

# A freight way to travel

OUR WRITER JOINED THE 243-METRE CONTAINER SHIP *SPIRIT OF AUCKLAND* IN SYDNEY'S BOTANY BAY FOR A 12-DAY VOYAGE TO TAURANGA ON THE EAST COAST OF NEW ZEALAND'S NORTH ISLAND.

WORDS ALLAN LOWTHER PORTER



Like any excited traveller about to embark on a journey, I checked the weather forecast on the morning of departure to see favourable conditions ahead for the voyage from Botany Bay. As I stepped on to the deck the Second Officer bid me welcome, checked my Passport name against the ships' manifest and directed me to E-Deck where the Chief Officer showed me a comfortable cabin.

After a welcome by the Captain and an invitation to chat over dinner it was time to explore the ship, one that I'm going to share with officers and crew – and a few thousand containers. What's special about freighter travel, presuming it is safe and there are no instructions to the contrary, is free movement about the ship including the bridge.

And at evening meal time in the Officer's Mess I met the full complement of passengers – one other like-minded

adventurer, a Kiwi lady who was doing a round trip from Auckland to Auckland, via Sydney and Melbourne.

Meals are taken at set times and it's a case of if it's good enough for the ship's company, it's good enough for passengers. As a rule, soft drinks and alcoholic drinks can be purchased separately. But no wine.

Final securing of the load, preparations for departure then release of the lines, and on the dot of the hour, we edged our way clear of the Botany Bay terminal.

The Bridge was in darkness with only the glow of instrument panels, console and readouts providing light; and completely silent, except for the quiet voice interaction between Pilot, Captain and Helmsman. All stayed quiet as all actions to move this great vessel out of its parking lot and down the main road to the open sea were put in place.

The calm sea conditions prevailed. The quiet vibrations in the hull from the

engine were a constant reminder that we were making way.

A clear morning dawned and in the distance was the New South Wales coastline. But with an eye to the weather further south, the words of the Pilot as he left us in Botany Bay loomed ominously. "It'll be lumpy crossing the Tasman!"

True to his words, the weather to the south had become interesting. Strengthening winds and bigger seas, gave a foretaste of what's to come, and passing through the entrance to Port Phillip Bay to sheltered waters and Melbourne was a welcomed respite. After shore-leave and when loading was completed we set off to cross the Tasman for Dunedin's Port Chalmers on the south island.

On departure from Port Phillip Bay, the deteriorating weather had prompted a review of sailing options. It was decided that a crossing of Bass Strait to Tasmania to anchor in a sheltered position and





*The Spirit of Auckland.*

allow the worst of the conditions to pass before attempting the Tasman crossing was the best option.

The slow movement of the low-pressure system at last provided an opportunity to cross the Tasman. Winds and seas were still unforgiving but eventually, with the Foveaux Strait of New Zealand's south island approaching, the conditions allowed the welcome relief of an easy walk on a steady deck as the calm seas, sunshine and distant coastline opened before us.

And from Port Chalmers, we sailed to Napier, the famed art-deco city.

In each port it never ceases to amaze – observing the fast movement of containers by the shore-based gantry. It's something that adds to the experience of travelling on a freighter and is a constant reminder that we are an integral part of the economic cycle of international trade.

At Tauranga, the next port, I disembark bringing to an end what has been a very

enjoyable adventure – and I was filled with envy that 'my' ship would go on across the Pacific, through the Panama Canal to Central and North American ports.

We park this great ship and then, the words from the Captain on the Bridge that in the history and tradition of ships at sea is an absolute finality, 'Finished with Engines'. Moments of quiet followed when the ship has come to final rest and is secured alongside. And for me, a moment to say, 'I'll be back'. The next voyage beckons.

A few facts about freighter travel

- Freighters often have cabins available for passengers that would otherwise have been used by members of the ship's company.
- There is no doctor on board freighters.
- There are no special meals or catering.
- Weather, tides and loading can influence a ship's schedule. Be ready for changes. Is it for you?

You have to have the ability to fit in with

the permanent members of the sea-going family. You are largely responsible for yourself and your own welfare and using your time to advantage, without cocktails, cabarets and casinos. If that's for you, the ultimate enjoyment will be yours, shared by all those on board and where life in the mainstream will seem worlds' away. •

*The author arranged and paid for his own passage with Hamburg Süd*

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