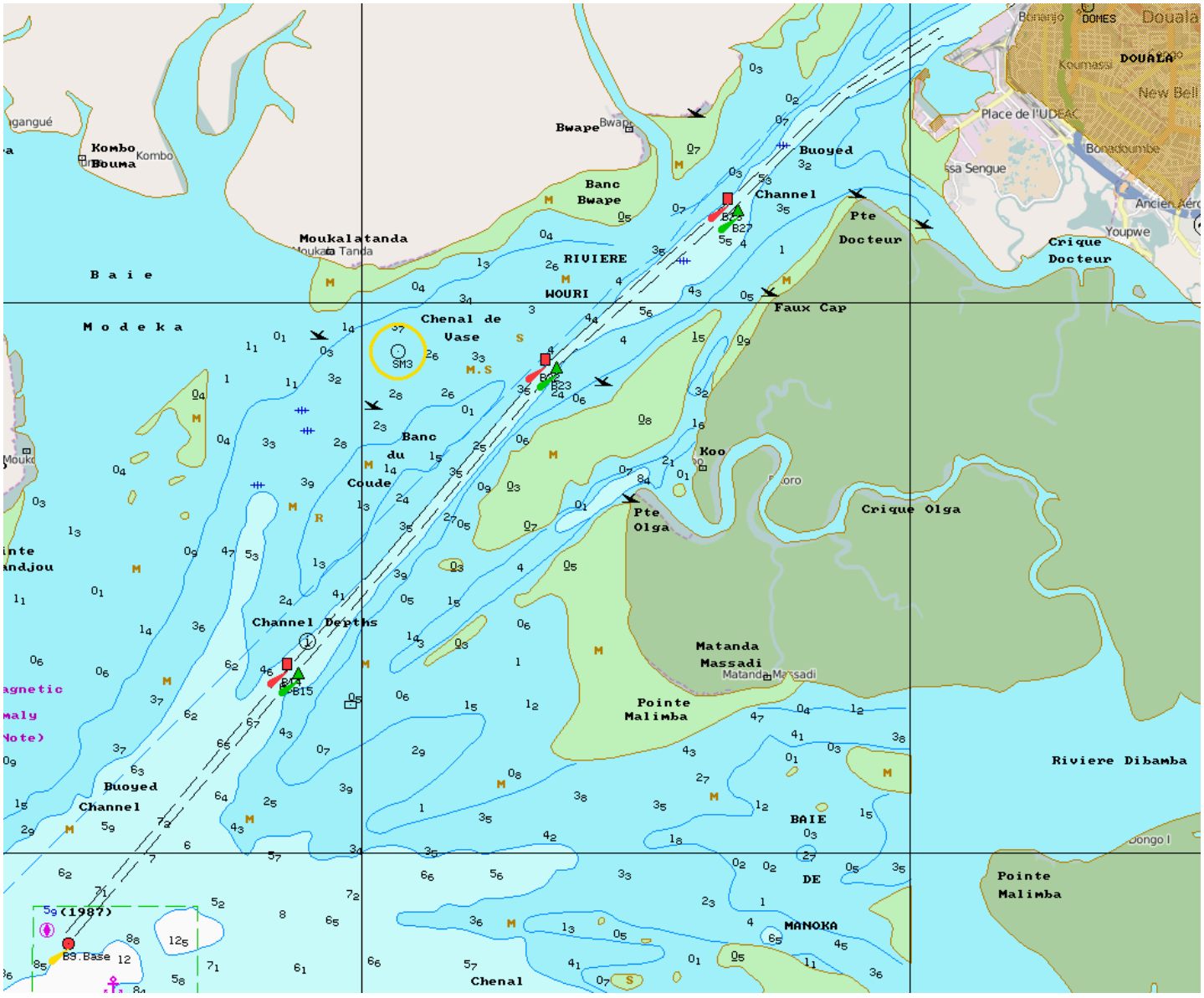

Douala – memories of a salvage expert from the gateway to Central Africa

By Jacob Hogendorp, GSC [Global Salvage Consultancy] (https://www.salvageconsultancy.com/en/)* The first of a series of Gard Insights about ports around the world with particular or unusual characteristics, which can sometimes present a challenge for shipping. *

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It is widely known that Douala has had its fair share of groundings in recent years. This Insight provides a unique perspective of the port from an experienced marine salvage expert.

Congestion

Douala port has a rich history and over the years has developed to become the gateway to Central Africa, serving other countries like Chad, the Central African Republic and the Congos. As exports of raw materials from Africa grow, the port has become very busy and congested. Congestion can sometimes result in delays of weeks rather than days. Vessels may even be sent back out to the outer anchorage when only part of the cargo has been discharged.

Approach

The outer anchorage is located in relatively sheltered waters. Reportedly the holding ground is not very firm and currents, especially during the rainy season, can be quite strong.

Entrance to the port is via the Wouri River, a narrow channel. Douala lies about 12 NM from the outer anchorage.

Vessel movements are determined twice a day and transits are usually during high tides.

Pilotage

The pilot boarding ground is located near buoy number 9, just outside the entrance to the narrow channel. However, pilots usually embark and disembark further upstream, between buoys 14 and 15 and 22 and 23. Masters therefore have to be prepared to enter the first part of the narrow channel without a pilot on board and to expect to pass outbound traffic at a close distance.

Pilots usually remain on board until the vessel is alongside. Available berth space is limited, therefore mooring operations may take somewhat longer than usual.

Channel depths

The Wouri is a typical sea river with large sediment deposits, resulting in constantly changing depths, especially during spring tides and the rainy season. The height of the rainy season is in August, when on average almost 700 mm of rain falls. The driest month is December, with an average of 28 mm of rainfall.

The depths in the channel close to the buoys marking the shallows appear to be less than the charted water depths in the middle of the channel. Masters of vessels with drafts in excess of 8 meters, should proceed carefully in the channel, particularly when passing close to the buoys.

The port authorities try to maintain the channel depths by deploying dredgers. Nevertheless, an increasing number of grounding cases have occurred during the past few years.

Groundings

Reportedly most groundings involve vessels with drafts in excess of 8 meters while passing outbound ships. Most were still within the buoy-line marking the edge of the channel. Furthermore, they largely grounded on soft mud and could be easily refloated during the next high tide with the assistance of port tugs. Some vessels however remained aground for longer periods and required professional assistance to refloat.

Local knowledge of the pilots is valuable and should be utilized - they are capable of handling vessels in straightforward grounding cases.

Salvage

If it is obvious a vessel cannot be refloated using port tugs, it is recommended to call in salvage expertise.

It may take a few days before salvors and salvage experts can board the vessel. Meanwhile, the master and his crew should gather helpful grounding data, such as:

- Taking readings using the six hull draught marks during high and low water.
- Measuring the distance from the main deck to the seabed during high and low water.
- Logging hourly the vessel's position and heading - both gyro and magnetic.
- Checking and recording tank soundings.

It is highly recommended that the vessel owner's agent is in close contact with the port authorities from a very early stage and keeps them informed of the grounding data. This should avoid unnecessary refloating attempts being made and assist salvors and salvage experts in discussing the technicalities of complex salvage plans.

Visa requirements

Visas are required for Cameroon, making it difficult to travel there at short notice. However, a transit visa can be obtained on arrival at Douala International Airport with an "OK to Board" letter issued by the vessel owners' agent. Airlines will not allow boarding on the final leg to Douala without such a letter. The visa is valid for 72 hours, after which a shore pass can be organized to stay in a local hotel, as long as the vessel is within port limits. When departing from Douala a new transit visa has to be applied for, requiring submission of a copy of the return ticket.

Boarding

Boarding a grounded vessel is by local speedboat, which is not inexpensive, costing between USD 500 and USD 800 per trip, which is often under 10 minutes.

Obtaining permission to board a grounded vessel can sometimes be an issue. Surveyors, for example, are not allowed on board the vessel during a refloating attempt and salvage experts are requested to keep a low profile, leaving the refloating attempt to the pilot.

Useful contacts

There are various agencies represented in Douala port, which can deal with the normal logistics of vessel calls. In a grounding incident however, it is important having the right people on the ground. The manager of BUDD Cameroon, Gard's correspondents in Douala, Suzanne Moume, has proved in recent cases to be influential in the port and able to solve issues quickly.

Our thanks to Jacob Hogendorp of GSC Global Salvage Consultancy for this interesting Insight into the port of Douala. For information relating to the recent experience of Gard Members and clients in Douala please see our forthcoming Gard Alert on Increased number of groundings in the Douala Channel.

Chart featured courtesy of Transas, TX97.

Questions or comments concerning this Gard Insight article can be e-mailed to the Gard Editorial Team.