Choosing a Program

There are as many sail training programs as there are ships, and choosing the right one depends a great deal on your personal needs and desires. Sail training differs from going on a cruise ship, in that you are expected to take part in the running of the ship by handling sails and lines and standing watch, as well as working in the galley or performing routine cleaning or maintenance duties. To what degree depends on the sail training program you select.

Do you want a program that specializes in marine biology or adventure travel? Would you like to ship out for a day, a week, a school semester—or, for as long as it takes to circumnavigate the world? Are you interested in maritime history? In celestial navigation? Whales? Do you want the unique challenge of climbing aloft in a square-rigger? A race across the Atlantic? Maine lobster dinners aboard classic windjammers? Exotic ports of call? Will you be bringing your wheelchair? Would you like to receive academic credit?

The answers to the above questions provide a profile for just some of the options available to you. As to what sail training programs require of you—beyond an eager willingness to get the most out of your voyage—the requirements are few:

SAFETY FIRST!

Take a close look at the vessel’s credentials. In the US, check to see if the vessel operates under United States Coast Guard regulations. Does the vessel currently hold a USCG-issued Certificate of Inspection (see “Regulations for Vessels”) or comparable certification from the authorities of the country in which it is registered? If it is a non-US vessel you should ensure that the vessel operates in accordance with the maritime safety rules of that country. In most cases this is supervised by a government agency similar to the US Coast Guard.

Talk to the program provider! Ask questions! Read the organization or company’s literature, check out their website and, most importantly, visit the ship if you can. Get a sense of the professionalism of the operation and the quality of its program. Find out about the experience level of the captain and officers. How long have they served the ship you are looking into? If you will be joining the vessel in a distant port, or if it does not hold a USCG Certificate of Inspection, be especially diligent in your research. Ask the program operator for the names of past trainees or clients and give them a call and ask about their experience. The diverse range of sail training opportunities featured in this book provides you with a great variety of options.

EXPERIENCE

With some exceptions, no prior sailing experience is required of trainees. Trainees are encouraged to develop a comfort level for living and working in and around the water; however, many programs have no formal swimming requirements. Some programs accept non-paying volunteers as crewmembers, but may require some previous experience in similar vessels or a long-term commitment—or both. Paid crew positions typically require a license or mariner’s credential. “Able-bodied Seaman” papers document a minimum of 180 days spent underway and successfully passing an exam administered by the US Coast Guard. Higher level licenses are awarded to crew based on additional time underway, the tonnage of vessels served in, waters sailed, considerable technical training, and additional testing.

AGE

Most voyages are planned with a specific age-range in mind. This varies from program to program, but many sail training programs start accepting unaccompanied trainees from the age of 13 (seventh grade). Ask what the composition of the ship’s complement will be and, if you plan to send a young person on an extended voyage, what the in-port supervisory arrangements will be. Day sails and dockside
education programs are readily available for elementary school students and overnight trips can be arranged for older school groups as well. There are a tremendous variety of adventure programs for adults of all ages, including voyages for seniors.

**ACADEMIC CREDIT**

Some vessels are tied directly to academic institutions that grant credit to trainees who successfully complete the program as part of a course of study. Some educational institutions will also grant credit for on-board independent study.

**CO-EDUCATION**

Many sail training vessels in the US sail with both male and female professional crew, and their programs are typically co-ed. Other programs are designed specifically as single-gender experiences, sometimes in conjunction with the Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts, or with a single-gender school or affiliated program.

**COST**

Prices vary considerably depending on the nature and the duration of the program and the type of vessel. Some vessels have limited financial assistance available, and some trainees, Scouting groups, school groups, and individuals have successfully sought private, business, and/or community support. Check with the sail training program you are interested in to see what opportunities may be available. Tall Ships America offers sail training scholarships and criteria and applications can be found on this website or by calling the Tall Ships America office.

**DEFINITION OF PROGRAM TYPES**

Dockside interpretation: The vessel does not get underway. Programs are delivered while the vessel remains moored.

Public/passenger daysails: The vessel sails for all or part of a day, but not overnight.

Overnight voyages: The vessel sails around the clock, with crew and participants rotating in shifts called “watches”. Sleeping accommodations and meals are provided.

Private charters: The vessel may be hired for excursions, business entertainment, private parties, weddings, etc.

Sail training: The primary purpose of sail training voyages or daysails is to provide participants with hands-on experience in sailing the ship and learning arts and skills of seafaring.

- Programs for professional crew are designed to enhance professional qualifications.
- Programs for paying trainees require trainees to pay a program fee or tuition.
- Programs for volunteer crew/trainees are designed to train volunteer crewmembers.
- Sea education: A core purpose of sea education voyages or daysails is to provide academic instruction in maritime subjects. Sea education programs usually incorporate sail training elements in addition to academics.
- Fully accredited programs grant academic credit for successful completion of the program.
- In cooperation with accredited institutions (schools, colleges) programs are offered through an explicit collaboration with an accredited academic institution.
- In cooperation with other organized groups (Scouts, etc.) programs are offered through an explicit collaboration with a non-academic organization.
- In-house programs in such topics as marine science, maritime history, ocean ecology, navigation, seamanship, etc. are offered in many vessels, whether or not they have a relationship with an accredited institution.