

Greta Thunberg Sets Sail for U.N. Climate Talks



By **Somini Sengupta**

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PLYMOUTH, England — Greta Thunberg, the 16-year-old climate activist, set sail Wednesday on a racing yacht bound for New York. The boat cast off from the Mayflower Marina here in this old English port city around 3 p.m. local time during a brief pause in the rain.

Ms. Thunberg wore black sailing gear and boots for what will be a roughly two-week journey at sea. “Unite Behind the Science,” read the logo on her suit and on the mainsail, raised against a gray sky. Her hair was tied back in a signature braid.

Ms. Thunberg is making this epic voyage because she has been invited to participate at the United Nations climate talks in September, and she refuses to fly because aviation has such an enormous carbon footprint.

The yacht, *Malizia II*, a 60-foot open-cockpit monohull, has made many journeys across the ocean, but never with a 16-year-old novice. The boat has been fitted with solar panels to power its equipment. The conditions inside are spartan: There is no toilet nor much light in the cabin, so Ms. Thunberg will have to read by headlamp. In a particularly acute challenge for a teenager with more than 871,000 Twitter followers, she will not have much access to the internet.

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Ms. Thunberg has never done anything like this before. She said she was looking forward to being without the familiar luxuries, to “being so limited.” She acknowledged being a bit nervous. “Whether it’s seasickness or homesickness or just anxiety or I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t know how tough this journey will be.”

Also, she said, she will really miss her two dogs.

She has packed many books (she is currently reading “Quiet,” a book about introverts, like her); eight writing journals, some partly filled; and boxes of freeze-dried vegan meals. (Ms. Thunberg stopped eating meat a few years ago, because of the emissions associated with animal protein.)

There is a satellite phone on board, so she plans to send some pictures and text messages from her voyage to friends who will upload them on her social media accounts. Going to the toilet will mean going to the back of the boat with a bucket. Her drinking water will come from a tiny desalination machine that treats seawater.

“By doing this it also shows how impossible it is today to live sustainable,” she said. “That, in order to travel with zero emissions, that we have to sail like this across the Atlantic Ocean.”

The epic journey of the Malizia II is the latest stage in an epic journey that Ms. Thunberg has been on for the last few years. As a child, doctors told her she had Asperger’s syndrome. In early adolescence she battled severe depression, so much so that she stopped eating for a while and stopped growing.

Recovery came slowly, and only after finding a sense of purpose. “I’ve had my fair share of depressions, alienation, anxiety and disorders,” she wrote in a recent Facebook post. “But without my diagnosis, I would never have started school striking. Because then I would have been like everyone else.”



The Malizia II in Plymouth on Tuesday. Its journey across the Atlantic is expected to take two weeks.
Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

Her weekly school strikes began in Stockholm, her hometown, a year ago. They sparked a global youth movement to demand climate action and then turned her into something of a modern-day Cassandra, a target of praise and pointed attacks. In March came a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. António Guterres, the United Nations secretary general, said he trusted young activists like her to “push societies to save our planet.” This week, Steve Milloy, a former member of the Trump transition team, described her on Twitter as “the ignorant teenage climate puppet.”

Ms. Thunberg on Tuesday shrugged off the attacks. “They are doing everything they can to switch the focus from the climate crisis to me,” she said. “That is what you have to expect when you talk about these things.”

Ms. Thunberg is taking the year off school. She is scheduled to attend the United Nations climate summit talks next month, speaking at a youth summit on Sept. 21 and then at the main meeting on Sept. 23. She also plans to travel to Chile for the next round of United Nations-sponsored climate talks in December.

Both meetings are to be attended by world leaders, all of whom have agreed, under the Paris Agreement, to keep global temperatures from rising to levels that would produce climate catastrophes. Still, global emissions continue to grow, and the world as a whole is not on track to meet the targets of the Paris Agreement.

“This is a big opportunity for those world leaders who say they’ve been listening to us to actually show that they’ve been listening to us, to actually prove that,” Ms. Thunberg said.

The voyage has drawn enormous media attention. Ms. Thunberg gave four face-to-face interviews Tuesday, spoke to other reporters on the phone in between, and greeted a few youth strikers who had come to Plymouth from elsewhere in Britain before heading into an emergency training session.

There were many handlers and helpers. And there was Greta swag. One woman moving chairs for her well-wishers wore a sweatshirt that hollered, “Be Like Greta.” Ms. Thunberg, for her part, wore a red hoodie and lilac sweatpants with a hole at the knee.

Boris Hermann, the 38-year-old German captain, said he had crossed the Atlantic many times. In fact, he has sailed around the world in this yacht, finding routes where the wind was in his back, steering it through rain and darkness. This trip, though, would be different. “I feel a special responsibility also because it’s an important trip for Greta and we promised to bring her over,” he said. “I admire her leadership.”



Boris Herrmann is the captain of the Malizia II, which he has previously sailed around the world.
Tom Jamieson for The New York Times

The captain said he would try to take a southerly route to the United States to avoid the strongest headwinds, to find what he called the “softest” variations. If the wind is calm, it could be smooth sailing and his passengers would be able to relax and read. Or, there could be gusts of wind and rain.

There are two beds for Ms. Thunberg and her father, Svante, who is accompanying her. The others on the voyage — Mr. Hermann, the skipper; Pierre Casiraghi, the head of the Malizia II racing team; and a documentary filmmaker named Nathan Grossman — plan to sleep on beanbags. The boat has a motor and generator in the event of an emergency.

Ms. Thunberg will be close to Mr. Hermann’s age in 2040, which is when, scientists say, climate catastrophes could strike the world unless we move swiftly away from a fossil fuel based economy.

“I have no idea how the world is going to look,” she said. Either the world will have tackled the problem in time, she went on, or it will have crossed what scientists call “tipping points,” beyond which it’s impossible to return to normal weather patterns.

“I can’t really start planning my future,” she said.

That profound uncertainty animates the activism of many people of her generation. It explains, in large part, why she is taking this voyage across the ocean — and why, for the voyage, she wants to focus on the basics.

“My goal is to feel as good as possible during the trip,” she said



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