

What if something goes wrong aboard a mega ship?

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SCHEDULED to round the Cape yesterday was a trio of Fairmount tugs towing the Teekay floating production, storage and off-load vessel (FPSO) Petrojarl Knarr, en route from Samsung Heavy Industries' yard in Korea to Norwegian waters.

These specially-equipped and complex vessels are connected by a fixed vertical pipeline to the oil deposit below the seabed. Oil is drawn up through the pipeline, and water, mud and some other impurities are removed from the oil. The semi-processed oil is stowed on board the FPSO until a tanker arrives to load the oil and to take it to a shoreside refinery.

Having bunkered off Mauritius, and wishing to pass the Cape during a fair weather window, the convoy was not scheduled to stop here, opting to bunker instead at Walvis Bay or Las Palmas before heading to Norway. Around two and a half times the length of Newlands rugby field, carrying massive top hamper, including a high flare tower, and with a price tag of over R10 billion, this imposing vessel will be installed on the Knarr oilfield off Norway during a protracted good weather period.

Another large critter is the cruise ship, Quantum of the Seas that, after a brief weather delay, was floated from her building shed in Germany last week. Although she is unlikely to come this way but rather ferry affluent Americans around the Caribbean or Europeans around the Mediterranean, her "floating out" (ships are seldom "launched" these days) introduced another leviathan that will enter the passenger ship market later this year. No expense has been spared on this vessel, the latest in a line of similar ships operating to the account of Royal Caribbean Cruises.

While enjoying a chat with an old salt last week, these mega cruise ships cropped up in conversation. "I wouldn't even go to tea in one," he declared, "because I would be *bang* that something might go wrong while I was aboard."

Many in the industry share this view, pointing to the loss of over 30 people during the smaller Costa Concordia's capsizing despite the accident occurring within swimming distance from land and in millpond conditions.

How can 4 000 passengers, including hundreds of elderly folks, plus 1 500 crew and entertainers be evacuated from a sinking or burning block of flats should an emergency occur in mid-Atlantic or in rough seas off the Alaskan coast where water temperatures are more attractive to polar bears than to those unfortunates who might be struggling in the water after a mishap? It's a question many are asking and it might need the International Maritime Organisation to formulate even more stringent regulations governing the design, construction and operation of these mega ships. Only after Titanic's demise with a dreadful toll were improvements effected in ship design and in maritime safety measures.

Some look to freighters to fulfil their bucket list desire for a leisurely voyage, but sadly, very few carry passengers, confirming the passing of an agreeable era of cargoship voyages that remains only a memory for a few old timers.

The German containership DAL Kalahari that once offered comfortable berths for five passengers now operates on the Australia-Asia service, sans passengers, while the popular passenger service to St Helena Island will end when the island's airport is commissioned in 2016, leaving no passenger-carrying freighter on the South African trade.

On the Europe-Asia service, the French company CMA CGM (the world's third largest containership operator) offers a "cargo cruise" aboard its 16020-TEU vessels.

If they can do it, why can't their rivals on the South African services?

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