

OCEAN VOYAGE



A ship is an excellent place to build verisimilitude into a campaign world. Essentially, the characters are a captive audience, and the ship can become a detailed backdrop to roleplaying encounters and more.

SHIP'S DRESSING

1. A sailor has left a tangled mass of wet rope dangerously uncoiled on the deck. Unwary passengers could trip and fall, as a result.
2. Wet footprints mar the deck. They lead from the rail toward the ship's stern and to one of the hatches leading below decks. A close look at the footprints suggests that whoever made them was probably not human.
3. A bucket, half full of seawater, stands on the deck against the rail. A wet rag lies nearby. There is no sign, of the sailor meant to be washing the deck.
4. A character spots strange scratches in the deck partially hidden by a barrel. Investigations reveal what looks like a treasure map carved into the wood. Maddeningly, the map bears no names, but a sea-wise sailor might recognise a certain cluster of oddly-shaped islands.
5. The ship's deck is in excellent condition. Spotlessly clean, it is washed down every morning by the crew.
6. The ship's sails have seen better days; they are patched in several places and show signs of many repairs.
7. During the night, the hull springs a minor leak. The next morning, several crew members are hung over the side to aid in effecting repairs. The work takes much of the day, and while it is completed the captain orders the ship's sails furled to lessen stress on the hull.
8. Several pennants fly from the ship's mast. Perceptive characters notice the flags change design most days. It transpires the captain is superstitious and commands the pennants adjusted based on the weather, the ship's location, direction of travel and which oceanic power he is trying to appease. He has a complicated system that not even the first mate understands.
9. During the voyage, the captain has the crew start on a program of maintenance. The first thing they do is paint the ship's rail a bright, jaunty yellow colour.
10. The crew has a strange tradition; every new member must carve his name into the ship's mast. Deceased or lost hands have their names effaced to avoid bad luck falling on the vessel. A surprising number of names have been scratched out, and the remaining names ascend the mast for quite some distance.

SHIPBOARD SIGHTS & SOUNDS

1. The insistent cawing of the seabirds wheeling and diving overhead fills the air. Anyone eating on deck is constantly dive-bombed by hungry birds.
2. A huge bird—perhaps an albatross or something more “exotic”—soars high overhead. It takes no note of the vessel as it continues on its lonely course.
3. A smudge of dark clouds hangs over the horizon for much of the day. When he descends, the lookout from the crow's-nest speaks of gloomy shadows on the surface of the ocean. The next day, the clouds have disappeared.
4. A sudden loud thud speaks of something large and heavy striking the ship's hull below the waterline. Of what struck the vessel there is no sign, but the event puts some of the sailors—a superstitious lot—on edge for the rest of the day.
5. Rats infest the ship's bilges. Driven forth by hunger, several of the creatures scamper about the deck in search of food. If chased, they flee seeking hiding places in one of the ship's uncountable nooks and crannies.
6. A ship under full sail appears on the horizon late in the afternoon. In the morning, it is no longer visible.
7. Sailors clamber about the rigging. One starts singing a sea shanty telling of the epic tale of Vilimzair Aralivar's legendary voyages. (Vilimzair was a bard of puissant skill who fell into the clutches of pirates. He endured many hardships before he wrested control of the vessel from the pirate captain).
8. Some of the other passengers get into a loud argument about sleeping arrangements—some want to swap berths, but the others decline. Investigations reveal they all believe the berths of the first group to be haunted!
9. Loud voices from below decks speak of a sudden, angry argument. Characters eavesdropping discover one of the sailors has just surprised and captured a stowaway.
10. A sudden strong wind picks up, filling the ship's sails. The ship runs before the wind, making good time, but several of the passengers fall seasick, much to the crew's endless amusement.

CREDIT

This is a short system-neutral extract from *20 Things #22: Ocean Voyage* by Creighton Broadhurst.