

Lingering fears about terrorist violence in Europe and the Mediterranean have seen cruise bookings dip in popularity across the regions. How might the sector reassure guests and allay security concerns? Greg Noone talks to **Commander Mark Gaouette**, former director of security for Princess Cruises and the author of *Cruising for Trouble: Cruise Ships as Soft Targets for Pirates, Terrorists, and Common Criminals*, to find out.

New wave of terror



The helicopter touched down on the *Mont St Michel* a little after 5:30pm. Three French sea marshals jumped out on to the pad before carrying out an armed patrol of the bridge and the outside decks. An announcement was made to the ferry's passengers that public access to these areas would be prohibited for the duration of the exercise.

The patrol capped off a traumatic month for the French people, still reeling in the wake of two IS-affiliated attacks. The first saw a lorry driven through a crowd assembled to see the Bastille Day fireworks on Nice's shoreside promenade, killing 84 people and injuring 308. The second saw two militants murder an 84-year-old priest in front of his congregation in a suburb of Rouen.

These attacks, among others at nightclubs, magazine offices, football stadiums and airport terminals over the past 18 months, had sapped the confidence of the French people in the ability of their government to prevent such atrocities. Hence the patrol on the *Mont St Michel* – an implicit acknowledgement on behalf the country's security establishment that any crowded setting, not least the confined spaces of a cross-channel ferry, now constituted an appealing target for IS-affiliated terrorists. »

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It is a prospect that has rattled would-be passengers, with this prime season witnessing a marked slump in bookings for cruises in the Mediterranean and northern Europe. As if to stave off anything similar happening to their winter rosters, river cruise operators have begun to slash the prices of advance Christmas bookings. All of this seems to carry the intention of shoring up the mental resilience of passengers against the threat of a terrorist attack – or at the very least, second-guessing the odds.

Commander Mark Gaouette prefers to think about it in a different way. A former Navy man, he adopts a weary tone as he recounts not only the methods by which a terrorist might attack or gain access to a cruise ship, but also the long list of plots and threats he had to guard Princess Cruises against as its director of security in 2003–2005. Five years later, he published his experiences, worries and warnings in *Cruising for Trouble: Cruise Ships as Soft Targets for Pirates, Terrorists, and Common Criminals*.

"You know, domestically we had a very good sense that some of our [security concerns] could be taken care of with a phone call, with the contacts that you establish at the ports, law enforcement and the coastguard," recalls Gaouette. "But when you've sent ships overseas into harm's way – as I called it – it really took a lot of forbearance to get those ports to understand that, yes, this might be a cruise ship coming in, but what was at risk was something like a [Bardo Museum] massacre or [an *Achille-Lauro*-style hijacking]."

“Some people would really get reassurance from seeing armed guards walking up and down the cruise decks, while they're walking around with their cocktails.”

Gaouette joined Princess during one of the most trying times in maritime security. Although there had been historical instances of cruise ships being targeted for terrorist actions, including the hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* by Palestinian militants in 1985 and the sporadic attacks on Nile riverboats by the extremist Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya movement, the modern era of maritime terrorism only really began in 2004 with the bombing of the Philippine liner Superferry 14. Targeted by the Islamic



Defence teams carry out a training exercise in rescuing hostages aboard a cruise liner.

extremist Abu Sayyaf group, 116 passengers were killed after a bomb explosion sparked a massive fire on board.

After that, "there was an uptick in bomb threats," Gaouette remembers. "[It is] still a common occurrence for ships to receive them. Thank goodness, 99.99% of them don't pan out to be anything."

Some, however, did come perilously close to succeeding. In 2005, al-Qaeda militant Lu'ai Sakra planned to attack an Israeli cruise liner off the port of Antalya, Turkey. Although he was caught after an accident involving the requisite explosives, he had already chartered a small boat for the occasion, planning to use it as a floating bomb to blow a hole in the side of the cruise ship. In 2010, German investigators stumbled across al-Qaeda plans to orchestrate a hostage situation on a passenger liner, for the purpose of forcing the release of fellow

acoustic device (LRAD) for use against seaborne boarding parties. The tool allows a cease-and-desist message to be conveyed by the crew to a group approaching the ship along a 10° beam, over and above the 360° beam afforded by a bullhorn. "If the boat comes closer, the LRAD has this sonic tone that disrupts the hearing and a sweet spot that makes it very uncomfortable to be in the direct line of that sound," says Gaouette.

He didn't stop there. Mobilised by then-CEO Peter Ratcliffe's standing order to come up with a "brand new idea a day", Gaouette lobbied for movable vehicle barriers that could be placed on piers when a Princess liner docked, and mobile quick-closing hatches that could shave the time it took to close off a corridor to a matter of seconds. Across the industry, advances in the size and weight of scanning equipment, including X-rays and magnetometers, have allowed cruise ships to bring these tools on board and supplement security equipment typically installed in cruise terminals.

Since IS supplanted al-Qaeda as the main terror threat in North Africa and western Europe, gun-related terror attacks have become more common. As far as cruise passengers are concerned, this threat has only manifested itself onshore, when an attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis claimed the lives of 17 tourists travelling from MSC and Costa liners. But, naturally, this has posed additional questions about the extent of cruise operators' responsibility for maintaining passenger security beyond the liner itself.

Gaouette believes that the incident showed the need for more advanced security work by the cruise operators in question, in light of the number of terrorist

millicants that were currently incarcerated. More recent attacks by IS with rocket-propelled grenades on Egyptian naval boats have also fuelled concerns that something similar may be attempted on cruise liners.

Watching the watchmen

In the face of these threats, whether real or imagined, Gaouette set to work. Outside of his authorship of *Cruising for Trouble*, the former director of security is primarily known for championing the long-range

incidents in Tunisia in the previous year. He also saw a need to liaise with the local authorities to ensure greater security for passengers being escorted to the museum.

"You have to do your homework," he says. "You have to do your due diligence, and then make a risk-management decision."

Armed cruising

For the most part, cruise operators have sidestepped this problem by cutting various North African destinations from their itineraries. However, the recent string of bomb and gun attacks perpetrated by IS-affiliated militants across Europe has posed a slightly more existential security dilemma. Although the risk could conceivably be lessened by the shrinkage of this market in favour of Caribbean and Alaskan destinations, the patrol of the *Mont St Michel* by French sea marshals may well point to a necessary, if unsavoury, compromise: armed guards aboard vessels.

It is a prospect that, in *Cruising for Trouble*, Gaouette tackled with reticence, given the historical misuse of firearms stored aboard cruise vessels for security

and recreational purposes. Nevertheless, it was an idea he mooted in 2004 to the board of Princess Cruises. While it was received unenthusiastically, Gaouette believes that the prospect of arming security personnel is becoming attractive on certain voyages.

"There are hard targets and there are soft targets [for terrorists]," he explains. An airline, for instance, with passengers and luggage screened at the terminal, would be a hard target, while a disco – undefended, crowded and confined – would be a soft one. "A cruise ship is kind of a relaxed target. It's not a hard target, but it's not a soft target, either. It would take some planning to attack.

"But armed guards? This morning I rode our Metro train to San Francisco, and there were four police armed to the teeth. They had tasers, batons and sidearms; they were ready for action. And, you know, I felt really good about seeing those guys there, because there had been problems; there had been shootings on those trains. And I just felt a level of comfort, knowing that these guys were riding along the line."

Gaouette acknowledges that not all passengers might feel the same way. "Some people would get reassurance from seeing armed guards walking up and down the cruise decks, while they're walking around with their cocktails," he says. "But what kind of vacation is that? Many others don't want to see that. And that's why cruise operators frown on the idea that they have to come to a point where their business model includes putting armed guards on ships."

There are exceptions to this rule, of course, mainly devised as responses to the threat of piracy in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. In 2009, Israeli security guards beat back a pirate attack on the *Melody* with pistols and fire hoses. Five years later, a detachment of Italian marines were dispatched to the *Costa Allegra* when the ship lost power and started to drift near the Seychelles. Then there was the *Mont St Michel*. When the risk is apparent, operators and governments have evidently been willing to entertain the possibility of an armed security presence on a vessel. Whether they will constitute the new normal as the security threat continues to evolve remains to be seen. ■

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