



Episode 363 – It's Happening: Seasteading—Liberty Through Floating Cities

Guest: Joe Quirk

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WOODS: What a topic this is, seasteading. When I first heard about it years ago, I hope you'll forgive me for thinking it was only half-serious, that people are desperate and they'll try anything at this point, libertarians. We've tried everything else. I remember hearing Patri Friedman talk about it as a conference in Brazil that I attended, and at one point he said something along the lines of, look, if you think seasteading is unrealistic, try every other strategy libertarians have attempted over the years, not one of which has worked, before you lecture me about how unrealistic seasteading is.

I just watched a video that you did where you spell out exactly how it would work and what the design would be like and how much it would cost and what the relationship would be like with coastal nations nearby. You guys have taken this from what might have at one time been a pie-in-the-sky idea to something eminently practical. Can we, before we even get started, comment on that?

QUIRK: Yeah, it's not a crazy idea at all. If you think about cruise ships, cruise ships are basically floating skyscrapers, and anything you do on land, people are doing on cruise ships, and the Dutch are already building floating parks and floating pavilions and floating apartment houses, and the technology for floating cities is rapidly approaching. If you think about the fact that we walked on the moon 45 years ago, and if you think space stations are expensive, imagine how cheap a sea station would be. We see seasteading as a rapidly approaching technology that will let future governments evolve with a speed akin to other technologies by providing a fluid market of governments competing to serve citizens.

WOODS: Not long ago, as a matter of fact, it was just last month, I was actually on a cruise ship with a number of other people, including the economist Bob Murphy, and Bob and I over lunch were saying—and of course, we knew all about seasteading already—how interesting it is that there's almost everything you need on this ship. You do stop at ports once in a while, and you can get on land and enjoy that, but basically there's everything you need except the Internet quality could be better, but that's got to be only a matter of time at this point. And plus you realize when you're on a cruise ship all the restrictions you are under with normal, land-based governments, because as

soon as you set sail, you can buy tax-free goods, you can gamble in the casino. So at some point some libertarian was going to put two and two together and figure this whole thing out.

Tell us about—first of all—define seasteading, and then I want you to talk about how this would work in relation to existing regimes. I guess I imagined seasteading as being a totally anarcho thing. It would be out in the middle of the waters, and you would be away from any sovereign territory that could impose its legal system on you. You're envisioning something a little different from that. Sort that all out for us.

QUIRK: Well, seasteading is homesteading the high seas, and our plan is to build floating nations that can disassemble and reassemble on the ocean according to the choices of the citizens, and we think this would prevent government monopolies from forming and force governments to compete to attract citizens. And continuing on our theme of cruise ships, these are basically libertarian skyscrapers. They dock in one nation. They incorporate in yet another nation. They fly the flag of yet another nation. They have friendly relations with nations all over the world, and they kind of stick together these different labor laws from one place, and you know, customers from another place. When I was on a cruise ship, I was walking around trying to do back-of-the-napkin calculations for how they could make this profitable, because it was the best standard of living I'd ever had.

It's like going camping and taking your mall with you, and there's ice sculptures and there's people taking care of me, and there's entertainment, and it's affordable for a middle-class American. Once we are able to build permanent structures on the high seas that can float permanently, you realize these would be independent governments. They wouldn't dock anywhere else. And once you wrap your mind around the fact that 45% of the earth's surface is completely unclaimed by any existing state, you realize you could have startup mobile governments on the ocean, and that insight started the seasteading movement. Since Patri Friedman proposed this—he cofounded the Seasteading Institute with Peter Thiel—we've attracted marine biologists, and nautical engineers, and aquaculture farmers, and maritime attorneys and medical researchers. It goes on and on and on, and probably at this point, at least 1,000 people have donated to the Institute because they want to see startup governments on the ocean.

WOODS: It's such a good idea—it's such an interesting idea that I would hate to see happen to this what's happened basically all over the world—that maybe here and there you start off with a pretty good idea, but then the statist come around, and before you know it, it's just another government like any other place. What kind of built-in safeguards are there to prevent that from happening?

QUIRK: If you imagine the ocean is so fundamentally different from land, you have to think really deeply about why governments on the ocean would be different. I think the

reason national governments are so dysfunctional is because they are monopolies. Some government just sort of claims a piece of land and all the people within it. We're just sort of born into this nation formed by a previous conqueror, and then some government claims us, and then we can't switch to a competing provider if we don't like it. On the ocean, you are mobile, and if you could imagine, our plan is to create cities that are like mobile jigsaw puzzles. They can fit together and detach according to the choices of the people who live there, according to the citizens, and we think this will create a market of competing governments where governments will compete to attract mobile citizens. And if you get in a political fight, you can detach, move somewhere else, link up with your allies, and found your own floating nation. We think this will accelerate the innovations in governance, because right now we don't think 193 governments represent the range of ideas that seven billion people have produced. So seasteading brings a startup sensibility to the problem of government monopolies that don't innovate sufficiently, and we think a market of competing services in governance will unleash innovation.

WOODS: All right, we'll come back to that topic a little bit later. There's so many other things I want to make sure I get to. Of course, I will be linking to seasteading.org on the show notes page for today, tomwoods.com/363. I will also link to your—you've got about a two and a half minute video on floating cities that spells out what you guys are up to. I am going to link to that as well. I want to talk about a few other things. Let's talk for a minute about maybe the technical aspect of things. What is this going to look like and how is it going to be built? These are questions that you guys have apparently looked into and answered. You've actually got estimates on how much per square foot the real estate is going to wind up being. Flesh that out for us, if you would.

QUIRK: I think it's going to happen in incremental steps, and in the immediate short-term, we've initiated our floating city project, which you can find on our website, and I encourage people to check out, and these will be modular platforms floating in the territorial waters of a host nation, which is willing to grant us substantial political autonomy, and if you want to find people who know how to build large floating structures, you go to the Dutch because Holland is sinking and the Dutch are learning how to float, and we've got a Dutch aquatic engineering firm known as Delta Sync, and they've created the feasibility report for our floating city project, and I think that's in the short term. If we were able to demonstrate a few floating platforms that can disassemble, reassemble, attach, and if we're able to create some jobs for the local people—if we're able to set a good example, we think this will attract enough brains to seasteading to solve the deeper engineering challenge of floating cities on the high seas. The technology to build in shallow waters already exists. The technology to build floating structures that are affordable on the high seas has yet to be solved—that problem.

WOODS: Now, you're talking about—and of course, we're just having a fun conversation here. We can speculate wildly about the future, and I know I am getting ahead of where you guys are now, but I am just a curious person. Right now you're talking about being in protected waters working out some kind of arrangements with coastal nations. Do you ever imagine this getting to a point where you would be beyond the reach of a coastal nation and somehow you would figure out exactly how the questions of sovereignty would resolve themselves?

QUIRK: Yes, we plan to create floating islands on the high seas beyond the jurisdiction of any government, and we think if these profits scale up—there was a floating airport in Japan in the year 2000. If people are able to fly out there, and these become cities beyond the jurisdiction of existing nations—sort of permanent. Imagine two dozen cruise ships all linking up and forming a city. Once these people have a running economy and once children are born there, we think the U.N. and other nations might be inclined to recognize them as sovereign nations, and we have all sorts of volunteer legal scholars working on setting establishing the legal precedence for why this could happen.

WOODS: Obviously, as you said, this is not an inexpensive undertaking, but on the other hand, if it works, it seems like it could generate quite a bit of revenue. Where does the startup capital come from?

QUIRK: Right now the people that are most interested are people that are interested in the problem of governments and what they imagine they could do if they could start over, and there's lots of different businesses that are interested in new sovereign mobile nations. Among them is medical tourism. Islands surrounding the United States like the Cayman Islands—they are already building gigantic health cities, planning on catching the rising wave of dissatisfied Americans flying overseas for better, cheaper faster care, and a famous humanitarian surgeon Devi Shetty: he was in the news saying the best place to have a floating hospital would be off the coast of an American city, and given that that doesn't exist, I am going to the Cayman Islands. I think beyond that, I know lots of biotech entrepreneurs and stem cell physicians who are frustrated by the regulations that are written in the 1970s preventing the kind of innovations they want to bring in 2020, and they are eager to get out from under this old gridlocked kind of sclerotic system of regulations and start anew somewhere else, and I think people will appreciate the power of starting over.

I think of Hong Kong as an example of a country that started over, created fabulous wealth and prosperity for people, and sort of embarrassed China into changing its markets to be more open. I think of Singapore this way. I think of the Cayman Islands, which has no standing army, and in many ways, takes a sort of spiteful stance towards the U.S., you know, welcomes financial mavericks and medical research entrepreneurs. As long as you don't directly provoke large nations, they are not really incentivized to invade. The way I always put it: If nations are shark, when you build your seastead you

want to think like a cleaner fish. You want to provide a service that the big nations find valuable. And people are interested in aquaculture farms. People are interested in mass farming of the oceans. They think the future of food is in algae. People interested in biofuel are interested in seasteading, and we're attracting environmentalists. The sign that seasteading is a meta-idea is the diversity of solutions that people brought to us. Once Patri Friedman proposed this, solutions we never imagined have been brought to us.

WOODS: Now, Joe, I realize we can take the cruise ship analogy only so far, but one valuable insight from the cruise ship analogy is that as you described, it is an incredible world you walk into when you set foot on a cruise ship, and as you say, it's a completely self-contained society with entertainment and wonderful food and people at your beck and call, and it's beautifully decorated, and you feel very comfortable. But notice that we don't sit on a cruise ship and think to ourselves, well, what kind of system of governance do they have? Do they have a constitution? Are they electing selectmen? Do they have a governor? It's a private company that runs that cruise ship, and I think that's part of the reason that we enjoy being on board. Now, why can't the seasteading thing be thought of in terms of a company? A private company runs this place, and if you think, of course, all the progressive websites would be horrified. Well, they don't have to live there. You can move away if you don't like it. Why not think along that model instead of thinking, well, let's try and have a slightly better example of what hasn't worked at all on land, namely, we'll come up with some constitution and try and start over again? Forget starting over again. Let's really start over and try something that humanity should have tried a long time ago, which is just a purely voluntary society. What about that?

QUIRK: At this point, most seasteaders support the kind of thing you just proposed. I have been on two cruise ships. I never saw a cop. I never saw an enforcer. Ships all over the world have their own private security. They bring their own private health care along. Before you get on this cruise ship, you sign something with a private company saying they are going to take care of your health care. They are going to assure that your food is safe. I think we could easily have such a diversity of arrangements on the ocean if you just provide the technology for people to start their own independent societies on the sea. I think unimaginable solutions will emerge, and I would like to see exactly what you proposed.

WOODS: Now, tell me. I saw this video that, as I said, I am going to link to at tomwoods.com/363, in which you matter-of-factly point out that there have already been talks or talks are ongoing with various coastal nations about working out some type of mutually satisfactory arrangements. I realize that you obviously can't disclose any specifics about that, but what can you tell us about that?

QUIRK: Most people don't realize that legal islands within existing states are being created all over the world. They are called special economic zones. They come under various names: leave zones, elevator cities. You had Michael Strong on your show not long ago. He's interested in elevator cities. So many nations that recognize that solutions emerge from startups are willing to allow little legal island within their country. And this is going on all over Asia, and in India, and in South America. The kind of nations that already have legislation to allow special economic zones are open to the idea of us coming to them and saying, hey, we don't even need any land. We'll make our own land just offshore. Technically, we'll be within your territorial waters, but maybe you could arrange for us to have some measure of political autonomy, and we promise that we will do our best to create some prosperity and hire some local people and maybe create some blue jobs. And many nations are open to this idea. So we're in various stages of negotiation with several.

WOODS: I note here in my notes that you and Patri Friedman have a book coming out next year to be published by Simon and Schuster, which is wonderful because, of course, Simon and Schuster is a big, big major publisher, which naturally elevates any book in terms of significance and visibility and credibility—very, very important. So I think in a case like this, it makes sense not to self-publish, even though I have been singing the praises of that because I self-published my most recent book. In this case, I would do exactly what you're doing. The title that I have here in my notes is *Why Seasteading? How Floating Nations Will Liberate Humanity*. Can you say a word about that? Because when that comes out, I would like to have one of you guys back on.

QUIRK: Often proposed titles change, so you're aware of this. These things might change over time, but we think people are—Patri comes from a family of people who have been innovating in how governance could work for decades. David Friedman has written very interesting ideas for how anarcho-capitalist societies could work. Lots of people would like to try these ideas. Milton Friedman put tons of his effort into explaining to people the power of markets and to talk them out of their—talk them into counterintuitive conclusions about what causes prosperity. But the problem is there is just no way to try these ideas. People are thinking of all sorts of ways that new societies can be created, and if you think the United States was designed when information travelled at the speed of a horse before there were cars, before there was electricity. We have lots of modern ideas that could be tried out, and we'd like to provide the platforms for people try them to unleash the innovation. We'd like to see innovators unleashed from the monopolies that prevent them from trying their ideas.

WOODS: Well, it's all very exciting, and I want to urge people to check out seasteading.org to get your newsletter, to follow what you guys are up to. As I said, when that book comes out, I'd love to talk to you guys again. I am going to collect all the various resources we've been talking about on the show notes page,

tomwoods.com/363. Joe Quirk, this has been—I think this is one of my favorite conversations I've had, and this is episode number 363. So I am really grateful for your time today—a lot of fun.

QUIRK: Tom, I really appreciate what you do, and I am honored that you invited me.