

Bella Desgagnés



Have you always wanted to get a glimpse of life on board ship? Are you curious about the atmosphere and each person's role?

The Sectorial Committee understands and would like to present the unique, human character of ships' crews! Here is the first in a series of crew portraits, that of Groupe Desgagnés' Bella Desgagnés.

Make way for seafarers!

Sept-Îles, September 28, 2014

It's 8:30 on a beautiful September evening, and a lovely, cool breeze is blowing. I park my car and through the darkness see the name Bella Desgagnés in big letters along with the vertical yellow line that is known on oceans the world over. There's no mistake; it's the ship I'm looking for. The gangway is lowered, and I board.

The crew of the MV Bella Desgagnés still has a good two hours to prepare for the next departure. Sept-Îles is the next-to-last destination on the upstream route. The crew is getting ready to head for Rimouski to start off on another seven-day trip.

With stops in Rimouski, Blanc-Sablon, Sept-Îles, Harrington Harbour and many other cities, towns and villages along the St. Lawrence, the vessel provides shipping service to residents, tourists and cargo transiting via Québec's Middle and Lower North Shore and Anticosti Island. Owned by Groupe Desgagnés, a Québec City-based ship owner and operator, the MV Bella Desgagnés serves an area further inland and the challenges linked to weather conditions and delivery deadlines are part of the crew's reality on every trip.



On the picture (from left to right) : Marc Maltais, Jérôme Bélanger, Juan Daigle Choquette, Eric Hounsell et Simon Leblanc du Bella Desgagnés.

« *[Life aboard], it's really a different world!* »

The MV Bella Desgagnés, which carries passengers, vehicles and cargo, is a cross between a cruise ship and a container ship. With its capacity for 381 passengers and 125 containers, it can carry a wide range of products...from envelopes to telephone poles. Usually, its cargo consists of foodstuffs, furniture, electrical appliances, commercial and recreational vehicles, machinery, construction materials and even live animals.

But, the ship does not run itself. It sails the St. Lawrence and makes these trips thanks to a highly qualified Canadian crew. In Québec, the River is central to our lives and yet we really don't know much about the crucial work sailors do on board ship or what life is like there. Few people really know the human side of these vessels...

Ship Steward Roberto Thomassin greets me warmly and gives me a guided tour. I feel like a VIP guest...what a privilege! All of the crew members are friendly, very courteous and happy to answer my questions.

Bella Desgagnés



I'm impressed to learn that the ship has 63 cabins and various public facilities designed to ensure the comfort and entertainment of all on board: dining room, indoor lounges, public showers, sick bay, gym, arcade, etc.

Each crew member has his or her own cabin equipped with a TV, writing desk, bathroom and, obviously, a bed. The employees also have access to a gym and lounge.

I'm told that, during the low season, the crew consists of 25 people, a number that, in the high season, can grow to an impressive 42 to meet customer needs (passenger services). Bridge and engine room crew numbers remain unchanged.

In addition to the Captain, who is Master on board the vessel, the crew is divided into three main areas: passenger services, engine room and deck. Each of these three categories is headed by a supervisor, respectively: Head of Passenger Services, Chief Engineer (Chief Mechanic) and Chief Petty Officer, and subdivided into hierarchical levels. For example, on deck, there are two categories of sailors: certificated (Navigation Officers, Captain) and non-certificated (Seaman, Wheelman, Crane Operator).

The crew's working conditions usually involve a six-week cycle followed by four weeks' holidays. In winter, when the Bella ceases operations, the crew can also take time off (5-8 weeks). Depending on the area they are assigned to, crew members work day shifts (10-12-hour shift) or rotating shifts (12-hour shift).

I wasn't surprised to see that most of the sailors were men and that most were native to the Lower St-Lawrence area. The women on board work mainly in passenger services. I'm thinking of Canteen Keeper Anita Simard, a pleasant, friendly woman with an exemplary desire to provide excellent service to customers to make their stay on board as memorable as possible. She's the type of person who doesn't hesitate to help someone who is seasick back to his or her cabin.



The crew consists of 25 people, a number that, in the high season, can grow to an impressive 42.



On the picture : Jade D'Astous (left) et Jessica Tremblay (right) of Passenger Services.



Bella Desgagnés



What she likes most about her job is working with people. It makes up for having to work far from her family, for the fatigue linked to long work shifts and for delicate situations involving difficult customers. This type of job can also give rise to amazingly heartwarming stories like this one of Mrs. Simard's: "About eight years ago, a woman from the Magdalen Islands was on board. She gave me a small medallion, telling me she had seen an angel in me and that I would need it. I saw her again not long ago and recognized her right away. I went over to her and we hugged. It was a simple but magical experience."

How does she describe the dynamics of work on board ship? Her spontaneous answer: the heart of the crew is the Cook! If the food is good, morale is good.

Anita Simard is not the only woman on board. Officer cadet Josiane Bellavance works in the engine room. A marine mechanical engineering student at the Institut maritime du Québec, Josiane worked on board the Bella Desgagnés last fall for her third and final sea phase internship, enabling her to complete the sea time needed to get her initial mechanical engineering certification. It was her first experience on a passenger ship...very different from her work on oil tankers (her first two internships). Smart and energetic, Josiane chose the marine sector to combine her two great loves: mechanics and travel. In her opinion, it's the best of both worlds!



On the picture : Officer cadet Josiane Bellavance works in the engine room.

On board the Bella, she is responsible for the daily maintenance of the engines, machines and various pieces of equipment, just like an Engine Room Rating. When asked what she likes most about her job, she is quick to answer: "Definitely what happens in the engine room. As long as I can remember, I've loved mechanics. My dad is an industrial mechanic and, when I was little, it was me, not my brother, who helped him and handed him his tools".

After resting in my cabin for a few hours and visiting the canteen and the engine room, I'm invited to have breakfast with the crew. The atmosphere is good: everyone is smiling and very friendly. It's like a family get-together! I sit down and someone sits next to me...his name is Guillaume Tremblay and he is a Wheelman and Crane Operator.



On the picture : Guillaume Tremblay, Wheelman and Crane Operator

With 24 years' experience in navigation, Mr. Tremblay worked for Relais Nordik on joining the marine sector. He knew the Nordik Express, the Bella's predecessor, for many years. A hard worker, he works virtually year-round on board the Bella. Over a six-week work cycle, he is assigned to the crane half the time and the wheel the rest of the time.

According to him, what people don't know about life on board ship is that the sailors work seven days a week. "It's not like a job on land, where you work 5 days and get 2 days off. It's really a different world", he says.



Bella Desgagnés



On the picture : Rémi Chabot, Navigation Officer



On the picture: Jean Iza, waiter at the dining room

After a very enjoyable breakfast, I meet Jean Iza, who has been serving in the dining room for just over 20 years. Minutes later, there is no doubt in my mind that this extremely generous man makes customer satisfaction his No. 1 priority. When I ask him to tell me about his duties on board, I am moved by his passion and devotion: "I don't call this a job...for me, it's much more! Being a waiter doesn't just mean bringing people their orders. On board the Bella, I have a week to get know people, give them personalized service and make their travel experience unforgettable".

Jean Iza is very proud of his long restaurant career in this far-from-typical environment. He's come a long way...from a hotel restaurant to the Bella Desgagnés' dining room! As he points out very clearly, the key to success in giving the best service possible is to put yourself in the customer's shoes. This requires a great deal of empathy and an extraordinary ability to listen...assets that Jean Iza has in spades.

It's 10:00 a.m. The ship is preparing to dock in Rimouski after a 12-hour crossing. I finish my interview with Navigation Officer Rémi Chabot. We have to hurry because Mr. Chabot is needed for the docking manoeuvres.

A husband and father of two teenagers, he divides his time between his job and his family. "What's great about the Bella's itinerary is that I can spend more time with my family in Rimouski. Every Monday, I go home for a few hours before heading off for Sept-Îles again in the evening."

For him, a typical day on board ship means 12-14 hours of work. The Bella's special status as a passenger/cargo ship means that the security-related tasks on board (checking the fire extinguishers, fire hoses and lifeboats) require extremely close attention. They are carried out by two officers, often outside their watch duties on the bridge.

While it's hard work with few breaks, some of our duties more than make up for the negative impacts associated with the long hours: "We serve 22 ports a week compared to 2 or 3 for the other ships doing the 'Northern run'. So, the Bella's officers do much more piloting than usual. It's a task that we're generally very happy to perform."

I thank Rémi Chabot taking some of his valuable time to grant me the interview. It's already time to leave the ship. From the wharf, I look back at the majestic Bella Desgagnés before preparing for the drive back to Québec City. I'm filled with happy, lasting memories.

Dominique Labbé, Communications Officer
Human Resources Sectorial Committee of the Maritime Industry

