

# A More Comfortable Berth for Lobsters

Carriers look to specialized containers to boost margins.

[More stories by Nicholas Brautlecht](#) 2. Juni 2016, 22:35 MESZ



Photographer: Getty Images

In Europe, lobster is an expensive delicacy, requiring constant cooling as the live crustaceans make their way from traps off the coast of Nova Scotia to kitchens in London, Paris, or Frankfurt. Until recently, that meant shipping the creatures via air, crammed about 10 to 20 per box filled with ice packs. These days distributors are considering a new mode of transport: a standard-size shipping container called Aquaviva that can carry almost 10,000 live lobsters, each in its own cubbyhole filled with seawater that's chilled, filtered, and monitored for oxygen. "It's a more natural environment, and the lobsters are packed separately, so they don't bite

each other, and you don't see legs falling off," says Danielle Westerweel, marketing chief of Krijn Verwijs Yerseke, a 136-year-old Dutch seafood monger. "The quality is much better than airfreight."

### Crustaceans on the Cruise

CMA CGM devoted four years to developing a new type of shipping container to transport lobsters, which usually travel by plane

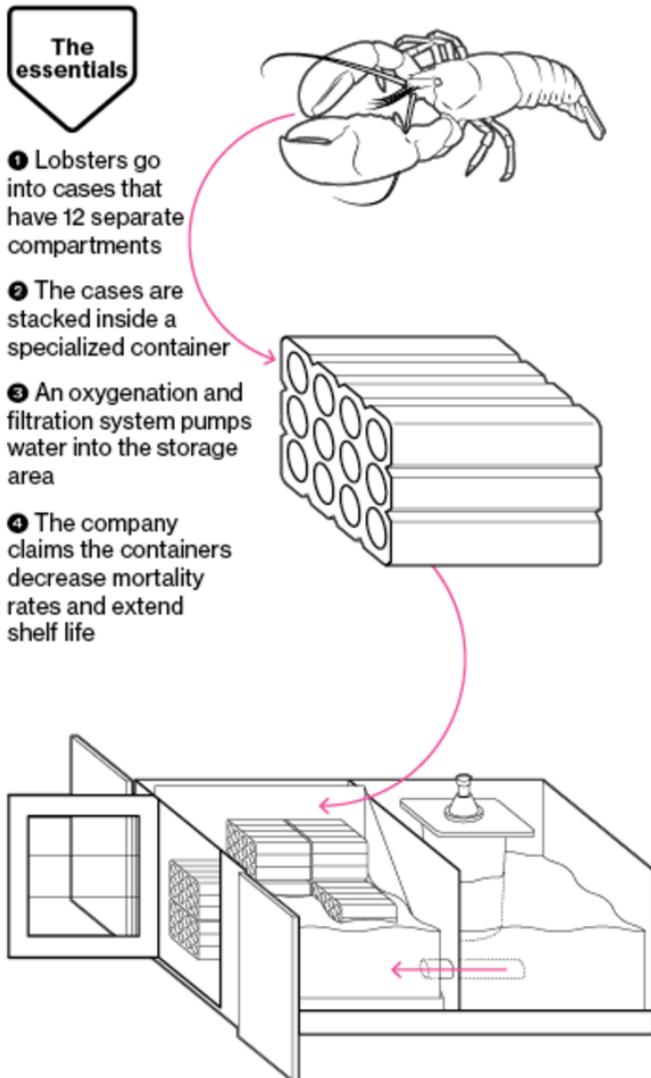


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The Aquaviva is made by France's CMA CGM, the world's third-largest container shipping line. Following four years of development, CMA in April started offering it for transporting lobsters and possibly other live seafood like mussels and oysters. The effort is an example of a trend in which carriers such as CMA, Germany's Hapag-Lloyd, and market leader A.P. Moeller-Maersk are trying to bolster margins with specialized containers designed to move perishable or fragile goods. The companies need to court new customers as an oversupply of vessels has sent freight prices down by two-thirds in the past four years, to about \$500 per container shipped from China to Europe—barely enough to cover handling, fuel, and terminal fees. The carriers are looking to expand the use of

refrigerated containers and making their boxes more intelligent, allowing them to communicate with port operators, truckers, warehouse managers, and companies whose goods are being shipped. "The industry is badly in need of beefing up the demand side at a time when demand for standard goods is scarcely rising," says Peter Sand, an analyst at Bimco, a shipping trade association.

Maersk has equipped cooling containers for another niche traditionally served by airlines: the \$500 million market for Kenyan roses shipped to Europe. The containers can be driven directly to farms, where the flowers are loaded in, cooled to just above freezing, and ventilated to limit fungus. They can keep the roses fresh for 25 days without water while cutting

transportation costs by as much as 70 percent, Maersk says.

Hamburg Süd Group is working to extend the shelf life of produce in containers with controlled levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide. That would open distant markets to Latin American fruit and allow importers to hold produce in containers if they expect prices to rise. And Hapag has 10,000 controlled-atmosphere boxes that can maintain constant temperatures for shipping blood plasma, vaccines, and other sensitive pharmaceutical products. Freight forwarders say such containers cost at least double the standard shipping rate, and so-called superfreezers for goods such as sashimi-grade tuna or vaccines used to fight the recent Ebola epidemic can cost as much as \$15,000. “The challenge is the shift away from standard products toward specialization,” says Niklas Ohling, who oversees container routing at Hapag.

The risk is that specialty containers will gum up the system. Containers have revolutionized shipping over the past six decades, in large measure because they’re interchangeable. The standard boxes can be filled with anything from shirts stitched in Bangladesh to iPhones assembled in China to BMW drivetrains made in Germany. Specialized containers often must be shipped back empty before they can be used again, because there’s not a lot of demand in, say, Canada for lobsters caught off the Dutch coast. “Each distinct container type potentially increases imbalances due to its restricted and less versatile use,” says Stefan Duehring, global head of logistics at Hamburg Süd.



Source: CMA CGM

Some European fishmongers doubt CMA's aquarium container will loosen airfreight's grip on the lobster market, pointing to the price risks of longer delivery times. While Canadian lobsters can be flown to Brussels or Frankfurt within 48 hours of being caught, surface transportation takes about two weeks—long enough to see huge swings in price. Maersk in 2014 scrapped a similar lobster container project, saying demand didn't warrant the expense. CMA says its project will be a success because its cooling and filtering technologies minimize stress for lobsters. Dutch fish seller Westerweel says her company isn't planning to switch solely to ocean shipping for lobsters, but she sees a future for the special containers. "There is always a price risk," she says. "We will probably use both means of transport."

***The bottom line:*** Carriers say containers tailored to transport goods such as fruit, flowers, or pharmaceuticals can shore up flagging profits.