

Sailing On The Winds Of Climate Change

The wind delivers both heartache and hope as travelers onboard one of the world's largest sailing ships encounter the aftermath of stronger hurricanes and warmer seas in the Caribbean.

By

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Royal Clipper, the world's largest fully-rigged sailing ship, anchors off the island of Mayreau.
LIZ HOOPER

The sinews of a thousand ropes sing as sails wake from their slumber. Billowing into a canvas canopy, they pierce the horizon with a silhouette from another age. On the bridge, Captain Bruno Borowka calls the shots as a mahogany

wheel spins. Hard to starboard. Hard to port. Finally, full sails.

In the Caribbean, wandering yachtsmen on sloops and catamarans know these masts well. They're the unmistakable callsigns of the *Royal Clipper*, a 442-foot, 42-sail phantom that dances between the Windward Islands and the Mediterranean every year. *Royal Clipper* is the last gasp of a bygone era, the world's only, fully-rigged, five-masted cruise ship. And for a week or two at a time, she gives travelers the chance to experience sea travel as it used to be.

Though forests of masts like hers were still fairly common on the world's oceans even a century ago, by the end of World War II less than a dozen ships like *Royal Clipper* remained. The sight of her towering sails conjures names plucked from the pages of history books—Magellan, Morgan, Drake, Vespucci and Teach.

Royal Clipper makes port in some of the same harbors the Caribbean's most famous pirates and infamous explorers once did. In turquoise bays, she drops anchor where ships like *Queen Anne's Revenge*, *Santa Maria* and the real-life *Black Pearl* took reprieves. She glides by the same verdant, volcanic peaks as her ancestors, while casting a strikingly similar shadow. And she disembarks passengers near some of the same beaches where colonial ambitions collided with Arawak, Carib and other indigenous cultures centuries ago. From the Grenadines to the British Virgin Islands, her passengers walk through a world where the footsteps of pirates and privateers are closer to their cabins than to Neverland.

In an industry [grappling with climate change](#), *Royal Clipper* is proving that sail power is more than a novelty. As the communities she frequents suffer the impact of warmer oceans, one of the world's last great, tall ships offers a case that the cruise industry doesn't have to contribute to the ocean's demise.





Royal Clipper under sail power off the coast of Martinique, January 2025.

Environmental Impact of Cruise Ships

The world's largest cruise ship, Royal Caribbean's *Icon of the Seas* holds more than 7,000 passengers spread across 20 decks featuring 40 restaurants, bars and lounges. Some the world's least efficient ships, like the 2,500-passenger *Disney Dream* and 4,100-passenger *Norwegian Epic* can emit more than 1,400kg of carbon dioxide per square nautical mile, according to 2023 data from the European Union's [Maritime Safety Agency](#).

On *Royal Clipper*, five decks house three bars and one restaurant that serve a guest list of 227. There are swimming pools, but no waterslides. There is a house band, but no nightclubs. The amenities on this ship are unrecognizable compared to the floating shopping malls of Royal Caribbean, Disney and Norwegian. But so, too, are the

emissions.

Though two Caterpillar diesel engines can provide propulsion when winds are light, the 56,000 square feet of canvas on *Royal Clipper* can generate more than 1,600 horsepower on the wind power alone. And in a cruise industry dependent on healthy oceans and thriving ports, being a responsible steward of the seas may be more important now than ever.



Royal Clipper, seen here near St. Lucia, holds the Guinness World Record for the world's largest, fully-rigged sailing ship.
LIZ HOOPER

Where the Wind Takes All

Less than 12 hours after leaving port in Barbados, *Royal Clipper* has covered around 100 nautical miles to an anchorage in St. Vincent & the Grenadines.

On Union Island, Alex Douglas ambles up and down the beach at [Chatham Bay](#), once widely regarded as one of the best “untouched” slices of sand in the Caribbean. For more than a decade, Douglas has worked as a historian here, educating sailors and boutique cruise passengers about the history of Union Island.

Until six months ago, his office was an unspoiled plot of sand sparsely peppered by a handful of beach bars. Today, stove tops jut out of the sand, mixing with glass bottles and pieces of debris scattered by Hurricane Beryl in July of 2024.

Thanks to the Category 5 storm, the beach here is no longer pristine.

Beryl took everything from many residents. All, like Douglas, are pushing through their

first tourist season after the storm.



Union Island historian Alex Douglas describes the impact of Hurricane Beryl on Saint Vincent & the Grenadines.
LIZ HOOPER

While a condescending Texan harps about the beach’s current conditions— promising a stern meeting with Borowka in between droughts of a local lager—Douglas tells his story.

“I was at my house when it struck. It was about 10:00 a.m. in the morning—daytime, but the sky was grey. I could hear the roof billowing, and I was frightened. I had a hold on the structure of the house when the roof went and the ceiling dropped on my shoulder.”

Douglas was fortunate. He says five Union Island residents died during the hurricane. Hundreds of homes were destroyed. Sheets of galvanized steel rooftops blocked the streets of Clifton and Ashton, the island's major settlements. Many beach bars were altogether blown away.

Six months after the storm, the streets have been cleared; but many of the estimated 3,000 people living on the island are still rebuilding. And while residents wait on a protracted government response, some—like Douglas—are leaning on tourists to lend aide.

U.S. dollars. East Caribbean dollars. British pounds. Euros. They come in little by little, story by story, from the smattering of sailors and cruise passengers anchoring off of Chatham Bay during peak travel season in the Caribbean.



Hurricane Beryl over the Caribbean as seen from the International Space Station on July 1, 2024. The hurricane reached Category 4 with winds of 130mph.
NASA/MATTHEW DOMINICK

Most of the vessels anchored in Chatham Bay are small. They carry half a dozen or fewer passengers. With slightly more than 200 passengers, *Royal Clipper* is one of the largest ships capable of anchoring in these shallow waters. For Douglas, the dozens of passengers visiting the beach to snorkel and sip rum punch served from Igloo coolers are a significant boon. During winter months, *Royal Clipper* returns every few weeks with a fresh batch of travelers to speak with.

Rebuilding is a slow, methodical process.

Douglas says Union Island has seen adversity before. There are fewer fish near the coast now than when he was younger, when he used to find work as a fisherman. After September 11th, fewer cruise passengers seem to frequent its shores, too. But the most threatening change, by far, is a warmer world. He says warmer oceans are the root cause of the island's current over-serving of strife.

"The warmth and heat is what a hurricane needs to grow," adds Douglas. "I am 49 years old, and I've never before in my life seen a storm like Beryl."



Former ship engineer Ivan Squires stands beside a tender from Royal Clipper on Union Island, St. Vincent & The Grenadines.
JOE SILLIS

Royal Clipper guest Ivan Squires has exchanged greetings with Douglas for years. The former P&O fleet engineer from Bristol has been sailing around the globe since the 1960s. In his youth, Squires made port calls in places as varied as Grenada, New York City and Bougainville, New Guinea, often onboard the ocean liner *SS Canberra*. Since 2017, Squires has gotten his fix at sea by tagging along with *Royal Clipper* ever few months. He always books the most affordable room— on the lowest deck, right at the bow where he can feel the waves.

Squires is now on his 40th voyage with the ship. In contrast to the teetering Texan, Squires is genuinely moved by the state of what he stills calls one of his favorite beaches on the planet. He's touched to see Douglas again, who is steadily greeting visitors descending on his island tender by tender.

"This beach used to be totally pristine," says Squires. "It had six or seven beach bars on one side. On the other, it had Sunset Cove. It was majestic. Right now they are trying to rebuild, and they will. It's just going to take time."

Squires has enough sea stories to circumnavigate the world twice over. They're the kind of yarns built over decades of life on the water: stories of ships running aground, gunshots, curfews and unexpected accidents on the high seas. But his most poignant tale features *Royal Clipper*.

Squires first saw the ship on a vacation with his late wife in 2002. More than two decades ago, the couple stood together on a beach in Grenada, not far from Union Island, watching the frigate-like specter emerge over distant swells. "I looked out and I saw this little speck on the horizon," says Squires. "Over time, it got bigger and bigger and bigger. I was gobsmacked that it turned out to be an incredible sailing ship. It was the *Royal Clipper*. I knew I had to be on it."

15 years later, after his better half passed from a prolonged illness, Squires steered a beeline towards the tall ship. Now, he rides the tides of memory beneath the sails of an old dream.

Douglas knows Squires, too. So do *Royal Clipper*'s crew and at least half of the small business owners in the Windward Islands. For Squires, the daily reunions with residents are like miniature reunions, passing like life rafts from one memory to the next.

The following morning, Union Island rests in the distance as Squires awakens off the coast of Mayreau. Here, Hurricane Beryl has altered another one of his favorite port calls.



Tourists stand near the wreck of *Serendipity* on the shores of Salt Whistle Bay in Mayreau, St. Vincent & The Grenadines.
LIZ HOOPER

The wreck of *Serendipity* looms over Salt Whistle Bay. The double-masted ketch might have once been a folly for a wealthy European business tycoon, or the life's passion of a sea-faring backpacker half a world away from home. Today, the ruins of *Serendipity* are a magnet for travel photos wedged into a shallow reef beside Richard Williams' restaurant, The Last Bar Before the Jungle.

Williams built the bar 14 years ago, growing it into a Mayreau staple. When Hurricane Beryl came ashore six months ago, most of his life's work was destroyed.

Six months after the hurricane, Williams is rebuilding The Last Bar Before the Jungle piece by piece, searing spiny lobsters on a stovetop surrounded by power tools. It's a breezy day, and the remnants of sail covers clinging to *Serendipity* sway as a fast-moving rainstorm begins to sprinkle the restaurant.

Just outside of the kitchen, a construction crew is still hammering together new tabletops. While his son mans the bar, Williams walks a fresh order of lobster through the sunshower. “When I started out, this place was very small,” he says. “But people kept telling me to make it bigger and bigger. It’s a nice spot with a good view of the beach and the bay.”



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revelers at one time. The bar developed a following, attracting travelers from England, France, Italy and the United States. Alongside them came the flags from dozens of ships and nations that line the bar’s walls.

Both Douglas on Union Island and Williams on Mayreau say that tourism represents more than 90-percent of their business. And while *Royal Clipper* is dwarfed by the shadows of modern cruise ships like *Icon of the Seas*, she is still by far one of the largest vessels to visit the smaller anchorages surrounding their islands.

Economic Impact of Cruises and Climate Change

A seafood lunch here and a travel bracelet there are not big picture solutions to rebuilding the Caribbean, but they certainly help the cause. Cumulatively, souvenirs and excursions purchased by cruise passengers do add up.

According data from the [Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association](#), cruises generated brought 228,820 passengers and \$11.6 million into St. Vincent & The Grenadines in 2024. The cruise lines themselves were responsible for another direct impact of \$6.3 million—a significant impact in a nation where the average income is under \$10,000 per year.



The Last Bar Before the Jungle is being rebuilt after Hurricane Beryl struck Salt Whistle Bay on Mayreau in July of 2024.

The impact of cruises; however, pales in comparison to the \$230 million in damages Beryl inflicted on this country. In St. Vincent & the Grenadines and neighboring Grenada, Beryl damaged nearly \$500 million in infrastructure. And recent history suggests that these powerful storms are affecting wide swaths of the Caribbean.

In 2017, Category 5 Hurricane Irma devastated the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. Less than a month later, Hurricane Maria—a second Category 5 storm—returned to Puerto Rico while pummeling Martinique and Dominica. In 2019, Category 5 Hurricane Dorian caused \$3.4 billion in damages to the Bahamas.

[Research from NASA](#) indicates that hurricanes are likely to continue to grow more intense and produce higher storm surges as the planet continues to warm. According to the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute, oceans have absorbed 90-percent of the

excess energy added to the Earth's climate by fossil fuel activities since 1971.

While mainstream cruise lines pivot to using hybrid technologies and biofuel blends to reduce their carbon footprint, other seafaring industries are looking back to sails.



Sailors Gajendra Kalyankar and Oscar Guevara repair a sail off the coast of Grenada.
LIZ HOOPER

A Future Unfurled From the Past

In 2022, Japanese shipping company Mitsui O.S.K. launched *Shofu Maru*, a 770-foot coal carrier partially powered by sail. A year later, in 2023, Singaporean company Cargill Ocean Transportation launched *Pyxis Ocean*, a 751-foot cargo ship equipped with a pair of 123-foot [WindWing](#) sails. Both ships use wind assisted propulsion to supplement engines and reduce fuel usage. Meanwhile, commercial shipbuilders in Sweden and France have also announced their own new sailing vessels. And while future container ship sails may be rigid rather than canvas, the principles of ancient seafaring technology still apply.

Currently, no cruise lines with mega ships have announced plans to augment their own propulsion with wind power, though a few smaller companies operate tall ships similar to *Royal Clipper*.

The ownership group of *Royal Clipper*, [Star Clippers](#), claims their ship operates on sail power roughly 80-percent of the time. This drastically reduces the ship's carbon footprint in comparison to other cruise ships, though she does use a low-sulfur gas oil to power engines at times.

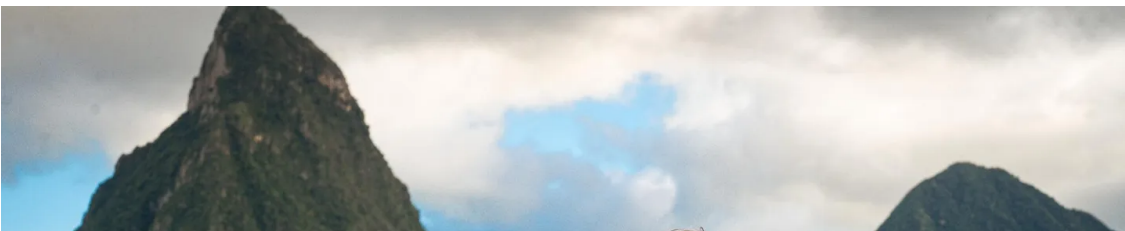


Royal Clipper hoists her sails while leaving Mayreau, St. Vincent & The Grenadines in January of 2025.

As *Royal Clipper* prepares to depart Mayreau, Captain Burowka surveys the bridge. Though his crew has access to GPS data, satellite internet and radar, the captain still makes use brass compasses, sextants and the ship's great wheel. As often as weather allows, Burowka orders the ship's crew to leave port under sail power.

A child of a Cold War-era Poland, Burowka says has had a heart for the sea since he was a boy. In the early 1980s, he began to pursue that passion in earnest. After spending 18 years crossing the world's oceans on a training ship with the Maritime University in Gdynia, Poland, Burowka took a command with Star Clippers.

Burowka's crew numbers 105, and while the ship and her captain may be Polish, the crew hails from every corner of the globe. There are Indian and German officers, Filipino and Honduran riggers; a Cuban cruise director and a sports director from Spain. Flags from Bulgaria, Chile, France, the United States and Japan hang in crew cabins. Some crew members are participating in training classes Burowka's old university.





Maciej Ziembla pilots a Royal Clipper zodiac in Surfiere Bay, St. Lucia in January 2025.

LIZ HOOPER

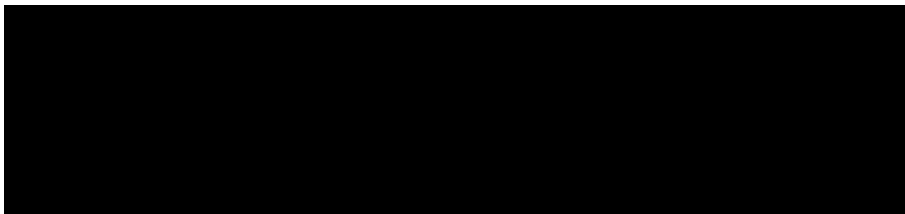
After tours with *Royal Clipper*, the ship’s crew will pass the lessons learned onboard to other vessels around the world. Year by year, they will share the knowledge of sailing a wind powered ship with the world. “The feeling of sailing under these sails when we are really moving is still amazing,” says the captain. “5,000 tons driven by the force of the wind feels incredible. It makes for a real adventure at sea.”

Little by little, those adventures could help island nations like St. Vincent & The Grenadines rebuild from climate disasters. For some, they could serve as a reminder that the wind has the power to deliver both heartache *and* hope.

As the last of the sails on *Royal Clipper* unfurl beneath an orange sky, Squires corals another memory from the dwindling daylight around Mayreau. “Life is not a dress rehearsal,” he says. “Up here, when the wind is in the right direction and you’re up on the bridge, you can feel the power of the wind in the sails. Up here, you can really feel alive.”

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