

Voyage of the Galleon

In October of 2010, a full size replica of a galleon, the Galeon Andalusia, sailed into Manila Bay with her Spanish crew. There aren't too many replicas around and it may have been the first time in two centuries that a galleon arrived in Manila. The ship was an instant hit. Crowds lined to get a view, their sense of history rekindled. Later on the ship sailed to Cebu to continue the exhibition. I had been in Manila in August for a niece's wedding but had left well before the galleon arrived. I wish I hadn't missed it.

I would really like to write about some of the men, and women if possible, who made the difficult crossing between Acapulco and Manila during the heyday of the galleon trade. Perhaps some of them, such as the ship officers, made the trip several times. For more than 200 years, starting in the late 16th century to early in the 18th, Spanish galleons criss crossed the Pacific from Acapulco to Manila and back. Most accounts indicate 1565 as the first year of the galleon trade and the last as 1815. 1565 was actually the year that an eastern route from Manila to Acapulco was discovered, credited to the Augustinian friar Andres de Urdaneta. By the latter date, Mexico was breaking away from Spanish rule, their fight for independence started by a priest, Fr. Miguel Hidalgo, in 1810. The last galleon sailed from Acapulco in 1815, named, perhaps appropriately, Magallanes.

The galleons from Acapulco were loaded with precious metals, mainly silver, from New Spain (Mexico) and Alto Peru (now Bolivia). These were used to fund the Spanish regime in the Philippines and pay for the merchandise procured in Manila. Spanish silver was the trading coinage, the dollar of the period. Manila was the capital and trading hub, halfway between the Chinese mainland to the north and the East Indies (Indonesia) to the south. To the west was Cochin China (now Vietnam, Cambodia & Laos), Siam (Thailand) and the Malay peninsula (Malaysia). Silk, porcelain, ivory, jade, perfumes, lacquerware, tea and pottery were brought from China. Cotton fabric came from India. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, Chinese silk was the most important cargo. Spices were from the East Indies, from the spice islands known as the Moluccas. Spices were what brought the Spaniards in the first place. The best account, providing an overview of the trade, was published in the September 1990 issue of the National Geographic magazine.

I was wondering what the trip would be like but I couldn't find a diary or an account that would be similar to the detailed log kept by the Italian cartographer Antonio Pigafetta. He kept the daily log of Magellan's voyage and was one of the 18 survivors out of Magellan's original complement of 235 sailors and five ships which sailed from Seville in 1519. (The only ship that made it back was the Victoria.) Val's explanation for the lack of ship's logs is that perhaps only 1 or 2 among the ship's crew were literate. It was hard enough surviving the elements, fending off the pirates, suppressing the occasional mutiny and keeping from starving to worry about a diary. From the National Geographic, there were only a couple of very brief paragraphs of individual accounts, with only one writer identified, the other anonymous. Well, the writer that the NG quoted was an intrepid Italian by the name of Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri. He made a voyage on the galleon San Jose in 1696. He was among the first tourists, traveling around the world and writing a journal, in Italian, of course. He wrote "Giro Del Mondo" in 1699, a total of six volumes, one of

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which was devoted to his stay in the Philippines. For the Manila-Acapulco voyage, he chronicles the interminable delays, rotten food, weather extremes, inequalities among the crew, deaths, etc. But there were no personal dynamics, no conversations, little insight about the travelers. His trip from Manila to Acapulco took 200 days. So here I am trying to imagine a galleon trip at around the time of the American revolution. The galleons were among the biggest ships of the time, as much as 2,000 tons, 160 feet long and 40 feet wide. The voyage was not an easy one. Call the Spaniards what you'd like - racist, driven by greed. They treated the native peoples with disdain and cruelty. But they were bold and unafraid. They had *cojones*. They were undaunted by the rigors and undeterred by the casualties suffered during each trip.

As the galleon grew in size, the total number of passengers increased from 200 to as many as 400. They were the officers, sailors, gunners, clergy, Spanish functionaries and occasional nobility. Sometimes they carried prisoners, which is another story. (To give you an idea of the sometimes questionable information available, a passenger count of as many as 1,000 has been submitted. On a 160 ft. ship for a voyage that would last for months? No way!) The five ships in Ferdinand Magellan's expedition averaged only 50 sailors, although they were carracks and caravels, smaller than galleons, the largest one having a displacement of 120 tons. Only the galleon's captain had a private room. Perhaps another room would be made available if there was a Spanish noble on board. The holds were reserved for valuable cargo so the sailors slept on the deck. The total deck area would be double that of a large suburban home. Imagine 200 people living in your house. Sanitation? Similar to what I saw on *bancas* in Palawan earlier this year, consisting of a 1 x 1 meter piece of wood that extended over the water near the stern. The sides were enclosed for privacy. Oh, there was a hole in the center and a bucket of seawater by the side. The sailors had one change of clothes. That isn't much for a trip that could last two to three months for the westward leg and twice as long for the eastbound.

The distance between Manila and Acapulco is 9,000 miles. To provide a perspective of this distance, that is 2 ½ times the distance from New York to London. But of course the galleons did not travel the 9,000 miles in a straight line. Their top speed under sail was 5 knots. Going west, they could take advantage of the north equatorial current, making the trip west in about 2 to 3 months, half the time of the voyage east. For the eastbound, there is a north Pacific current that the galleons could likewise utilize but it made the trip longer since the route takes the ships much further north (this was the route discovered by Urdaneta). First the galleon would sail to the east of Japan and enter the Kuroshio current, where it would later merge with the Pacific current. The ship would swing south before they reached the California coast. The first landfall was usually Mendocino, north of San Francisco. Sometimes the ships would dock, the first time the passengers would walk on land after six or seven months. At Morro Bay, halfway between Monterey and San Diego, there is an historic landmark commemorating the landing of a galleon in 1587. So Filipinos preceded the 49'ers to California by more than 250 years!

The diet on board consisted of salted pork and hardtack, a combination that would still be in use during the American civil war. Small live animals were brought on board but that didn't help the sanitation. The greatest scourge was scurvy, a debilitating condition that was literally a slow

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death. They didn't associate the affliction with a lack of citrus fruit in their diet until later. A writer named Cindy Vallar indicated that one third of the galleon's crew perished from scurvy. Another author places the scurvy fatality rate at 50 percent. Wikipedia estimates the total deaths from scurvy among sailors worldwide at 2 million between 1500 and 1800, which seems like an absurdly high number. Another instance of questionable information. Only four trips were made every year, 2 from Manila and 2 from Acapulco, so at the most there would have been 500 round trips. Even if all 300 passengers perished, that would be 30,000 maximum. Atlantic, Caribbean and Indian Ocean trips were shorter, so the chances of scurvy incidence was less.

The hardships were enormous, something unimaginable today. If the trip took too long for whatever reason, they would all be suffering from scurvy by the time they arrived. There is an oft repeated tale about the galleon San Jose, a "ghost ship" drifting off the coast of Mexico in the 1650's. All passengers and crew were dead. At least 40 galleons were shipwrecked. This seems like a small number, but there were only 6 galleons in service at any given time, 3 in Acapulco and 3 in Manila. Still, the Spaniards carried on, year after year. The riches earned from the trade made the risks worthwhile. The first galleons were built in Zihuatanejo, up the coast from Acapulco. Afterwards, the galleons were built in Philippine shipyards, using Filipino labor. The main shipyard was in the province of Cavite, on the southern shore of Manila Bay. It was probably the largest single "industrial" complex in the archipelago. There were other shipyards as well, such as Sorsogon, on the southern tip of Luzon. Ore, raw iron and assorted iron products came from China. In Cavite, they were forged into everything from anchors and chains to cannons. The Spanish were way ahead of their time in outsourcing.

The galleon's officers were undoubtedly Spaniards but it is uncertain how many of the crew were Spanish and how many were Filipinos or Mexican. I had written a previous essay about the possibility of Nahua Indians coming to the Philippines, perhaps as sailors on the galleons. They certainly wouldn't be taking a cruise compliments of the Viceroy of New Spain. On the return trip to Acapulco, some of the crew would be Filipinos. It has been established that some of these Filipinos stayed in Mexico to settle. Some went north to California and there are records of Filipinos settling near New Orleans, where they were known as Manila men.

The search for sunken galleons continues to this day, undertaken by archaeologists and treasure hunters. All are meticulous in preserving artifacts and minimizing disturbance to the ocean floor or reefs. So far, no Manila galleon has yielded the kind of treasures found in the Nuestra Señora de Atocha, which sank south of the Florida keys. You can view this treasure in Key West, FL. A nearly complete recovery of the most valuable remnants of a Manila galleon's cargo was not recovered until the late 1980s, off the southern coast of Saipan. The Nuestra Señora de la Concepcion sank off the reefs in the northern Marianas in 1638. This salvage was covered in the NG article. There is a nearly complete documentation of the ships that sailed. But what about the captains, navigators, soldiers of fortune, friars, sailors, noblemen and noble ladies that braved and survived the trip? Where are their accounts? What friendships or bonds were formed? Any romances? In times of conflict, such an attack by the dreaded English or Dutch privateers, was there any heroism or gallantry displayed? Many survived shipwrecks and

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were rescued. What happened while they were marooned? Was it like a Spanish “Lord of the Flies?”

Another example of forgotten men, those sailors of the galleon trade. I'll look for more logs, then weave that experience into this narrative. Perhaps I'll make the story an “historical fiction.” Here is how I'd like my story to start: *“Capitan Andres Martinez Rojo surveyed the ship he was to command, the galeon Flor de Manila. She was a beauty! Those indios from Islas Filipinas learned their craft well, taught by Spanish shipwrights. Constructed in Cavite, she had sailed to Acapulco the year before. For her trip to Manila Bay, her hold contained 20 tons of silver bullion and newly minted silver pesos. Most of the crew were Nahua indios, but that was the best the capitan could do. However, his gunners, musketeers and arquebusiers were all criollos, pure Spanish born in Mexico. They could fend off those bastardos, ingles and holandes piratas, trying to steal Spanish treasure. If all went well on this and the return trip to Acapulco, the capitan could use his share of the profits to retire to the family vineyard in Jerez. In his cabin, the capitan had a private hoard of Manzanilla from his home town. He could sell some to the Spanish insulares in Manila, adding to his profit. Among the passengers were two newly ordained Franciscans, eager to spread the Word among the Filipino indios. Even after 200 years, not all the indios had been converted. There were so many islands, so many languages. The friars came from Andalusia, making the Atlantic voyage from Cadiz to Vera Cruz then overland to Mexico city and finally to Acapulco. The trip from Cadiz to Manila would take the better part of a year. Another passenger was Fernando del Fierro, a Gallego naval officer from Betanzos. The Virrey (Viceroy) had appointed him the new Alcalde (governor) of the province of Zambales, up the coast from the mouth of Manila Bay. Zambales had Subic Bay, a natural harbor as good as Manila's. It would be Fernando's task to carry out the order of King Alfonso to build up a naval presence in Subic. Fernando's three daughters Isabel, Lucia and Mariquita would be born in Zambales. His great great great grandson, descended from Isabel, is now writing this account....”*

N.B. The above paragraph is fiction, of course, but Fernando and his daughters are real. Isabel is the grandmother of my maternal grandmother.

Mario E. Orosa
Oct. 24, 2013