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What will happen to Sealand, the world's smallest micronation, after Brexit?



Sealand, a self-claimed principality in the North Sea approximately 12 km from the coast of Suffolk CREDIT: GEOFF PUGH

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By **Charlotte Lytton**
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As Brexit beckons, Charlotte Lytton visits the North Sea island taking citizenship into its own hands

Seven miles off the Suffolk coast, it is officially the smallest micronation in the world. For more than half a century, Sealand – a wind-lashed (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1538866/For-65m-your-very-own-nation.html>), Second World War naval fort whose main platform, some 60ft above the North Sea, can only be reached by being winched up by crane – has seen off not only German advances but also those from the British government.

Now, with increasing uncertainty about Brexit on the UK mainland, the sovereign state is receiving hundreds of applications for citizenship. According to Michael Bates, the principality's 67-year-old prince, would-be Sealanders are inspired by the ruling family's "desire for freedom" as well as its black passport, embossed with two crowned sea creatures.

Prince Michael describes himself as a "dual citizen", having first clambered aboard the decommissioned HM Fort Roughs, which saw active service in the Second World War, at the age of 14. It was his father, Roy, (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/royalty-obituaries/9602837/Prince-Roy-of-Sealand.html>) who declared it theirs in 1966 after eyeing it up as a potential site to run his pirate radio station. Designed to defend shipping routes from German attacks, it was then abandoned and, when the Marine Broadcasting Offences Act was introduced that year, Bates Snr made his land grab, declaring independent grounds that it was in international waters and outside the jurisdiction of the British courts.





'Prince' Michael Bates has presided over Sealand since his father's death in 2012 CREDIT: GEOFF PUGH

Unable to wrest it off Bates, the government sent in the military to destroy other long-derelict wartime forts in international seas, should other Bates watched from his own newly conquered land as helicopters rained down explosives, blitzing steel detritus into the air. Sealand has remained under British control, the first family says, ever since.

Which is quite some feat, as Prince Michael, a barrel-chested Del Boy-type with a gap between his front teeth, knows well. He took over the rule – which the government once described as having the potential to become the “Cuba off the east coast of England” – when his father died in 2012. To become a guerrilla state, it has seen more than its share of action. Indeed, on reading tales of the place's survival attempts over the years – a “swashbuckling incident” that landed the Bates' in court, a coup attempt a decade later by German businessmen via helicopter, which ended with Michael bound by his elbows and knees in one of the fort's 21 rooms for days; a major fire in 2006 – you wonder how it could continue to rise f



Sealand was once described as 'Cuba off the east coast of England' CREDIT: GEOFF PUGH

That feeling does not dissipate in Michael's company: our rain-smattered boat ride to the 5,920 sq ft slab, which can be visited by invitation or of whale-spotting with Jean-Michel Cousteau in Mexico and encounters with Simon Cowell's PA in the first class cabin. Nor when we sit down Sealand's kitchen – a neatly done Ikea job, all cream cabinets and silver handles, save for the transmitters piled high on one of the counters.

He doesn't live there now – that's the job of Michael Barrington, its caretaker, or 'Head of Homeland Security' (the most inhabitants Sealand has at time is in the low dozens) – but has spent much time here over the decades, sleeping out in the open for a period in his mid-twenties when he was at their most furious. The wind whipping around the place on the rainy September day we meet does not make an al fresco arrangement task.

But Sealand inspires a kind of devotion at once impressive and destructive. "It didn't help much," Michael reflects of his first marriage to the mother of his children, which floundered under the strain family finances being endlessly poured in – a pressure that has since eased due to a successful career in Essex and doling out Sealand 'titles' to paying customers, which cost up to £499.99. Barrington, a former engineer on Radio Caroline who was once fixed with a little square of green and yellow tape, agrees that his loyalty hasn't weathered well with "lady friends", who see his service as "wa-



Michael Bates's wife Mei is winched up to Sealand. Visiting Sealand involves a 60ft ascent via crane CREDIT: GEOFF PUGH

He was close with Roy and **his wife, Joan:** (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2016/03/28/princess-joan-of-sealand---obituary/>) in fact, the place's inaugural prince was like a "second father" and sole resident, who returns to land every couple of weeks to swap with his "oppo", who takes charge while he's away.

"We were two mavericks together, as bad as each other," Barrington reflects of Roy, who died seven years ago tomorrow. "He wasn't an easy man. He put Sealand before anybody, before his family." It must have been hard, I ask Prince Michael, to be heir apparent to a man like Roy Bates, who was a Spanish Civil War aged 15, later became the youngest major in the British Army, serving in the Middle East and North Africa, and drawing arms from Monte Cassino. "My dad saw the War as a huge adventure," his son recalls, adding that he "enjoyed it" – in spite of the fact he was made a prisoner and narrowly escaped the bullets of a Greek firing squad.

Prince Michael's tussle with his own sons, aged 32 and 30 and raised on terra firma in Essex, has been different; they work together maintaining the cockle factory, and are in daily contact via messages and social media. Prince Michael's youngest, Charlotte, a 26-year-old canine beauty, is separate from the goings-on of the world's smallest independent state, which stopped issuing passports a few years ago after forged documents got the principality in hot water (before the 9/11 attacks, a Sealand passport could be used for international travel with ease, Prince Michael says.)



Sealand has been in the Bates family since 1967 CREDIT: GEOFF PUGH

She has been more involved with her father's attempts at finding a partner. "My daughter always thought I should go for a woman more my own age," says Michael. He married Mei, 47, whom he met on Tinder three years ago and has joined us on our jaunt. A former major in the Chinese army who he calls his "exotic liaison," they married in Thailand last year and now live with her 17-year-old son, also named Michael, in the marginally less exotic Leigh-on-Sea. In spite of her age, she still works, driving her Maserati to her job in VIP customer relations at the Empire Casino in Leicester Square.

It is at once incongruous and entirely fitting that the younger Bates has ended up with a "communist" wife 20 years his junior, to whom there is a folder of photos on his phone of her rifle-wielding army days; they attend lavish trips and dinners, thanks to her work and his, further adding to the mystique that Sealand (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/united-kingdom/galleries/most-remote-and-lonely-places-in-britain/micronations>) for decades. Almost inevitably, Hollywood has come calling – repeatedly. At present, "we have a producer, we have a household name and a scriptwriter, but Hollywood's a very flaky place, and until it's done, it's not done," Bates says. "Everyone says it's a love story," he reflects.



Michael Bates aboard Sealand with his wife Mei and stepson Michael CREDIT: GEOFF PUGH

“Mum and Dad really did love each other. But the Sealand story is more of an adventure.” Michael documented its escapades in his self-published *Holding the Fort* – described as “an Ealing comedy crossed with a Bond film and scripted by John Le Carré”. His stories are wild, often unbelievable, but he is surprised that anyone could doubt the veracity of a life that he says really has been stranger than fiction.

In recent years, the [nature of the Sealand](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/galleries/Ten-bizarre-micronations/micronations2/) adventure has changed somewhat since he ended up at the Dutch border on a trawler with his captors, or saw the place implicated by the FBI in the death of Gianni, or turned down requests from Wikileaks to host their servers.





Michael Barrington, Sealand's 'Head of Homeland Security' CREDIT: GEOFF PUGH

Its legacy endures, though – perhaps because its “two fingers up” to the government, as Barrington calls it, has never gone much beyond that; rather than a bid for, anarchy. “Our ultimate goal has always been to raise some land around it... and have a senate to run it and people living there,” noting that other attempts to establish micronations in the likes of Thailand and the United States have always acceded to military might. Having survived grenade attacks and legal challenges – one court ruling decreed the law did not have jurisdiction over the territory, which Sealanders claim with recognition of its sovereign status – its current prince is confident about their future.

He is not anti the British government, he is at pains to add, but he won't go down without a fight. “We won't lose this place,” he says. “I know it's an old Blighty's a wonderful place to be involved with. We just have different values.” How those values might change as the UK's international position is in flux. If Sealand's history is any indication for its future, though, it will take more than the breakdown of a union to uproot the sturdy little nation from the sea.

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