



ASTO & James Myatt International Exchange

SAIL AND LIFE TRAINING SOCIETY (SALTS), CANADA

Jack Dignan | Ocean Youth Trust South | August 2016

I don't think I will ever be able to use words alone to emphasise quite how special my time sailing in Canada was to me. The moments I was fortunate enough to experience alongside some of the most incredible and talented people I have ever come across, I will most certainly hold dearly for the rest of my life!

After the 9 hour flight over to Vancouver from Heathrow, I found myself already immersed in the amazing Canadian culture with totem poles and beautiful ornate carvings dotted around the airport. Following a short wait, I was on a smaller plane to take me from Vancouver to Prince Rupert, a port city just north of Vancouver Island.



Upon landing in Prince Rupert, I had to board a bus that took everyone from the airport's island, onto a short ferry and across to Prince Rupert city. I started to meet some of the people I learnt would also be sailing on the same boat as me, and was able to spend the evening getting to know some of them before sleeping in a nearby hostel for the night.

Along with a few others that were joining *Pacific Grace*, I went and had bagels for breakfast in a local café. We collected our bags from the hostel and raced down to meet the boat on the quayside.

All of the trainees lined up and one by one, met the voyage staff, were given log books that included space to write our thoughts as the trip went on, and then given the chance to choose our bunk. I thought it would be a good move to select one of the top bunks, without realising quite how small it would be!

Everyone on board then gathered together in the hold and introduced ourselves, and were divided into watches, before a fire evacuation drill to our muster stations where we tried on the lifejackets and immersion suits. Shortly afterwards, the mooring lines were slipped from the pier and we were off!

The first night was a sail from Prince Rupert to Massett, across the Hecate Strait. I was due to go on my first watch from 4am to 8am - which fitted in quite well with my still English body clock! At night there was just three trainees on at a time, which meant we were only on deck for 45 mins of the whole watch and still wake up having had plenty of sleep. The sun rose as we entered Massett, illuminating the beautiful woodland horizon and silhouetting the village houses.



We spend that day in the village, being given the very special opportunity to go and meet the Chief of Massett, visiting his home and listening to a talk about the area's history. He laid on fresh muffins, salmon sandwiches and juice with frozen huckleberries for us to enjoy. We were then taken outside to take a look at a totem pole that was being carved, due to be raised later in the year.



After being given an afternoon of time to explore the area, eating copious amounts of ice cream and time to relax, we sat down for our first meal as a whole group. To end the day we all walked into the village to find a football field and have a friendly game, culminating in me accidentally scoring in the opposition's goal and swiftly destroying England's reputation for being good at football!

Each evening on board the *Pacific Grace* we all gathered to play some games as a group, followed by singing together using instruments we had on board. Having everyone together and singing together was something I will remember forever, the atmosphere and community that this formed was really quite special. We always followed our singing with 'mug-up' where a warm drink and fresh biscuits were served before bed.

After mug-up that evening, we were each introduced to the idea of 'secret friends' on board. The idea being that everyone would pull a name out of a hat, of someone else on the boat, and they would have to spend the voyage doing nice things for the person they selected, but without the person ever finding out who their secret friend is.

The following day, we began our sail down the eastern coast of Haida Gwaii to arrive late in the evening at an anchorage just off Skidegate. The mountain range lit up by the bright moon like shards of glass, stars as far as the eye can see and the perfect reflection upon the flat water was like something out of a film.

As the sun rose the next morning, the view had transformed into yet another breathtaking landscape. We spent some time laying crab pots and then moved the boat to come alongside a pier for the day.



Once alongside the pier, we all disembarked to go and see the nearby Haida Heritage Centre, which displayed the culture and history of the Haida people who occupied the islands. On returning to the boat, we all decided to have a swim in the water off the pier – the water was a lot colder than I expected! The crab pots from the previous night were lifted and we managed to catch about 16 huge crabs. We needed to prepare them to be cooked, which involved ripping the legs and claws of the crab off. Unsurprisingly, the crab I was attempting to prepare wriggled around as I was trying to remove its legs, so I screamed and accidentally dropped it back in the sea!



The next day we sailed further south and anchored off a place called SGang Gwaay, a village site of the Haida people and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We were given a tour of the area by one of the watchmen that look after the village, who took us around the remains of wooden longhouses and totem poles. It was incredibly interesting to listen to how these people lived off the land and let all of their homes return to the earth as they decomposed.



We again then sailed further south to the southern tip of the Haida Gwaii archipelago, Cape St James. Whilst waiting for the dinghy to take us ashore to climb to the top of the island, we saw an Orca circling the boat and jump up into the air – it really was like something out of a David Attenborough documentary! Climbing to the top of the hill was a challenge but the view was beyond worth it; we were able to look out across the open Pacific, with nothing between us and China.



As we started to head back north, we stopped at a nearby beach for a few hours to collect any plastic and litter that was lying around on the beach. To get onto the beach we climbed into wooden dory boats as a watch and rowed ashore – the boats were very long and thin and so were very wobbly! We managed to collect a number of items from the beach, from car tyres to plastic bags to help keep the natural beach as clean as possible for nature to thrive.

Further up the coast, we stopped off in another Haida settlement called T'anuu. We were once again shown around the area by a local watchman, another fascinating place to have the chance to look around the remains of the village and the mass grave of the residents who were killed during a smallpox epidemic that swept through the area.



After leaving T'anuu, we made our way back to the mainland on the other side of the Hecate Strait on our way back to Port Hardy. This journey lasted for the night and took us through to the afternoon of the next day.

As this was our last evening on board, once we were at anchor for the night, a talent show was put together where everyone would perform something to the rest of the group on board. I found this to be one of the big highlights of my trip, watching other people show off their talents and passion that perhaps has not been shown during the rest of the trip. We had guitarists, singers, pianists, rappers, comedy acts, poetry, and many more. It was really quite a magical moment as it was when it became apparent we had created a community on board where everyone felt confident to show off and truly be themselves.

At the end of our daily mug-up, we gathered together in the hold and watched a slideshow of all the photos we had taken during the trip. We talked through how far we had come, where we had been and what the whole experience meant for each of us. Although we had only known each other for less than 10 days, it felt like the memories and friendships we forged together went back a lifetime.

We settled down for the night and in the morning sailed a short hop around the corner to Port Hardy, when it was time to say goodbye to each other. Exchanging contact details, taking photos and saying goodbyes was a particularly emotional time for everyone as we had all become one massive family for the time we were on the boat.



I was then fortunate enough to be offered to stay at the homes of one of my fellow trainees for a few days outside Vancouver before I flew back home. I spent some time exploring the city, doing some sailing in Vancouver Harbour and sampling some of the local culture.

I don't think words will ever be able to do my exchange trip to Canada justice, I saw some incredible wildlife, experienced indescribable scenery and was able to spend 10 days with a group of people who grew to become my close friends.

I also endlessly thank SALTS and the staff working on the *Pacific Grace* who made my voyage so special (Tony, Sam, Elske, Steve, Beth, Tannis, Glenallen, Caelen and Katie). I would give special thanks to the James Myatt Trust and ASTO for selecting me to take part in the trip, as well as funding the whole experience – without them, none of this would have been possible. I also want to thank Marcia from ASTO who organised all of my flights, bookings and travel, amongst other things, another person who without them, my trip would have not been possible. Thanks also to the Gerves family for giving me a place to stay during my time in Vancouver and making me feel so welcome.

This amazing opportunity has taught me so much, not only with regards to sailing, but with my personal life also. It has shown me the true power in sail training and that it really can (and does) change lives.