



COMMUNITY >

Captain Bill Bailey narrates a tour aboard the *Westward*.

The Soul of a Wooden Boat

Westward lives on

BY PATTIE LOGAN

CAPTAIN BILL BAILEY SETS DOWN HIS COFFEE CUP AND CASUALLY ANNOUNCES to the eight guests aboard *Westward*, his 1924 wooden boat, “I suppose I should go down in the basement now and contrive a series of semi-controlled explosions.”

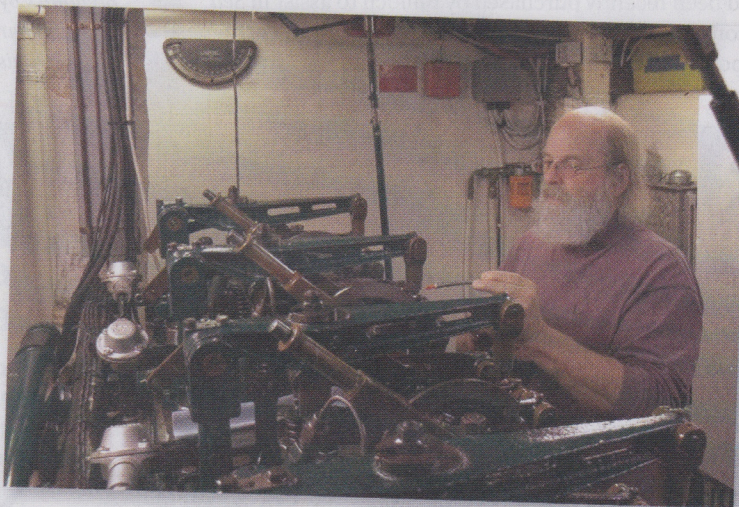
Guests smile and laugh, but make nothing of it. They’ve come to know the captain’s quick wit, even though it’s only the second day of their cruise through southeast Alaska.

Bailey backs down the ladder leading to the boat’s big green heart for its daily resuscitation. Guest Bob Mueller follows Bailey like a kid after Santa Claus—not a bad comparison to the captain with his sturdy frame, impressive salty beard, and mischievous twinkle in his eye. Mueller is thrilled to be invited into the engine room. He specifically chose *Westward* for his trip of a lifetime to Alaska.

“I love those guys because that’s who I am,” says Bailey. “I’m that guy. For people who are passionate about wooden boats, it’s sort of unparalleled to be on a boat like this.”

Westward is the only boat designated a Historic Place by the U.S. Department of Interior. She was the first boat built specifically to take passengers to Alaska, designed by legendary naval architect Ted Geary. You could say she launched the Alaska cruise industry. Her early passengers were George Eastman (Eastman-Kodak), Walt Disney, Bing Crosby, John Wayne, and other luminaries.

Bailey grabs an oil can that looks like a relic from the Tin



Checking the unique old engine below deck is one of the captain’s daily tasks.

Man. He has to lubricate the original 1923 Atlas-Imperial engine in 120 different places every three hours when it’s running. The shiny, forest-green machine cuts an imposing figure at 12 feet long, seven feet high and four feet wide; so large the boat was built around it. Rocker arms and pushrods awaken and nod up and down. “It looks like something someone made just to wiggle and twitch and make a noise,” says Bailey.

Mueller is mesmerized and imitates the engine perfectly, “1-4-2-3, 1-4-2-3, 1-4-2-3, ka-choo’, ka-choo’, ka-choo’.” There is nothing that sounds prettier than an Atlas running,” he says. “I just wanted to be able to experience the flavor of that era.”

Westward tops out at a gentle eight knots. “A nice speed to see the world,” says Bailey. His well-worked hands guide the



The *Westward* rests in a beautiful, calm cove.

original caramel-colored steering wheel. “We start slowing down when icebergs get bigger than a microwave. We make fewer splinters that way.” When asked if he has to dodge big cruise ships he says, “Well, it’s preferred. There are rules about running into them. Some of them are laws of physics.”

Bailey has managed to keep the 86-foot boat intact—barely. He built houses, fished commercially, and worked on machinery before launching his charter business. Shortly after buying *Westward*, they were doing a small repair when a screw wouldn’t anchor to the wood beneath the exterior. It was unsettling as they bashed their way along the Pacific Coast in a vicious storm that flung around the crew and boat. Fortunately, there were no guests.

When they finally reached harbor in Seattle, they discovered the boat’s core was rotten. “It’s sort of that heroic thing; it’s the war horse that brings her wounded rider to safety before expiring,” he says. An investor helped with the six-figure rebuild. Bailey is still recovering from

financial and personal costs, but he believes it was the right thing to do for the historic and heroic vessel. “There are so many hands that have touched this boat that have carved each piece of wood out and made patterns and sanded and painted and varnished. Maybe whenever an object, an inanimate object, receives that much focused attention for so long, it stops being completely inanimate. There’s something here that’s not just a collection of wood and iron.”

Plus, it’s hard to sink your boyhood dream. Bailey was eight when he hammered together some of his father’s wood to make his first wooden boat. “It was really a box with a point, but it had a seat.” He took the garden hose and flooded his backyard and launched it in an inch and a half of water. “I sat in my boat in my pond and pretended I was on a great voyage.”

Today his grown-up wooden boat slips into coastal nooks and crannies of Baja, Mexico, in winter and Alaska in summer—places big ships don’t dare. The scenery and wildlife are almost a bonus for this “wooden boat guy.” As he steers

toward a colony of bellowing sea lions climbing on top of one another, he muses, “It could just be their internal dynamic or it could be election season.”

Later, he slows *Westward* to watch a group of humpbacks torpedo to the surface, mouths open, capturing fish. The whales prepare to descend for another go at their unique feeding technique, swimming about 10 feet off the hull. They dive under, waving their flukes. Bailey is as awe-struck as anyone, saying, “What I get to do is so cool, I keep expecting to get caught.”

Read more about Captain Bailey’s wooden boat adventures on his blog at pacificcatalyst.com/category/blog. Or, join other wooden boat enthusiasts for the Kachemak Bay Wooden Boat Festival in Homer during the fall: kbwbs.org/events.html. 🚢

Pattie Logan loves connecting people with the natural world. She’s written books and films on national parks and is an Emmy Award-winning filmmaker.