

all aboard empire sandy



# CRUISE INTO HISTORY

By Kevin Patterson

Photography by Kevin Patterson and Ryan Maloney

## a passenger's log

■ On a humid Saturday morning in June, I joined a long line of eager "history tourists" waiting to board the Tall Ship Empire Sandy for a unique voyage into the past. The annual cruise is actually a course conducted through Niagara College Continuing Education Department. It's hard to believe it is a history class considering it includes a cruise, relaxing in the warm sun, fine food and adventure.

Our teacher and guide was Wes Turner, a retired associate profes-

sor of history at Brock University. The cruise took us east from Port Weller, up the Niagara River from Niagara-on-the-Lake to just within sight of the Queenston-Lewiston Bridge. It was the first of three voyages the Sandy made while in Niagara. The Sandy cruised Lake Ontario, threw a party and a dinner-dance, and the following day she travelled south, up through the first three locks of the Welland Canal.

I kept a diary of the voyage of a year ago, my passenger's log. >>





Photo: Ebonie Kaminew

Framed by the towers of Bridge 21, the Sandy navigates a Lake Erie-bound turn near the southern terminus of the Welland Canal in Port Colborne, where she's welcomed home every August long weekend for Canal Days. History tours aboard the Sandy are designed to cover War of 1812 events at the lower Niagara River, and battles and shipwrecks on Lake Ontario. On Lake Erie, diving charters explore hundreds of wrecks recorded within a short sail from port.



Photo: Kevin Patterson

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**11:15 a.m.**

Excited passengers fill the Sandy's main deck, as the ship slips away from dock and Captain Eric Rogers steers the 740-ton riveted steel hulled ship out into Lake Ontario on an easterly course. The vessel's history dates back to the 1940s when she was one of six Empire Class ocean salvage tugs. Her purpose was to salvage damaged convoy vessels making the passage from the US to Europe during the Second World War. By the 1950s the Sandy—under the name Chris M.—hailed multi-acre timber floats to mills on the Great Lakes. In the mid-1980s she was converted into a three-masted schooner and re-christened Empire Sandy.

**11:30 a.m.**

Professor Turner assumes his role as tour guide using the ship's PA system to provide us with a feast of sounds, music and stories from the past. Professor Turner reads first-hand accounts of the tragic sinking of the armed schooners Hamilton and Scourge. Imagine a quiet evening in August 1813, American and British fleets on Lake Ontario have dodged each other during the day, a battle seems imminent perhaps even later this night because of their close proximity to each other. Without warning, a fierce lake storm unleashes its fury upon the two fleets. Hamilton and Scourge are doomed in minutes to a watery grave 300 feet down in Lake Ontario, leaving only 53 survivors.

Passengers marvel at the engineering feats inside Lock 1. Ships enter the lock, 233.5 metres (766 feet) in length, 24.4m (80 feet) in width. The massive doors close and the lock fills in 11 minutes with 91-million litres (21-million gallons) of water, lifting the vessel(s) inside 14.2m (46.5 feet) to the next level of the Welland Canal. For some of the ships, there are barely 10 inches of wiggle room on each side.



Photo: Kevin Patterson

Empire Sandy shares the first of eight locks in the Welland Canal with a pleasure craft as water surges to raise the vessels from the level of Lake Ontario to climb the escarpment to the level of Lake Erie. Depending on traffic in the canal, it can take the better part of a day for ships to travel between the two Great Lakes.

## Noon

The Sandy's crew sets tables for a meal including slices of roast beef, steaming potatoes and an array of fresh salads. Professor Turner continues our historical journey back to a time before Europeans ventured into this part of the continent. Life followed the familiar themes of war and peace among generations of Indian tribes including the Iroquois, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca nations. The ship will soon be on a wide turn into the Niagara River. Here, near the western end of Lake Ontario, the Great Lakes superhighway narrows to just one kilometre width as the Niagara River rushes into Lake Ontario. In the distance loom two military strongholds—Fort Niagara and Fort George—built to protect the tight passage which many regarded as the “key to the continent.” At the heart of Fort Niagara's imposing fortifications is a massive stone chateau. As we pass by, I get a mingled feeling of awe and terror as I try to imagine living in Newark—Niagara-on-the-Lake's name in 1812—or Fort George and exchanging hot cannon fire with the stone giant on the opposite shore. My imaginings are jolted back into reality as a small cannon is fired from the Sandy in salute to the passing fort. It's a deafening crash of sound testing the endurance of our eardrums. >>



Photo: Eddie Chau

Brock's Monument was built on the Niagara escarpment over the lower Niagara River and Queenston in 1823 to mark the death of General Isaac Brock, killed Oct. 13, 1812 in the Battle of Queenston Heights. American sympathizer Benjamin Lett blew it up in 1840. The cornerstone of the new obelisk was laid on Oct. 13, 1853; the official opening was in 1859. It cost 5,000 British pounds.



Photo: Kevin Patterson

Many Niagarans share with international visitors the exhilaration of being up close and personal with lakers and the awesome ocean-going "salties" travelling the Welland Canal— what better vantage than from the deck of a Tall Ship, modern-day symbol of the canal's first cargo carriers.

## >> 2 p.m.

The Empire Sandy works its way against the current towards the Queenston-Lewiston Bridge and Brock's Monument. I take the opportunity to mingle with fellow passengers. For some, it is the first time aboard a sailing vessel, some are here to enjoy the scenery, fine food and a warm summer day relaxing on deck, and there are those like myself who want experience history from a different perspective.

## 2:25 p.m.

As the high cliffs of Queenston Heights drift ever closer, Professor Turner describes for us

in detail the Battle of Queenston Heights. For brief moments we are transported back to the morning of Oct. 13, 1812 to relive the famous action by revisiting the moment when General Brock is killed leading his troops in an attempt to retake the heights from an invading American army. What looked like the beginnings of an American invasion would turn into a key British-Canadian-Indian allied victory. We leave the past as Captain Rogers turns the ship gracefully away from Queenston Heights. It's an impressive sight watching the Sandy crew working as a team and a reminder that each member of a ship's crew must work in concert for shipboard life to continue

smoothly. By 3:20 p.m., fife and drum music is blaring over the ship speakers as we arrive back in Lake Ontario. The Sandy's crew has prepared a dessert table filled with a marvelous selection of decadent delights. Dessert and drink in hand I take time to explore the lower deck. Strolling through two spacious wood panelled lounges I notice some passengers have escaped the crowded upper deck to enjoy quiet conversation with each other. It's a relaxing setting for the rest of the journey back to Port Weller.

### 5 p.m.

My fellow students disembark and the crew prepares for tonight's dinner-dance and cruise. I remain a few moments to chat with Captain Eric Rogers and Wes Turner and express my thanks to Shirley Tomovic, who put together these marvelous historic cruises for Niagara College. Today has been an amazing adventure and tomorrow, well, tomorrow morning can't come soon enough.

### Day 2

It is even more humid and the queue to board the Sandy even longer than yesterday. Today's voyage is once again punctuated by another feast of historical sounds, voices and facts provided by Professor Turner. The meals are once again outstanding prepared fresh by onboard chefs. The

mix of passengers today is just as interesting as it was yesterday. I have the pleasure of meeting up with old friends and an opportunity to chat with a gentleman who served in the Royal Navy around the same time as the Empire Sandy in the Second World War.

The highlight of today's journey is navigating through the huge locks of the Welland Canal. The size of the Empire Sandy is dwarfed as we pass through huge concrete, steel and wood structures. The cavernous doors are closed and the water surges in; we rise rapidly from "sea level," as if from deep in the earth. At once, one gets a clear picture of ships' immensity, considering they clear the lock walls with mere inches to spare. It's a long slow passage as the Sandy must wait for larger, higher priority ships to move in and out of the locks.

To travel from one end of the Welland Canal to the other (all eight locks) takes a full day. Our journey takes us to the other side of Lock 3 where the ship is turned around and we head back to Port Weller. It's an amazing journey full of opportunities to make new friends and be amazed at the engineering marvel that makes travel along the lakes possible.

The Empire Sandy visits Niagara a number of times each year providing its passengers with unique opportunities to enjoy some of the region's most unique historic attractions.**NL**



Photo: Ryan Maloney

Port Colborne on Lake Erie is 99.5m (326.5 feet) higher than Port Weller on Lake Ontario. The first canal had 40 locks to bypass Niagara Falls and carry ships over the escarpment. The fourth canal, has eight. Historic sites abound between each terminus, and the paved multi-use recreational Welland Canals Trail runs along stretches of all four versions of the canal, lake to lake.