Superyacht security
Understanding the four major threats associated with superyacht useage.

The superyacht industry continues to grow and it's estimated there are more than 5,500 vessels that are 30m or over. Although North America is still dominant, forecasts suggest the Asia-Pacific Region will eventually take over.

The number of UHNWIs is increasing in Asia Pacific, the Middle East and Africa, but these new opportunities will inevitably create significant security challenges.

Those owners who are less interested in venturing between glitzy ports in the Mediterranean want to explore the wider world while avoiding attention. Popular and remote areas to explore include countries such as Madagascar and the eastern coast of South America. However, when doing so, four key threats must be taken seriously by superyacht owners and their crews: drones, ecological factors, crime and the insider threat.

Drones
The threat posed by drones to superyachts is one of the most obvious. There is potential for both aerial and marine drones carrying explosive devices to attack a superyacht, although, fortunately, there have been no cases so far. Unmanned aerial vehicles have been used in land-based bomb attacks, notably in the 2018 assassination attempt on Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro. Also last year, Houthi militants in Yemen launched unmanned boats laden with explosives to attack Saudi Arabian naval facilities at Jazan. Airborne drones are more likely to be associated with espionage activity or threat to privacy. Drones equipped with cameras can provide eyes for paparazzi or pirates planning the abduction of a high-value targeted individual. For this reason, many superyachts have already invested in cutting-edge technology that can detect airborne drones and their pilot.

The ecological stance
The growing focus on the environment and safeguarding the planet continues to play out and the use of luxury yachts is not exempt from this. As locations off the beaten track become more popular, the possibility of damage caused to ecosystems, leading to anger among local populations, is increasing. Two contrasting examples are the coastline of Madagascar and the Galapagos Islands.

In the Galapagos, stringent regulations have been implemented to protect the environment, ensuring the longevity of the tourism trade and appeasing the local population, and these rules have been accepted by those sailing the seas. Conversely, no such regulations apply in Madagascar where vessels are advised to stay close to the coastline, especially towards the north of the island, because of the high winds and waves that affect the area. As a result, superyachts and other vessels are increasing the already alarming coastal erosion. Although there has been no example yet of criminal activities against superyachts or their owners in Madagascar, this is a possibility if damage to the environment continues.

Crime
The most obvious threat comes from piracy. The threat has evolved and we remember vessels being boarded off the Gulf of Aden and ransoms being demanded. The threat is not just to commercial vessels; private superyachts are also a target, although cases have been thankfully rare.

Anti-piracy devices are now being adopted by superyachts and these vary from preventing boarding to emergency measures in the event of a boarding. It's possible to acquire non-lethal devices such as the Glare Helios dazzle gun or the Long Range Acoustic Device, both of which can scare off pirates. If a vessel does get boarded, the risk to life increases in remote or dangerous waters. Yachts are having escape pods installed which can be deployed rapidly and have reliable GPS functions, as well as provide conditions necessary for human survival.

It's also worth noting the evolving role technology will play for cyber criminals. In 2013, Texan students, with the permission of the owner, hacked into a yacht's computer and tampered with its GPS system. By doing so they were able to change the course of the vessel without the crew noticing. Like many 'smart homes' of today, superyachts have adopted and utilised smart technology. For example, you can carry out a variety of functions on the boat using a touchscreen control, whether to lower the anchor or control the navigation lights. Although such technology is appealing, it has proved to be vulnerable to hacking in homes and this should not be ruled out at sea. Superyachts should pay the same attention to cyber-security as they do to their physical-security measures.

Insider threat
The transient nature of superyachts means crewmembers often leave one vessel and find employment on another within a short time. Therefore, questions must be asked as to whether adequate background checks and due-diligence procedures have been carried out on these employees. The threats and risks are very real and should be viewed as such. Who is the captain? Who is in charge of catering and housekeeping? For whom have they worked previously?

The consequences of not addressing this could be wide ranging – from business discussions being overheard and information passed on to third parties as a form of insider trading, to theft, supporting hostile forces attacking the vessel or serious misconduct such as sexual assault. Given the numbers of auxiliary staff involved, it would be naive to believe that none of the staff was a threat.

The threats faced by superyachts will only increase as they continue to migrate through new areas. As malicious actors continue to refine their tactics, vigilance by owners and crew will be crucial to securing safe passage. **SG**