

THE MSC TEXAS



WILLIAM VASTA/Special Contributor

Owner and manager: NSB of Germany
Chartered by: Mediterranean Shipping Co. of Switzerland
Delivered: Sept. 23, 2004
Length: 1,096 feet
Width: 140 feet
Maximum height: 202 feet
Total decks: 9
Total crew: 23
Total containers: 8,238
Route: Xiamen-Chiwan-Hong Kong-Yantian-Long Beach-Oakland-Xiamen
One round trip: 35 days

SOURCE: MSC Texas

Make way for megaships

Huge boats hauling Asia's wares pose logistics challenge

By KATHERINE YUNG
Staff Writer

ABOARD THE MSC TEXAS — Capt. Axel Bartel watches silently from the ninth deck, 122 feet above the water, as an enormous red crane opposite him methodically lifts a rectangular container from his megaship's deep and open hold.

Here at the Port of Long Beach, the unloading of thousands of containers affords the captain and his crew a bit of rest, a welcome relief after the 12-day voyage to Southern California from Yantian, China.

The MSC Texas is no ordinary boat. Designed to carry 8,238 20-foot containers, it's

one of a new breed of giant container ships built to help satisfy the cravings of American consumers for clothes, electronics and other goods made in China.

"In the next few years, all these ports will be overrun by these ships," said Capt. Bartel, a 55-year-old veteran of the seas from Bingen, Germany.

Just how massive are these vessels? Imagine something that can carry enough containers to fill a 1 million-square-foot shopping center — or five Wal-Mart Supercenters — with toys and other products piled 8 feet high.

The latest symbols of globalization's might, megaships such as the MSC Texas began calling on West Coast ports last year.

Though their numbers remain small, they are expected to quickly multiply because they make international shipping more economical. As a result, they could help drive the surge of imports from China even higher.

The \$85 million MSC Texas is only 36 feet shorter than the world's largest cruise ship, the 1,132-foot-long Queen Mary 2.

That kind of heft enables the carrier to exceed what today's largest ships can move by more than 2,000 containers. The more containers, the lower the cost to transport each one.

On this trip, the MSC Texas is unloading \$500 million worth of electronics, furniture and other items from Hong Kong and its neighboring cities. Then it will head north to Oakland to drop off 300 containers before returning with mostly empty boxes to southern China.

Inside the ship's massive hold, containers lie stacked nine levels



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Axel Bartel, 55, of Bingen, Germany, captains the MSC Texas between China and California.

deep. On deck, multicolored steel boxes sit in neat rows, rising six containers high into the air.

Equipped with a 12-cylinder engine, the biggest one at the moment, the year-old vessel consumes 20 tons more fuel per day than the next-biggest carrier.

But it operates with the same size crew, 23 seamen, and at the same speed, 25 knots, as its less imposing brethren.

Though many marvel at its size, the MSC Texas doesn't represent the limits of what shipbuilders can do. On the horizon are ocean carriers that are 25 percent bigger, capable of hauling 10,000 20-foot containers.

Yet size poses challenges of its own.

It takes 15 to 20 minutes to bring the MSC Texas to a standstill, which adds almost half an hour to every maneuver. The ship, which is steered automatically by computers and guided by radar, can only be brought into the port during daylight when the wind falls below 10 knots. And the carrier just barely clears the Long Beach port's 155-foot-tall Gerald Desmond Bridge.

So gigantic are these ships that only three U.S. ports — Long Beach, Oakland and Seattle — can handle them. They can't even fit into the Panama Canal.

Just as major airports are scrambling to alter their facilities so they can service the new Airbus A380 super jumbo jet, ports around the world are rushing to build longer berths and larger terminals to make room for the megaships.

At the Port of Los Angeles, engineers have been dredging its 45-foot-deep channels, extending them eight feet lower.

Down the street, executives at the Port of Long Beach envision filling in some basins to create larger piers from smaller ones. Other initiatives to accommodate the huge carriers include widening the port's channels and building a taller Desmond Bridge.

"We do like megaships, but there's operational issues in having that much cargo at once," said Art Wong, a Long Beach spokesman.

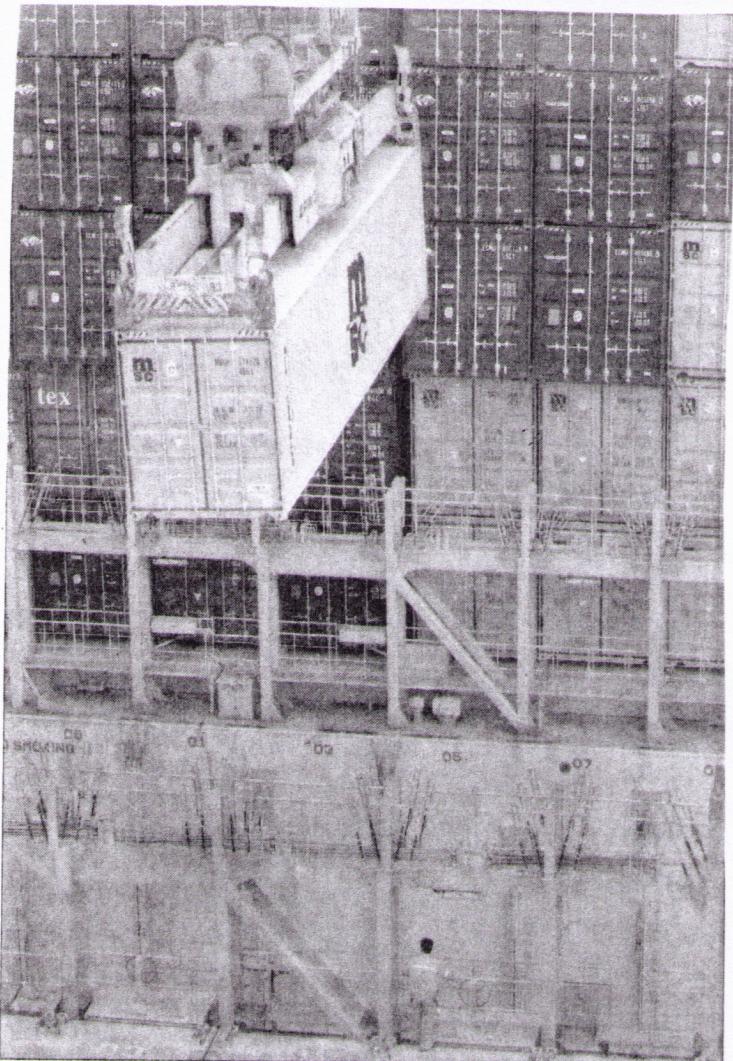
The megaships take four to five days to unload instead of two to three. And they require the use of taller, bigger cranes than those found at most ports.

The flood of cargo is already forcing major railroads like the Burlington Northern Santa Fe to make adjustments, such as running longer trains on nonstop routes across the West.

"The ships are a challenge because they are new," said Frederick Malesa, BNSF's vice president of international intermodal.

Practical as they may be, megaships like the MSC Texas also boast creature comforts.

The South Korean-built carrier doesn't leave port without its gourmet chefs from the Philippines. In their off hours, the mostly Filipino crew can enjoy a fresh-water swimming pool and sauna, a weight room and pingpong table. There's also an officers' break room and a pharmacy.



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A worker looks on as a container is unloaded from the MSC Texas during a stop at the Port of Long Beach.

Satellite phones, computers with e-mail access and two fax machines help lessen the sense of isolation triggered by long periods at sea. And guests can stay in special cabins.

But one of the most cherished benefits has nothing to do with amenities. "You feel much safer on a big ship," Capt. Bartel confided, as the clanking noises on the pier echoed far below him.