many famous Acadian names are on board: Allain, Gauthier, Le Blanc, Maillet, Thibodeau. For some it is an emotional if not literal homecoming. "It's where I left my parents' ashes," says Rob Duncan of Vancouver, British Columbia, "and I feel I need to go... home."

Hanson Paul Le Blanc, a retired dentist from Baton Rouge, agrees with this, but for him the voyage is also a piece to a puzzle. Hanson Paul is one of seven Le Blancs on the crew; all descendants of one Daniel Le Blanc from that 1604 voyage. In his youth, Hanson Paul Le Blanc's parents downplayed the family's Acadian ancestry; as a consequence he regrets he speaks no French.

Le Blanc explains the motivation for the book he is writing about his ancestors: "I always had this sense that I belonged to something bigger," he says in a rich, almost formal Louisiana drawl. "But I ended up looking for the questions which I had no answers to."

The oldest member of the Acadian crew, Benoit Lanteigne, stares up into the complex web of running lines and sails and admits that the trip more than anything represents a chance of a lifetime. "For me it is a dream to be here, to commemorate that sail. Emotionally it gives me a lot of feeling," Louis Daigle, who whose family goes back nine generations in New

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Several residents of Acadiana are among those creating the bark Europa as she makes her way from Le Havre, France, to Nova Scotia. They are retracing the voyage first made 400 years ago by the people who became the Acadians of Canada and the United States.

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Brunswick puts it more simply: "I am fascinated by tall ships. And I love adventure!"

A high-pressure system awaits us in the Atlantic now. When we sail from Le Havre we will cross the Channel to the English side then run for the open ocean before easterly winds. The watches are assigned; the sail training is just beginning. There is an air of expectation for grand experiences that will surely be delivered.

The Acadians sail for ancestors and they sail for adventure — ahead 3,000 miles and back 400 years.

Crossing the Channel

The tall ship Europa, with topsails set and pennants flying, stands out into the English Channel on Thursday, on the horizon a scum of land is all that remains of Le Havre, France.

For the 40 members of the Acadian Sail crew, this is only the start of a one-month ocean adventure as they sail in wake of their ancestors.

These Acadians set across the North Atlantic to commemorate the 1604 voyage of de Mons and Champlain who also embarked from Le Havre to deliver the first French settlers to the New World.

The Acadian crew's excitement is palpable, but only a mere fraction of the mix of dread and anticipation that their forefathers must have felt. In leaky wooden ships with limited provisions, those French farmers and artisans sailed for a New World as foreign and untried as any we can imagine. Wrestled from the wilderness their home would be Canada's l'Acadie, an adaptation of the name Arcadie given to the New World by Italian explorer Verrazzano in 1524.

Our crew hoists the colors of l'Acadie — a gesture their forefathers could scarcely have imagined in 1604. The French vertical red, white and blue bars bear Saint Mary's gold star, a beacon to bring sailors safely home from sea. These are symbolic colors for most of the crew, from Acadiana, Holland and the USA.

This is not lost on attorney Gil Thibodeau from Edmundston, New Brunswick. "Four hundred years ago when they sailed from here the diplomatic language of world was French. It shows how much things can change," he says, framing the paradox of the lingua franca being English for Europa's international crew.

In the evening light men and women cluster around the ranks of belaying pins, craning necks to trace the sails' 200-plus working lines high up into the three tall masts. Bit by bit they learn Europa's complexities.

Tanned and white-haired, Lanteigne of Pokeshaw, New Brunswick, quickly acclimates to Europa's 100-foot tall masts. "It's like standing on deck to me," he
A sunset viewed over Europa's traditional spoked wheel, a sight the voyagers will see many times on their trip.

says, astride a metal bar, six stories up. Gripping the rigging with tattooed forearms, the retired fisherman scans 100 square miles of wind-combed sea. "But up here the view's a lot better!"

For two days Europa enjoys fine weather but headwinds prevent our desired westerly course. We must tack back and forth across the Channel, pulled between England and France — an historic metaphor for an Acadian crew.

The chop of the English Channel brings the first victims of diabolic mal de mer, referred to by sailors as "The Great Equalizer." Despite health, wealth or station in life, seasickness claims its victims in a random roulette of misery.

Summer light lasts until midnight in these latitudes, the day brightens early. The crew's life rotates in four-hour watches with two-hour "dog watches" to vary daily work hours. The tall ship's world offers much to learn, but the crew, from age 15 up, does it all, manning the helm, standing lookout for shipping, bracing yards to the winds.

On Sunday we spot the Lizard, a famous English headland, a bruised knuckle on a misty horizon. Leaving Land's End and the Scilly Isles abaft our starboard beam, we have patiently tacked out of the Channel, gaining sea room to chart the course of our choosing.

And into the Open Sea

The winds build across the ocean's immense reaches throughout Monday. Squalls buffet Europa as we strike and set sail regularly. By Tuesday we roll on six-foot swells as the barometer drops. Anna Gauthier of Sunset, falls, breaking her nose. We offer icepacks and sympathy; amazingly, she tries instead to comfort us, saying I am fine, just fine. Doctor Rob will set her nose in the morning.

Crewmember Patricia Donahue has never before been to sea though she was raised on the New Brunswick coast. Sobered by the ship's roll and Gauthier's accident she reflects on those first settlers sailing to the unknown. "Imagine those people holding on, trying to protect their children. What hearty people," she says, "... or desperate."

In the night the gale closes with Europa. The inner jib sheet parts to send the sail cracking on the wind. A buntline explodes into shattered fluff; the huge foresail buffets and booms in the wind like God's own laundry. Waves board over the rails, leaping the deck awash and lines streaming out the scuppers. Whipped by wind, crew hurls aloft to secure the straining sails from the claw of the gale.

By morning the gale has passed. Personal effects are strewn about the cabins; our only toaster has leapt to its death. Swells of 12 to 15 feet settle down in the afternoon along with a few stomachs.

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On the library table Doctor Rob resets Gauthier's broken nose — she still maintaining that I am fine just fine.

We have weathered the storm, and not in the figurative sense. The sun again offers a welcome warmth, unfolding a fiery sunset as dolphins race and rollick on the bow wave, leading Europa, encouraging us on to Canadian shores.

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