Is Your Cruise Ship Prepared for a Terrorist Attack?

YAHOO! TRAVEL

*Sophie Forbes
January 20, 2016*

Tunisians walk in a Tunis market on March 20, 2015. Following a terror attack, cruise companies canceled stops in Tunisia. Seventeen of those killed at the Bardo National Museum in Tunis were passengers on shore excursions from two cruise ships in port that day. (AP Photo/Salah Ben Mohamed)

In the first 18 days of 2016, there have been 41 terrorist attacks across the globe that have killed more than 500 people. Several of these attacks took place in popular tourist destinations, such as Paris, Istanbul, and Tel Aviv.

In November 2015, the U.S State Department issued a Worldwide Travel Alert, warning its citizens about ongoing risks of travel due to terrorist threats, and stating that the authorities believe attacks by extremists towards Westerners overseas will continue.

But while international governments scramble to secure towns, cities, airports and tourist attractions, there is one big question that has yet to be answered: What if terrorists attack at sea?

In 2015, there were more than 22 million passengers aboard cruise ships worldwide — meaning that at any time, there are tens of thousands of travelers afloat.

Some of today's larger ships can carry as many as 6,000 people, including staff.

This undoubtedly makes cruise liners major targets for attacks. But how big is the risk? And what are cruise lines doing to protect their ships and passengers?

"There are numerous studies by security companies and U.S. government organizations which have studied terrorist organizations that concluded that terrorism against cruise ships is likely," explains maritime lawyer and cruise ship expert Jim Walker.

In fact, groups such as ISIS, Boko Haram, and al-Qaida have threatened cruise ships on multiple occasions.

" Terrorist groups have openly expressed interest in maritime targets," admits Joseph Mroszczyk, manager of intelligence products and services for Global Rescue, a travel risk and crisis management firm.

And while there are no recent examples of actual attacks on cruise ships, there have been several cases of terrorist attacks on other maritime targets, such as the bombing of USS Cole at a Yemeni port in October 2000, when two al-Qaida suicide bombers rammed a boat carrying explosives into the side of the docked ship, killing 17 people and injuring 39 others.

"Conducting an attack against a maritime target at sea requires a higher level of operational sophistication and coordination than other forms of terrorist attacks we have seen," says Mroszczyk. But the risk is still there — especially when a boat is docked in a foreign port, he says.

"When docked at other destinations while passengers are offboarding and onboarding," he says, "there is perhaps greater vulnerability to the ship — both in terms of passenger screening practices and port security infrastructure."

The high risk to passengers that occurs when a ship is in port has largely to do with the unregulated nature of most port facilities. There are no set guidelines for how to secure ports in different countries, and little way for cruise lines to have an impact when it comes to that issue.

"A port has to be adequately screened, and cruise lines are responsible for sending in a team of people to assess whether the ports they are sailing into are capable of suitably docking and securing a boat that might have 3,000 to 4,000 people on board," explained Walker.

The largest risk to passengers likely is when they disembark the ship. Just last March, 17 passengers were killed and another 21 were injured during the terrorist attack on the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, Tunisia. That attack specifically targeted tourists, and reports indicated that the attackers had waited for the buses to arrive from the ships.

Cruise ships docking in the Eastern Mediterranean are at increased risk due to the proximity to regions that sympathize with terrorists, as well as inadequate security protocols make an attack easier, similar to what we saw last year in the bombing of a Russian passenger plane over Egypt.

Sadly, these risks to cruise ships can be tied directly to the industry's lack of international regulation.

"The cruise industry as a whole is a largely unregulated industry, and is not tied to the economy of any particular country," says Walker, who authors the popular blog Cruise Line News. "It is an offshore industry. Most of the cruise lines are incorporated in other places, not the U.S., largely to avoid any regulations. And as such, you are left to the goodwill of the cruise lines themselves to take appropriate steps to protect the passengers."

Just after the attacks in Tunis, Commander Mark Gaouette, the former director of security at Princess Cruises, criticized the cruise industry for not adequately protecting passengers.

"I believe the risk management process failed to properly assess the extremely volatile situation in North Africa," he told IHS Maritime at the time. "At a minimum, more security should have been required for that excursion in the form of armed police or military escort, and armed presence at the museum itself."

Gaouette, who authored the book Cruising for Trouble: Cruise Ships as Soft Targets for Pirates, Terrorists, and Common Criminals in 2006, has worked with the Department of Homeland Security and is an expert in the field of cruise ship safety. He is adamant that despite last year's attacks, the industry as a whole is not doing enough.

"The underlying truth is that even with a surge in pirate attacks and worldwide terror threats on the rise, the cruise industry has not altered its security paradigm in any significant way," he wrote recently. "Instead, the cruise lines have opted for selective avoidance of ports and oceans known to be at risk." This technique will not completely protect a ship, or its passengers.

Other potential major weaknesses on board cruise ships, according to Mroszczyk, are their staffs — which are sourced internationally, less likely to be extensively vetted, and enjoy less-restricted access to the ship than passengers. So what is being done to protect cruise passengers?

As with airlines, ships are now putting passengers and staff though stricter boarding procedures.

"All bags are X-rayed and screened, passengers and staff pass through metal detectors prior to boarding, and by its nature, there are usually only a few gangways, so entry is easily monitored and controlled," says Global Rescue's Joseph Mroszczyk.

"Ships usually log passengers on and off the ship electronically so they can maintain accountability, and a ticket, ID, and passport must be shown at each stop."

And while staffing ships with a visible, armed guard is an unlikely future measure, the implementation of armed marshals — similar to those operating on board aircraft — is currently being considered by Congress as part of a new maritime security bill.

So while becoming a victim of terrorism is still, in the grand scheme of things, a very slight possibility, it is clear that more needs to be done to protect cruise ships and their passengers.

"The terrorists perceive that with just a little ingenuity and secrecy, they can succeed in killing scores of people in a single act," says Gaouette.

"Unless more stringent deterrence is enacted in the cruise industry, the possibility of a serious attack against a cruise ship or port facility can't be discounted."