

Matt Braun's Reflection for Leg 1

My name is Matthew Braun. I am an undergraduate student in the Wise Laboratory at the University of Southern Maine in Portland, Maine. I have been on the first leg of the Voyage of the Odyssey, 2010 covering Portland, Maine to West Palm Beach, Florida. Leg one was certainly an adventure, and I was excited to be on board for it. This leg was particularly exciting not just because it was my first leg, but also the first leg and likely the only leg until the end that we sail on the infamous Atlantic Ocean.

To start off, I have done very little sailing. I have sailed on small sailboats for a few hours here and there on lakes in Maine and Minnesota. I have also sailed twice in 2008 on the Odyssey when it was docked in Falmouth, ME. So to make things clear, I have no sailing experience, and thus, neither my body nor my brain is used to the motion of the ocean. If I left it at that I'm sure you could speculate what this leg has been like for me just trying to adjust so that I could carry on with my daily sea life.

When we left Portland the first night, the water was stormy. We had all had a long week already and I went to bed soon after. So badly wanting to sleep, I was defeated when I spent most of the night tossing and turning and struggling to stay in my bed from the rocking of the waves. My bed is a very small top bunk. On one side there is a wall with two metal portholes that do not close flush with the wall. The other side is open with a small, weak piece of army canvas tied to two hooks on the wall preventing me from tumbling out of bed. Above me there is a foot and a half of room to climb in to and maneuver around in. There are two hanging chains from the ceiling, and in the span of a night, I hit my head a dozen times on them. The safety canvas does not seem pretty safe. Now, I am not a big guy, but I am fairly convinced that if a wave rocked the boat hard enough I would come rolling with a lot of force and rip the rope right out of the wall. Likewise, the first mate/safety officer, Eric Carr told me that it was not durable enough for me to use it as a brace as I slept. Unfortunately, this would be the ideal spot to sleep as my only other choice (since I sleep on my side) would be to have my back against the metal portholes that jab me awkwardly because they do not close properly. If I fell I would surely concuss myself on the ceramic sink below. It was frustrating to sleep there.

Many nights were like this the first week, and it was beginning to take a toll on me. For about a week, I had a hard time focusing and staying awake during the day. Then a week in, the seas got exponentially worse. Staying stationary in my bed was impossible and realizing that it wasn't worth trying anymore, I had the brilliant idea of bringing my pillow and blanket up to the salon to sleep on a bench. When I got up there, much to my surprise, there were four bodies sprawled out on the floor and benches. They clearly were having some difficulty, too. I headed up to the pilot house to talk to Captain Bob. He said that we were sailing through Cape Hatteras, known for high wind and big waves; this is the worst that he had ever seen it in this area. He expected at least two more days of this. Lucky us!! We wanted an adventure and we got it. I walked back down to the salon and curled up between the people on the floor, wedging myself between them so that I would move as little as possible. This was a rough night for everyone. I knew where my bed was going to be for the end of time. The next day, Bob

told us that we would have one more day of this and then we would port in Beaufort, NC because he didn't want to risk damage to us or to the boat. We crept along at three knots because the boat could not safely handle going any faster. Basically we were sailing at walking pace. We welcomed the break in North Carolina after the wild ride that we had just experienced.

One of the funniest things on this leg, that never seemed to get old, was watching people try and fail to stay stationary and upright while standing. "Woooooooo!" said Principal Investigator, John P. Wise, sr., as he struggled to walk a straight line down the stairs, through the salon, and into the galley during the waviest period of the trip. He did a little sea dance for us before leaping onto the bench right next to me to avoid crashing to the floor. I do not think that he was having as much fun as we were just then. He was lucky this time...but other times he did not even make it to a seat. Most of the crew adjusted well to getting their sea legs. However, Dr. Wise seemed to struggle. We all had our moments and our fair share of mockery.

The lack of sleep, the rough water, and the dehydration took a toll on me from the start. I was generously given the nickname "Ralph." They could make all the snide comments they wanted because I got sick, "fed the dolphins" as Dr. Wise puts it, and then felt great! Some of the other crew members felt sick and were incapacitated for most of the day. A few times I climbed up to the upper observation deck 50 or so feet up in the air for the sunrise shift (at 5:30 am in the upper Atlantic). My body is never ready for food or water this early in the morning, two things that I realized were crucial in staying healthy and alert, even this early. As a result, I got sick up there and could not focus my task of scanning the ocean for whales.

Slowly but surely, my body began to acclimate. It started with drinking more water. I had to force myself to chug a glass before I left to go up. Drinking water and eating something small like a granola bar made all the difference. After about a week of this I was pretty stable. Ever since then, I have gotten very used to drinking water, lots of it. On the hottest days I probably drank 20 ounces every half an hour. Thankfully, my body is used to drinking lots of water, now.

Likewise, I am used to the uncomfortable rocking of the sea. In fact, I now find comfort in the gentle swaying of the boat. My brain is used to that motion. When I got off the boat at the first port in North Carolina, I noticed that I was rocking back and forth at breakfast and it felt like the world was moving around me. I did not expect that, but it was pretty cool. I just sat there enjoying my motion as the others looked at me like I had just cloned myself. By the time we docked at West Palm Beach, Florida two weeks in, I had gotten used to the transition from boat to land back to boat again. Both were comfortable to me, although I much preferred being on the boat. I have hopped off the boat now for a few weeks, and I miss the boat and the crew. At night I still am comforted by the gentle swaying of my surroundings because my brain is fooled into thinking I am still on board.

All the sea life that we have seen thus far has been truly rewarding. I had never seen whales up close in person before this trip. The first whale sighting was amazing, and

some of us were so dumbfounded that we almost forgot to carry out our jobs to get the samples. Oops. We saw a blow a kilometer away and Bob motor-sailed up to it slowly and put them right at the bow off the starboard side. This was a real treat. Never did I expect to be able to reach my hand out and almost touch them. They are truly remarkable creatures with such power, but so graceful and calm at the same time. The second night aboard the ship, Kellie, Johnny and myself were sitting on the aft cabin enjoying the magnificent sunset, when we saw a whale breach the surface right under the sun. Words cannot even begin to describe the sight, but unfortunately they will have to do as no one was fast enough to take a picture. I will never forget that mental picture.

The first few days we only saw a dolphin here and there. I saw a few from the upper observation platform during one of my watches, and was so intrigued that I would have completely missed a whale if one was near; little did I know that we would see many, many more dolphins the next two weeks. Someone yelled from the bow of the boat "dolphins!!!" and we all came rushing out on deck and piled onto the bow to take a peek. I have never been so fascinated by something in my entire life. The first thing I said was "that looks awesome; I want to be a dolphin!"

There was a school of dolphins that proceeded to chase the bow and tease us very playfully for the next ten or fifteen minutes. Suddenly, we saw another curious dolphin begin to jump furiously from a ways back to catch up to the boat. They all swam under the nose of the boat, and if on the starboard side; they were visible from the underwater bow camera. I felt like jumping into the water and swimming with them, but could not pull myself to do it. Alas, it was far too unprofessional and too dangerous.

However, we did get the chance to swim with them once. We had just finished enjoying the company of a dozen dolphins at the bow for half an hour when Bob decided to cut the motor and allow us to cool off in the eighty degree water. The water was a little too warm for me, but I did not hesitate to swim regardless. Bob said that there were a few lingering dolphins a few hundred meters away. We quietly got into the water as not to scare them away, and I swam slowly to try and find them. The water was so clear that I could see them (and actually hear the high pitched squeals, too) when I went under the water. One dolphin came up and did a circle around me ten feet from my body. I treasured every moment that the dolphins blessed us with their presence.

I could go on for many more pages talking about all of the incredible things that I have experienced so far, but I will stop here. Two last things that have stuck out. The first is the incredible sunrises and sunsets that we have seen. Each day these have been a little different, and some of them have been spectacular. Sometimes you can only see bits and pieces of the sun, partially hidden behind some clouds with every piece behind a different thickness of cloud, producing an ever so slightly varied color. You would have to see it to believe it, and luckily I captured some of it on camera. I had the chance to view one of these from the crow's nest. Being up on the crow's nest was exhilarating and the one time I went up for the sunrise, I did not want to come down, so I stayed up for two and a half hours until they said I had to come down and get ready to port. I will be up there a lot on the next leg, I'm sure.

One other really cool thing is that Cathy has successfully gotten Fin and Humpback Whale cells to grow. I did not expect that we would have that many explants actually grow on the boat; rather, I thought that we would have to freeze and ship them back to our lab to grow them to avoid contamination. Congratulations Cathy! I'm excited that we are making history and that I am a part of it. I look forward to all the awesome things that we see/hear/experience on the next leg.