

When Your Liveaboard Capsizes

a harrowing tale of survival and heroism

Imagine what it must be like to be enjoying yourself in a liveaboard salon or being comfortable below decks when suddenly your whole world is turned upside down. The windows become the floor, and the door, your only means of escape, is above your head and out of reach.

Divers assume that any liveaboard they book must undoubtedly be seaworthy; however in April, within days of each other, two liveaboards – one in the Philippines, the *MY Dream Keeper* and the other in the Red Sea, the *Carlton Queen* – capsized (see *Undercurrent* May). Everyone survived the sinking of the *MY Carlton Queen*, but when the *MY Dream Keeper* turned turtle and sank; it took four unsuspecting people to the depths.

There are international regulations for vessels that travel beyond immediate territorial waters; however, most diving liveaboards are licensed to go no more than a few miles from their coast. In territories administered by the U.S., the Coast Guard can demand specific standards of seaworthiness. Indeed, back in the '90s, *MY Sundancer*, operating in Palau, failed a U.S. Coast Guard inspection due to stability issues. The owners modified it with extra buoyancy tanks, then moved it to PNG, where regulations were less demanding. They replaced it with the more seaworthy *MY Sundancer II* in Palau. Luckily, there were no repercussions.

Not so with the Egyptian *MY Carlton Queen*. Built two decades ago, it was recently refitted with a larger superstructure, and the hull was altered. When completed in 2022, it was marketed as a new liveaboard. On its second outing, it turned over in calm seas and sank near Sha'ab Abu Nuhas, a great circular reef in the Gulf of Suez, littered with the wrecks of vessels that have run into it over the years. It's a magnet for scuba divers, and now there is another wreck to dive.

Christian Hanson, a British diver and PADI IDC staff instructor, was among the passengers aboard and wrote to *Undercurrent* to give us a first-hand account of his experience on the vessel.

He says, "I've been on quite a few liveaboards. The boat safety briefing is pretty much the same, boat to boat. But do you really know what they're telling you? 'There's a life vest under the bed; there's an escape hatch in cabin eight below deck which allows you to reach the outer hull; there are two life rafts on the upper flybridge,' and so on. The usual. Did you take note? Your life may depend on it, but only if those things are true."

Christian says, "The vessel heeled over and started to sink in around 30 seconds. A minute later, the boat tipped more. I was in the salon off the dive deck with Helen, a divemaster, and Rob, a master instructor. As the vessel capsized, everything tipped, and the tables and four buffet stools flew at us. The boat capsized, throwing us backward onto the windows.

"Water jetted through the cracks around the windows. I could see the boat still powering through the water with the engines running. Bubbles were washing past the windows. I couldn't believe it. I told the dive guide earlier that I hoped the Captain would take the crossing easy given the strange listing issue the boat was experiencing, and now we were in trouble.

"The saloon door was now 12 feet above my head. The slippery wood laminate floor was an almost vertical climb, and the boat could turn over at any moment. The salon doors opened outward, but the surge from the seawater forced them shut. My only option was to



The Egyptian MY Carlton Queen

smash the tempered glass while there was still some air on both sides.



“I could see the fixed sofa above our heads shaking and moving. Eventually, it fell free onto Rob and Helen, knocking them back onto the salon window.

“Meanwhile, we could hear screams from below decks from David Taylor and his son Christian, who had been in their cabin. There were sounds of crashing and smashing coming from all quarters. There was nothing we could do to help those people. Access to the stairs was now more than 20 feet above our heads. Unbeknownst to us, Fernando was also in his cabin.

“We received our first stroke of good fortune; the sofa landed in such a way that I now had a platform for climbing. I rammed my foot into the corner, gripping it with my fingernails, and heaved, pulling myself up over the arm onto the top eye level with the glass door, a good six feet away. I jumped from the sofa onto the side of the cupboard adjacent to the door, the side now being the top.

“Rob threw a metal-footed stool up to me, which I used to smash the glass doors. By now, the boat was tipping bow forward. Rob grabbed my leg, and I pulled him up after he stood on Helen’s leg, and we then managed to drag her up too. There was nothing we could do about David and his son, so we set off swimming for our lives.

“I was relieved to see my wife was already in a RIB dive tender with other passengers. I was dragged into an adjacent life raft and was surprised to see the *Carlton Queen’s* Captain already there. Entrusted with our passports in case of emergency, he failed to take them with him when he abandoned ship.”

Fernando Suarez Mella, another passenger, was also below decks when the boat heeled over. He told us:

“I went down to my cabin, and after getting inside, I was pushed toward the cabin’s windows by the boat’s tilt. I remember thinking, if it goes just a little farther,

it’s not coming back! In the next seconds, the boat cap-sized; the cabin windows looked toward the bottom of the sea, and water poured in. The cabin door was on the ceiling and impossible to reach. I managed to use the bathroom door to step up and get out to the corridor. David and his son Christian were screaming for help. I went to them and tried to calm them. I still wonder how I could think straight and keep calm.

“The stairs were impossible to climb, and there were no handrails that could be used to monkey our way out. The engines stopped, and the lights went off. I told David and Christian that we needed to get to the most forward cabin to use the emergency escape hatch. Reluctantly, they followed me into the now dark corridor toward the bow as I checked all cabins to make sure no one else was there. Once I got to the forward cabin door, I jumped into the water, which was now at knee level, and asked them to wait. Although the escape hatch was labeled, it had no handle. I tried pushing and pulling, but there was nowhere to grip it, and I couldn’t open it.

“We needed to get back to the hall of the stairs. I got out of that cabin with great effort, and we followed back the corridor and stayed in the hall. I asked David to press himself toward the hall ceiling (now a wall for us) and asked Christian to climb above me and his father and try to reach the opening of the stairs. He did and hung from this opening on top of his father when I raised my arm and offered him yet another ‘step’ to reach farther and be able to get out.

“Once Christian was up, I asked David to use my body like a stair. I grabbed the space in the ceiling where the LED lights were and offered him my leg and two arms to climb. He was able to grab the upstairs rail, and I pushed his feet up, helping him out.

“Now, they were both in the salon, but the distance between us was too long, and even with their arms fully extended, they could not reach down for me. I asked them to leave the boat. “Better one than three!” I could clearly see the tremendous stress on David, confronted with saving his kid and abandoning me.

“Christian grabbed a diving tank with a regulator that had floated into the salon, and David threw it to me. Unable to reach up and now alone, the water, mixed with sewage and fuel, started to flood the corridor and the hall where I was.

“I waited for the water to rise, and little by little, I could float, hanging on to the dive tank. There was 100 bar of air in it, which gave me enough confidence to know that if it really came to the worst, I could still breathe and try to find my way out. I focussed only on the route I needed to get out of the boat. When the water was high enough, and I could grab the rail,

I pulled myself up to the salon that was, by then, fully flooded.

“Chairs and other materials were floating all around. Daylight came from the submerged door to the stern. I took a depth breath and dived into the water, swimming under it until I reached the stern. A tremendous amount of debris was floating, and I did not want to be trapped in it.

“Once out in the sea, I was shocked to see that there was no one to help me out of the water. I thought of swimming toward the life rafts, but they were very far away. I swam toward the boat’s bow, and I held on. I’m sure they assumed I’d drowned.

“A huge cargo ship was hove to no more than 300 yards from our sinking boat, and I could see men onboard making signs to me. I indicated that I was OK, and the boat started its sirens. After a few minutes, a Zodiac, I believe from the liveaboard *VIP Shrouq*, helped me out of the water and took me to safety.”

David Taylor reflected on Fernando’s heroism:

“Fernando was clearly the best man to have in this situation. Without a doubt, we would have perished if it wasn’t for his help. Fernando selflessly ordered me to leave him in the stairwell. It was the hardest thing I have done, which still haunts me. Christian went outside the salon onto a flooding dive deck, shouting for a rope, and when one wasn’t provided or found, came back inside, despite shouts not to by crew members, with a rigged tank, which we dropped to Fernando.

“Our exit from a flooding saloon was problematic. The water surging into the salon carried debris, and I was hit on the head by a loose scuba cylinder which forced me under the water. When I came up, I was

under a floating sofa. My son saw this and stopped me from going any farther by grabbing my legs. Together we made our way through the surge and out the doors by timing our exit between surges. We finally made it into the open ocean. I was extremely tired, and my son swam off and brought me a buoy. My relief when I saw Fernando had been rescued was immense. I am grateful for our lives to this man and also to my son. Both of us needed hospitalization as a result of minor injuries.”

The *Carlton Queen* had been listing both to port and starboard as soon as it left port, indicating a severe stability problem. When the passengers queried about this, they were met with silly answers such as the vessel was new and the timbers along the keel needed to get fully wet, its desalination tank was still filling, or people had showered – emptying the water tanks on one side. Christian Hanson reckoned it had a 30-degree list to starboard while it was moored overnight and a list to port while it was underway. That indicates a shockingly poor ship design leading to fatal instability.

Nobody died, but their problems weren’t over because all their possessions, including passports and money, had gone down with the boat. How the vessel operators failed to meet their obligations regarding that is another story. Meanwhile, a few days later, at the remote Tubbataha reef in the Philippines, another poorly designed diving liveaboard, *MY Dream Keeper* capsized and sank in deep water, taking four of its unlucky occupants with it.

(We have edited the quotes for clarity.) In the July Issue of *Undercurrent: What happened afterward and how the operators reacted*.