First Experience, Sailing

By Alex Hale

Ever since I was a kid, I have wanted to sail. Maybe it was because my father was in the navy, or because of the lure of being a pirate. But growing up in rural Indiana, an opportunity to sail the seven seas doesn’t come around very often. So one can appreciate my delight when my first experience sailing, was off the coast of Portugal, where history might argue the art was refined.

I was studying in Seville, Spain, a 3 hour bus ride from Lagos, Portugal on the Atlantic coast. Lagos is known for its stunning coastline of towering, jagged cliffs rising straight out of the dark blue sea. Just like what you would see on a postcard, local men kept small boats moored near the beach, waiting to take tourists on boat rides around and through the cliffs. The Portuguese are well-tanned, mustachioed, and expert seamen, a byproduct undoubtedly of their rich naval heritage. Our sailboat was a bit larger and more modern than these dinghy’s with outboard motors, but crewed nonetheless by the suave local sailors. It probably wouldn’t have surprised me if a man emerged from below-deck with a peg leg and a parrot on his shoulder. It was that surreal.

This particular day was perfect. It was early October, still warm enough to lounge in the plentiful sun. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky and it was hard to tell where the sky met the ocean on the horizon. I had been on the Atlantic Ocean before, but not from this side. Somehow it seemed so much sweeter, to be looking back on America across the pond. With the sails snapping and flapping in the wind, myself perched on the bow, and a cool glass of sangria in my hand, I could think of no place I’d rather be.

We toured the cliffs and caves along the seashore. The Portuguese have names for all of them such as the ‘Cathedral,’ the ‘Living Room,’ and oddly the ‘Toilet.’ While most dealt with the gods or mythical beings, some were simply monikers that stuck. One particularly frightening cave looked like a hollowed skull, straight from the Jolly Roger.

It all made me wonder how satisfying it must be to be a local Portuguese man, sailing around all day, preserving your heritage, and getting a great tan while you’re at it. I decided right there and then that if my career in America somehow just doesn’t work out, I’m going to move to Portugal or the Mediterranean, buy a boat, and park on the beach, waiting for tourists.

-Alex Hale spent his fall 2006 semester studying in Seville, Spain. In addition to traveling to Portugal, he also spent time in Greece and North Africa.