

Third Greek ferry accident brings death total to at least 78

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Within five days of the sinking of the *Express Samina* in the Aegean, resulting in at least 77 deaths, a third Greek ferry has been involved in a serious accident that cost the life of an elderly passenger.

On Saturday, the *Zeus III* ran aground just minutes after leaving the island of Naxos en route for neighbouring Santorini. All 38 passengers were rescued but one, an 82-year old American tourist, died shortly afterwards of a heart attack. Crew member Niazi Bay told the press, “the ship sank within 20 minutes of it hitting the rock. We gave all the passengers life belts. Unfortunately the lifeboats on board were out of use.”

The *Express Artemis*, sister ship to the *Samina*, ran aground on Friday carrying 1,026 passengers. The *Artemis*, which had hit a sandbank, was refloated and could continue its journey to Piraeus, Athens with no injuries being reported.

Divers are still working to recover bodies from the wreck of the *Samina*, which is lying on the seabed at a depth of about 100 feet. The vessel was approaching the island of Paros with some 530 people on board Tuesday night as the weather deteriorated. In the worst maritime disaster in Greece since 1965, the ferry hit the Partes islet just outside Paros. Water rapidly filled the lower decks, causing it to list sharply; then the ship broke apart and sank within half an hour of the collision. The rocks are well chartered and have a lighthouse to warn shipping of their proximity.

The final death toll from the *Samina* is still uncertain, as there is no clear record of how many passengers she was carrying when the ship went down.

In strong winds and stormy conditions, passengers had to abandon ship in the dark, with many stating they received little or no help from the crew. Nikos Skiades told the press, “the crew did not make any announcements, nobody helped to get people into life

jackets. The lights failed and we were on our own.” Fisherman from Paros braved the stormy sea to help bring many people ashore.

On Saturday, the Greek government moved to suspend the operation of 65 ships deemed to be “unsafe”. A spokesman for the Merchant Marine ministry said the ships had to improve their safety standards within 20 days or their sailing permits would be revoked. The vessels suspended include passenger ferries that ply the busy routes between Greece's many islands in the Aegean. The ban came into effect on Sunday and affected 47 island ferries and nine on the Piraeus-Crete line, as well as nine international cruise ships.

The captain and three crew members of the *Samina* have appeared in court, charged with multiple counts of murder. Captain Vassilis Yannakis said he was asleep when the ship ran into difficulties. He told the Greek newspaper *Eleftherotypia*, “I went to sleep for a bit, for 10 minutes, because I wasn't feeling well.”

The second-in-command, Tassos Psychoyios, was left in charge of the vessel. He said he had struggled to avoid hitting the rocks: “I tried to steer left, the bow passed, then hard right, I took the wheel from the seaman's hands and tried to turn all the way right but the stern couldn't get through the waves. The weather was very bad. I couldn't turn”.

Some passengers on board said the crew had been watching the Panathinaikos-Hamburg football match on television when the collision occurred.

As tourism has increased on the many Greek islands in the Aegean and Mediterranean, so has the need for ferries to bring people from the country's major airports to their holiday destinations. They are also a vital transport link for local inhabitants who work and live on the islands.

The *Express Samina* should have been taken out of service next year on reaching the 35-year age limit for Greek ferries. The ship was owned and run by Minoan Flying Dolphins, a subsidiary of Minoan Lines of Crete, one of Europe's biggest ferry operators. In a report to MFD and the Merchant Marine Ministry last month, second engineer Anastasios Sorokos described the vessel as "dangerous and unseaworthy."

The *Greek Island Hopping* guide, published annually by British travel agents Thomas Cook, describes the *Samina* as "arguably the worst Greek ferry afloat. A large grime bucket with a reputation for running late, she is definitely a boat to be avoided."

"Her comparative lack of exit facilities would make it hard to escape from inside the vessel in a rapid sinking, as the only exits for deck-class passengers are at the stern. Other doors are usually kept locked on vessels of this age to prevent deck-class passengers going into higher ticket price areas."

Along with her sister ship the *Naias II*, the *Samina* was built in 1966 for French cross-Channel ferry operators SNCM, and has operated in Greek waters since the mid-1980s.

The German motoring organisation ADAC surveyed 30 European ferries in 1998. The *Samina* was described as having "no automatic fire doors; engines or lifeboats broken; inflammable liquids on the car deck."

The *Samina's* owners, Minoan Flying Dolphins, was formed in 1998 as a result of a merger between Ceres Hydrofoils Joint Service, Minoan Lines Highspeed Ferries, and Minoan Lines. A 1998 press release on the company web site boasts that:

"Minoan Flying Dolphins will restructure the sailing plan, in order to better satisfy passengers' demand and to maximize shareholders' profit."

"The new company enjoys significant competitive advantages, since it operates with the most user-friendly computer reservation system, offers the largest network by calling 62 Greek ports with 100,000 departures per year, has the largest passenger volume in the Greek Domestic Market (1998: 2,350,000 passengers)."

"The company's target is to maximize customer service and to further expand its current network (Cyclades Islands, Saronikos Gulf, Northern Sporades), with the existing fleet, offering regular services also in the Ionian Sea."

In May 1998, the company was listed on the Athens Stock Exchange, and according to the company web site, "The large number of investors was beyond any expectations, being the biggest in the Greek stock market."

In 1999, Minoan Lines acquired Air Greece. This made it the largest carrier of passengers and goods in Greece, and one of the largest in Europe. Later that year a new agreement between Minoan Lines and Aegean Airlines established the biggest private airline company.

While the company has bought several newer high speed ferries, ships like the *Samina* were hived off in November 1999 to a new subsidiary, Hellas Ferries, which operates all the older vessels of Minoan Flying Dolphins.

Whether negligence on the part of the captain and crew of the *Samina* were directly responsible for the tragedy or not, the move by the Greek government to suspend 65 ships from sailing is a clear indication of the serious problems afflicting the island ferry fleet.

Ferry disasters have not just hit underdeveloped countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia. Ships have also gone down in the English Channel (where the *Herald of Free Enterprise* sank in 1987 with the loss of 193 lives) and the Baltic (where the *Estonia* went down taking the lives of over 900 passengers and crew in 1994).

The sinking of the *Samina*, an old and unsafe vessel, lacking the latest satellite navigation and collision warning equipment that might have averted the disaster, reveals tragically once again that the ferry and passenger shipping business places profits before the safety of its customers.



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