

7,000 miles to the beat of the sun

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Amidst towering pleasure boats, gas-guzzlers whose hulls sprout gadgetry in dizzying array, a simple and revolutionary vessel has, since Saturday, quietly occupied a berth at the edge of the Nichols Marina in Great Kills.

Compared to the floating Goliaths, Sun21 looks like a glorified raft, with two slim, twin living quarters and a simple, moss-green deck shielded by a canopy that's lined with 48 solar panels.

The 14-meter catamaran from Basel, Switzerland, was the first to complete a 7,000-mile journey across the Atlantic Ocean using purely the energy of the sun: It's a throwback to the long-ago era when the sea was considered a frontier and a time machine to a future of possibility.

Today, Sun21 is slated to make its triumphant final glide under the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and into the entrance of the New York Harbor, where a ceremony in the Marina of Battery Park City will seal the journey and its significance will be noted for the history books.

"This is a way to show we can make a difference; to promote solar energy, wind energy, renewable energies," said Dr. Martin Vosseler, one of the founders of the project and one in a crew of five who left Seville, Spain, Nov. 28 and arrived in the Caribbean island of Martinique Feb. 18 before making their way up the Eastern Seaboard, in a voyage designed to prove that leisure boats and commercial transport can be powered by renewable energy.

"I'm inspired by nature and this unique planet, which has such a beautiful and delicate skin -- the atmosphere" said Vosseler, a Swiss physician who helped create the organization Transatlantic21, which underwrote Sun21's voyage. "This is an oasis in the universe; we can do better to take care of this paradise; we were not expelled from paradise, we are destroying it."

About 988 gallons of diesel -- an expenditure of almost 3.1 tons of fossil fuel -- was saved by taking Sun21 across the Atlantic instead of a diesel yacht. In fact, a diesel yacht of comparable size to Sun21 would not be able to carry enough fuel for the journey across the open sea.

During the crossing, the 48 modules on the roof of the vessel generated sufficient energy to run the motors, as well as all the computers, radar systems, radios, satellite phones, video cameras, lights and even an electric toothbrush on board.

The boat, which has a maximum speed of 9 knots per hour, traveled at a constant speed of 5 to 6 knots an hour (about 6 to 8 mph), 24 hours a day.

Like an electric car, the vessel propels soundlessly, and the absolute quiet allowed commune with the natural world, said crew member Dr. Beat von Scarpatetti

"I've gotten used to quiet," said the philosophy professor, looking askance at the owner of a nearby boat who was using a roaring, gas-powered water compressor to clean the underside of his vessel

In the Spartan yet cozy twin hulls, the slim shelves along the walls hold well-thumbed books and magazines in multiple languages, and a postage-stamp-sized kitchen had stores of Nutella.

Over the tiny beds, windows provided the crew views of the vast and spangled night sky, undimmed by the light pollution of land-lubbing civilization.

"I like the sea as a symbol of the largeness of the mind, the liberality of it, the generosity of it," Dr. Scarpatetti said in his French-accented English. "If you are looking at the sea, how can you have a narrow mind?"

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