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Historic Atlantic Crossing Powered by Sun

By Alana Herro

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Sun21, the first solar-powered boat to cross the Atlantic.

The first solar-powered boat to cross the Atlantic Ocean arrived in New York Harbor on Tuesday after more than five months at sea. The vessel, christened sun21 [1], made its historic crossing by following Christopher Columbus's path from Spain to the Americas, stopping first in Martinique and then making its way up the U.S. eastern seaboard. Without using a drop of oil, the ship completed its 11,265-kilometer (7,000-mile) journey with no major setbacks, demonstrating the feasibility of clean energy vessels on the open seas, according to Mark Wüst, the vessel's designer.

The sun21, so named to reflect the urgency of shifting to renewable energy sources this century, is a catamaran measuring 14 by 6.6 meters (46 by 22 feet), with a photovoltaic (PV)-paneled roof. The PV panels charge an

electric motor and battery that operate the vessel. Although the boat can reach a maximum speed of 9 knots, it traveled at a rate of some 3 to 5 knots on the journey, Wüst said. The panels generated enough extra power to operate all of the equipment on board, including computers, radar systems, radios, satellite phones, video cameras, lights, and even an electric toothbrush.

“Sailors don’t particularly like making speeches,” sun21 skipper Michel Thonney said upon his arrival in New York. “However, this time it is different. I really feel like shouting to the whole world that the sun is the energy source of the future!”

As emcee of the ship’s welcoming ceremony, Worldwatch Institute [1] president Christopher Flavin thanked the European crew for coming to the United States and demonstrating the potential of solar power to the rest of the world. Noting the progress of many U.S. cities [1], including New York, in embracing alternative fuels, Flavin predicted that, “the U.S. is about to get back in the game in leadership in renewable energy.” The voyage was “the environmental equivalent of Lindbergh crossing the Atlantic,” said James Cavanaugh, president and CEO of the Battery Park City Authority, the area of New York where the ship docked. Cavanaugh noted that aviation expanded beyond Lindbergh’s wildest dreams after his historic flight, and predicted that renewable energy will follow a similar trajectory. Sun21 designer Wüst said he looked forward to the day when he would return to the United States and see many solar-powered boats motoring on the Hudson River.

This story was produced by Eye on Earth [1], a joint project of the Worldwatch Institute [2] and the blue moon fund [3]. View the complete archive [3] of Eye on Earth stories, or contact Staff Writer Alana Herro at aherro [AT] worldwatch [DOT] org with your questions, comments, and story ideas.

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