

LIFEBOAT EXPERIENCE PIERS TOWNLEY DONS DRYSUIT AND BUOYANCY JACKET TO FIND OUT WHAT IT TAKES TO CREW A LIFEBOAT

Crewed up and spat out

Wecan make it sporty – we can chuck you overboard if you want,” shouts Allan McGreal, one of Shout Lifeboat Experience’s leading hands, over the crash of the English Channel’s swell. “Sportier than this?” someone yells back, as we all stare petrified at the sickeningly tilting horizon to starboard.

This is what it’s like to be at sea, then. Not just on the ferry across the Mersey or a rowing boat on the duck pond, but at sea with a lifeboat crew in their state-of-the-art Arran-class vessel.

The Experience offers thrilling and unusual day trips aboard their boat, sailing from their base in Weymouth.

Having a swell time

On arrival, I clamber into a drysuit and buoyancy jacket and, along with other part-time sea dogs, am led through the safety briefing, which is far more thorough than I expected.

Though it’s now out of active service, the Edith Emmelle is a fully functioning boat – all the radar equipment, navigation, radio and safety kit is top notch and each of us, under supervision, can have a go at all elements of piloting her.

After we’ve cruised out to sea and familiarised ourselves with the workings of the boat, we steer towards some harmless-looking swells.

Then it gets exciting. Two other datrippers hit the deck as salt water pummels the ship, and what just three seconds earlier was the calmest of spring days has turned into The Perfect Storm.

“It’s the combination of three tidal currents,” laughs Allan and, quoting the warning from Reed’s Nautical Almanac, adds: “South of Portland Bill lies Portland Race in which severe and very dangerous sea states occur. The irregular contours of the sea bed greatly contribute to the violence of the race.

Everyone else is caught off guard too quickly to raise a smile. We’re all clinging



Only the wave: Lifeboat crews face torrid conditions left. Far left: Piers, crouching, with his fellow adventurers



to the rails for dear life, bravado streaming away from our faces, the lifeboat dwarfed by the waves.

“Don’t worry – it can take it,” shouts Allan. “It’s designed to be able to roll right over and then right itself. The cabin acts as an air pocket. Of course, should that happen, it’s unlikely we’ll be in it.”

Later on, he says: “This gives you a tiny insight into what it’s really like out there. If you all want to do a night-time exercise, then we’ll stay out. If you want to hang on

for really bad weather – and that’s a real day out – then we can do that as well.”

“We’ll just stick with the boat being on the right side of you for today, thanks, we say.

The experience also offers you the chance to try a mock rescue, but Allan advises it’s just that little bit too cold to try that one out this time.

And, as it would have been one of us taking the plunge, our green faces momentarily return to their natural colour.

The Shout Experience can be contacted on 01297 21 492.

Piers made himself sick courtesy of Red Letter Days (0870 444 9000, www.redletterdays.co.uk) who charge £199 for the day out of Weymouth, Dorset.

Edited by JAMES ELLIS features@ukmetro.co.uk

THE RNLI

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution is a registered charity which saves lives at sea. It provides the 24-hour service necessary to cover search and rescue requirements up to 50 miles out from the coast of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. As a charity, it depends entirely on voluntary contributions and legacies for its income. There are 230 lifeboat stations in the British Isles – including a new station at Wexford in the Republic of Ireland – housing 310 lifeboats.

In 2001, 6,922 people were rescued by the service, which is run by some 4,500 volunteers – only mechanics, admin staff and some coxswains are full-time employees. It costs around £103million a year to run the service. If you would like to make a donation, visit www.rnli.org.uk

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