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Across the Sea Under Power From the Sun

By [JAMES BARRON](#)

So far, the five Swiss sailors aboard the sun21 have not run into trouble the way Giovanni da Verrazano did.

He sailed through the narrows between Brooklyn and Staten Island without guidance from computers, cellphones or a sophisticated navigation system. The latter-day adventurers glided through on Saturday without fear of Indians like the ones who, according to some accounts, wound up eating Verrazano. But that was on a later voyage.

Adventurers have tried many ways to cross the Atlantic. The Swiss sailors rode on a specially built solar-powered catamaran, a 45.9-foot-long craft with 3,600 pounds of batteries to store power drawn from the sun. The claim they staked is to pilot the first motorized vessel to cross the Atlantic without oil or steam power.

They say they drove their 11-ton boat on the energy needed to light 10 100-watt light bulbs. Their typical speed was 3.5 knots.

The crew — a historian, a doctor-turned-environmentalist, a biologist, a shipbuilder and a professional skipper — followed what they said was Columbus's route to Martinique, with a stopover in Morocco. They left Chipiona, Spain, on Dec. 3.

Unlike Columbus, they did not depend on the wind. Their vessel has two engines that

can go up to 107 nautical miles a day in good weather.

“We did it,” Beat von Scarpatetti, the historian of the group, declared yesterday, sounding more like Lindbergh than, say, Columbus.

They docked at the Nichols Great Kills Park Marina, in Gateway National Park on Staten Island, on Saturday. The sun21 spent yesterday rocking gently in the water and soaking up the sun. Today the crew will lift anchor and depart for Manhattan, where the sun21 will be met by the consul general of Switzerland, Christoph Bubb, among others.

There will be music to celebrate their arrival — not a brass band oom-pah-pahing its way through a rousing Sousa march, but a string quartet working its way through Haydn. Mr. von Scarpatetti and the doctor-turned-environmentalist, Martin Vosseler, will play the violin parts. (Landlocked friends will handle the viola and cello parts.)

“It’s a self-sufficient little world,” said Dr. Vosseler, who in the 1990s founded, with a colleague, Physicians for Social Responsibility, the Swiss chapter of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. “We wanted to demonstrate on a small scale what could possibly be done on a larger scale, because we are astonished that we are the only one around, that this well-working technology is not applied on a larger scale.”

He looked at the boats nearby — vessels that run on fuel. If more boats were equipped like the sun21, “all of the harbors could become solar energy plants —power plants,” he said. Power generated onboard could be channeled onshore, for distribution to consumers.

He and Mr. von Scarpatetti said that even on overcast days, the sun21 could draw enough power to function. But between Spain and the Canary Islands, the sun21 “had to

manage on very little," Dr. Vosseler said.

"The days were short," he said, and there was a problem with the solar-power equipment that was taken care of on the Canary Islands.

"That tripled the charge of energy," he said. "From the Canary Islands on, we had abundant power."

On the canopylike roof are 48 silicon cells, which collect energy from sunlight and transmit it to a device in one of the two narrow cabins. That device transmits the energy to the storage batteries below deck (directly under one crew member's bunk).

The crew had to dive under the sun²¹ when fishermen's nets tangled the propellers off Africa, Dr. Vosseler said. "And we had to remove barnacles from the hull twice," he said, "because they slow the boat."

Mr. von Scarpatetti, a specialist in medieval manuscripts who is running for the Swiss Parliament, had never been to New York. "I came in a sustainable manner," he said. "I did not book a flight for \$399.99. That is below my honor."

He said that after he reported sighting land — the sun²¹ was never without its connections to the wired world — his 20-year-old daughter sent him a message that said, "Congratulations, my crazy papa."

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