Westward to the Galapagos

by Bernard A. Goldhirsh

Photographs by: the author, Pierre Brandt, George Nichols, & Mary Crowly
Plankton photos courtesy Woods Hole
On the sixth day of January 1972, the 100’ schooner *Westward*, topped with fuel, filled with supplies, and overloaded with excitement, set her 7,000 square feet of sail and left San Diego for the Galapagos Islands, 3,000 miles to the southeast.

On board were 15 student apprentices, aged 17 to 24, who had paid or come on scholarships to participate in an educational adventure beyond the dreams of most young students. They had come from all parts of the United States to join *Westward* on her first of a continuing series of oceanographic expeditions to remote places around the world.

Completing the ship’s complement of 25 were 10 highly skilled professional sailors, teachers and oceanographers under whose guidance the apprentices, through lectures, demonstrations and practice, learned the techniques of big ship sailing, navigation, seamanship, and something of the secrets and mysteries of the ocean.

An excellent vessel, particularly well suited for her job, *Westward* is a marconi rigged staysail schooner, rigged with squaresail and raffee on the foremast. She was built of steel by Abeking & Rasmussen, Germany, in 1961 as an improvement on *Yankee* of Irving Johnson fame. She proved a comfortable and forgiving ship in those first days at sea, accepting the confusion of young apprentices who steered sinusoidal courses, jibed and stumbled as they adjusted to the four hours on, eight hours off, routine of life under sail.

But soon the uncertainties gave way to confidence and even at night sails were hoisted and lowered smoothly, and the course became steady. As *Westward* drove south her young complement became a crew.

The days were filled with activity. Off watch there were lectures on a broad spectrum of subjects including ocean currents, wave systems, seawater physics and chemistry, bottom topography, plankton life, cetacean (porpoise and whale) physiology and behavior, marine ecological systems, navigation, meteorology and sailing theory.
Those on watch took their trick at the wheel, made sail changes, carried out repairs to sails, rigging and spars. (A new 50’ yard for the squaresail was tapered from a telephone pole taken on board in San Diego.) Routine tasks included daily weather observations, sun and star sights, adjusting of the course. The apprentices also took turns as galley assistants, baking fresh bread and tasteful meals and slowly became accomplished sea cooks.

Each day, at noon and at midnight, the ship was hove to under backed forestaysail and main while teachers and students tended the big oceanographic winches and trawled for plankton that could help determine migration patterns. Still others took temperature records, salinity data, and radioactive cesium samples. The samples were analyzed and labeled in the ship’s laboratory, and made ready to be sent to Woods Hole Oceanographic Research Center, Scripps Institute of Oceanography, and the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institution where they would help in work going on to understand our environment, and the role of the ocean in our world of diminishing resources.

After the sun set, phosphorescent plankton and jewel-like sparkling eyes of mid-depth sea life came to the surface to light Westward’s path. The apprentices came closer to each other and to the ship. Westward became a home and the ship’s crew a family. The social and political pressures of land life became ever more irrelevant and they, like the northernmost stars, steadily sank lower and lower until they disappeared altogether.

Seven days out, Westward, having made good time, put in at the seldom visited volcanic island of Socorro, off the Mexican coast. Here the crew found warm hosts and gracefully went down to a 9-0 soccer defeat. Socorro’s entire population of 35 lined the beach to wave goodbye. “For the first time in my life I visited as a friend rather than as a tourist,” commented an apprentice.

Ten days later Westward made another unscheduled stop, this time to examine a dead whale. Small inflatables were put over the side and crew members cut from the rotting carcass the jaw bone — a ready supply of scrimshaw for all aboard.

As each day’s noon position put Westward closer to her destination, lectures, discussions and reading centered around the Galapagos. Charles Darwin called this assortment of 60 volcanic islets straddling the Equator the “Encantadas” or enchanted islands. “Here both in space and in time we seem brought somewhat nearer to that great fact — that mystery of mysteries — the first appearance of new beings on earth,” he wrote.
On January 30, 1972, 24 days out of San Diego, Westward crossed the Equator at Longitude 90°05'W and, after a joyous celebration of the traditional shellback transformation, cleared into the Galapagos at the Ecuadorian government’s station on San Cristobal.

For two weeks teachers and apprentices explored the island archipelago observing and discovering for themselves much of the very same plant and animal life that led Darwin to write his famous Origin of the Species. The islands are essentially unchanged except for two that are now settled. It seemed that Westward had sailed through a time warp, back to Darwin’s world. One instinctively knew that the earth must have appeared this way when it first rose from the primordial sea.

Black basaltic lava formed an infinity of abstract shapes as it snaked down to sea level to form lagoons and mangrove swamps. On this lava, as Herman Melville wrote, “Little but reptile life is found — tortoises, lizards, immense spiders, snakes and the strangest anomaly of outlandish nature, the iguana. No voice, no low, no howl is heard, the chief sound of life here is a hiss.”

But in the lagoons, the white sand beaches, the mangrove swamps and in the highland rain forests, flamingos, pelicans, giant tortoises and a multitude of other birds, animals, insects and reptiles live peacefully with little fear and great curiosity about man.

Day after day, the crew of Westward went out on the islands, swimming with the sea lions and fur seals, watching the penguins, flightless cormorants, frigate birds, marine iguanas and much more. And each evening, back on board in a quiet lagoon, they talked in hushed voices as if not to disturb this remote and precious wilderness.
But then, with a sudden finality, time came to this timeless place and Westward's itinerary reminded us of our connection with home — the United States.

Letters were mailed home. The ship was washed down and made ready. Loose gear, like memories, were safely placed in preparation for the next passage. The apprentices, strong and seasoned by their 3,000 mile voyage, set sail and Westward headed east for Panama. With most hands facing west, the islands slowly dissolved into the primeval fog.

(Westward is a ship of the American Sailing Education Association (S-E-A), an organization formed for the purpose of those things outlined in this story. For more information write S-E-A, 3 School Street, Boston, Massachusetts, 02108. — Ed.)