

Mill Valley family of 8 to sail to New Zealand

Beth Ashley

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On Thursday, (left to right) Steve Saarman, family friend Lee Wood and... (IJ photo/Frankie Frost)

A SEAFARING Mill Valley family of eight plans to shove off this weekend on a yearlong sail to New Zealand.

All eight were alight with excitement Thursday as they did their final equipment check and stowed three months of provisions aboard the 51-foot yacht Haapsalu, berthed off Liberty Ship Way in Sausalito.

Sailing, they said, is the ultimate adventure.

"I'm pretty jazzed going back on the ocean," said Steve Saarman, 57, of Mill Valley.

From 1979 to 1982, Steve, his brother Jeff Saarman, 54, of Mill Valley and their father, Paul Saarman, 84, of San Francisco, sailed together for two and a half years around the world.

On this trip, they're taking other family members along: Jeff's wife Teresa Ferrari, 50, Jeff and Teresa's children, Giovanni, 18, and David, 21, and Steve's children, Nico, 13, and Stephanie, 18. Family friend Lee Wood, 56, of Hawaii will join them.

Their route will take them first to the Marquesas in French Polynesia, to the Cook Islands, Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji. They expect to leave their yacht - a Beneteau model 510 Oceanis with four cabins and plenty of luxury equipment - in New Zealand, available for sailing trips in the future.

Paul has another boat in San Francisco, the 50-foot Rapture, which took them around the world.

For Paul, the voyage will be another chapter in his lifelong romance with the sea. He learned to sail as a boy on the coast of his native Estonia, and during World War II sailed to Finland to escape being drafted into the German army. In Finland, he fought the Germans - and the Russians.



A Mill Valley family of three generations is preparing to sail to New Zealand starting this weekend. In the front row from left to right are Nico Saarman, Teresa Ferrari, Jeff Saarman, Paul Saarman. Back row, left to right: Stephanie Saarman, Giovanni Saarman, David Saarman and family friend Lee Wood. (IJ photo/Frankie Frost)

As for the current trip, "I'm really flattered that the family thinks that an 84-year-old man can make it."

Jeff, a licensed captain who will act as skipper on the voyage, attributes his love of the sea to his dad, who sailed him to Tahiti and South America when he was 20. "It was such an inspiration to me," he says. "I wanted to give the same gifts to my sons and my brother's children."

Teresa, who was a non-sailor when she married Jeff in 1985, says "the most important thing I have learned as a part of this family is that sailing is the path to manhood."

The Saarman brothers will fly back home from time to time to check on the family business, a San Francisco construction company they began with their father in 1982.

Steven will fly home in September to enroll son Nico in Marin Academy.

Paul's wife Irma plans to join the voyagers in October, somewhere in the Society Islands.

Plans for the trip have been three years in the making. Jeff and Teresa, who were married on a boat in Lake Tahoe, bought the boat in October, naming it for Paul's home town in Estonia, Haapsalu.

They picked this month's departure date because it followed on the heels of Giovanni's graduation from San Francisco Waldorf School and Stephanie's graduation from San Domenico.

The two will take a year off before college.

The four youngsters have sailed on San Francisco Bay all their lives, but this is their first long voyage. They will learn celestial navigation on the trip, Steve says. "You can't always depend on the navigation system on the boat."



On Thursday, (left to right) Steve Saarman, family friend Lee Wood and Teresa Ferrari prepare for departure this weekend. (IJ photo/Frankie Frost)

They will certainly be buoyed by the enthusiasm of their elders.

Sailing, says Jeff, "gives you a sense of self, a sense of confidence. One can survive anywhere, one can live anywhere, and not be bound up in the pleasures of America. There are many pleasures in other parts of the world, and being exposed to them gives one a wide perspective on life in this country."

"The way Jeff got me to love sailing," says Teresa, a former nurse and preschool teacher, "was to have me sit on the bow. The movement is so beautiful you can't help but fall in love with it. You hunger for it."

"A long ocean voyage is transformative," says Steve. "Seeing the sun rise, seeing it set, standing watch in the night, you have a lot of time to think. Everything slows down."

"If you're lucky, you make 250 miles a day, a jet makes that in 20 minutes. You feel much more a part of the world."

Paul, who has sailed for most of his life, says, "You learn to make peace with yourself."

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