

New niche cargo and passenger venture has the wind in its sails

France's Trans Oceanic Wind Transport will build four sailing vessels offering a 'decarbonising' service

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From 2022, French chocolatier Cemoi will be shipping the cocoa it uses to make its chocolate bars from Abidjan on the Ivory Coast to Le Havre, France, on board the first of a fleet of new sailing vessels built by Brittany-based Trans Oceanic Wind Transport (TOWT).

TOWT has been moving niche cargoes — such as coffee, organic wines and olive oil — around the French and European coast and across the English Channel and Atlantic for other small family-run businesses since it was set up in 2011.

The Douarnenez-based company has shipped 1,000 tonnes of goods on 18 chartered and often vintage sailing boats and developed its own brand, Anemos — derived from the Anemoi, the ancient Greek gods of the four winds.

But now TOWT plans to up its game and extend its services to Cemoi and other brands that want to move towards a more transparent, and largely carbon-free, way of shipping products on modern sailing cargo vessels.

SHORTLISTED YARDS

TOWT co-founder Guillaume Le Grand, speaking from Le Harve, said the company has shortlisted four European shipyards to build the first of its four 67-metre-long, steel-hulled and rigged cargo vessels.

The largely automatised ships will be kitted out with 4,000 square metres of sail.

Le Grand, who co-founded TOWT with his partner Diana Mesa Robayo, is expecting to sign shipbuilding contracts at the end of October and see the keel laid for the first vessel in December. The vessel would be launched at the end of next year and be in operation for March 2022, with sister-ships following at yearly intervals.

TOWT offers shippers a guaranteed sailing speed of 10.5 knots on the vessels, which have a 17-knot critical design speed. Customers are given a 36-hour window on deliveries. "We know we can go much faster," Le Grand said, with 15 knots expected on some routes.

Up to 1,000 tonnes of cargo can be carried by each vessel in six holds, with space for barrels also available in the forepeak. A crew of six will sail on board each ship.

The new vessels are also designed with six double cabins to take paying passengers in two classes of accommodation. Le Grand is about to open a waiting list for these berths, which he believes will be cheaper than a business-class airline ticket.

He said TOWT has already seen "strong demand" for its passenger berths from those who want to "be part of an adventure", follow the cargo and specifically from young people who are seeking an alternative to flying.



PLANE SAILING:
An illustration of Trans Oceanic Wind Transport's new cargo sailing ship
Photo: TOWT

Guillaume Le Grand: We are sailors and we need to tell [customers] what has happened at sea, be it environmentally, technically and nautically on how the goods come to them

Preliminary quotes and negotiations are clearly still in play with shipyards, but Le Grand is looking at a newbuilding price of about €10m to €12m (\$11.8m to \$14.2m) per vessel.

FUNDING SOURCED

Le Grand said TOWT is about to finalise the funding for the ships, mentioning that a large unnamed French family, which specialises in distribution, has come on board as an investor.

"It's going really fast now," Le Grand said, although he added TOWT remains open to discussions with other interested parties.

TOWT has also secured cargo income with brands such as Cemoi, coffee company Belco, rum producer Longueteau, textile outfit Picture Organics and Ethic Drinks.

By 2025, the company will be shipping 12,000 tonnes of cocoa for Cemoi alone. That is 120m chocolate bars, or two for everyone in France, Le Grand said.

TOWT's new larger vessels will allow it to scale up by

10 on the existing capacity of some of the traditional 30-metre to 40-metre sailing vessels it has been using.

This effectively divides the freight costs for those shipments by a similar amount. Shipping a cargo for about 40 US cents a kilo equates to about 3 US cents per chocolate bar, he said.

"The freight is drastically cheaper," he added.

The new vessels can also make more shipments, with four transatlantic voyages a year, a similar number between Central America-Mexico and Colombia and three from Abidjan to France scheduled for each ship.

But TOWT wants to go further with transparency about how the products it ships are transported.

Each bar of chocolate will show a voyage number, which will reveal the ship's GPS tracking data,

carbon savings for each bar — 48 grams of CO2 over the maritime journey — and information, photos and videos that can be accessed by customers.

"Why isn't shipping changing?" Le Grand asked rhetorically.

He believes that if there are end consumers who want their coffee delivered by slow-steam-

ing vessels, the opacity of the business prevents them from being able to choose this type of shipment.

"We owe the end customer that information which is the best we can give," Le Grand said. "We are sailors and we need to tell them what has happened at sea, be it environmentally, technically and nautically on how the goods come to them."

Cargo owners do not want offsetting, greenwashing or industry labelling initiatives, he said. "They know that if they have their cargo on board our ships they will actually decarbonise, and a new way of moving cargo will also emerge. These companies want to position themselves for the real transition."

GUILLAUME LE GRAND:
TOWT manager and co-founder

Photo: TOWT