

## **‘What happens on the boat, stays on the boat’: The dark side of luxury yachting**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to discuss the dark side of luxury yachting, with specific focus on the treatment and wellbeing of yacht crews.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper is based on a literature review of key terms: luxury yachting; yacht crews; wellbeing; maritime tourism; and yacht guests.

**Findings** – The paper observes luxury yachting as having a hidden dark side that is impacting on the overall wellbeing of yacht crews who are responsible for producing luxury yachting experiences. It argues scholarly research into both luxury yachting tourism and yacht crew management and experiences remains under-developed.

**Practical implications** – The success of the *Below Deck* television franchise has had a direct influence on the growing phenomenon of luxury yachting tourism. Behind the happy smiles and grandeur of the luxury experience, there is a dark side to this booming industry that requires further investigation and resolutions to enhance yacht crew wellbeing without impacting on the guest experience.

**Originality/value** – This paper presents luxury yachting as a growing tourism phenomenon. It explores the dark side of this industry from the experiences of yacht crews, who are generally seen, but not heard.

**Keywords** – Luxury yachting; Yacht crews; Wellbeing; Maritime tourism; Charter guests; Below Deck; Upstairs/downstairs

**Paper type** – Conceptual Article

## Introduction

Luxury yachting has been defined as “the act of chartering a yacht both as a base for accommodation and recreation and as a means of transportation” (Ioannidis, 2019, p. 31). It is “an exclusive area of tourism and practice which operates in a relatively small and niche environment”, attracting high-profile, wealthy elites (Gladkikh *et al.*, 2022, p. 1). This exclusivity extends to academic research concerning luxury yachting, which, until Gladkikh *et al.*, (2022) *Luxury Yachting: Perspectives on Tourism, Practice and Context*, has remained relatively low.

Unlike cruise ships, the luxury yachting experience is wholly private and personalised for a price that the common mass tourist might think of as being exorbitant. Yet following the success of the reality television series *Below Deck* (2013) and its subsequent spin-offs, the luxury yachting experience has become more popular. Reports indicate the television series directly influenced the rising interests in private charters, whether that be luxury superyachts, sailboats, or catamarans; and it is not just the guests seeking out the luxury experience, but the level of interest among people wanting to work on board has been rising too (Beck and Beckett, 2021). Reinforced by social media, *Below Deck* has helped to create greater awareness about this previously unseen and generally unattainable tourism experience. However, it is a reality television series, and the truth of the luxury yachting industry is, of course, much more complex (Beck and Beckett, 2021; Gladkikh, 2022).

As part of the wider maritime tourism industry, luxury yachting is specifically a leisure sea activity, in which wealthy guests charter a yacht for recreation purposes, including visiting seaside destinations and enjoying luxury services and a wide range of water toys that help to co-create the yachting experience (Ioannidis, 2019). This type of activity is appealing to high-paying guests seeking personalised experiences and the freedom to do anything they want away from the masses (Gladkikh, 2022). Yet, just because luxury yachting has the term ‘luxury’ in it does not mean that it is without problems. In fact, the term luxury is perhaps the reason why this industry has a bit of a dark side given its inherent associations with materialism, social discrimination and perception of being exploitative (Batat, 2022; Wang, 2022).

Given the expectations of luxury yachting, most people would probably not associate luxury yachting, or any luxury experience for that matter, with being dangerous or risk tourism – travel activities that involve the potential for personal harm, physical injury and/or death (Holm *et al.*, 2017, p. 116). However, reviews of crew experiences reveal that luxury yachting is beset with dangerous, risky, dark and contentious circumstances that can overshadow the happy and grandeur luxury experience. Unfortunately, most of these experiences have been overlooked

in tourism scholarship. In fact, luxury yachting, as a subject for study, remains largely underdeveloped, despite its growing popularity in mainstream media. This paper therefore explores the dark side of luxury yachting by exploring examples of the dangers and contentious topics that have come to be associated with the industry, including crew wellbeing, personal harm, physical injury, death, and piracy. While luxury yachting is of course not all bad, by exploring examples of challenges and issues discussed in what has been published about luxury yachting, this paper suggests that this leisure experience could find itself subject to discussions of risk tourism. Intended as a conceptual paper, this article acknowledges that further research is required to fully articulate the nuances of luxury yachting as potentially being a risk tourism activity, but in doing so, it provides a foundation for further conversation about the Janus-faced nature of luxury yachting, and in particular its dark side.

### **Upstairs/downstairs culture**

Luxury yachting is an industry based on high-end customer service, in which the wealthy elite pay high prices to charter yachts for luxury treatment in glamorous coastal areas. In fact, luxury yachts, and superyachts in particular, are not just forms of recreational transportation, but they are also symbolic of super-rich lifestyles, serving a socio-technical purpose (Beaverstock and Faulconbridge, 2014). This symbolism is extended by the look and performance of the yacht crew, who, for example, must be seen in formal uniforms whilst on dock when collecting guests and must not be seen loitering, smoking or drinking when in uniform (Spence, 2016). As a consequence of these expectations, numerous reports have highlighted an upstairs/downstairs culture, which is a commonly used term to reference the differences between the rich and poor – a direct influence of the successful British television series (1970s) about a wealthy family who lived ‘upstairs’ and their servants who lived ‘downstairs’ (Longman, 2022).

The upstairs/downstairs culture is certainly intimidating, and many charter guests are said to come on board thinking they can do whatever they want and treat the crew however they want (Page, 2021). As charter guests essentially dictate the yachting experience through their expectations and demands, most yacht crews have no personal agency (Spence, 2014a). The lack of personal agency is an issue intensified by crew feelings and/or perceptions of being owned by the yacht owner who not only sets the yachting experience expectations and standards, but is also responsible for the crew’s care and provisions (van der Merwe, 2022). While many crew members have said that the yacht owner takes good care of them (van der Merwe, 2022), being unable to say ‘no’ to charter guests, unless it is a health and safety concern, often results in a range of substandard working environments, including being harassed, yelled at and/or having to wait discreetly in the background to be asked for anything

at any time (Evans, 2018; Presser, 2021). Such experiences are a direct consequence of the upstairs/downstairs culture and are comparable with what others have described as a 'plantation tourism landscape' characterized by structural and spatial inequalities (Avond *et al.*, 2019; Brohman, 1996; Sanchez and Adams, 2008).

A common experience for most yacht crew members is when guests take advantage of the crew and their experience by turning their dinners or parties into all-night benders. Spence (2014a) describes situations of younger charter guests partying through the night, which forces crew members to work exceptionally long shifts and miss out on essential sleep. Further complicating these matters, if guests become too intoxicated, they can make poor decisions without inhibition. One *Below Deck* episode demonstrated this situation when an intoxicated charter guest decided to take a night-time swim despite having been told by crew that was prohibited for safety reasons. While the guest's behaviour may be surprising, Lardy (2022) reports these antics are actually quite common. Guests are meant to adhere to charter agreements and general laws and regulations; however, many do not appreciate the inherent danger of being at sea and see their privileged 'upstairs' status as a reason to push boundaries (Lardy, 2022).

### **Mental health and personal wellbeing**

The mental health and personal wellbeing of the crew is reported to be directly impacted by the upstairs/downstairs culture and the restricted physical area of the boat. On most luxury yachts, crew are predominantly housed in small, windowless bunk-type cabins in the lower chambers of a vessel and work up to 20-hours a day (Evans, 2018). While some have suggested living in small quarters is not always a difficult experience (Gladkikh, 2022), others have noted the location of the cabins often cause crew members to have trouble sleeping as a result of mechanical vibrations or sound, such as the raising and lowering of the anchor (Spence, 2014a). The lack of sleep is a problem exacerbated by guest demands and their partying into the night. According to Lardy (2021a), work and rest hours are often under-reported or manipulated on records for compliance purposes, which is generally caused by insufficient staffing and exceptional 24/7 guest expectations and demands. Fatigue from lacking sleep not only impacts on mental and emotional health, but it can also lead to accidents or injuries caused by negligence attributed to sleep deprivation (Lardy, 2021a).

Spence (2014a) highlights that much like other workplace environments, yachting has its fair share of workplace tensions, frustrations, anxieties and disappointments. However, because yacht crews are unable to separate their work environment from their home environment (i.e., they work and live in the same space), they tend to suffer from these stresses more intensely

(Spence, 2014a), which can create or exacerbate already established toxic working relationships (van der Merwe, 2022). In fact, some crew members have reported the shower is the only space for privacy (Agnew, 2020). Having to manage stressful situations away from guests' view not only exacerbates the problematic issues, but also reinforces the upstairs/downstairs mentality.

“Nothing is impossible in the world of luxury yachting” (Gladkikh, 2022 p. 86). Consequently, crew members must be ‘on’ and ready to perform at all times and in a positive manner regardless of how they are feeling or being treated by guests or fellow crew (Spence, 2014a). The inability to step away from work or say ‘no’ has resulted in crew becoming tired, burnt out, and even depressed (Agnew, 2020; Spence, 2014a). As reflected in almost all *Below Deck* and spin-off episodes, there is an added pressure on crew members to work at an accelerated pace. It is not unusual for interior crew to be managing multiple jobs at one time, such as cleaning guest cabins in between serving guest meals, whilst responding to other guest requests (Spence, 2014a). This fast-paced environment is also challenging for the exterior crew who must manage mechanical equipment and docking whilst ensuring crew and guest safety. Consequently, Agnew’s (2020) report highlights that crew often feel so overworked, undervalued and depressed that suicide has now become a very real issue. It is for these reasons many crew members feel the need to explode when charters end, often turning to alcohol and extreme partying (Spence, 2014b).

Reports indicate that mental health cases have been on the rise in recent years. Most troubling is the increase of crew helpline calls relating to suicide or suicidal thoughts (ISWAN, 2021). Although there are actions being taken to support those in need, there is a general lack of mental health training, a misuse of alcohol among crew, and a tradition of staying quiet and getting on with the job (Beck, 2021a). In consequence, mental health has become a taboo topic within the industry, which van der Merwe (2002) explains is exacerbated by the fact that private-owned yachts are not legally obligated to comply with established labour conventions designed to support the mental health and wellbeing of crew. Most mental health cases are directly influenced by fatigue, burnout, poor leadership, weak recruitment and crew politics or tension (Beck, 2021b). Although most yacht crews have no need to pay for food, rent or amenities, and are able to travel to a range of destinations, whilst making substantial amounts of money in regular pay and guest tips (Spence, 2014a), the negative aspects of the work environment can often overshadow the positive aspects.

## **Sexual harassment, physical assault, and verbal abuse**

According to the International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) 2018/19 Annual Review, abuse, bullying, harassment and discrimination were the leading problems raised by crew members. This is perhaps because when at sea and on a luxury yacht, the upstairs/downstairs culture is much more complex and entangled in circumstances surrounding power imbalances that are reinforced by a gendered infrastructure, non-disclosure agreements and the notion of 'what happens on the boat, stays on the boat' (Agnew, 2020; Osnos, 2022; Thompson, 2009; van der Merwe, 2022). This notion is not only problematic, but can be exacerbated if guests become overly-intoxicated. Being unable to say 'no' to guests can make this particularly challenging, and as a consequence does sometimes result in sexual harassment and assaults on crew (Page, 2021).

Sexual harassment of both female and male crew members has been shown in the *Below Deck* series and spin-off series, with many scenes actually encouraging this behaviour as crew members are made to perform for guests (for increased tips) in an often sexualised, but seemingly uncomfortable manner. Patronizing and misogynistic behaviour from both guests and male crew towards female crew members in particular is also in abundance both in the *Below Deck* world and in the real world. While the *Below Deck* interactions between crew members often appear to evolve into high tensions and heated arguments, the interactions between crew members and guests are often laughed off because crew can't say 'no'. As McCarty (2022) notes, many guests see it as harmless fun. This echoes other reports that unwanted touching, for example, is often impossible to refuse for fear of being fired, and so it is generally laughed off as being playful banter (Agnew, 2020). Although *Below Deck* is a reality show, these scenes, however scripted, are representative of truths. In fact, Page's (2021) report addresses sexual harassment and assault (verbal and physical) towards female crew in particular as so rampant that 'everybody has a story'. Reviewing a 2016 poll of crew members, McCarty (2022, p. 200) noted 72% of respondents had experienced sexual harassment or assault, 64% had witnessed it, 20% had officially reported it and 30% told someone but did not officially report it. The high percentage of unreported incidents is most concerning. However, McCarty (2022, p. 200) found many feel reporting harassment and/or assault is "not worth the trouble" for fear of retaliation and is "just part of the industry", so crew members "must get used to it". The low reporting of cases is aggravated by the fact that, as mentioned earlier, private-owned yachts are not legally obligated to comply with labour conventions designed to protect crew rights and safety (van der Merwe, 2002) and also that many captains lack the experience of managing people and these kinds of experiences (McCarty, 2022).

Harassment and assault are perhaps exacerbated by the gender-oriented mentality that continues to underpin the industry. As McCarty (2022) notes, there is a gendered power imbalance reinforced by the low number of females working in the industry who are often relegated to the domestic service roles of housekeeping and catering. Although gender-oriented roles are not strictly enforced, scenes from the *Below Deck* series demonstrate how male crew members often act as superior to their female counterparts. Spence's (2014b, p. 205) study highlights this sense of superiority in a case where a male crew member explained why he does not suffer from seasickness like female interior crew do: "I can't understand why *you girls* get so seasick all the time. But I reckon it's because *we're* more in tune to the sea [...] I anticipate the movement [of the sea] and I guess you can't really do that having *only* worked inside". The male crew member's condescending tone and choice words distinguishes him, and his male counterparts, as being superior in terms of managing seasickness. Most concerning however is the response from female crew members who agreed with this statement, suggesting it is likely true because they (females) tend to work in hotels and other permanent places, which lowers their tolerance to seasickness (Spence, 2014b). Extending this gendered power imbalance is the issue of females being judged by their appearances when applying for yacht jobs. McCarty (2022) notes employers often require females to supply full-body images with details of their height and weight when applying. It is instances like these that reinforce the gender-oriented mind-set that continues to challenge crew safety and inclusivity.

### **Work accidents, injuries, and death**

While from the guest perspective the luxury yachting experience may seem like everything is smooth sailing, it is a skewed perspective, because in reality, there are many challenges and injuries that occur. The most frequent injuries are contusions - generally caused by slips, trips and falls; hand injuries (e.g., lacerations, fractures, dislocations); head and face injuries; overuse injuries - generally impacting shoulders, elbows, knees, and back; and burns from ropes, engine parts, kitchen, and food/drink (Nathanson, 2019). Some of these injuries have been seen in the *Below Deck* series, for example, when Chef Marcos of *Below Deck: Sailing* hit his head so hard that part of his scalp was ripped off, and when deck crew member David of *Below Deck: Mediterranean* slipped and injured his thigh resulting in a disturbing contusion. Nathanson (2019) argues the most common causes for many of these injuries are either operator-preventable factors, such as alcohol use, inattention and inexperience, or they are non-preventable factors, such as equipment failure, bad weather, high winds and hazardous waters. Accidents, whatever their cause, can lead to more severe injuries, for example, when in the original *Below Deck* series, deck crew member Ashton got his ankle wrapped in a loose tow line and was dragged into the water. Although he was saved by another cast member,

this could have resulted in his foot being severed and him bleeding to death, or him drowning from being tangled in the ropes while being dragged behind the yacht.

Severe accidents and injuries are very real dangers of the trade, and in some extreme cases have resulted in death. Evans (2018) reported that in 2010 a 28-year-old bosun (officer in charge of crew and equipment) went missing in Monaco harbour after a boat collision accident, and in 2015, a 24-year-old deck crew member fell while cleaning a harness, causing severe brain injuries that led to a coma and subsequent death. In 2013, a 22-year-old deckhand also fell from the top deck of a yacht, hitting his head and drowning (Neate, 2018). In 2019, the reckless actions of a yacht captain caused a boating collision, which resulted in the death of a 29-year-old deckhand (Boyle, 2019). These reports are real-world evidence that can be used to support Nathanson's (2019) findings that falls overboard and boat collisions are the leading causes of yachting related fatalities; although the findings further report that drowning was the most common cause of death, and generally attributed to not wearing a life jacket.

### **Criminality and piracy**

Adding to crew stresses are those of environmental conditions outside of their control. It is not just concern for bad weather, but also the risks of violence and criminality on open-waters are very real. In areas of warm winter weather, criminality and acts of piracy, such as robbery, kidnapping, smuggling, cyber-attacks, intrusion, and extortion are often a concern for luxury yacht owners (ParExcellence, 2021). In fact, the most dangerous time for yachts is when anchored at port and the hour before departure, particularly in areas of political and economic instability, and when yachts are attacked, the memory of that attack can haunt the region for years (Spencer and Tarlow, 2021). Much of the criminal activities are in part due to a perceived lack of security, which is why companies like ParExcellence recommend hiring security with anti-piracy training for luxury yachting experiences.

Exacerbating the issues of criminality and piracy are new forms of criminal activities that are occurring via technology. Cybercrimes at sea are on the rise. Smith (2018) reports cyber hackers are able to use laptops to take complete control of a vessel, including its steering. Cyber-criminals are generally after financial data, and because yachts are becoming cross-functional, meaning they are spaces for leisure and business, they now require more technology, which makes them vulnerable to attacks, particularly those with lowered cyber security or navigation systems (Smith, 2018). As *Below Deck* has shown, guests (and owners) want strong Wi-Fi to make the luxury yachting experience better for checking emails, stocks, and posting Instagram photos. However, this demand to take land-based functions out to sea



means the network must be extended, opening it up to cyber-criminals and cyber-piracy (Smith, 2018).

Although government action is being taken in many coastal areas to combat and lessen criminal activities, particularly piracy, many yacht owners must still grapple with the real possibility of crime while both anchored and while out at sea. Reports indicate some yacht owners are arming their boats with guns, water cannons and safe rooms in the event of actual piracy (Dockwalk, 2010; ParExcellence, 2021). However, the ISWAN 2018/19 Annual Report noted piracy is still a concern for crew members. Thus, what remains to be understood is the impact such concerns can have on crew and how they perceive their safety and well-being in terms of extreme criminal activities.

## **Conclusion**

Although one must experience luxury yachting first-hand to truly understand the stresses and realities of being on-board, the review undertaken for this paper demonstrates a very real need to better support yacht crews and recognise their contributions to luxury yachting and maritime tourism. Organisations like Nautilus International (trade union), Professional Yachting Association (NFP) and the International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (NGO) are working to reform sea culture and yachting practices to ensure the welfare and wellbeing of crew members (Beck, 2021a). Additional organisations, such as MedAire and Seas the Mind have also been created to provide 24/7 confidential emotional support and mental health first aid training for yacht crews (Beck, 2021a). However, it is obvious that the industry has severe issues and challenges that continue to impact on the wellbeing of crew members. *Dockwalk* provides numerous yachting reviews, information and advice to support crew members, and other boating websites and organisations have posted information about how to be a good charter guest (i.e., don't harass the staff). However, the voyage to a perfect yachting experience for the crew (and the guests) appears to be an enduring endeavour.

From the discussions above, it is clear that luxury yachting has a dark side that, while mostly hidden, is directly impactful on yacht crew members and their overall wellbeing. Holm *et al.*, (2017) suggest it is possible that all forms of travel and tourism have some inherent risks; however, they argue that risk tourism is specifically activities that involve “thrill seeking, physical exertion, and the possibility of physical harm” (p. 116). While this description is directed at the risk taking of tourists, it is difficult to ignore the similarities in these tourists and the crew members who willingly sign up to put their lives in compromising situations and very real dangers associated with luxury yachting. In fact, there are so many similarities between Holm *et al.*, (2017) descriptions of risk tourism and luxury yachting crew life, that the argument

could be made luxury yachting *is* a form of risk tourism. While few reports have revealed the very real dangers and challenges in working in the industry, the limited academic literature on luxury yachting, and in particular of crew experiences, remains a substantial issue for creating a strong understanding of this industry and the complexities within it. Future research could build upon this paper to develop further information about luxury yachting as a form of risk tourism. An understanding could also be made of how the issues addressed in this paper are perceived and compared to other luxury hospitality and tourism activities.

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