

THE OLDEST 'CRUISE SHIP' IN THE US



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ATTORNEY AT POLLOCK COHEN IN NEW YORK

I have zero interest in camping, and I've never put 'glamping' on a short list of vacation options. I do, however, love cruising, and the more luxurious the better. That is why the four-night cruise aboard the 155-year-old Stephen Taber – the oldest continuously operating vessel in the United States – was wonderfully

surprising.

I booked for an out-of-character reason: sentimentality. I had found photos of my father taken aboard the Taber in 1967, shortly before he died, and learned that the ship had been completely overhauled. A bit recklessly, I booked a double cabin before asking my wife Sarah. Happily,

she agreed to the Taber adventure.

Owner and skipper Noah Barnes sails the Taber in Maine's Penobscot Bay from May through October. In the winter, he personally supervises tender maintenance on the sleek wooden vessel. The two-masted gaff-rigged schooner measures

68 feet on deck, carries 22 passengers in 12 cabins and has five crew members. There is no inboard engine. Instead, the Taber tows a small motorised yawl boat to get into and out of her Rockland homeport.

No two itineraries are identical. The Taber follows the wind and the captain's whims through about 200 scattered islands across a thousand-square-mile area. The cruises last between three and seven nights, and often have a theme such as music, gastronomy or racing against other schooners. Ours was chocolate.

Calling our seven and a half feet square cabin 'snug' would be an understatement. One person could stand upright at the sink. This was at the base of the ladder up to the hatch, which we kept open for fresh air. Above each single bed was a reading light and storage net, which Sarah still raves about for its practicality. There were hooks for towels, a tiny shelf for toiletries, and just enough space under the beds and ladder to store soft luggage and clothing.



Crew polishing lanterns ©Steve Cohen

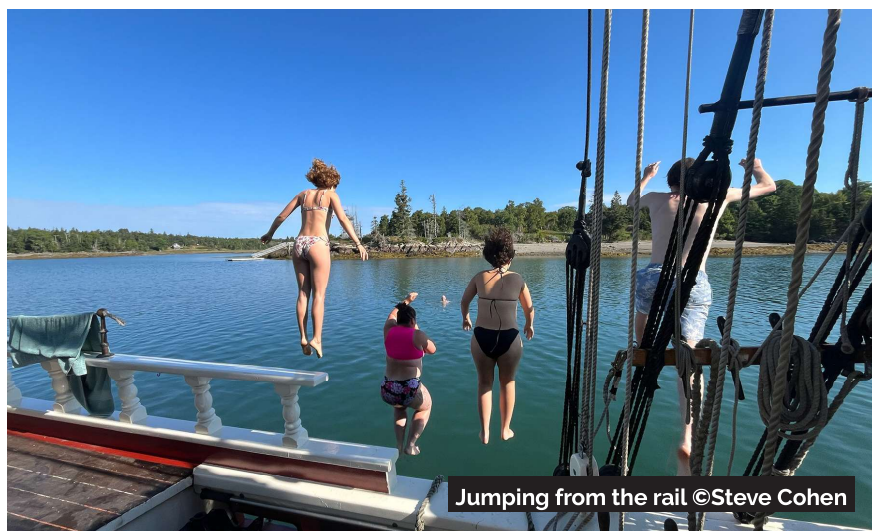
I learned about the cabin's only downside when I sat up in bed, forgetting about the wooden beam 18 inches above my pillow.

The ship's linens and pillows were first-rate. On deck there were two shared toilets, but surprisingly there was never a wait and the crew kept them spotless. A curtain-enclosed outdoor shower was erected every morning, which was quite lovely.

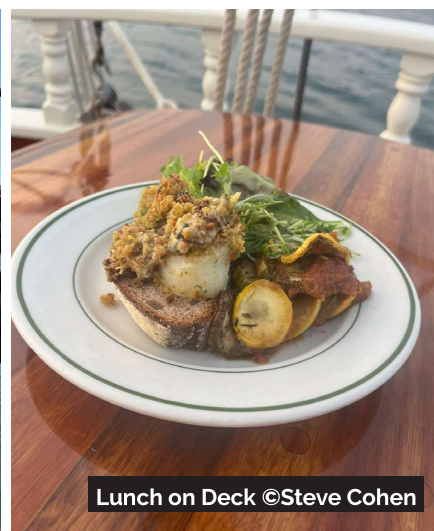
Food is a big attraction on all cruises. As a New York City food snob, I was ready to pass judgement on what I expected

would be simple, adequate fare. Instead, I was completely blown away. Master chef Bethany emphasised quality and creativity over variety, with some of the best food I've eaten anywhere. This included at least one special chocolate-based dish at every meal.

Bethany fired up the wood-burning stove around 4.30am to bake muffins, scones and breads for early risers. At 8am, she rang the ship's bell to announce breakfast. We served ourselves from typically five dishes at each meal. Most of us sat on hatch covers or



Jumping from the rail ©Steve Cohen



Lunch on Deck ©Steve Cohen

water kegs in the sea breeze, but a few people occasionally went below to sit at a common table in the galley/dining room. After meals, we cleaned our own dishes.

My favourite breakfast was undoubtedly the best blueberry pancakes I've ever eaten, accompanied by an incredible local bacon and lots of pure maple syrup. A dinner menu might include beef stew enlivened by a blue cheese dressing, and a salad with shaved carrots, pickled shallots, sprouts and pine nuts, all dressed with a champagne and blood orange vinaigrette.

The Stephen Taber spent nearly 80 years as a working freighter. So, the little bit of help we were invited (but not expected) to provide was fun. About half of the passengers helped hoist the sails, wash the anchor and trim the sheets. Even that minimal work gave us a real appreciation of how hard it was to run old-time sailing ships. We left climbing the 75-foot tall mast to the crew.

About half of each day was spent sailing. As self-appointed

lookout, I spotted a whale, several porpoises, a few seals, and lots of birds including eagles. I also loved watching the lobstermen speed to their buoys, check the traps, toss back any too-small crustaceans and try to be the first to market.

Our first stop was Isle au Haut. The sheltered harbour is surrounded by hills studded with beautiful old homes for several hundred summer residents. It was on Isle au Haut where our special guest Kate Shaffer, cookbook author and highly respected chocolatier, founded Ragged

Coast Chocolates. Kate said that during the winter, there are only 36 residents. Several of us hiked through Acadia National Forest. Back on board, Kate gave her first lecture about chocolates along with a tasting, which was a double treat.

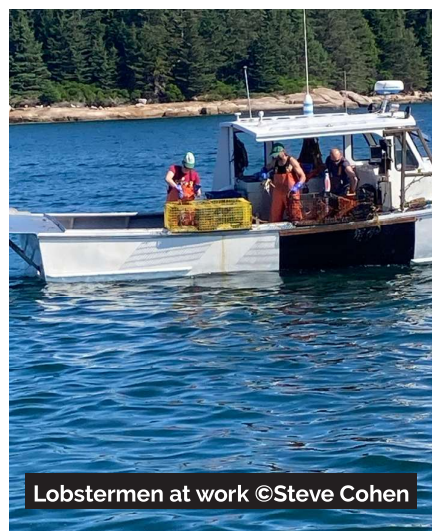
Before we moved on to our next strenuous activity – a wine and cheese tasting – Captain Barnes suggested we take a dip in Penobscot Bay. He warned that it might be a “bit nippy”, but assured us it was well worth it. I lumbered up the rail and jumped. It took about a half-second to hit



Rockland Harbor ©Steve Cohen



Stephen Taber at anchor ©Steve Cohen

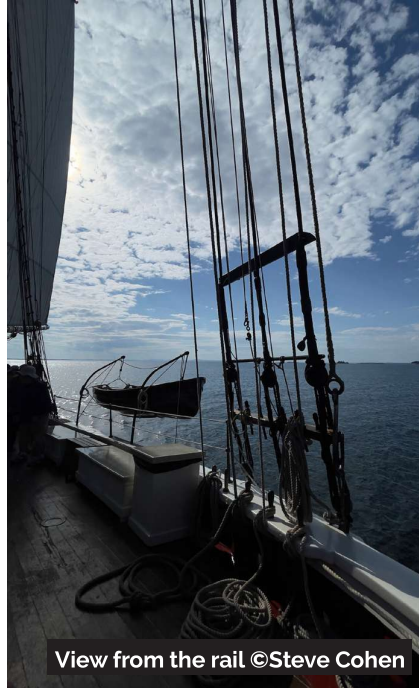


Lobstermen at work ©Steve Cohen

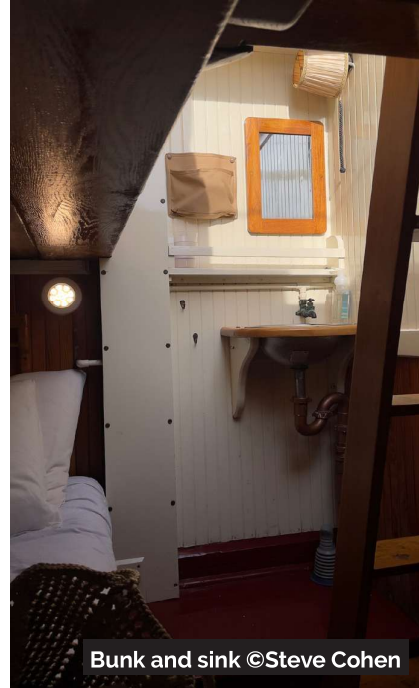
the water – which was absolutely freezing – and even less time to scamper out. Sarah jumped in and loved it! She swam every day. She continues to amaze me after 40 years of marriage.

The next day our destination was the deserted and appropriately named Wreck Island. The Taber anchored in a safe cove, and we were ferried to a beach in the yawl boat. The crew thoughtfully arranged narrow planks to the beach, to avoid wading through cold water. Captain Barnes presided over a shed-season lobster bake (easy-to-remove shells) complete with fresh corn, steak, chicken, wine and an elegant s'more. We ferried back every bit of gear, trash and leftovers, leaving Wreck Island as pristine as we found it.

Our last destination was the beautiful town of Stonington, Maine's top lobster-landing port and a major granite-mining quarry. I most enjoyed the two bookstores. One had a sign: 'If you don't like the price, make an offer.' I did, and lugged home books about the sea and sailing.



View from the rail ©Steve Cohen

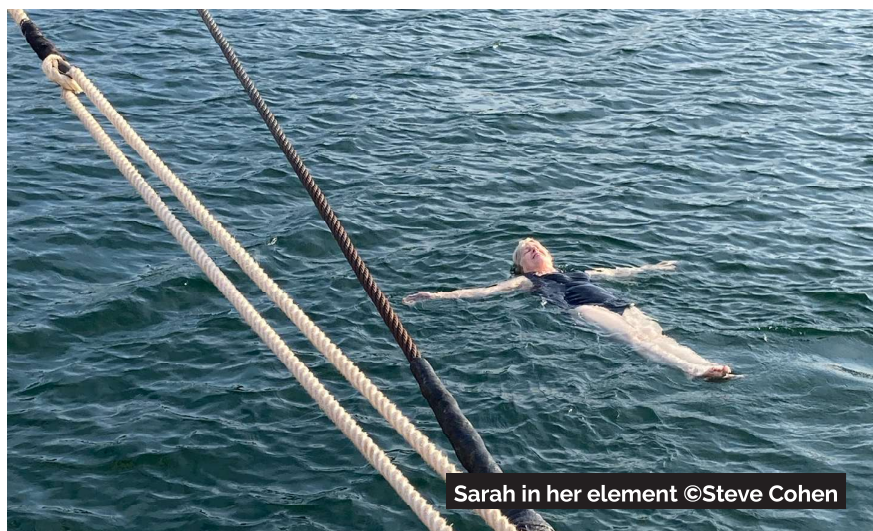


Bunk and sink ©Steve Cohen

All cruises rise or fall on the interactions with other voyagers. Our group was eclectic, interesting and pleasant. A former rock-and-roller played a mean harmonica. His wife, once an Italian Vogue model, was a hoot. Four high school friends now in their 50s welcomed everyone into their circle. And a film producer Brooklyn mom got special permission to bring her wonderful 11-year-old son on the trip (the minimum age is typically 14). The lovely lad was quiet and respectful, and spent much of the time teaching us city-folk how to fish.

On our last day, I showed Captain Barnes my father's photos. Noah Barnes has been skipper of the Stephen Taber for 25 years, and worked aboard the ship for nearly 50. His father was the previous owner/captain, until Noah left a music career in New York to raise his family in Maine. He told me about the previous crew and the Taber's legacy.

Our remarkable trip and emotional journey ended with a shock: Sarah said "Let's do it again."



Sarah in her element ©Steve Cohen



Morning coffee ©Steve Cohen