

Cruising with Containers: A Qualitative Investigation of the Lived Experience of Passenger Freighter Travel

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Abstract

This thesis is the result of a preliminary investigation into a niche market segment of the maritime tourism economy. Travel by working class freighter or cargo ship is not a new activity; however, the concept of freighter-based tourism (wherein participants travel by container ship in their free time solely for leisure purposes) has emerged relatively recently on the tourism spectrum. A major cause of its recent popularity and allied growth is the positive word of mouth promotion which has been generated by people who try freighter cruising and like it. As the number of prospective travellers increases, merchant shipping lines are seeing dramatic changes in the makeup of their passenger lists. In former years, the typical freighter 'passenger' spanned all ages and walks of life, as thousands of European immigrants traversed the Atlantic in search of a new life in the Americas. Today's freighter 'travellers' are almost always over 50 years of age (up to a maximum age of 79) and are, for the most part, affluent with time and money to spare. Freighter travel nowadays involves the movement of people solely for the purpose of a unique and atypical travel experience.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of 22 participants engaged in recreational travel aboard working container vessels/cargo ships. The research questions driving this study were: What expectations and factors are understood by passengers to influence their decision to choose this particular mode of transport? What is the nature of the freighter experience, as passengers themselves understand it? What meanings do passengers attach to their experiences? How do the temporal dimensions of the passenger freighter experience (before, during, and after) connect with each other?

This study employed a qualitative methodology to capture and portray as vividly as possible the participants' experiences and their attempts to make sense of those experiences. A phenomenological case study research design, set within a symbolic interactionist analytical framework, guided the study. The data consisted of in-depth online interviews and document analysis in the form of unsolicited travelogues/journey diaries. Through a prolonged and iterative process of data analysis using the transcendental phenomenological model provided by Moustakas (1994) and the operational refinements suggested by Schutz (1970) and Kvale (1995), the researcher documented the 'lived experience' of travel by cargo ship from the individual travellers' perspectives. Further, as a tool for describing, analysing, and interpreting the data, this study utilised the 'generic social processes scheme', a sociological method for the purposes of organising, and interpreting qualitative data (Pits 1996). Within this research the themes were presented collectively, although they were systematically identified separately.

The shared themes, meanings and patterns that shaped the informants' travel narratives suggested that moving out to the unfamiliar can be frightening, or it can be liberating. Participants had assessed and realistically accepted the potential hazards of a freighter voyage, working on the assumption that a willingness to roll with uncertainty, unexpected delays, and mishaps is mandatory.

Associated with these themes were issues of adaptation; dealing with challenges, ambiguities and constraints, which, despite their potential to preclude further similar such involvements, shaped the overall freighter travel experience and did not affect participants' satisfaction with the experience.

It was further shown that freighter travellers are highly individualised people characterised by their interest in unique 'life experiences' and defined by their search for the 'extraordinary'. Participants framed their behaviours as an extension of themselves; their self-designation as 'travellers' and not 'tourists' and their emphasis on independence and autonomy conferred a sense of individuality and personal determination. Like Cohen's (1976) non-institutionalised, unstructured tourists, these 'travellers' valued risk, adventure and novelty.

The idea of negotiation through ambiguity and occasional setbacks in their travels further challenges commonly held perceptions about constraints, which, too often is seems, have been construed as obstacles or barriers (Jackson 2000) to travel. With regard to the present study, constraints, while inherent to freighter travel, would not have represented a full or accurate picture of the travellers' experiences without a concomitant description of how they were negotiated; moreover, the process of their negotiation repositions these travellers as active participants (instead of inactive consumers) of the tourist experience. These travellers decided what they wanted to do, where they wanted to go, and ensured they could negotiate their constraints to do so.

The conclusive findings of this study suggest that freighter travel was viewed largely as a positive, beneficial, and rewarding experience, offering opportunities for self-development, reflection, social interaction, and cross-cultural immersion and learning. While certain constraints and limitations were acknowledged and recognised, freighter travellers negotiated through them, and fully enjoyed participation in the travel experience.