

Grassroots Campaign to Save and Preserve the Historic Ship, Georgios Express, ex. Roi Baudouin

In the last decade, we witnessed a massive exodus of classic ships from the Greek ferry system. These historic vessels have not only been retired but are on the beaches of Alang waiting to be scrapped. Although, these ferries have proudly served as “sea bridges” between the Greek islands, their operators decided that it was worth the price to sell them as scrap. With their passing, a bit of Greece’s maritime heritage and history was lost.

The Georgios Express, ex. Roi Baudouin, is one of the last remaining historical ferries in Europe. The Roi Baudouin was launched at the Cockerill Yards in Belgium on February of 1965. She entered service on June 1965 at the Dover-Oostende route for the state Belgian Marine fleet of “Regie voor Maritien Transport (RMT)”. Here is how John Hendy describes the Roi Baudouin in his book *The Dover-Ostend Line* (1991):

“This superb-looking vessel was launched at Cockerill’s on 13 February 1965 and entered regular service on 13 June. Gone were the vertical masts which had characterized all the previous Ostend motor ships and in their place came a very rakish vessel indeed with plenty of modern touches combined with the usual flair and sheer. She was a little larger than the previous car ferries, carrying 170 cars and 850 passengers. The present writer fondly remembers seeing her arrive at Dover for the first time – the most graceful vehicle ferry there has ever seen.”

In 1973, the Roi Baudouin served the seasonal link from Ostend to Parkenston Quay (Harwich). Her last service under the name Roi Baudouin was on charter to “Sealink UK Ltd” at Folkestone and Dover during the summer of 1982. Following the year at Folkestone, the vessel was sold to “Ventouris Ferries”, a ferry operator in Greece. She was renamed Georgios Express and entered service from the port of Piraeus to the Cyclades islands on 29 July 1983. Except for some changes on her stern superstructure, the Roi Baudouin has retained her original appearance and elegant lines.

After being laid up during the past 7 years, the ship was almost sold for scrap in March 2008.

Who can imagine the Aegean Sea without a classic ferry plying its waters? The Georgios Express launch marked a new era in the Greek ferry system. As part of the expansion of the ferry operations, the ex. Roi Baudouin played a central role in expanding and upgrading coastal shipping services in Greece. Moreover, the arrival of the Belgian vessel was a breath of fresh air amongst the aging Greek ferry fleet at the time. The Georgios Express has at the very least brought about a change in the way everyone traveled around the Greek islands.

It is worthy to note that the Georgios Express has been one of the most popular ferries in the Greek coastal shipping system. The striking beauty of this ferry has captivated many travelers and ship spotters alike, who enjoyed traveling with her through the Greek Archipelago. The Georgios Express was said to be one of the finest pieces of naval architecture then in Greece. The ship was comparable in size, and varying degrees of outfit and service, to a number of other superb car/passenger ferries also completed at about the same time in Belgium. Her hull and superstructure stressed a clean-lined aerodynamic form with a pronounced rake of the bow. The eminently pleasing aesthetic appearance of this handsome ship represented one of the best examples of Belgian shipbuilding in that period. The sleek lines of the white hull with its unique bow are an outstanding example of naval engineering of an era gone by which we should preserve.

The Georgios Express was a vessel that set the standards for the inter-island service in Greece. It is of utmost importance to point out that the ship has been an economic generator for the Greek islands. She proudly served the ports of Cyclades and

she provided the necessary “sea bridges” for the residents of the islands. Not only that, but her services were extremely profitable for her operators.

Furthermore, the ex. Roi Baudouin has been providing training and experience for a number of merchant marine officers in the past 30 years. She was a staging post for a number of officers who excelled and progressed in their careers. For travelers and islanders to seafarers and mariners, the Georgios Express has been a beacon of hope, inspiration, and motivation. We wish to see this beautiful vessel preserved for not only us, but for generations to come. It would be a waste of true craftsmanship and naval engineering to see this vessel neglected and left to rot without any hope of preservation.

But good intentions are not enough to save the ship. We cannot allow this historic vessel to be sold unconditionally for scrap. With her loss, one important aspect of the Greek maritime culture and heritage is lost.

Greece, perhaps, is the only country in the world, whose people do not know nor want to know much about their maritime heritage. There are no museums commemorating the heritage and history of coastal shipping. Nevertheless, the coastal shipping has been an essential player of Greece’s economy. It is ironic, but only a handful of people recognize the importance of these historic vessels and how they were part of Greece’s economic boom.

All of the above are some of the reasons we try to preserve this historic ship as the Coastal Shipping Museum of Greece. The ultimate goal is not just to preserve the Georgios Express but to bring the community and maritime ideals back to life by introducing volunteers, developing educational plans, and encouraging the development of a center for training and innovation in the maritime heritage, seamanship and island culture. Furthermore, the Georgios Express could serve as a

library and repository of information and historical artifacts from Greece's coastal shipping heritage. It is an opportunity for the community to come together and establish a Coastal Shipping Museum that will be a point of reference for the future generations. It would be a pity to lose such a beautiful & historic vessel along with all of its history.

The time is running against our efforts to preserve this very fine specimen of Belgian shipbuilding and Greek coastal shipping heritage. In this campaign, we have put pressure on the government at a community and political level. The stakes are high in this campaign, since the Ministry of the Mercantile Marine does not have the resources to house or preserve the historic Georgios Express.

At this point, it is imperative that additional volunteers are recruited for the preservation of the Georgios Express. These volunteers will contribute their skills and expertise in developing preservation and business plans. In addition, volunteers will be needed to utilize these plans in order to devise programs which could be developed for the preservation society of the historic ship through funding from the European Union and/ or private donations.

The first step is getting the community engaged and that is why we all need your signature and volunteer support, today. Please, follow the web address to sign the petition and offer feedback for the preservation plans. Your volunteer skills will be greatly appreciated. : <http://www.georgiosexpress.gr> Alternatively, you can email us directly at: info@georgiosexpress.gr or savegeorgiosexpress@gmail.com

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Show Your Support for the Grassroots Campaign to Save and Preserve the Historic Ship, Georgios Express, ex. Roi Baudouin.

... S.O.S. ... SAVE OUR SHIP ...

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