OUT in the rough South China Sea one night, Singaporean N. Sivasothi slowly made his way up the rigging to adjust the sail.

The wind was strong, the waves were high and it was pitch black.

Sounds like a nightmare for most, but for the 40-year-old research officer, three weeks on the Swedish ship Gotheborg was an adventure of a lifetime. He was among 50 volunteers and 18 professional crew who were taking part in a Swedish project retracing a 250-year-old trading route from Sweden to the Far East on a replica sailing ship.

The three-mast ship is a full replica of the 18th-century East Indiaman merchant vessel that ran aground and sank in 1745 while on the way back to its home port of Gothenburg in Sweden.

The replica, launched in June 2003, cost 250 million Swedish kronor (S$56 million) and took more than 10 years to build.

Conditions on board are not wholly 18th-century, though. Modern amenities include washing machines, dishwashers, and showers. It also has modern navigational tools such as global positioning systems, radar and electronic charts.

The Gotheborg set sail on her current expedition on Oct 2 last year and has made port calls in Spain, Brazil, South Africa, Australia, Indonesia and cities in Guangzhou and Shanghai in China.

The journey back home started two months ago with a call in Hong Kong and now in Singapore. It will return to Sweden via India, the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean.

Together with Mr Sivasothi were three other Singaporeans - Navy cadets Oh Poh Huat and Oh Zong Bo, and Singapore Management University business student Teo Wei Chuan - all of whom were selected by the Republic of Singapore Navy and the National Heritage Board to participate in the voyage.

They boarded the ship in Hong Kong and arrived at VivoCity yesterday afternoon, to the applause and cheers of the Swedish community here and Singaporeans, including Defence Minister Teo Chee Hean.

Mr Sivasothi, a research officer at the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research at the National University of Singapore, told The Sunday Times that climbing the rigging was manageable, even in rough sea conditions.

Each day, he carried out two four-hour watch shifts together with 16 other people. He was also assigned at times to steer the ship, conduct a fire watch, act as a lookout for other vessels, or perform deck duties and other maintenance work.

The Singaporean crew members won praise from Gotheborg’s Captain Peter Kaaling, who said that they were fast learners.

For Mr Sivasothi, however, it was about more than sailing. “The things I used to know about Sweden were limited to Abba, Volvo, Saab and Ikea,” he said. “Now I know their history and culture and the Swedes learnt about Singapore too.”

The ship will be open to the public from today until Jan 9. Tickets are available at S$10 for adults and S$5 for children below 12 years old from VivoCity’s south court on level 1.

Close to 300,000 visitors have boarded the Gotheborg since its departure from Sweden last year.