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News

## Cruising into turbulent waters

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IF MARITIME superstition is to be believed, the Costa Concordia was destined for disaster - the champagne bottle didn't break against its hull when it was christened.

The \$570 million floating city, complete with four swimming pools, 1500 cabins, 13 bars, a casino and a Grand Prix motor racing simulator, spent her short life cruising calmly.

But on Friday the 13th, only three hours into a week-long Mediterranean cruise last week, the liner struck rocks and capsized off the island of Giglio on the Tuscan coast.

About 4000 passengers and crew managed to escape but at least 11 people died and a further 26 are still missing.

The ship now sits precariously heeled to 90 degrees on her starboard side on a submerged rock ledge.

Casting aside sailor folklore and bad luck omens, questions are being asked about how a state-of-the-art vessel fitted with the latest technology could end up involved in one of the worst maritime disasters of recent times.

Human error has been blamed.

Pier Luigi Foschi, CEO of Costa Crociere SpA, distanced his million-dollar cruise line company from the stricken ship's captain, Francesco Schettino, saying on Monday that the captain "took an initiative of his own which is contrary to our written rules of conduct".

Capt Schettino is now under house arrest on suspicion of multiple manslaughter, causing a shipwreck and abandoning ship.

It was alleged he skimmed the Concordia close to Giglio to show off, had been driving the vessel "like a Ferrari" at erratic high speeds, and had stalled for almost an hour after the collision before ordering the ship's evacuation.

But the catastrophe has raised concerns that new megaships like the Costa Concordia are too big to be safe.

One of the main points of concern is that cruise ships have undergone immense transformation in the short time that the cruise industry has boomed.

When she was launched in 2006, the Costa Concordia was Europe's biggest cruise ship, at 17 decks high and carrying 3000 passengers.

Royal Caribbean's new sister ships Allure of the Seas and Oasis of the Seas now carry more than 6000 passengers each.

The Titanic, which sunk 100 years ago, carried 2200 people.

Some cruise industry observers fear higher profit margins have led to a compromise on safety.

There are allegations that cruise companies are fixated on offering abundant ocean views by making the draught - the area below the waterline - shallow, which may cause a higher incidence of ships rolling.

The 114,500-tonne Costa Concordia's draught is 8.2m, while the structure sits about 36m above water.

"We have been predicting this for a number of years," said Allan Graveson of seafarers' union Nautilus International. The trade union for maritime employees said in a statement, released shortly after the accident, that they wanted a "thorough review of regulations governing the construction and operation of passenger vessels, in particular standards of stability and watertight integrity".

Brett Rivkind, who is regarded as one of the world's leading authorities on maritime law, said he has never seen anything like the Costa Concordia disaster.

"I've handled cases involving a smaller cruise ship that just disappeared during a storm, sinkings, fire on board where over 169 died, but this disaster is something I didn't think I would see," he said.

He believes the rapidly increasing size of ships compromises safety, particularly with 6000 passengers putting their lives into the hands of one captain.

"You put that many people on board a ship and you have an emergency and try to rescue or even evacuate all those people, it's going to lead to what these passengers in the Concordia situation described as chaos, panic and confusion," he said.

The incident has highlighted the need for close scrutiny of cruise safety, Mr Rivkind said.

"You can't rely on the cruise ship industry to say 'we're safe and nothing happens on a cruise ship', because it does, whether it's human error or something else," he said.

"This was close to shore where people could swim to safety, and look what happened. Imagine if it hadn't been close to land."

In response to Costa Concordia, the new head of the International Maritime Organisation - the United Nations agency responsible for shipping safety, security and prevention of marine pollution - said it would take a close look at the regulation of cruise ships.

"We should seriously consider the lessons to be learnt and, if necessary, re-examine the regulations on the safety of large passenger ships in the light of the findings of the casualty investigation," IMO Secretary-General Koji Sekimizu said.

"In the centenary year of the Titanic, we have once again been reminded of the risks involved in maritime activities."

But many people in the maritime industry believe the bigger the cruise ship, the safer they become.

Senior marine inspector of the US Coast Guard's Cruise Ship National Centre of Expertise, Brad Schoenwald, said survivability in newer ships was "better than ever".

"Regardless of the size of the vessels and regardless of the number of souls aboard, every safety scenario, every condition, every little bit of oversight is equal and the same," he said. "So to suggest the size of the vessel compromised safety, the answer is no, based upon regulation, plan review and oversight of the build of the ship."

All ships must be built according to the regulations of the SOLAS (Safety of Life at Sea) Convention, which are drawn up by the IMO.

Since 2002, all ocean-going cruise ships on international voyages have to carry voyage data recorders (like an aircraft's black box).

Crew members must also be regularly educated in emergency drills, lifeboat equipment, fire-detecting devices and alarms must be checked, and simulated drills undertaken.

On the Costa Concordia, it seems safety skills may have been short among some crew.

Australian survivor Rob Elcombe, 50, who works in the WA mining industry, said he was astounded by some crew's lack of safety expertise during the evacuation.

"I was having to console crew members," he said.

University of Greenwich's Fire Safety Engineering Group director, Professor Ed Galea, said that if the Costa Concordia evacuation began as soon as the ship hit the rocks, the outcome might have been different.

Formerly of Melbourne and now based in London, Prof Galea is one of the world's leading evacuation experts.

He said assembling passengers and then abandoning a cruise ship on lifeboats should not take more than an hour.

"Theoretically it's possible that everyone could have been off that ship in good time," he said.

"When did the assembly begin and when did the captain call for abandonment to begin?"

"They are the issues why the evacuation took as long as it did and potentially why we have loss of life."

But while she sits creaking in just 20m of water, the Costa Concordia's threat of damage continues.

There are fears approaching storms could push the ship into a 130m underwater plunge, causing potentially disastrous consequences for an environment that is home to whales, dolphins and local fishermen.

Rotterdam-based Smit Salvage is expected to start pumping 2300 tonnes of heavy toxic and light fuel off the stricken ship in the coming days.

The company also is expected to clean up the ship - either patching the 70m gash in the hull and towing her away or carving up the carcass.

It's a difficult operation predicted to cost hundreds of thousands of dollars a day.

Add that to an insurance bill that includes ship damage, personal injury and loss of life, and financial damage, and the total could end up being between \$500 million to \$1 billion.

But the tragedy may do little to put people off cruising. Australian cruise lovers almost doubled in four years, with 366,721 taking holiday cruises in 2009.

Since 2005, more than 100 million people worldwide have taken cruises. Until now, only 16 people had died.