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Improbable ships: From hospitals to floating nuclear generators



In times of crisis, ships sail to the rescue. For instance, the Greeks have just dealt with an influx of migrants by housing them on a liner. But, from carrying prisoners and nuclear generators to serving as a bases for medical campaigns, such craft have many uses beyond cruising.

RHODRI MARSDEN | Tuesday 25 August 2015

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A ship that was recently summoned to the island of Kos by the Greek government has a back story that you could describe as moderately interesting. Built in a Polish shipyard in 1984, it changed names as it changed hands – from Polonica, to Bonanza, to Kydon II – before adopting the name of the father of modern Greece, the former Liberal Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos.

Complete with a casino, disco, perfumery and gift shop, it briefly served as a floating hotel during the G8 summit in 2001 before going on to provide a more humdrum service shunting people and stuff around the Greek islands. But earlier this month, with some 2,500 migrants stuck in a disused sports stadium in Kos and several thousand others sleeping rough around the island, the Greek prime ministerial aide Alekos Flambouraris announced that the country would deal with this pressing problem by floating it.

The Eleftherios Venizelos, he said, would provide the needy with temporary shelter and give the authorities a place to issue documents that might aid their movement across Europe. That day, more than 2,000 migrants, mostly from Syria, boarded the former hotel-turned-administration centre, moored between the



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posh yachts and the cruise ships. The problem had been transferred from dry land to the sea. A ship brought a solution.

Ships are among the largest structures ever built by man. The largest measure more than a quarter of a mile long and weigh more than half a million tonnes – and, crucially, they can move about. Their sheer size, coupled with their ability to be sent comparatively cheaply to remote parts of the world, makes them unique in their capacity to handle tricky problems, whether they're humanitarian or "First World", whether they're caused by disease, geological faults, midlife crises or legal issues.

The idea to transform the Eleftherios Venizelos into a 2,000-capacity processing unit was a master stroke on the part of the Greek government (albeit one that might have been deployed a little earlier) but the ability of ships to shoulder troublesome burdens in difficult times is well documented. Last year, when the RFA Argus transformed itself into a hospital equipped with 100 beds and 80 staff and sailed from Cornwall to West Africa to assist with the Ebola crisis, it was the latest in a long line of floating medical centres. Perhaps the best known are owned and operated by the global charity Mercy Ships; with 75 per cent of the world's population living within 100 miles of a port city, it's been able to provide care valued at \$1bn (£637m) across 57 countries since 1978.

"A ship," the charity says, "is the most efficient platform to deliver a state-of-the-art hospital to regions where clean water, medical facilities and skilled personnel are limited." The Africa Mercy ship – the largest hospital ship in the world, currently docked at Toamasina, on the east coast of Madagascar – contains five operating theatres, intensive-care facilities and performs 7,000 interventions a year.

Decent healthcare is far from being the only pressing requirement for people living in remote regions. Russia has started building floating nuclear-power stations, the first of which, the Akademik Lomonosov, is due to be put into service early next year. The idea dates back to the 1960s, when an American Liberty class cargo ship was converted into a nuclear-power station named the MH-1A (Mobile, High-Power). In 1968, it was towed to the Panama Canal zone, where it provided a crucial source of power until it was taken out of service in 1975, and the Russians are now seeing the potential of a similar vessel.

While the Akademik Lomonosov is being sent to provide power to the Kamchatka peninsula in Russia's far east, 15 other countries (including China, Indonesia, Algeria and Namibia) are reportedly interested in hiring something similar, despite concern from some academics that it's uneconomic and vulnerable to accident and attack. In Japan, however, the Fukushima disaster of 2011 has made ship-generated power look like a safer option. Late last year, a Norwegian firm, Sevan Marine, presented a plan to the Japanese government that involved a ship using liquefied natural gas to provide power to the mainland. "Tsunamis and earthquakes don't have destructive effects on the open sea," a Sevan spokesperson said at the time. The plan was reportedly well received by the Japanese – who don't want power stations to be located in their backyard.

Ships can appear to offer a magical solution to all kinds of nimbyism, from the perfectly justified to the slightly paranoid; the action recently taken in Kos certainly succeeded in placating some locals, and there's no doubt that shunting certain problems on to water has benefits – at least on paper. The 1997 opening of HMP Weare, just off the Dorset coast, seemed to offer a double plus: a prison that wasn't within walking distance of any houses, and plenty of economic benefits brought to the local area. But

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while some mourned its closure in 2005, poor conditions on board (no exercise opportunities, no access to fresh air) seemed only to add to the lamentable reputation of incarceration at sea.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, dozens of ships were decommissioned by the British, made unseaworthy and used as prison hulks on which thousands of men would eventually die in captivity. Today, the world's largest prison ship – the five-storey, 47,000-tonne Vernon C Bain Correctional Centre in New York – still has its critics, with the regular assertion that it would have been "cheaper to send them to Harvard".



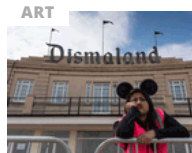
The Dutch 'abortion boat' Aurora at anchor in Holland (AFP/Getty)

Moving detention facilities off land is one thing, but moving them into international waters is another. In the past few years, the US has been accused several times of detaining terrorist suspects at sea, beyond scrutiny and in locations where the legal jurisdiction isn't always crystal clear. (The 2008 capture and detainment at sea of al-Qaeda's Abu Anas al-Libi provoked debate among lawyers about the international legal rules that applied.)

A country's territorial waters extend up to a maximum of only 12 nautical miles from its coastline, but it's a misconception that the seas beyond are somehow lawless; the rules governing jurisdiction can be complex, but the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea states that ships have the nationality of the country whose flag they are entitled to fly. In 1999, this realisation provided the impetus for a Dutch doctor, Rebecca Gomperts, to set up Women on Waves, a ship-based abortion clinic that would dock in countries where access to abortion was restricted (most notably the Republic of Ireland and Portugal) and transport women into international waters, where Dutch law would apply and abortions could be legally performed.

Odd things can happen 12 nautical miles out to sea. Stories about the establishment of pirate radio off the east coast of England in the 1960s have been frequently told, but more recently, in 2004, two Hartlepool businessmen set up an offshore off-licence just outside British territorial waters. From there they attempted to sell cheap booze and cigarettes to customers arriving on board, just beyond the reach of Customs and Excise. (It was shut down fairly swiftly, though the ensuing court case rumbled on for months.)

The success of these kinds of schemes seems to depend on getting the agreement of the country whose laws you're attempting to circumvent; back in 2012, an American company, Blueseed, managed to do just that. The idea stemmed from the fact that B-1 business visas are hard to come by in the US, and the plan was to moor a ship 12 nautical miles off the coast of California, where foreign technology entrepreneurs could make their luxurious (although remote) home in "a floating



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autonomous city state". The idea of being endlessly ferried back and forth to the mainland for business meetings didn't dampen the enthusiasm of some 1,500 entrepreneurs from more than 70 countries who expressed interest in the scheme; for them it was the next-best thing to living in America – but Blueseed's money ran out. "Now on hold, pending additional funding," the website says.

For some, the floating city doesn't just represent a halfway house to better times on solid ground; it's a dream destination, a relief from the drudgery of life on land, where your every need is catered for. Jules Verne's 1895 novel, Propeller Island, tells of a floating city populated entirely by the extremely wealthy – and it's not surprising that such vessels now exist. The World, registered in the Bahamas and launched in 2002, is a private cruise ship owned by its residents with between 150 and 200 occupants at any one time and staffed by 260 crew. Utopia, a South Korean-built ship which was said to be due for completion in 2016, will offer 200 permanent homes at sea for between \$3m and \$30m, depending on the level of outrageous luxury you're after.

While you couldn't be blamed for imagining Utopia as a ship where rich people go to die quietly somewhere in the Pacific, libertarian dreamers have long envisaged a quiet life beyond governmental restrictions. Norman Nixon, an engineer from Arkansas, came up with the concept of the Freedom Ship back in the late 1990s, and mention of it resurfaces every so often alongside new rumours of potential funding. "Envision an ideal place to live or run a business," the blurb says, "a friendly, safe and secure community with large areas of open space and extensive entertainment and recreational facilities... and a full 1.7 million square foot floor set aside for various companies to showcase their products".

If the prospect of a shiny 40-acre showroom is too much to bear, you may find the ideas of the Seasteading Institute slightly more palatable. Historically, its vision has been to establish communities on seaborne platforms in international waters, but its Floating City project reins that in slightly; the city would lie within the territorial waters of a host country, giving a ready-built legal framework and the opportunity to leave reasonably swiftly if someone started really annoying you. There are proposals by the Jidong Development Group to construct islands in the South China Sea, but whether for dwellings, tourism or military bases isn't clear.

We've used ships for some strange stuff: a McDonald's in Canada, a floating forest in Australia, a school (Semester at Sea) that's taught 55,000 students across the world since 1963. But today, two rather similar seaborne structures can represent two very different things to different people: on the one hand, a least-worst option for desperate migrants from the Middle East; but for others, the potential for escape, an idyll on humanity's last frontier.



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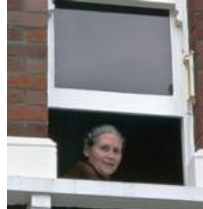
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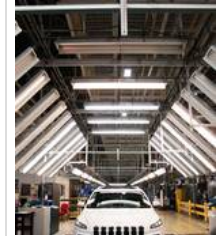
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