Today there is a single ship on the Dead Sea: a vessel that makes monthly research cruises. But in earlier periods many kinds of boats sailed the waves of the saltiest of all lakes. Stone and wooden anchors found on the newly exposed shore of the shrinking lake and dating from the 5th century B.C.E. onwards and the remnants of a 1st century B.C.E. shipyard are witnesses of extensive navigation on the Dead Sea in antiquity.

There is written documentation of a naval battle fought on the lake in 312 B.C.E and a letter from 134 C.E. mentioning a ship loaded with fruit anchoring in the harbor of Ein Gedi. The 6th century Madaba mosaic map depicts two sailing boats on the Dead Sea. Legal deeds from the crusader period prove that a cargo ship was operated on the lake by the Knights Hospitaller of Jerusalem.

The 1848 exploration of the Dead Sea by Lt. William Lynch of the US Navy and the earlier unsuccessful ventures by Christopher Costigan (1835) and Thomas Molyneux (1847) used small rowing boats, but a French expedition of the Duc de Luynes in 1864 brought a custom-built luxury sailing yacht.


Two and a Half Thousand Years of Navigation on the Dead Sea

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Fig. 1. 3rd Century B.C.E. Stone anchors (110-134 kg) found on Ein Gedi beach.

Fig. 2. Khirbet Mazin, a 1st century B.C.E. shipyard on the shore of the Dead Sea.

Fig. 3. Cargo ships on the Dead Sea depicted on the Madaba mosaic map, around 560 C.E.

Fig. 4. The boat used in the 1847 Thomas Molyneux expedition on the Dead Sea.
In the middle of the 19th century a navigation route to India via the Dead Sea was even considered as a possible alternative to the Suez Canal. A great variety of vessels sailed the Dead Sea in the 20th century. The first motorized ship started service in 1908, and a large fleet of vessels of different kinds maintained the connection between the operations of the Palestine Potash Company at the southern and the northern ends of the lake. Among the unusual crafts seen on the Dead Sea in the last century were a Martinsyde bomber plane equipped with floats instead of wings used as a weapon during World War I, BOAC hydroplanes that landed on the Dead Sea in the 1940s on their way to Australia, and the yellow submarine that in 1999 explored the bottom in search for the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

![Fig. 5. The R.V. Taglit, serving Dead Sea exploration today.](image)

### References


