

Salty tales and a slice of history on a tall ship sail

GRAHAM ERBACHER

It's gloomy way down here in the cargo hold, paved with 400-year-old bricks from the Netherlands. This is where on a late 16th-century ship the precious commodities would have been stored. Not so much gold or silver but items Europeans of the time really prized, such as pepper, cinnamon, cloves and the culinary gem, nutmeg.

Shafts of light pierce the hold from above and the sounds around are of Sydney Harbour alive again with pleasure craft. I am on a late afternoon sail of the four-masted tall ship replica, Duyfken ("little dove"), which is based at the Australian National Maritime Museum in Darling Harbour.

The original Duyfken, part of the fleet of that pioneering global trading operation the Dutch East India Company (eat your heart out, Amazon), was the first recorded European ship to land in what is now Australia.

In 1606 Captain Willem Janszoon and his crew of 20 sailors stepped ashore at Pennefather River on the western side of Cape York, making the first known white contact with Indigenous people. Relations were initially amicable but turned hostile, with the loss of nine crew and an unknown number of First Peoples.

On this three-hour twilight sail, conducted by the museum in association with Cultural Attractions of Australia (see More to the Story), my group of 15 passengers has a chance to explore a little-known slice of history and maritime life of four centuries ago, and lap up the majesty of Sydney Harbour. In a season of interminable rain, how we have fluked a sunny Saturday afternoon is no small wonder. It is a convivial group, all eager to tour the ship and help hoist the sails, but there is no pressure to do anything except share the exhilaration of a warm harbour breeze – and a snack box each of tasty gourmet sandwiches and treats, accompanied by beverages from the bar. It's more palatable than the fare original Duyfken sailors faced of salted, dried and pickled meat, fish and vegetables (with occasional fresh vegies to ward off scurvy), and biscuits hard enough to shatter teeth.

Master of the ship today is Brendan Reed; bosun's mate, Mirjam Hilgeman, welcomes passengers and delights with her enthusiasm for the vessel and life on board. A crew of museum volunteers helps with docking, raising sails and spinning old-salt yarns.

The building of this replica is a wonder in its own right. Constructed in Western Australia by the Duyfken 1606 Replica Foundation, with community, corporate and government funding, there was no blueprint. Paintings of



Tall ship replica Duyfken; Sydney Harbour sail; authentic rigging



IN THE KNOW

The Sail on Duyfken experience, which has been in recess since its summer season ended in early April, will resume on Saturday, July 16.

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the Duyfken and examination of shipwrecks of similar vintage provided a guide but, true to the period, much relied on old-fashioned intuition. Those bricks in the hold, by the way, are authentic Dutch old-timers; their type would be used as ballast on the journey out from Europe and then as building material in a colony, with local, heavy timbers loaded for the trip home.

The historic Duyfken was a small, agile

ship and hence a scout. It paved the way for other Dutch ships to "discover" Australia. They had mapped about three-quarters of our coastline, thoughtfully named New Holland, well before it was a twinkle in Captain Cook's eye. The "little dove" was also a little battler with cannons on deck, and fought in the 1601 Battle of Bantam in the Spice Islands (now Indonesia), which banished Portugal and helped establish 200 years of the Dutch Gold-

en Age. Battered and bruised, the sea dog was deemed irreparable by 1608 and put down aged 13, which makes the replica, launched in Fremantle in 1999, older and more widely travelled.

On our tour, we learn about steering a tall ship, navigation by compass and the stars, the use of sails, and the hard yakka of seafarers. One lesson I pick up quickly is to duck my head; spaces are confined and ceiling beams perilously low. But it is great fun.

As we sail for home past the Opera House and shimmering Circular Quay, the Harbour Bridge ahead is celebrating its 90th anniversary. What a magic blend of Old World and New.

Graham Erbacher was a guest of the Australian National Maritime Museum and Cultural Attractions of Australia.

MORE TO THE STORY

To peep behind the scenes of an institution, whether gallery, museum or theatre, always feels like a privilege and even more so when in the hands of a curator or expert escort. Cultural Attractions of Australia (CCOA) specialises in such back-of-house experiences, which often include access to rarely exhibited items or those in the throes of repair by conservators.

My two-hour Hidden Gems and Ancient Artefacts tour of the Australian National Maritime Museum at Sydney's Darling Harbour is a fine example of the CCOA portfolio. It's billed as a "white glove" outing, referring to the need to don such protection if handling fragile items, but that's best left in the hands of those who know what's what. For starters, we tarry in the unambiguously named Large Objects Store amid a trove of maritime treasures that rotate on displays, including streamlined craft helmed by Australian Olympians, a double fibreglass kayak built for treacherous Tasman crossings, and a single rowing scull used by three-time world champion and gold medalist Bobby Pearce, circa 1930.

But as we progress it's the smaller items that catch my eye, such as domestic artefacts recovered when the wreck of Batavia, which sank in 1629, was discovered in 1963. Plus pieces from Shackleton's polar explorations, a hand-operated pump used by pearl divers in Broome, and a shark-proof cage to shield abalone divers. There are Indigenous bark canoes, a 1790s piece of coral-encrusted rock ballast from HM Endeavour and displays of curiosities. G'day "budgie, bikini and boardie"



Visitors to the Australian National Maritime Museum

swimwear of times not that long ago. My erudite escort jokes there won't be quite enough time to view the 140,000 or so items stored away and on display so off we go to the conservation lab, with its rigorously controlled humidity and lighting settings. The air is alive with quiet but palpable energy as skilled workers, one of whom tells me she's taking "a beauty school approach" as she attends to the surface grime of objects being restored and readied for eventual exhibition,

remove the "rusticles" from deep-sea finds. "Minimal intervention" is the mantra for restoring paper, photographs, textiles, timber, metal and composite objects.

Then it's back to the surface, as it were, to get acquainted with a few members of one of the world's largest collections of floating historical vessels, from ex-RAN ships to an Edwardian-era steam yacht. But what most fascinates from this small voyage of discovery is the story of Oskar Speck, who paddled an 18ft folding kayak from the Danube River to Australia's northern tip on a treacherous journey between 1932-1939, and was promptly interned as a German prisoner of war. He bequeathed his personal papers and memorabilia to the museum upon his death in 1995. A few days later, I mention the story to a neighbour, who points out a huge house on a cliff in my Killcare patch. "That's where Oskar lived," she says. "He got rich from opals. Everyone knew him."

Tours, \$80 a person; minimum two guests, maximum 10.

SUSAN KUROSAWA