

Two Ferries to Sierra Leone

The following press release was made after the successful delivery of two fast ferries to Freetown, Sierra Leone.

“Two passenger ferries, called Yapate and Louise, arrived aboard the Grimaldi ship, Paulo San Grande, on the 31st March 2009 and will shortly begin a new service from Freetown to Tagrin.

“The ferries were originally designed for use on the River Thames in London, England as passenger transportation to and from the Millennium Dome at Greenwich. They were built as trimarans (three hulls) to Lloyds A1 specification, the very highest standard, and fully coded to the UK’s Maritime and Coastguard Agencies stringent safety regulations. For those of you who like the technical details, each boat is sixty feet long, eighteen feet at their widest point and, with a depth of only two and a half feet, can go into very shallow waters. They are powered by the reliable Scania DSI 14 turbo charged diesel engine, producing 620 BHP. These ferries can accommodate up to fifty passengers and crew, the passengers sitting in twelve aircraft style seats, facing forward, and the remainder in bench seats towards the back of the cabin. They are each fitted with radar, VHF radio and GPS together with passenger safety equipment consisting of life raft, four life rings, a life jacket for every passenger and additional flotation devices.

When the boats finished service in London, they worked in the Moray Firth, near Inverness in Scotland, taking visitors to view dolphins and other wild life. After being purchased by Allied Marine, they were taken to a boatyard in Faversham, Kent for upgrading so that they now have fully air-conditioned cabins and smart tartan upholstery. They were then driven to Tilbury Docks for loading on the Paulo San Grande and their sea journey to Sierra Leone.

Having arrived in Freetown, they had to be unloaded by a special process which involved the ship anchoring off the port and craning each boat off the deck and down sixty feet into the water. The General Manager, Mr Gazie Kadi, and Captain Gwyn Phillips were on board each ferry as they were lifted into the water so that they could be driven straight to the port for importation.

When the boats were released by customs, they were driven to Government Wharf so that the training of Captains and crew could begin.”

The story starts with the usual journey to the vessels location, in this case a flight from Inverness to Gatwick, an overnight stay at a B&B in Windsor and a flight from Heathrow to Freetown the next day. All this was fairly unremarkable with only a two hour delay on the Heathrow leg.

Arriving at Lunghi, the first obstacle was to cross a river delta which separates the peninsula on which the airport stands, from the Freetown peninsula. In a straight line, it is probably no more than 4 miles but there are several ways to make the crossing, none easy.

The heat, first experienced on the walk from airplane to terminal, even at 10.00pm, was oppressive to someone coming from Inverness, still in winter. As my sponsor was an influential person, we were quickly taken through immigration to the VIP lounge to await the final formalities and arrangements for the crossing to Freetown. On walking to the helicopter check in, we were accompanied by a small army of people who crowded round offering to carry bags, obtain taxis, give advice, sell all manner of things or simply asking for money.

It had been decided to use the helicopter service, as the quickest option, of which I had been told stories by Scotty as to their reliability, one had crashed not too long ago, and their comfort, or lack of it. The helicopter was a Russian ex-military machine where you sat in two rows facing inwards with a large pile of luggage between. The windows could be opened for ventilation and the noise was deafening. Take off and

flight were not especially worrying but as soon as it started to descend into Freetown, the helicopter started to shake violently and sounded as if bits were falling off in every direction.

Surprisingly, we landed in one piece, the noise and vibration I supposed being a quite normal and everyday occurrence. The helicopter terminal in Aberdeen, was much quieter and we were met at the door by Kadi's staff in two vehicles for the ten minute ride to his villa in Murray Town.

The villa was situated a short distance down a bumpy dirt road, off a reasonably maintained tarmac road, leading to a fisherman's wharf in a small bay. The house, behind high walls topped with broken glass, was beautiful, with the accommodation on the first floor behind a large veranda. On entering the front door, there was a large lounge with bedrooms off to the left and right, the dining room and kitchen being accessed by a door at the rear left. The style was minimalist with floor tiling throughout and aircondition units in every room. The villa was cool and comfortable, the verandah warm with gentle breezes but off limits after 6.00pm due to mosquitos.

During my three week stay, I came to know the staff well, nearly all of whom were very nice people. Abu the cook, Sah the second cook and waiter, Soree the head houseboy and Momoh Ports the driver. Momoh Ports was known to quite a few of the population of Freetown, having supported the Ports football team, who he called the black Chelsea, since he was a young boy, hence the name. He was short and wide with a deep, deep, gravelly voice with which he could talk endlessly about football, films, reasons for being late for work and why he always needed more money. The staff were quite astonished that I ate, and enjoyed, all the local dishes put before me, such as fufu, palm oil stew, fish stew and gr'nut soup.

We had three days to wait for the arrival of the ferries aboard the Grimaldi ship, so we used the time to familiarise ourselves with the route that would be used for the passage to and from the airport. The Navy was called in to provide a small patrol boat which took us from Government Wharf to Tagrin, a distance of about six miles across the river, almost due west. We had a good look at the pontoon facilities at Tagrin, which were rudimentary but usable if necessary, whilst Government Wharf was slightly better although with no access from the jetty to the pontoon except down a dangerous, vertical ladder. The pontoons on both sides were not fixed to anything and floated free, being restrained only by ropes or wire hawsers.

I did manage to visit Lumley beach for a swim and a beer but foolishly did not take adequate sun protection and ended up with a burned scalp which later peeled and looked most unpleasant.

The ship arrived and it was constructed in such a way that it could only dock on its port side, with its derricks for lifting off containers and cargo on that side. Most of the containers were offloaded in the morning but towards lunch time one of the ship's cranes broke down. For a while, the ship's Primo (First Officer) could not say whether their engineers could fix the problem but after several hours, work started again and we were told the ferries would be unloaded onto the dock. Gazie and I went to talk to the Primo and pointed out that the contract had specifically stated that the ferries should be lifted into the water. The Primo then went off to talk to the Captain, who then contacted the office in London for clarification, before returning and confirming that we were correct. The ship's cranes, being on the port side could not lift the ferries out over the starboard side so we had, he said, two options. The first would involve casting off and returning with the ship starboard side to. The second would mean anchoring the ship in mid channel and lifting the ferries into the water there. I said that I preferred the second option as being the safest and we parted on that understanding for the night.

Returning the following morning, despite what had been agreed previously, we found the ship anchored in the middle of the river, and were forced, reluctantly, to take the first option. So, enlisting the help of a tug, we made our way to the ship and climbed a rope ladder up her steep side to the access hatch. Making our way up to the container deck, through cavernous cargo access passages within the ship, we made sure that the ferries were undamaged and unstrapped before climbing aboard Yapete. The ship's crane then lifted the ferry high in the air before swinging out over the side and dropping one hundred feet into the water, all the while with Gazie and I holding tight on the ferry's foredeck. As soon as the boat was in the water, I started the engine and waited for the tug to come alongside bringing crew, fenders and mooring lines. Luckily

everything was in working order and we were soon steaming to the dockside, a mile away. Having safely tied up, the whole procedure was repeated for the second ferry, the Louise.

After waiting the rest of the day for any news of customs clearance, we eventually returned to the villa at night for a welcome rest. The waiting was still not over as we spent two more hot and frustrating days in the port, sitting in the shadow of the large sheds, awaiting the clearance which eventually arrived mid afternoon. The Yapete was quickly made ready and then driven to Government Wharf, about two miles distant to the east, along a shore littered with corrugated tin shanties. It was getting late by the time I had returned to the docks to collect Louise so, not wanting to make the short passage in the dark, we made ready to leave immediately. Unfortunately, it was at this point that Louise decided to make all our lives difficult, by not starting. There was not a single light working on the control panel and after a frustrating hour trying to find the problem, we eventually had to give up and call for Farraj, the engineer, to visit the next morning. Farraj, a small, wiry, sallow faced man with a distinguished head of white hair, was remarkable in being able to fix just about anything with a couple of screwdrivers and a plastic bag of assorted spanners. He was accompanied by a helper called Rambo. The only problem that Farraj could not fix was his seasickness, which started if he stayed on the boat too long with his head inside a hold or bulkhead.

After half an hour of Farraj's tender care the next morning, the Louise started and was driven along the same route to Government Wharf. Having successfully moored both ferries, one beside the other, we then started to make notes of the maintenance required to put them into service.

Whilst we were waiting for the boats to arrive, we had met several candidates for the two positions of Captain and, after a short evaluation cruise, eventually arrived at short list of four. Having finished the essential work on Yapete, a period of intense training with the candidates was undertaken which involved making the passage to Tagrin and docking at the pontoon. We started with a thorough grounding in all the instruments and controls, moving on to simple exercises which involved going forward in a straight line, going astern similarly, turning to port and starboard and slow speed manoeuvring. After the candidates showed a basic grasp of the way the boat handled, as it was completely different from anything they had experienced, we moved onto the more difficult tasks of leaving, and coming alongside, pontoons with the tide both ebbing and flowing. Whenever we came to a pontoon, we always had an audience shouting encouragement and comments, even a round of applause when a Captain made a particularly good approach and docking. If the onlookers thought that something was being done incorrectly, they would all shout advice, as loudly as they could, and it was an important lesson learned by the Captains, that they should ignore all the comments, trust their own judgement and concentrate solely on the task at hand.

Every day, one of the Captains was asked to perform the daily checks which involved the levels of engine oil, hydraulic oil and water. There was quite a lot of rubbish in the water and on one day a woven, plastic rice sack was sucked into the impellor where it wrapped itself around the shaft and caused unpleasant, and potentially damaging, vibration. This, fortunately, gave me the opportunity of demonstrating the way to access the shaft from inside the boat, and one of the Captains spent an hour cutting away the offending item.

The training continued for two weeks, firstly during the day and then later in the evening and night, until we had achieved a reasonable level of proficiency, then came the unpleasant task of choosing one to leave. It was a very emotional time for the unsuccessful candidate but he was told that, if more ferries were purchased, as was the intention, he would be the first to be asked to return.

After three weeks in the water there was some growth on the bottom of the vessels and I had recommended driving them up a sandy beach to give them a good clean and antifoul treatment. Antifouling, however, has a different meaning in Sierra Leone and was carried out by a fit young man jumping in the water and attacking the boats below the water line with a scrubbing brush. He did an excellent job, leaving the hulls spotlessly clear of weed, and was suitably rewarded.

After finishing the last day of training, I gathered the Captains and told them that, on the following day, they would ferry me to Tagrin, where I would be picked up by a taxi, to go to the airport. I stressed that they should arrive at Government Wharf at 6pm sharp so that we could depart no later than 6.30. At that moment

Momoh, who had been listening in on the briefing, piped up “That’ s 5pm BMT”. I knew GMT but told him I had never heard of BMT, he explained, “It stands for Black Man’ s Time” and added for clarity “This is Africa”.

The last day involved tidying up odds and ends of paperwork, including finalising maintenance scedules, daily check lists, ferry service time tables and a letter to each Captain saying that I had given them training on an Ultrajet powered boat.

The Captains turned up on time at the wharf that evening and had done me the honour of dressing smartly in the company uniform without being asked. On the crossing, I acted as a passenger, sitting in the cabin well away from the wheelhouse, and was very pleased that everything was done to a good professional standard.

At the airport, I was whisked through check-in and security very quickly with many hand shakes and greetings, much to the obvious annoyance of other passengers waiting in line, and taken to the 1st class lounge. The overnight flight to Heathrow was uneventful, but with very little sleep, then a bus transfer to Gatwick and a six hour wait for my connection to Inverness.

All in all, a most enjoyable trip, having met some wonderful people and visited Africa for the first time. Sierra Leone is a beautiful country, except for the city slums, but for the most part very poor. I hope that they continue to improve facilities because this would encourage more visitors and bring desperately needed money and jobs.