

# Meet the new \$9 million vessel of the S.F. Bar Pilots association



In a ceremony full of tradition, optimism and Champagne, the San Francisco Bar Pilots christened a brand-new vessel that goes like the wind but doesn't pollute the air.

The vessel is the pilot boat Golden Gate, which will take ship pilots around the bay and out to sea. The ship pilots and their operations are "a key link in maritime trade that moves over \$1 billion in goods through local ports," said Assembly Member Tim Grayson, D-Concord, one of the speakers at the midweek ceremony. Grayson wrote the legislation passed last year that raised pilotage fees to pay for the new vessel.

The Golden Gate is 73 feet long, described as "state of the art" and cost \$9 million. Much of the expense went into the high-tech engines and water jet propulsion, a new generation of pilot boat design that meets stringent new rules for marine carbon emissions.

The engines develop 110,000 horsepower with a top speed of 30 knots and a cruising speed of 25 knots. "It's quite a boat," said Capt. David McCloy, who helped develop the Golden Gate.





The ceremony at Pier 9 on the Embarcadero had all the old-time trappings. After speeches full of good wishes and optimism, Capt. Steve Ross, the bar pilot association's oldest employee, and Vanessa Wilkerson, the newest, did the honors. They cracked a bottle of Champagne on the foredeck: "To the sea, to the sailors who sail on her, I christen thee pilot vessel Golden Gate," Wilkerson said in the best nautical tradition.

Then the 100 or so guests at the ceremony drank a toast to the boat. A few guests got a quick run on the bay aboard the boat, the skipper whipping up a bow wake as if to show off.

The San Francisco Bar Pilots is one of those under-the-radar organizations that play a big role in the region, especially in a city surrounded on three sides by salt water.

Bar pilots are master mariners who board ships at sea at a point 11 miles outside the Golden Gate, just outside where the shifting sand bar marks the channel leading to the bay.

They take control of the vessel and navigate the ship to the Golden Gate strait and then to a berth inside the bay. Some pilots also take ships up the Sacramento and San Joaquin river ship channels into inland ports.

The pilot boats come in because at least one pilot boat is on station outside the Golden Gate at all times, ready to offer the required pilot service to incoming ships — day or night, in all weather.

Bar pilots stay aboard the pilot vessel as required, and the nimble pilot boats have an important role. As the ship approaches from another port, it makes a big turn to present a lee — or side sheltered from the wind.

The pilot boat moves close to the side of the larger vessel, which is rolling and pitching on the open sea. The bigger vessel has a wood, steel and rope ladder hanging over the side — a device called a

Jacob's ladder, after the biblical ladder the prophet climbed from earth to heaven.

In the nautical version, the pilot times the pitch and roll of the moving ship with the roll of the pilot boat, and makes a quick leap, and climbs up the Jacob's ladder on the side of the bigger vessel and then up to the navigating bridge. On outbound ships the procedure is reversed, except the pilot has to leap backward.

It's dangerous, especially in stormy weather. Some pilots have been injured making the transfer. A few have been killed.

That's why a well-handled pilot boat with an experienced crew is essential.

The San Francisco Bar Pilots — there are 60 licensed members now — is one of the oldest maritime organizations in the west. One of the first acts of the first state Legislature was to authorize licensed ship pilots. That was in 1850, and they have been at it ever since.

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