Sail cargo's imminent achievement: Timbercoast's Steel Schooner, the Avontuur

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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My report and photo shoot from Germany last month after attending the Paris COP21 climate meeting:

Elsfleth, Germany, near the North Sea - This is the Timbercoast project, renovating the Avontuur that was built in the Netherlands in 1920.

I found that she is speeding on to re-launch, with much work being efficiently done. She will be the biggest sail transporter on the planet, with a 70-ton capacity (= 3 twenty-foot containers). This 44-meter (length from tip of bowsprit to stern) schooner is getting a complete remake. This vessel was looking good to me from my visits to the holds and from observing the work on board and in the ship yard.

The masts were stepped a few days before I arrived in Elsfleth on Dec. 15th. Almost all aspects of the project are industrial-scale, compared to Fair Transport's smaller Tres Hombres brigantine and Nordlys ketch which are traditional wooden ships. Unlike those, the Avontuur will have an engine, but basically for getting into and out of harbors.

Crew will be 5 regular and about 10 trainees. There will be about 4 heads below deck, unlike the single one on the Tres Hombres in its stern where you have to really hunch down.

Founder and Capt. Cornelius Bockermann knows how to run such operations, from his 22 years in Nigeria and Angola working on Chevron’s offshore equipment, for example.

He has spent 700,000 euros and needs to spend 400,00-500,000 more, if launch is to be May or not long after. He does sell shares, like Fair Transport, 1,000 euros per. The proven Tres Hombres volunteer system, whereby people of skill are fed and put up in a former Elsfleth boarding house (that I visited; excellent grub), is being utilized. Volunteers will be getting a day of sailing aboard the ship for each day worked. Thirty 30 letters come in per week from hopeful volunteers.

After sailing around Europe for a few months, including to the Med possibly, the Avontuur is to cross the Atlantic in November, and slips through the Panama Canal to the South Seas and its future home port in Australia. The project is benefiting from a team of masters students from Sweden helping to solidify the sustainability of the project.

The history of the Avontuur is long as a sailing cargo ship. After Otto Smidt built her, the two-masted gaff rigged schooner was sold and renamed Catharina. The Catharina was trusted with sailing cargo between European coastal ports for many decades.

In 1977, she was found by the storied Dutch Captain Paul Wahlen who bought her and restored the name Avontuur. He believed in sailing cargo and re-rigged her. Harnessing the gusts and squalls of his day, Captain Paul traversed goods throughout the North Sea, Baltic, North Atlantic and across to the Caribbean. He and his team were widely regarded as one of the last true cargo sailing crews of the twentieth century.

In 2005, the Avontuur changed owners and roles. Refurbished and rebuilt, she was transformed into a day passenger ship. Up until 2014, she dazzled her patrons along the Dutch coast and West Friesian islands.

As a visiting journalist who met three of the Timbercoast people in Paris at the COP21 in December 2015, I could only offer publicity and some assistance via Sail Transport Network. I gave the Timbercoast office our STN burgee along with a packet of Fair Trade organic coffee from a company possibly interested in sail transport.

Captain Cornelius told Sail Transport Network on January 20th, 2016, “We are going to merge the relationship between commerce and preservation under sail, proving that a committed grassroots community can shift the paradigms of shipping.” May people on many waters take this to heart and change the world!

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Timbercoast.com.

Video:
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