

Captain Brenda Walker

From the banking world to the boating life.



ANYONE WHO KNEW Brenda Walker nine years ago thought she'd capsized her career when she left a cushy bank job to be a cook on a Maine schooner. She had sailed only once before. Now, Brenda is the only woman who owns and captains her own schooner, the *Isaac H. Evans*, along the coast of Maine. Her office is a 65-foot National Historic Landmark—made of oak, mahogany, and fir—that was built in 1886 to harvest oysters on the Delaware Bay. Today it is one of 14 boats in the Maine Windjammer fleet.

Captain Brenda spends five months a year on the schooner, taking passengers on three- to six-day trips out of Rockland, Maine—through shallow coves dotted with lobster buoys and fishing boats, around islands that are home to nesting bald eagles, past rocky

headlands punctuated with lighthouses that guide her way. Each night she drops anchor in a secluded bay.

"There's no real itinerary and no destination," says Brenda, 33. "The only thing I do know is that I have to leave Rockland, return to Rockland, and have a lobster bake in between. The rest is up to the winds and currents."

She says this with remarkable confidence for someone who grew up far from the ocean and knew nothing about sailing until she was 23. At that time, Brenda was working in the consumer-lending division of a bank, pushing papers around her desk for ten hours a day. "I was sick all the time from breathing recirculated air," she says. "I never got outside. I just sat there, with my permed hair, wearing suits, high heels, pantyhose, and makeup."

Then, in 1993, Brenda went on a one-night trip

aboard a Maine schooner and instantly fell in love with sailing. She quit her high-salaried job, with its bonuses and benefits, to work on a schooner in the Maine fleet, making \$100 a week as a cook and dishwasher. When the *Isaac H. Evans* went up for sale five years later, Brenda returned to her old consumer-lending division and took out four loans to buy the historic vessel—a boat she didn't yet know how to sail.

"If you want something bad enough, you find a way to make it work," says Brenda, who earned her captain's license two months after the loans were approved. She then launched her business and spent the next several years learning how to run and fix all systems on the schooner.

"Every time something breaks, I learn something new," says Captain Brenda, who's now an unofficial

plumber, electrician, carpenter, and mechanic, too. Virtually everything Brenda earns goes back into the boat, to cover repairs, crew, food, and her four loans. "But all summer long she feeds and houses me, so it's symbiotic," she says of the *Evans*.

Off-season, Brenda works on the boat if it needs any renovations. Beyond that, she chooses more cerebral activities to let her body recover from the physically demanding

five-month season. She's taken adult-education classes in pastry-making, oceanography, Hebrew, photography, and art and architecture. "I definitely need that hibernation period," she says.

Brenda is the only captain in the fleet who does midnight sails and the only one who allows

children as young as six on her shorter trips. "I think I'm the only captain with a toy box and pirate costumes on board," she says. She also runs special cruises for hikers, outdoor photographers, and knitters, and, at the start of every season, she organizes a benefit sail to raise money for local charities.

Are you living your dream somewhere in New England? Do you know someone who is? We would like to hear about it. Write to us at "Living the Dream," YANKEE Magazine, P.O. Box 520, Dublin, NH 03444, or get in touch with us by e-mail at livingthedream@yankeepub.com.



Before passengers step on deck, they don't always realize their captain will be a 33-year-old woman. "I've gotten all sorts of reactions," Brenda says, "from 'Are you the cook?' and 'You're the captain?' to 'Cool.'"

The biggest challenge for Brenda, though, is having no privacy or personal space. When the 22-passenger schooner is full, she sleeps on a bench behind the stairs leading down to the galley, in a tiny area that sits over the holding tank. But she wouldn't trade a minute of ocean time for a foot of extra space.

She'd rather spend her days breathing fresh sea air, pushing nautical charts around her desk, and sporting a new look: carpenter pants rolled up at the ankles, T-shirts, and a fleece vest—plus bare feet, naturally straight hair, and a complexion colored by Mother Nature. —Kari L. Bodnarchuk

Sail Away

Schooner *Isaac H. Evans*, 877-238-1325. Three-, four-, and six-day trips run from Memorial Day to Columbus Day and include a lobster bake on a deserted island, plenty of wildlife (porpoises, seals, and bald eagles are common sights), and a chance to learn about sailing, astronomy, and maritime history. Passengers can kick back and relax, or help hoist the sails, haul up the anchor, and steer. Each summer the *Evans* takes part in a schooner race and a schooner "gam," or gathering, when all the boats in the fleet tie up together offshore so passengers can meet and explore the other boats. www.midcoast.com/evans/main.html