

## **Stowaways**

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 5<sup>th</sup> April 1998 when they were placed in a container loaded with cartons 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 6<sup>th</sup> April 1998.

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

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

Fifteen days in a pitch-dark container filled with cases of 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, five decks up from the main deck, they still couldn't face the glare – they kept their eyes covered against the bright light in the accommodation. 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 container sealed by customs the responsibility fell on the shipper. And the customs officer sealing the container would maybe have had some explaining to do.

We settled them in an empty cabin. They were fed, and we also gave them cigarettes and beer. And 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 boarding 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 the paperwork 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 in fluent sign language. Five minutes later they were gone.

In the morning, the paperwork 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 again, they will get flown back to where they came from."

He smiled, "Of course, if they slip across the border into the USA, it will no longer be our problem."

**Les Hellmann**