

From Stem to Stern: the 2006 Tall Ships Challenge

By Cal Pifer

It's that time of year again. The flowers are starting to bloom, the weather is a little warmer, and sail training finally culminates with two weeks of sailing in the Gulf. It is also the time of the year when ELISSA volunteers should think about summer sailing opportunities. Apart from the difficulty of taking vacation time from work, sail training experiences in the summertime are easily attainable and very affordable. Many of the programs that charge money cost approximately the same amount of money as staying in a normal-priced motel. I can't think of a better way that ELISSA volunteers could spend a vacation than sailing tall ships!

Perhaps one of the best opportunities to sail on these ships is to participate in a leg of the 2006 Tall Ships Challenge on the Great Lakes this summer. The American Sail Training Association operates the Challenge series every summer. It alternates between the East Coast, the Great Lakes, and the West Coast. The Challenge is actually a race series designed to increase camaraderie among the fleet. I know what many of you are thinking; but yes, the tall ships really do race! Each race starts and finishes in a city that then holds a Tall Ships Festival. These festivals draw thousands of people from around the country, and can be quite a spectacle. The last time that the ships were in the Great Lakes was 2003.

During that summer, the Tall Ship Festival in Chicago broke an all-time weekend record for public attendance on Navy Pier. In addition to visitors and tourists, the port festivals hold crew parades, crew games, and crew entertainment. There are free city tours, concerts, and activities that run the entire weekend. Some of the best celebrations that I have ever attended have been Port Festivals.

The process for sailing on one of the ships is fairly easy. You can reference the American Sail Training Association's website and look to see what vessels will be participating in the Great Lakes Challenge. From there, pick the vessel that is your favorite, and that fits your budget, then contact the vessel's office. There are different dates available for different durations of sailing – for example, the Green Bay to Chicago race will take four days. Additionally, many of the ships are also taking side voyages after the Challenge is over.

There will be many exciting vessels that will be participating in the 2006 Challenge.

To name a few, you could sail on the "Sloop Providence" which was the famous movie star ship featured in last month's column about "Pirates of the Caribbean," or, if speed is more your cup of tea, you can sail on the extremely fast and traditional "Pride of Baltimore II" or the historic Essex schooner, "Highlander Sea." Finally, you may choose to visit ELISSA friends Wes Heersen and Walter Rybka on the U.S. Brig Niagara – one of the most beautiful ships in the world (although I am slightly biased).

The ELISSA crew that have participated in these summer events have had very positive experiences. Ship Operations Committee Chair Geoff Mills participated in the 2000 series on the East Coast. I am sure that he would be happy to answer any questions that you might have. Additionally, Race Director Jonathan Harley at the American Sail Training Association can update you on which vessels will be in attendance. I truly hope that many of you will take advantage of this great experience—or, at the very least, consider it. You will be better sailors because of it, and you will have the experience of a lifetime!



Above: tall ships at the 2003 race start in Cleveland – the HMS Bounty and Tarangini. Below: tall ships at Muskegon, Michigan – Highlander Sea, Tarangini, and Europa. Photos courtesy of ASTA.

