

Refugees



There is a very fine line between stowaways, people in distress at sea, refugees and illegal immigrants. I was privileged enough to be exposed to one particular stowaway experience and another of people who started out as refugees but become people in distress at sea along the way. I say privileged as these events gave me first first-hand experience of why people are driven in desperation to the “underground” alternative to legal immigration and international travel. They don’t pay just in dollars; they also pay with their lives.

Being a stowaway doesn’t mean travelling for free. It simply means the shipping company is not paid for services rendered. This was the case with two Romanians who paid a third party for passage on the Safmarine container ship “Mediterraneo”. Their journey kicked off in Milan on 5th April 1998 when they were placed in a container of red wine bound for Montreal. I don’t know what they went through to get from Romania to Milan, but I doubt it was a day trip on a luxury bus.

They came on board the “Mediterraneo” in Valencia on 6th April.

From Valencia we sailed for Cadiz then Lisbon, before heading for Montreal.

Three days out from Montreal the crew heard banging coming from hatch No.5.

Fifteen days in a pitch-dark container filled with red wine proved to be too much for our Romanian paying passengers. Using especially hardened chisels, they cut themselves out of the container.

Generally, containers stowed underdeck form one stack across the breadth of the ship. The Mediterraneo had three separate stacks, with a gap between the center stack and the two side stacks. Was it luck these men were able to cut themselves out, or was their container stowed with an escape route in mind? But if the stowage position was planned, why was the container stowed in the fourth tier rather than on the bottom of the hatch? I tend to believe it was good fortune.

By the time the stowaways arrived up at my office they still couldn't face the glare. Kept their eyes covered against the light. I cannot imagine what they went through in those fifteen days. Would they have survived another three days?

They spoke very little English — which was a lot more than my Romanian — but they took great pains to explain the ship would not be in trouble. They were scared, very scared — this was at a time when stowaways were being thrown overboard by crews whose jobs were at risk if stowaways were found on board. Having come on board in a customs sealed container the responsibility fell on the shipper. And the customs officer sealing the container would maybe have some explaining to do.

We settled them in an empty cabin. Fed them, and gave them cigarettes and beer as well as soap and towels.

After dealing with the two men I went to inspect the container. An AB saw me and strongly suggested I give it a miss. Seems plastic bags do not make a very efficient sewage system.

The twenty-four hours leading up to arrival alongside in Montreal were a bit rough for me. A blizzard before arrival at the pilot station cut into my rest hours. As did the long pilotage up the St. Lawrence River. We rang finished with engines at 21:00 on 23 April. I hadn't had much sleep in the previous 36 hours, and now had the port officials to deal with. Fortunately, being Canada and not the USA, the officials were friendly, quick and efficient.

The last party was immigration. On completion of the crewing papers I told them I had been up a while and asked if they could do the stowaways in the morning. "If we knew that Captain, we would have done everything in the morning. But we'll need to check the stowaways to make sure they are in good health before we go off."

Down at the stowaways' cabin the immigration officials were friendly and polite, and all fluent in sign language. Five minutes later, they were gone.

In the morning the paper work was done in no time at all. Our Romanian 'passengers' didn't need to speak English to say thank you — their gratitude could be seen in their eyes.

I asked the immigration officers if the two men would be going to jail. Their response blew me away. "You crazy Captain? Any idea how much it costs to keep someone in jail? No, we will put them up in a hotel."

"And what if they do a runner?"

"Well, with no official documentation, plus the fact they don't speak English or French means they will get neither accommodation nor work. And when we pick them up they will get flown back to where they came from. Of course, if they slip across into the USA it will no longer be our problem."

Eight years later, by which time illegal immigration was big news with a bad name, the crew of the Safmarine Nimba had a close look behind the scenes. This time not at stowaways, but rather people in distress at sea. Although these poor people had started out as refugees from Western Sahara attempting to get to Europe via The Canaries.

Around 14:00 on 4th October 2006 the Nimba was about 120 nautical miles SW of the Canaries heading for Lome in Togo. It was a cloudy fine and clear day with force 4 to 5 white horses running about. Not a ship in sight. A lovely day to be alive and at sea.

I'd gone up to the bridge and as I opened the bridge door, which gave a view out of a bridge front window towards the port side, I started hallucinating. Sixty miles off the coast of Western Sahara I saw a rubber duck with people on it. My sanity was restored when the second mate, Adam Shaffer, reacted the same way. He was on the starboard side checking navigation publications and had turned to see who was coming on to the bridge. A dash to the port wing

showed it was no illusion. Alarms were rung, whistles blown and an unplanned man-over-board exercise was initiated.

For once I was deeply grateful for modern technology. The Man Overboard Button on the GPS. There is no such thing as a quick Williamson turn on a laden 200 metre container ship doing 20 knots. By the time we were heading back to where we had come from, rescue boat ready for launching and lookouts posted, all we could see was the sea and a herd of white horses. A rubber dingy with a freeboard of, maybe, 0.7 metre does not make an even mediocre radar target. And even less so if it capsized with the outboard motor underwater



What a relief it was to hear a lookout posted on the monkey island call out “Dingy two points to port!” We drifted slowly down on to the dingy, and once we had a line down to it we made it fast in way of the pilot ladder. An AB went down to assist in the donning of life jackets. One by one the men on the half deflated dingy crept up the ladder until all eleven were safely on board.

They were taken to a supernumery cabin with bunk beds on the main deck. And we turned back on our course to head up to Las Palmas.

Bit by bit we managed to patch together an account of what had happened.

Five days earlier these men had headed out from Western Sahara to cross the 50 nautical miles to Fuerta Ventura, the closest of the Canary Islands to the African mainland. At that stage there were 31 people on the dingy. The outboard motor stopped. We suspect they had run out of fuel. The wind had picked up; the sea turned nasty and capsized them. At night. Twenty people did not make it back onto that overturned piece of rubber.

I cannot imagine what was going on in the minds of those who made it back on the dingy. Drifting helplessly away from those still in the dark water. What do you feel when you hear people calling for help from the dark? What do you feel when the last of those cries goes silent?

How do you survive five days and nights without food and water? No shelter against the cold or sun. Too scared to fall sleep in case you fall off your flimsy world. And wondering why big ships can pass by without stopping to pick you up. How can they miss you, the only dingy in a wide open sea?

We arrived off Las Palmas shortly after midnight, and were all fast at 01:00.

A mass display of blue and red flashing lights on the quay gave me a dash of Port Official Anxiety. Big trouble here, I thought. How wrong I was.

Two plain clothed men came on board and asked to see the refugees. They wanted to know how many stretcher cases there were. Luckily it was low tide and not much on an angle on the gangway, so our refugees managed to walk off on their still wobbly legs. They were examined by a doctor on the quay. Those needing medical treatment went into ambulances and the rest into police vans to be transported to a refugee camp.

The two plain clothes officials wanted to know where the boat was. They were not happy when I said we had not retrieved it. But they were happy with my report, which included photos showing the dingy. They told me some ships tried passing off stowaways as rescued people.

Back in 2006 the Canaries received up to 5 000 refugees a month in the 4 month "season" when crossing the Atlantic was the easiest. No accurate record of how many were lost, but it was estimated at around 3 000 a month. Of the lot we took in, 11 out of 31 made it. Two of them teenagers. No women.

We rang 'standby engines' at 02:00. My shortest ever port stay. And the kindness shown to those refugees by the Spanish officials still warms my heart.

I had other stowaway experiences, but none that illustrated the desperateness of people wanting to get away from the hell that is home quite the way these two stories got through to me.

None of these 13 people set out on an adventurous journey, backed by sponsors. They knew they would suffer en route. They knew they could die, as twenty did, but staying in their country of birth was not an option.

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