Voyage of an Acadian lifetime

Long Acadians retrace ancestors’ original route from France to Canada

By François Gauthier
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At the port of LeHavre, France, they gathered with their four belongings. They brought clothes for all weather: coats for every use, they were given, blankets, hats, shoes, banners, carpentry tools, pipes, and other necessities. They were given leaves to make their meals, and they were given prepared food for each day. They were driven to the docks in a small boat and told to get into their small boats. (The French had already told them that they would have to navigate their own boats.)

They became seamen, and the Acadians would have to navigate their own boats. (The French had already told them that they would have to navigate their own boats.)

As we departed LeHavre, we had a chance to see what the Frenchmen were doing. We saw the sails of the ship, and we saw that there were no masts. (The French had already told us that they would have to have a mast.)

Passengers wait in the main salon of the Europa.

One of our favorite activities is to compare genealogical trees. Family trees are devised, and each family has a different branch. (The French had already told us that they would have to have a family tree.)

Did they sail back to France? How did they get to Louisiana? (The French had already told us that they would have to have a Louisiana voyage.)

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staysail, every jib, the spanker, even the ape. Every sail went up. The ship heeled over nearly 30 degrees and ran like we'd never seen her go. She sliced through eight-foot seas, water brimming over the leeward gunwale. Europa made 12 knots with little effort. The trade winds blew true, and we didn't reset sails for nearly four days. Because of the lean and wave action of the boat, I slid toward the lower end of my bunk as I slept and awoke all balled up by my feet. That's sailing.

Knowing this is the final leg of the journey, many make the decision to "go aloft." Donning safety harnesses, we climbed the 10-story mast and worked our way out onto yardarms while adjusting sails and taking pictures. Being on the mast or arms in these seas has a reverse pendulum effect. When the ship rocks, those up high are swung 60, 70 feet from side to side.

"Man, a roller coaster is nothing compared to this," Mark, the 15-year-old, gleefully proclaimed. I looked up that afternoon and saw a woman of 60 and man of 62 on either side of Mark, way up on the yardarms, loving the ride and the howling wind as much as he did. We sail and we sail, and again the Atlantic proves its expansive presence. The flying fish are iridescent turquoise. Whales "blow," and I saw one roll his 60-foot length just above the waves. He was eight feet wide, brownish gray, and the crew told us he is a fin whale.

We kept journals, took pictures and movies, recording feverishly to preserve our memories. We kept watch and enjoyed meals on the sun-drenched deck.

We marveled at Marianna, who recognized many of the sailors taking the original Acadians to Nova Scotia also were Dutch.

Two days from Nova Scotia a pod of 60 or so dolphins arrived, intent on fun. They chased our ship's bow. They chased, jumped, they swam on their backs and layed for more than an hour.

Encountered, we hailed every camera device we had onto the main decks and clicked away. We were like children watching other children play. The baby dolphins are as slow as the adults. The sunset was one of the most magnificent we'd seen, darkness arrived and our friends the dolphins bade farewell. It was such a clear night that the clouds of the Milky Way were clearly visible. Scorpio decorated the southeastern sky and Polaris was higher in the heavens than should be allowed. I did not want this day or this voyage to end.

Were the original Acadians experiencing the same thing at this point? They reached Nova Scotia completely adjusted to life at sea. But their motivations and expectations were different. They were not arriving at a world already built, governments set up, economies established. They found a continent raw with promise and natural resources and they were anxious to start building. At Cape Sable, they made the intelligent decision to split up. Two of the ships started up the St. Lawrence and their colonists gave rise to Montreal and Quebec. Others populated Newfoundland, and the one we Louisiana Cajuns study most went to the Bay of Fundy. After a first harsh winter, they gave rise to Port Royal and Grand Pré and much of Nova Scotia.

On the last day, the weather closed in, reducing visibility to a quarter-mile in the rain. We knew the coast was right there but were unable to see it. Cell phones started to work and happy calls were made home.

A wave of realization caused a stampede of gathering belongings and packing luggage. By noon, we made Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, and cleared Customs there. A crowd greeted us on the dock with posters and sweet welcomes. "Bienvenue Européens!" Within an hour, we sailed north toward Port Royal (now Annapolis Royal) and again an enthusiastic town swelled with visitors greeted us at the dock. The town had planned a welcoming ceremony: speeches, music and good food. The Mi'kmaq Indians paddled out in birch bark canoes to greet us, peace drum thumping. The anchor touched down, the davits were lowered, everyone hugged and exchanged e-mail addresses. Laughs and tears mingled as we went ashore. Half of the 40 Acadians left the Europa in Annapolis Royal because obligations from our lives couldn't wait any longer.

Some other half returned to the ship and sailed to Halifax where another commemoration ceremony awaited. We mixed with the town's people, reveling in our welcome. There was music, beer and food, friends all around. The Europa crew joined in the celebration and memories were once again relived and joked about. French and English languages intermingled freely and the sun set just past the anchored Europa.

I wonder about the celebrating that must have occurred on land as the original Acadians began to realize they'd made it across, that they stood on the continent they would now call home. Perhaps they butchered a pig, pulled out a keg of ale, there was probably music and dancing too. Little is known of the day they landed.

That evening, after the celebration had quickly subsided, we stood at the dock, telling the last load of Acadians and crewmates goodbye before they motored back to the Europa. Rob, the doctor from Holland, Rosie, a brand new high school graduate, my wife, Anna, and I stood on the dock, a light mist falling on our eyes as we watched silently as the Europa raised anchor, sounded three huge blasts of the ship's horn and slowly ... oh so slowly ... sailed away.

Something in me reached out for the ship, those people, that experience, that life. Something in me went through a small panic that the Europa was going away without me. I could still feel the ship rocking below my feet, still feel the wind. I yearned to be out on a yardarm, and already I missed the crew and my shipmates. And I knew I was changed.

I would take days, weeks, or months to fit the change into my life. The original Acadians probably felt this too. Their ship left with promises of returning with new supplies, more deck with economic trade with France. But, they too had to stand there and wave goodbye and watch them go. They must have missed the sailing and their shipmates. But, once the ship was gone, they turned to a completely different task at hand. The First Acadians indeed succeeded. They, alone in the wilderness against all hardships, despite deportations, no matter what their ill treatment, have succeeded. Regardless of what coast they settled or what language they spoke, the Acadians are here and there and are growing in number, in government power, in economic strength, in all things. Their voyage of 1604 and ours of 2004 was indeed, the voyage of an Acadian lifetime. •