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Exotic yacht cruises world showing off native skills

Visiting Newport's International Yacht Restoration School, the Pajaro Jai, built over 12 years by natives of Panama, embodies a project showing what an indigenous people can accomplish with the right kind of help.

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NEWPORT — It was a scene you wouldn't normally see in this prim, proper and preppy seaport.

On the deck of the spotless 92-foot ketch, with the sounds of light drumming accompanying the wind-driven thrumming of the rigging, stood a handful of indigenous Central Americans, all wearing the least nautical of outfits by Newport standards. Instead of boat shoes, white pants and blue blazers, they wore only revealing loin cloths and colorful necklaces made of coins and fruit seeds. Their faces were painted with

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black, patterned lines.

Then again, there was nothing typical about this crew or this yacht, the Pajaro Jai (which means "enchanted bird" in Spanish). It was built by hand by natives of the Darien Rainforest in Panama from wood they harvested themselves. The undertaking was so ambitious, expensive and painstaking — and so unlike anything these inland peoples are accustomed to — that it took 12 years to construct the Pajaro Jai.

Launched in March, the stunningly beautiful yacht and its crew of Chocoe Indians is now cruising from port to port along the East Coast — and soon around the world — for the Pajaro Jai Foundation. The organization is on a mission to show that when indigenous peoples are properly assisted, they can develop their skills and become self-sufficient. Too often, says founder Jim Brunton, aid breeds dependency.

Brunton repeated this message to all who came aboard when the Pajaro Jai tied up yesterday afternoon at the International Yacht Restoration School. The yacht, which arrived from Connecticut, is here for only a day. It is expected to leave today for Martha's Vineyard.

In the meantime, Brunton and his crew welcomed visitors and

showed off the craftsmanship that went into the making of the Pajaro Jai. He talked about how it took nearly six months for the Indians to build a mold to fashion the yacht's 75,000-pound lead keel. He pointed out the many types of tropical hardwoods used on the decking and interior of the boat, including the rosewood main cabin. The metal fittings were hand-forged. The Indians knew the woods of the rainforest and how to work them — they just needed to be taught ship-building techniques, he said.

The foundation emphasizes that the rainforest was not exploited for construction of the ship. "Lumber harvesting in the Darien is a reality that will continue into the future. The premium price the [foundation] pays for lumber harvested in sustainable ways, demonstrates to lumber concessionaires that conservation can be profitable," its Web site states. "In an area where slash and burn agriculture and cattle farming provide the primary means for survival, the Pajaro Jai project provides alternatives which use fewer resources to yield more profit. Though the construction of the Pajaro Jai will consume over 100 trees, the men working on the boat are farmers who would otherwise provide for their families by burning trees by the thousands in order to plant cash crops and cattle pasture."

The foundation was started by Brunton, a computer software developer from Westport, Conn.,

whose Peace Corps experience with the Chocoe in 1967 left a lasting impression on him. He has been helping the Chocoe develop a furniture and basket-weaving business that will cut out the middleman and bring greater profits to the tribe. He spent \$2 million to have the Chocoe build the Pajaro Jai, which he owns.

Brunton wants the Pajaro Jai to help not only the Chocoe, but to empower indigenous people the world over to become self-sufficient.

The yacht will sail to such international ports as New York, London, Barcelona, Hamburg, Amsterdam, Rome, Athens, Hong Kong and San Francisco.

Wherever it sails, he says, it will seek to bring together international foundations, government agencies and local entrepreneurs to explore and craft the most effective types of aid.

During that time, the Pajaro Jai will be manned by revolving crews of indigenous people, some from Panama and some from other parts of the world. Next up are the Wampanoag Indians on Martha's Vineyard, followed by a meeting next week in Maine with representatives of the Penobscot Indians.

The Pajaro Jai, he says, can serve as an inspirational symbol of what poorly educated and shunned tribes can accomplish with the right kind of help.

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