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Black Pearl makes port at new home, to provide public sailings this summer

BY RICHARD E. BALDWIN - NEWS NIAGARA REPORTER

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The classic sailing ship Black Pearl has found a new home port at Lewiston, where it is providing public cruises and private charter voyages for most of the summer.

The owners and crew of the brigantine Black Pearl had three reasons to celebrate Thursday:

They announced that the 73-foot-long wooden-hulled ship will be moored all summer at Lewiston Landing on North Water Street, with public sailings on Tuesdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.

One of the ship's co-owners, Amanda Alexander of Lockport, celebrated her 50th birthday with a birthday cake onboard the Black Pearl and a light dinner at the nearby Silo Restaurant.

The owners announced that there would be no public cruises Aug. 2 through Aug. 7 because one of the crew members -- Amanda Alexander's daughter, Stephanie Zelaski -- is being married in Lockport during that week.

Black Pearl cruises, operated by Liberty Excursions (otherwise known as Amanda Alexander and her husband, Nicholas), began sailing last summer on the lower Niagara River and Lake Ontario from ports in Lewiston and Olcott Harbor. This year's season is the first in which the ship's public sailings will be exclusively from Lewiston, which soon will become its official home.

Nicholas Alexander pointed out, however, that the Black Pearl's winter storage site is at the Lake Breeze Marina in Kent.

The Alexanders and their crew did extensive renovations of the ship last winter. Nicholas Alexander said 1,000 linear feet of new oak beams were installed, making the superstructure almost all new, and 1,200 board feet of CV Douglas Fir with mahogany plugs were installed on the floor of the main deck.

The ship accommodates about a dozen passengers for most of its voyages, but Nicholas Alexander said improvements during the coming winter probably would fit it out for about 20 people. Next year's sailing season is expected to begin about May 1.

This year's schedule calls for one-hour cruises beginning at noon and 1:30 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays, at 3 p.m. on Saturdays and at 6 p.m. on Tuesdays; and three-hour cruises beginning at 6 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays and at 3 p.m. on Sundays, weather permitting.

The cost is \$35 a person for a one-hour cruise, \$75 for a three-hour cruise, and \$300 an hour for a private charter, with a minimum of two hours. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to the Historical Association of Lewiston, which is handling reservations for all of the sailings by calling 877-754-1812.

The tours take passengers past the spot where escaping fugitive slaves crossed the Niagara River to freedom in Canada, where the United States invaded Canada during the War of 1812 and where Western New York was first settled by Europeans in 1720.

The Black Pearl's rigging is exactly like the rigging on the USS Constitution, Nicholas Alexander said. Like the Constitution, the Black Pearl's main mast stands 68 feet tall and it can hoist up to 13 sails.

It normally operates with a captain and a five-member crew. Nicholas and Amanda Alexander both are licensed captains.

At least half-a-dozen people can sleep overnight below the deck if they don't mind being a bit crowded. Nicholas Alexander, who planned to spend

Thursday night aboard the ship at its mooring, said somebody always remains on the ship to guard against trespassers or accidents.

The Black Pearl was built in 1948 by C. Lincoln Vaughn, a Newport, R.I., shipbuilder who used it as his personal yacht. He sold the vessel in 1959 to Barclay Warburton III, who helped to promote the South Street Seaport Museum in New York City by anchoring it at the museum's pier in the early 1970s for sea music festivals.

Warburton sailed the Black Pearl to the Caribbean many times and to Europe for the first Transatlantic OpSail race. In 1974, he organized the American Sail Training Association and the Black Pearl became its flagship. Upon Warburton's death, the Black Pearl was willed to the association.

After several other owners and in desperate need of repair, the Black Pearl was bought by the Alexanders who are lovingly restoring it and have put it back into service.

CALL RESERVATION NUMBER TO VERIFY OPERATION