

Sailing under the Southern Cross

BY BETH PARKS
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

It's an experience you should try, if just once in your life: sleeping on the deck of a tall ship as it rocks gently beneath the star-filled heavens.

It clears your mind. It helps you put things back in perspective. It reminds you what insignificant specks we are in the vastness of creation.

Essay

As you lie on your back, far away from light pollution, the stars glitter so brightly it hurts to look at them. Countless galaxies stretch far beyond what your eyes can see or your mind can conceive.

You can't fathom the vastness. You see points of light in the sky and imagine them as outlines of figures.

But this time, sailing aboard a schooner off the coast of Venezuela in February, there is no Big Dipper, no Little Dipper, no Cassiopeia overhead. I never had sailed before, save for a few brief escapades on Frenchman Bay when hardly a gentle breeze stirred the air. Sailing on the Yankee Clipper would be a real stretch, and I wondered if I could stand up to the challenge.

The Yankee Clipper is as fascinating as the islands it visits. Originally called The Cressida, the vessel was built in 1927 by German industrialist Alfred Krupp as one of the only armor-plated yachts in the world. Krupp reputedly had ties to Adolf Hitler, and the Cressida was confiscated as a war prize in World War II. The Vanderbilts eventually acquired the ship, renaming it Pioneer and racing it off Newport Beach in California. At 22 knots under sail, it was one of the fastest tall ships on the West Coast. It was refitted as a commercial windjammer in 1965.

Now you can lie on the Yankee Clipper's weathered teak planks, transfixed by the starry cross in the dark sky beyond the sails. There is Crux, the Southern Cross.

Don't bother looking for the Crux constellation in the northern skies. It won't be there. To see it well you must be south of 27 degrees latitude, and some

say it is worth the trip.

And don't expect to find a host of myths or stories linked with the Southern Cross. They don't exist. The ancient Greeks and Romans were the myth-makers, and they considered the tiny kitelike cluster of stars to be part of the constellation Centaurus.

People living in the Middle East at the time of Christ found themselves awed by the vision of a celestial cross, which by then lay touching their southern horizon as a result of stellar procession. As more and more centuries passed, the stars gradually drifted out of the view of those living in the Northern Hemisphere.

It wasn't until the 16th century that Crux became its own constellation in the southern night sky. With no single bright star pointing to the South Pole, explorers began using the little constellation to guide them.

Later, both Australia and New Zealand included the Southern Cross pattern as a distinctive symbol on their flags.

Aboard the Yankee Clipper, it has been life in the slow lane. The evening's entertainment consists solely of watching hermit crabs "race" each other across the deck. Your muscles ache from hoisting the stiff canvas sails.

Relaxed and unencumbered, you begin to muse how life gets in the way of living. We embroil ourselves in day-to-day



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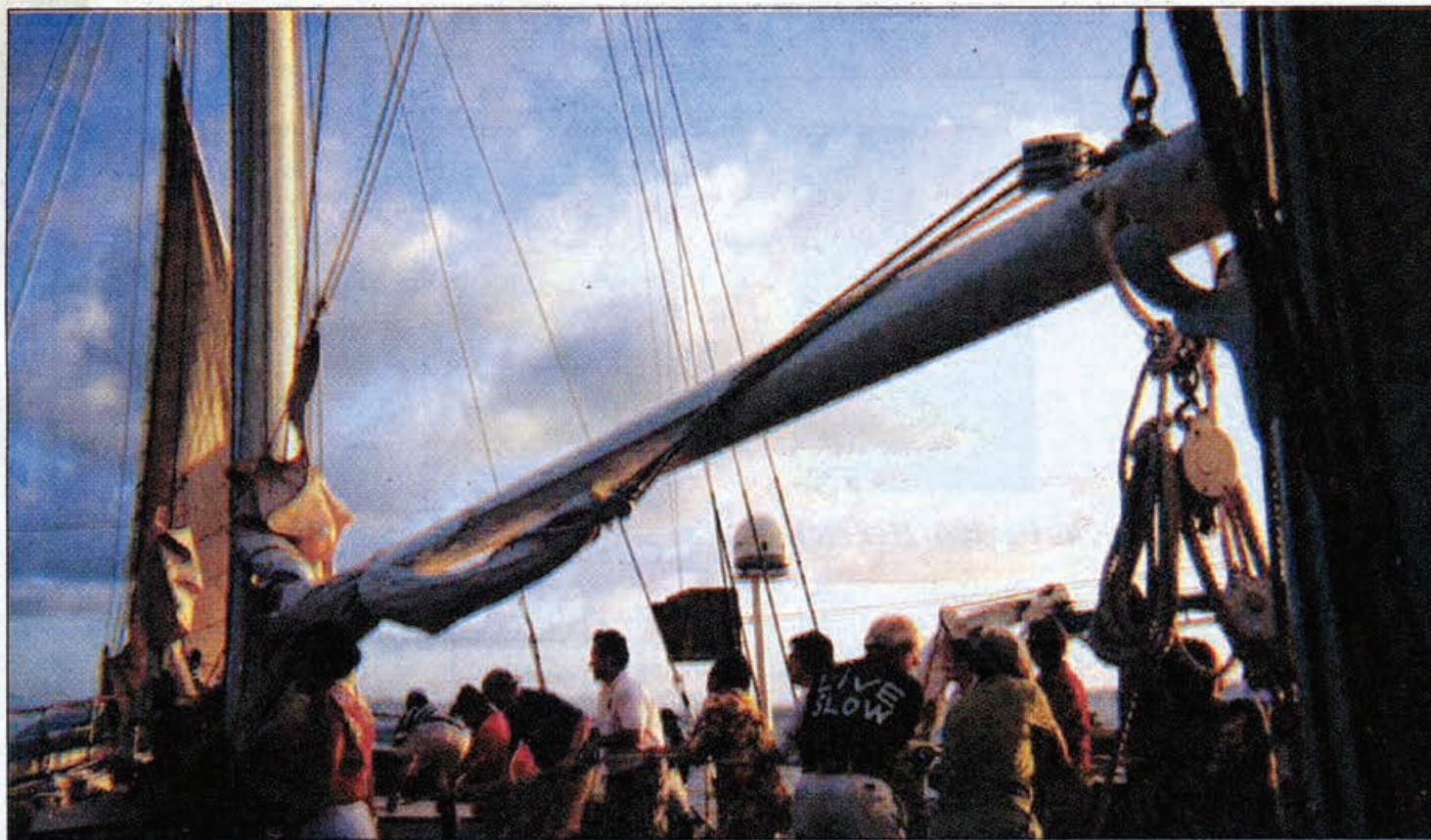
From the schooner Yankee Clipper's weathered deck, the Southern Cross can be seen in the night sky.

details. We are born, we grow, we learn. We eat, we work, we play, we fight. We love, we procreate, we sleep. We hold beliefs, we make commitments, we die. We're born on the conveyor belt of existence and, all too soon it seems, we drop off into eternity.

You wonder how Earth would appear to someone traveling through time and distant space. The tiny blue marble on

which we live surely would appear inert and insignificant from afar. The space traveler would perceive no political boundaries, no sign of armed

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BETH PARKS PHOTO

Passengers haul the sails aboard the Yankee Clipper off the Venezuelan coast.

Sail

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conflict, no evidence of the constant struggle for survival by each and every living thing.

Looking at Earth from the perspective of space, perhaps our existence is really simpler than we choose to believe. Our planet is nothing more than a terrarium, filled with soil and water and growing things that maintain a semblance of equilibrium unless something gets knocked out of whack. But mankind has a penchant for disturbing systems that work well. Ultimate consequences topple beneath the crushing weight of his immediate gain.

Despite his striking flaws man assigns himself the scientific name *Homo sapiens sapiens*, "Man wise wise," or man the very, very wise. He cannot conceive his arrogance.

And so there you lie on the aged and creaking boards of a tall ship, looking up at the

Southern Cross and wishing we were all a little smarter. People will make their fortunes, gain or lose power, and wars will come and go. We will bulldoze our way forward with scarcely a thought as to how the things we do today will affect our world tomorrow or 10,000 years from now. As we slowly destroy our own terrarium we will seek new and ever-distant places and resources to exploit.

Perhaps instead of pledging allegiance to our individual countries and political systems, we should consider the greater reality. Scoff if you will.

I pledge allegiance to our world and universe.

I will use resources wisely and responsibly,

Practice the golden rule, And contribute and cooperate for the common good

Toward balance and a sustainable future for all

Beth Parks lives in Hancock County village of Corea. She can be reached at bparks@umext.maine.edu.