



Photo: Debra Bell @ Mercy Ships International

SHIPS OF MERCY

By Andy Cowie, Transport Manager Mercy Ships.
Currently docked in Tema, Ghana

How a fleet of 4X4's helps the world's largest non-governmental hospital ship transport hope and healing in West Africa

It's early morning, but already the West African sun is stifling as I walk down the gangway from the air-conditioned ship to meet the rest of my transport team dockside to check on our vehicles before the day starts. It's going to be another scorcher!

Nothing could have prepared me for the African way of life. I had always dreamed of going to Africa but it has taken years to get here. I never would have guessed that it would be as Transport Manager for the Mercy Ship *Anastasis*, the oldest and first Mercy Ship, originally built in 1953 as an ocean going passenger liner. I've only been here in Ghana for six weeks and I've got a lot to learn. In an average year, Mercy Ships performs more than 2,000 free surgeries including cleft lip and palate repairs, tumour removals, ophthalmic operations and specialized gynaecological services.

Teams of dentists, educators, and community development workers head off ship every day while surgeries continue onboard. They partner in training, water, sanitation, and construction projects off ship, near the port and up country. Our fleet vehicles are essential to keeping these projects moving smoothly.

For the past 3 1/2 years I have worked as part of the shipyard refit team for the newest Mercy Ship, the *Africa Mercy* in Newcastle, England. When completed, the *Africa Mercy* will make her maiden voyage down to West Africa to take over from the *Anastasis* as she retires. The *Africa Mercy* will then take on the mantle of the world's largest non-governmental hospital ship. My responsibility is to prepare for the fleet needs of the new hospital ship as we continue on through the current and final field outreach of the current hospital ship.

Originally a Danish rail ferry named the *Dronning Ingrid*, the *Africa Mercy* was built in 1978 and operated as a rail ferry until a bridge was built across from the main island to the middle island of Denmark making the vessel redundant. The former rail deck had a new floor fitted to make room for six purpose-built state of the art surgery theaters, offices and recovery bed space for 78 patients. Cabins for families and singles had to be purpose built to house a crew compliment of 474 in addition to adding a school, redoing the galley/dining area and public areas of the ship so that the crew could spend months in Africa. It's almost finished and when it is, we hope to double the amount of patients served.

In the meantime, I'm plenty busy taking care of the fleet here in Ghana until the new ship arrives. Over 100 authorized drivers onboard use our 23 ship vehicles almost solidly from 8am to 11pm every day.

Right after breakfast onboard ship, teams of crew and translators hit the road, going to our community projects, post-op and palliative care visits, visiting orphanages and prisons, and assisting with HIV/Aids teaching. As well, our Food Services, Engineering and Deck departments use our vehicles to pick up and deliver heavy supplies from areas where normal vehicles would not be able to travel. On average, our ship vehicles log a combined 250,000 km on the road per year.

Part of my role as the Transport Manager is to give new drivers from all over the world an orientation on the local laws and prepare our crew to share the road with local drivers. Horns are almost more important than brakes here, so if your vehicle doesn't have a working horn then you're in trouble!

At first I thought everyone was full of road rage - hooting their horns all the time but as I get used to the African driving style, I can see that they hoot to let you know they are around you and to beware. Many still overtake on blind corners and even when you're turning at a traffic light, a taxi will often push his way around the front of the line. People just hoot and then courteously let them through.

As many of our vehicles and drivers go out into remote villages, I give all new volunteers a crash course in 4x4 driving at a local disused lorry park near the ship. This is great as the area is being redeveloped so it has some drops and banks that show how our Land Rover Defenders can really perform.

Everyone I train is absolutely amazed at the capabilities of our vehicles. The idea is to show them the correct way to use the vehicle but also how to protect it at the same time. This is a highlight for me as I like to put our vehicles through their paces and have some fun too.

Keeping up with the repairs of the fleet is an on-going challenge as every one of our vehicles is used daily. Making time for repairs and maintenance is almost as hard as finding the parts locally. Here in Ghana we are happy to find a Land Rover dealership 45 minutes from the ship, but they only stock a limited supply of parts. Much of my day

can be eaten up in scouring around some of the many second hand markets looking for parts that will repair broken vehicles.

The vehicle cleaner has the task of cleaning all the red dust from inside the vehicles because when we drive with the windows down to keep cool, the vehicle fills up with dust and it gets everywhere into all the joints on the dash. After a while, even the white paintwork starts to take on a red tint.

If you'd like to be part of our "team" too, please get in touch. We always can use qualified volunteer mechanics both short and long term to help us maintain our fleet, as well as donations to help us keeping up with needed tools, spare tyres and diesel.

Those serving onboard our ships volunteer their time, covering their own flights to and from the ship in country and expenses while being housed onboard. That helps us pour our resources into those we are helping in country.

I'm not a doctor, but I feel privileged to be part of a team that keeps the vehicles running so that projects can run smoothly. And that helps serve people who are desperate to find hope and healing.

For more information on how you can donate and/or volunteer with Mercy Ships, visit online at www.mercyships.org. For information on supplying the Africa Mercy with fleet vehicles, spare parts or volunteering with vehicle maintenance, contact Andy Cowie, Transport Manager at andy.cowie@mercyships.org.

QUICK FACTS

Mercy Ships, a global charity, has operated hospital ships in developing nations since 1978. The crew on each Mercy Ship is made up of volunteer professionals from around the world. Doctors, dentists, nurses, community developers, teachers, cooks, seafarers, engineers, and many others donate their time and skills to the effort.

Over the years, Mercy Ships has performed more than 1.5 million services, with a value of \$600 million and impacted over 1.7 million people directly.

Some of the more notable statistics include: treating more than 300,000 people in village medical clinics, performing 26,000 surgeries, 162,000 dental treatments and completing close to 800 community development projects including construction and agriculture projects, including schools, clinics, orphanages and water wells.

Each year more than 2,000 short-term volunteers serve with Mercy Ships. Our hospital ships have visited more than 550 ports in over 70 nations.

Photos: Debra Bell @ Mercy Ships International



Petrol station in Liberia – where fuel is measured by the mayonnaise jar!

READ MORE

www.mercyships.org

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