



Freitas used to work as an engineer. "I got tired. I started creating the great escape," he says, and turned his hobby of sailing into his work.

Captain of the Ship

Greg Freitas on a captain’s role and the sea evacuation on 9/11

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NEW YORK—A sailor is someone with an adventurer’s soul, according to Captain Greg Freitas.

“A sailor is somebody who understands what’s ahead of them, knows that’s going to be dangerous, and adventures beyond the horizon—still goes to the horizon and seeks it out,” Freitas says. “And when they find the dangers there, they don’t charge right into them. They cope with them, they design their life so they can weave in and out. You use it, take these dangers, and use it to propel themselves to the next horizon.”

He considers his words for a moment and worries they’re too poetic.

“I’m getting old!” he says.

Freitas, who has been sailing since the 70s, is back at the Classic Harbor Line in New York City as the “Old Salt,” a veteran captain on the crew.

“I suppose they want me to pass down my experiences, and wisdom, if you can call it that,” Freitas says.

Freitas has a tendency to wax poetic when talking about being out on the water.

“It’s like flying, without the danger of crashing into the earth,” Freitas says about sailing. But it’s by no means effortless.

“You have to commune with Mother Nature, you have to deal with the elements. You’re not dealing with external forces, you’re not dealing with other people—something happens to you, you can’t blame somebody else,” Freitas says. “You have to be self-reliant, you have to rely on yourself. It’s just you. It’s proof of existence.”

It’s not like the kind of nature-immersion you get from hiking, he says. When you’re hiking a trail, you’re walking on a path someone built, where others have walked before you. On the water, nobody has ever been in that exact spot—yet being out on the water today is scarcely different from being out on the water a thousand years ago.

“It’s ancient,” he says. “The more I’m thinking about it, the more I like it.”

Freitas is currently giving tours on the Yacht Full Moon, a homey 65-foot yacht he says is a crew favorite.

Safety First

As a captain, Freitas stresses that the safety of everyone aboard is the absolute primary concern. It’s his responsibility to look ahead and prevent crises before they happen.

“What I want to accomplish on the whole is make them feel safe,” Freitas says. “I want to change people from being afraid of the water to loving the water.”

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has to get into the rhythm of the sea—when it gets you to the rhythm of the sea, then I can’t see anything that gets you closer to being with nature,” he says. “Now, I’m in harmony. Once you start and you feel this, it’s just a spectacular, spectacular communion of sorts. It’s a consummation of who you are and what the universe is.”

In this line of work, as a captain, immediate action is a virtue.

After years of tours to the paradise that is the Virgin Islands, Freitas began spending summers—hurricane season—in New York with the Classic Harbor Line in the early 2000s.

But on one clear and sunny Tuesday, a different sort of disaster struck.

Freitas had been giving tours six days a week and spending the day off on the boats of one of his friends, Captain Sean Kennedy. Freitas was with Kennedy when, out of nowhere, a plane flew into the first of the Twin Towers.

“I thought a tourist plane had flown into [the tower],” Freitas says. He didn’t pause to think about it.

The two captains headed straight into action on Kennedy’s boat, the Chelsea Screamer. With two cameramen from a TV crew, they captured what was happening to the towers for all to see.

Lower Manhattan was chaotic. People had run to the edge of the island. Some jumped in and started swimming to escape. All paths out of the city had been closed.

The U.S. Coast Guard made a call over the radio, asking all available boats to assist with evacuation.

The Chelsea Screamer wasn’t designed to come straight up against the island, but there was no time to consider things like that. On a boat meant to hold a maximum of 49 people, they ferried 75 people to New Jersey during the first trip.

What followed was the largest sea evacuation in history. About a half-million people

were evacuated by sea, more than at Dunkirk during World War II.

“People say, ‘What were you thinking of when you were coming in?’ You don’t have time to think at all!” Freitas says. “Sean’s a captain, I’m a captain—it’s what we do. Most times, we’d rather act before we have to react. We’re normally doing things that are preventative.”

“That’s what we do, that’s who we are,” Freitas says. “It’s a sense of duty.”

The sense of duty extended beyond the day of evacuations. Freitas says that had been an experience, but the following week was even more so. By Friday, relief efforts were really beginning; volunteers had brought piles of donated things downtown, but they were just sitting in the rain.

Freitas looked around to find some sort of organizer and asked someone who was in charge. They didn’t know. He found someone else and asked the same question; they didn’t know either.

“After the third or fourth attempt, I stood on the benches and yelled, ‘Okay, I’m in charge,’” Freitas says. Kennedy had a boat with a big lawn tent on the back, and they moved the tent over to the marina to cover the donated items. Freitas started pointing volunteers in the right direction, and firefighters helped organize designated spots.

“As a captain, you have to make decisions,” he says.

Great Escape

Before Freitas was a captain, he was an electrical engineer. In the oceanographic field, he worked at a company at which most people sailed, so he thought he better learn how to sail too. So he went out and built a small boat.

“My mother made the sail. I used a wooden closet pole for the mast,” Freitas says. He took it across a small, 25-acre pond in Massachusetts, where he fell off the rickety thing. He then bought a boat instead, and Freitas realized he was indeed a sailor, but he definitely wasn’t a builder.

Out of everywhere he’s been, his favorite place might be out on the water.

“I was successful as an engineer. I had three houses on the ocean, on Cape Cod,” he says. “I used to travel the world, in many, many different places—and I got tired. I started creating the great escape.”

He purchased a 40-foot boat and realized he couldn’t yet retire, so he turned to sailing as a profession and gave charter tours to the Caribbean. He’s been to 36 countries, and that’s about as close to paradise as you can get, Freitas says. During that time, he met his wife—also a captain—and has been sailing ever since.

“I’m still learning about it [sailing],” Freitas says. “It’s my vocation, my job, my ambition. My thrill comes from dealing with nature.”

Captain Greg Freitas on the Full Moon yacht on the Hudson River near New York City on Aug. 16, 2019.

