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April 28, 2007

Tales of a Sinking Ship

Sea Diamond passengers' accounts emerge, portraying chaos in the Greek Isles; a mattress as escape slide

By PAULO PRADA

Melissa Mitcham was standing on the top deck of the 22,000-ton cruise ship Sea Diamond earlier this month, photographing the rugged red cliffs and whitewashed villas of the fabled Greek island of Santorini, when a friend pointed down at the crystalline water and said: "Look at how close those rocks look."

Ms. Mitcham felt a sudden lurch.

The Sea Diamond and its 1,547 passengers and crew had foundered on the underwater volcanic reef that shelters Santorini bay from the Aegean Sea. By the next morning, the harbor had swallowed the Greek-flagged ship, the first time a large cruise vessel has sunk since the Achille Lauro burned off the coast of Somalia in 1994 -- and one of only a handful of major cruise-ship sinkings in several decades.

SLIDESHOW

See additional photos¹ of the sinking of the Sea Diamond.



All but two of the Sea Diamond's passengers survived following a chaotic evacuation that took hours, involving life boats that crew members struggled to operate and scores of local fishermen and ferries answering a Mayday whistle to pluck passengers from danger. Louis Cruise Lines, the operator of the ship,

says passengers underwent a standard safety drill on the first day of the cruise to establish muster points for an evacuation and outline other emergency basics.

But many survivors -- most of them Americans on spring vacations -- say the drill did little to prepare them for the confusion of the actual accident. Their accounts of the wreck and evacuation paint an unsettling portrait of a crew and command seemingly awkward in an emergency.

The accident came at a time when the number of Americans buying cruise-ship tickets abroad is soaring. Not since the last heyday of trans-Atlantic cruise liners in the 1950s have so many Americans spent so much time on waters far from the U.S. coast and Caribbean.

In addition to new vessels from global industry leaders like Carnival and Royal Caribbean Cruises, smaller and largely domestic companies like Cyprus-based Louis Cruise Lines are also sailing more than ever.

While ferries often make headlines after disasters, such as recent

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Melissa Mitcham

Some passengers slid down mattresses to a rescue boat.

sinkings in Indonesia and Egypt, cruise lines by and large are considered by maritime experts as some of the safest vessels sailing. The popularity of cruising means most fleets are newer than ever. And because their very livelihood depends on the enjoyment and well-being of passengers, operators go to great lengths to test equipment and on-board procedures, which are regulated by international shipping laws.

Michael Marathestis, a spokesman for Cyprus-based Louis, says while crews regularly prepare for such scenarios, the extreme circumstances of an evacuation prevent it from ever being routine. "There are complaints, but an event like this is never rational. The crew did their best in a far from normal

disembarkation."

Greek authorities are blaming the Sea Diamond's April 5 accident on "human error." The captain and five crew members have been charged with negligence for steering the ship off course.



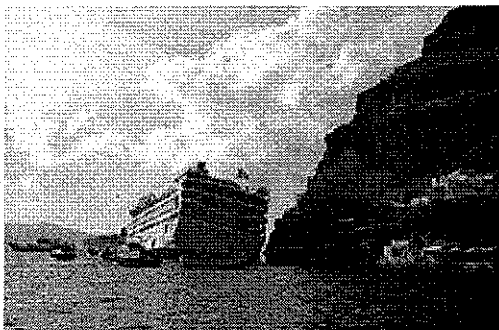
Zach Hayes

Evacuating the ship.

Louis Cruise Lines, which sails throughout the Mediterranean, wasn't known to have had any serious mishaps in the past. After the accident, the company said its crew followed established regulations and procedures practiced weekly to safely evacuate the ship.

The Sea Diamond was no small boat or cheap sightseeing ferry. The four-day cruise cost about \$800. Yet lifejackets were hard to find for some passengers. Shipboard lighting failed. And worse, those aboard recall, officials did little to inform passengers of a problem.

"We didn't know how serious it was," says Ms. Mitcham, a speech pathologist from Carrollton, Ga., who was separated from her 15-year-old son, Mason, for more than three hours during the ordeal. After stepping down from her vantage point because of the unexpected lurch, the deck began slanting.



At first she and four friends thought the ship was making a tight turn into the harbor. Indeed, there was no official indication the ship was in trouble until at least 45 minutes after it ran aground around 3:45 p.m. local time.

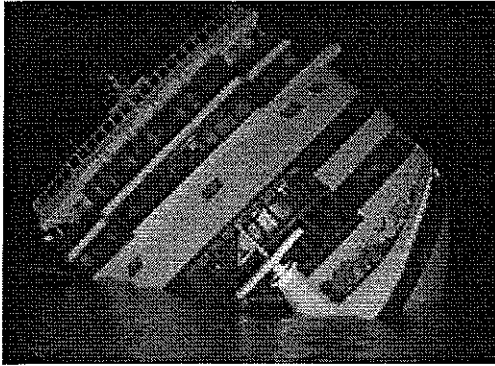
Because the ship was supposed to have dropped anchor by 4 p.m., Ms. Mitcham and her friends remained topside, commenting on the delay and joking about "people walking at a funny angle."

Shortly after 4 p.m., a crew member spoke into the intercom, asking passengers to remain calm, but offering no explanation as to why passengers should feel otherwise. A similar announcement followed five minutes later. By 4:15 p.m. another announcement was made asking passengers to move away from the starboard side of the ship.

Not until about 4:30 p.m. did officers blare an SOS through the ship's horn, prompting surrounding vessels to rush toward the Sea Diamond. Helicopters arrived and circled the ship

overhead. Over the following two hours, crew members struggled to guide passengers to lifeboat stations and cargo ramps beneath which the rescue vessels awaited.

Mr. Marathestis, the Louis spokesman, says the ship's officers, in conjunction with port authorities, decided against a faster evacuation because it was apparent the ship wouldn't sink immediately. "When you do a forceful evacuation, it is likely you have serious injuries and accidents. We tried to avoid that with a slower, but more orderly process."



The sinking Sea Diamond

Order, however, wasn't what many passengers recall. Samantha Putman, a 16-year-old from Winston-Salem, N.C., was stepping out of the shower when the jolt threw her to the ground. She heard a "giant scraping sound" and smelled burning metal. A few minutes later, a friend from her spring-break school group banged on her cabin door, yelling "We're taking on water!"

Because her cabin was just one deck up from where the reef ripped through the ship's hull, Ms. Putman and her neighbors were among the first to grasp the severity of the problem. "You could hear water gushing in below

us," she recalls.

Ms. Putman threw on jeans, a sweater and flip-flops, and grabbed three life-jackets from the cabin. She then rushed out into the passageway, where people were already rushing up from the lower level, some of them wet and bleeding from cuts. "It was crazy and tilted and hard to climb toward the stairways," she says.

On her way toward the stairs, the passageway grew increasingly crowded and the lights on the ship began to fail as the incoming seawater began to short the vessel's electrical systems, according to witnesses. A fellow passenger ripped a lifejacket from her arm. As crew members appeared and tried to manage the flow of traffic, they directed passengers away from a malfunctioning elevator, where at least one woman was already trapped, her arm jerking about through a crack between the doors.

Within 20 minutes, Ms. Putman made her way up to her muster station at one of the outdoor decks. Another two hours passed, however, before crew members with flashlights guided those at the station back down through darkened passageways to a cargo ramp. There, they descended a plank that rescuers had lashed to a waiting ferry. For those wary of taking the wobbly step down to the rescue vessel, personnel had also tied a mattress to act as a slide down onto the ferry, passengers said. "It was not a fast process," says Zak Hayes, another student from the North Carolina group.

The process was even slower for those far from the point of impact. Ms. Mitcham and her four friends from Georgia, for instance, didn't attempt to go to their station until shortly after 4:30 p.m., when they heard the SOS.

Once they came down from the upper deck, though, they realized the lower decks were already crowded with people, most of whom were also uninformed and without life jackets. Because many passengers were ready to disembark when the ship ran aground, they were far from the emergency flotation devices stored back in their cabins.

As crew members began to appear with armloads of life jackets, they began passing them through the dense crowd, relying on passengers at the front of the throng to relay them back toward the rear. Some passengers tried to hoard them, other passengers said. Most were apparently still clueless that the ship was actually sinking.

Ms. Mitcham finally realized around 5 p.m., when she recognized a waiter. Looking as if he had just rushed out of his cabin from a nap -- wearing his waiter's jacket over a bare chest -- he told her: "We abandon ship."

She immediately feared for Mason, who earlier had joined a group preparing for a sailboat excursion in port. Because of the growing crowd, though, she couldn't maneuver to search for him. "People were rude," she recalls. "There was a lot of pushing and shoving."

Around 5:15 p.m., witnesses say crew members began spreading word for women and children to move toward lifeboat stations along the port side of the vessel. But the crowds remained thick and crew members labored to mobilize the passengers.

As they waited for passengers to begin disembarking, Mary Gwen Wilson, one of Ms. Mitcham's companions, saw crew members struggle with ropes and pulleys to lower a lifeboat with about 25 people in it. When one crew member managed to pull a rope free, the lifeboat dropped several yards, nearly hurling him overboard. "It looked like they hadn't done it before," she says.

The company says the ship's tilt made equipment unwieldy. "You're not talking about straight lines anymore," says Mr. Marathestis. "The ship had taken a list and made it more difficult to get the lifeboats down."

Eventually, the lifeboats began to descend and the crowd began to thin.

By 5:30 p.m., Ms. Mitcham's group all had life jackets. Crew members then began guiding them toward a stairwell and down into the ship's dark interior, she said. Unable to see clearly in the dark, she and others held onto the straps of life jackets worn by the passengers ahead of them. Slowly, the group snaked its way down to a cargo ramp, where they walked the plank onto a ferry. Ms. Mitcham's group was headed into port by 6:30 p.m. She kept looking back at the sinking ship, worrying about her son.

Mason, it turned out, had already made it off. Instead of waiting for the logjam to clear up at lifeboat stations and the cargo doors, he joined another group of passengers who climbed down rope ladders dangled across the listing hull. "Everybody was giving instructions," says Mason. "We didn't know which ones to follow."

The Sea Diamond sank shortly before dawn on April 6. Now 500 feet underwater, there are no current plans to dredge it up. Crews are studying how to pump the ship's fuel tanks to keep them from further staining the bay.

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