

# *Man Tried to Travel the Atlantic in a Hamster Wheel, U.S. Says. Again.*

The man, Reza Baluchi, 51, was charged Tuesday in connection with the attempted voyage from Florida to London, cut short when the authorities caught up with him off the coast of Georgia last month.



By Livia Albeck-Ripka

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As Hurricane Franklin was barreling toward the Eastern United States last month, the United States Coast Guard, preparing off the coast of Georgia, encountered another unexpected phenomenon.

Alone at sea was a man in a buoyant human-size hamster wheel, who claimed he was trying to journey on the Atlantic Ocean. Again.

The man, Reza Baluchi, 51, of Florida, told officers he had planned to travel more than 4,000 miles to London in the homemade vessel, which the Coast Guard later described as unsafe, given that it was built with buoys. Mr. Baluchi, who has been attempting similar voyages since 2014, threatened to kill himself should officers interrupt his mission, the Coast Guard said.

He was eventually persuaded to leave his vessel on Aug. 29 and was charged in federal court in Miami on Tuesday with obstruction of boarding and violation of the Captain of the Port Order.

According to the Coast Guard, Mr. Baluchi was first spotted on Aug. 26, around 70 nautical miles off the coast of Tybee Island, Ga. Officers asked him to show his registration documents, but he could not find them, according to a complaint filed Tuesday in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida in Miami.

When officers approached Mr. Baluchi's vessel in a smaller boat and asked him to disembark, he said he had a 12-inch knife and would kill himself, so they returned to their ship, which remained nearby, according to the complaint. They next day, officers tried again, but this time Mr. Baluchi showed them two knives, again threatening to kill himself. He then grabbed some wires and said he would blow himself up, according to the documents. Later, he told the officers that the so-called bomb was fake.

It was two days before officers — who had tried to deliver food, water and news of the approaching hurricane to Mr. Baluchi — were finally able to coax him from his floating wheel. On Friday, they brought him ashore in Miami Beach.

Neither Mr. Baluchi, a former professional cyclist who was born in Iran and was granted asylum in the United States, nor his lawyer could immediately be reached for comment on Wednesday evening. The Justice Department refused to comment further on the case.

According to court documents, the voyage was Mr. Baluchi's fourth attempt in a decade at traveling on the ocean in a homemade contraption. Each time, the Coast Guard ultimately intervened, according to court records.

In 2021, beachgoers were stunned when he popped out of a top hatch of a wheel, having traveled just 25 miles of his planned route from St. Augustine, Fla., to New York, using the power of his two legs and, if all had gone according to plan, the Gulf Stream.

Mr. Baluchi had spent thousands of dollars making improvements to that craft, called a hydro pod, which was equipped with a satellite phone, a water filtration system, a solar array, neoprene wet suits and a stockpile of granola and ramen noodles, he said in an interview at the time. But he aborted his adventure when he realized his backup GPS device and charging cables were missing.

“I know what I’m doing,” he said in the 2021 interview, in which he noted that the purpose of his attempted trips was to raise money to help homeless people and for other charitable causes. He added, “I am not dumb.”

According to the authorities, Mr. Baluchi also attempted trips on the ocean in a homemade vessel in 2014 and 2016. The year after the first attempt, he was served an order advising him that his vessel was unsafe and outlining the requirements for making it seaworthy. Those included clearing any voyages with the relevant authorities and making sure he had a support vessel.

Mr. Baluchi was released on Tuesday on \$250,000 bond, according to court documents, which note that he “may not go to the ocean or board a vessel on to the ocean.”

**Livia Albeck-Ripka** is a reporter for The Times based in California. She was previously a reporter in the Australia bureau. More about Livia Albeck-Ripka