



A teenager alone on high seas

Oriana inched away from the dock, snapping streamers and breaking bonds. I stayed on deck in the fading light, watching our wake, all the way down *The Solent* and into the Channel, excited about the voyage to come, and places due to enter my viewfinder. But a few hours later, when we hit a violent storm in the Bay of Biscay, I was no longer thinking of exhilarating settings. Instead, I lay on my D-deck bunk, watching a towel swing from side to side on the cabin door, turning various shades of green, as the grand ocean liner rolled in the enormous swell.

The next day, anchored by Gibraltar's Rock, with millpond waters under a cloudless sky, I leaned over the railings, watching small boats ferry people back and forth. Then on our way again, and just one day later, I found myself wandering the back streets of Naples, jousting with sun-glassed Italian touts, over postcards and paraphernalia.



A day or so further along, across *The Med* in Port Said, and prior to the Suez Canal, I recall bartering with a Muslim trader, attired in white cap and gown, who stood in one of many small boats, way down below. He was selling leather goods: mustard-brown and russet-red bags, one of which I bought; the money and the purchase shuffled up and down



on a long rope. Later, SS Oriana led a convoy of thirty ships down the canal to Suez, stopping enroute in *Bitter Lake*, to let a northbound convoy pass buy. Out on deck, the incredible heat of that day gave me a taste of what was to come in Australia.

After Suez, we made an overnight stop in Aden, where quite remarkably, Peter, a classmate from my village school, came on board to take me ashore for a meal amongst camels and dimly lit souks. It was his first posting in the Royal Navy. He was 18 and I was 16. Incredible to think that a few years before, we had been running around the primary school playground; now we sat smoking sheesha, with the bright lights of Oriana, anchored close to shore, a glittering backdrop.

Leaving Peter to keep the flag flying, we ploughed on across the Indian Ocean to Colombo, a 24-hour stop and my first taste of the tropics; resuming back on board for the longest sea-leg: six days South to



Western Australia. For a few days It was all deck quoits and smooth sailing. Then just prior to landfall we ran into the mother-of-all storms: so bad that the big ship had to stand offshore for 12 hours, until relative calm allowed the pilot to come on board to steer us into Fremantle. My first steps in the land down-under had stalled ... but not for long.

It seemed a long time had passed since I stood on deck, as Oriana broke her ties with the Southampton dock: a simple teenager. Then through the voyage - which traversed vast oceans and visited exotic ports - I caught a glimpse of another world; enough to amaze and inspire me. When three weeks later, I looked out as the massive ship edged into Port Melbourne quay, it was as if I had begun to inhabit a new and more adult persona.

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