

A veritable league of nations seek adventure on barque

PORT POURRI

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IT SEEMS as though it was yesterday that I photographed the almost timeless buildings around Alfred Basin from Picton Castle's deck, and later that evening, a large flock of seabirds – perhaps gulls, illuminated eerily by the light of the big wheel at the Waterfront – flew slowly from the sea towards their roosting places. Yet, I was astonished to learn that the three-masted barque was last here three years ago.

“I am writing from Picton Castle,” e-mailed Captain Dan Moreland a few days ago, “south-west of Bali, 10 days and already 1 200 (nautical) miles out, and sailing in perfect trade wind conditions. We are bound for the lovely French island of Reunion and then round the Cape of Good Hope to Cape Town. From South Africa, we sail to Namibia, St Helena and Senegal and then on to Cape Verde.”

I understand that the barque will follow another trade wind passage, crossing the Atlantic to Grenada and the Grenadines for three weeks' cruising in the eastern Caribbean before heading for Bermuda, and finally to her homeport, Lunenburg, in Nova Scotia, Canada, to complete her sixth circumnavigation of the globe.

Registered in the Cook Islands in the South Pacific Ocean, Picton Castle carries passengers who also participate in the operation of the ship at sea. On her current voyage, Scandinavians, Brits, Canadians, Americans as well as folks from the South Pacific islands of Tonga and Fiji are among the passengers; it's a veritable league of nations aboard the barque, one of the selling points to prospective passengers. When she leaves Cape Town, several berths will be available for adventure seekers who will go aloft to make sail, who will turn the yards to catch any breath of wind in the doldrums, who will peel potatoes, who will learn astro-navigation, and who will really gain a taste of the sea that only those under sail can appreciate.

Named after the 11th-century castle in Pembrokeshire, Wales, Picton Castle was built in 1928 as a steam fishing trawler for Consolidated Fisheries of Swansea who owned five similar vessels that were considered very modern for their time. The 40m trawlers boasted electric lights, and a “depth finder” for their fishing operations in the Irish Sea, with occasional voyages to the Dogger Bank in the North Sea.

For years, Irvin & Johnson had a number of steam trawlers that were built a few years later, yet were not much different to the Swansea sisterships and, after war service as minesweepers along the South African coast, they returned to trawling until they were replaced in the 1960s. One of that class, Bluff, took to the Bakoven rocks one foggy Sunday morning while returning to Cape Town from the fishing grounds, becoming a total loss. Sadly, her cook drowned during the incident.

A few days later, her near-sistership, Blomvlei, then little more than a hulk, was scuttled off Robben Island.

Refitted as a traditional barque, Picton Castle will be of interest when she berths in the Alfred Basin, as so many sailing ships have done since the basin was completed as Cape Town's first harbour in 1870.

The Chinese tug De Zhou will arrive from the Gulf of Mexico next month to tow the rig Ensco 5001 to the east, possibly to scrap.

The Antarctic season has begun in earnest with polar supply ships now appearing on agents' lists of inward vessels. Although ships still transport many teams and their equipment to the ice, the first Norwegian team of the season was due to leave for Antarctica yesterday by special aircraft.

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