



A Wife on the Ocean Wave

*by
Lorraine Churlow*



Before Colin and I married and went to sea together, I had a very different kind of life - in Bristol's bedsit-land - where I shared a small flat in a large, decrepit Georgian house with my best friend Judy. Owned by the very strange Mr Bawn (otherwise known as the Goblin), who lived with his unfortunate family in the other side of the building, the house had long ago seen better days: cracks in walls, chipped paint and damp patches everywhere, wallpaper peeling off mould grew a foot or more up the walls, and when we woke in the morning our hair and clothes were damp. Through a large hole underneath the kitchen table, we were able to converse with the lads in the flat below without having to trouble to go downstairs. The only heat was from a broken-down gas fire which ate our coins with the ravening appetite of a gaming machine, so that sometimes there was no heat at all.

The Goblin complemented the slum-condition of his house very well; a small, dirty, filthy-minded crow-like creature, Fagin-esque in appearance and personality, he let it be known that he would sometimes be willing to overlook difficulties with the rent in return for certain favours, and thereafter developed the habit of quietly letting himself into our flat early in the morning with his spare key - bursting into the bedroom in the hope of catching one or both of us unclothed. To his disappointment, he never did - once giving vent to his frustration by rushing in and tearing the bedclothes from Judy who, to his annoyance, was wearing a sturdy nightdress in anticipation of his arrival!

The rusty old gas geezer over the tub in the communal bathroom next door smelled strongly of gas. We felt our lives were imperilled when taking a bath - or when using the loo, peering down through a useful hole in the dirty floorboards to the hall below, where we could keep track of the comings and goings of other tenants through the front door. So worried was Bawn about the smell of gas that he immediately set about finding the source of the apparent leak with a cigarette lighter. We stood in the doorway, frozen with horror, waiting for the explosion that would blast us all into the Bristolian sky. Unexpectedly, we survived his investigations and he got a man in to fix the leak.



Judy

Our bath thus temporarily out of use, the Goblin kindly offered us the use of his family's bathroom next door. The house was two semis, and it occurred to him that if he knocked through the dividing wall he could spy on his tenants more easily - so he demolished a large section of the wall to give himself unlimited access for sneaking around. So it was that when Judy or I wished to take up his offer of a bath, we had to negotiate our way in the semi-darkness across nearly three feet of rubble; broken plasterwork, cement and

stone hung out spookily from the sides, like a scene from a horror film and so over into his half of the house, which wasn't much better than ours.

We lived on baked-beans-on toast and salads, supplemented by bags of food donated by our families at weekends, hitching to Somerset and back since we had no bus fare. Our wages were poor; one time, we were so broke that we stuffed most of our clothes into carrier-bags and took them down to the newly-opened Oxfam shop - which we thought was just a second-hand-shop - and tried to sell them so we could buy something for dinner. "We are a CHARITY shop!", said the assistant, nose in the air, "we do not BUY clothes!" So we took them back home again, crestfallen, cold and supper-less, but still with something to wear!

Judy and I eventually moved from Bawn's Dickensian slum to separate bedsits, but remained close friends and one day, from her new job at the GPO Telephone Exchange, she invited me to join a group of GPO telephonists who were going to a party on a ship at Avonmouth dock. A minibus had been laid on but it was late arriving, and I was just crossing the road to go home when it finally came round the corner - and within the space of one minute the whole course of my life changed.



A party on a ship was a new experience for us: squealing, all dressed up and giggling like schoolgirls, seven or eight of us staggered up the gangway escorted eagerly by several members of this new species - sailors! Colin was standing at the foot of the stairs leading into the bar when I first saw him, looking up at us with a big grin on his face. "Hello girls!" he called, "come on down to the bar!" I remember he was wearing an orange shirt and I looked at him with interest; I thought he was quite dashing, and his sense of humour was just as daft as mine. We were together all evening dancing, talking and drinking and he was sorely disappointed to find himself with a girl who said no! But he asked me out just the same.

The following evening we went out to a Berni Inn (remember those?) for steak and a bottle of Mateus Rose. I'd had neither steak nor wine before, so I thought this was really living the high-life! The evening after, he invited himself to my bedsit for dinner, where he was astonished to be offered a plate of baked beans on toast which, I explained, was the staple diet of girls in bedsit-land. So he took me out again instead, not being a fan of baked beans apparently ... or perhaps he just felt sorry for me!



Our Wedding day

Colin somehow managed to remain on the UK coastal run for nearly a year; we managed to meet around once a fortnight, but eventually he was sent back deep-sea and away from England for six months. During that time we exchanged long letters, then when he phoned my flat early one morning from Auckland and asked me to marry him I said yes, OK then!

Our two-and-a-half-year adventure at sea together began in the freezing February of 1973, soon after we were married. Colin was 24 and had been a

marine engineer for three years, I was 23 and an ex-commercial artist. We joined the MV Westmorland in the vibrant port of Liverpool, full of vessels of all sizes lit up like carnival floats in the misty, icy evening. The warmth hit me as we stepped through the door onto the accommodation deck, along with the smell of oil and the steady thrum of the ship's huge engines down below. I'd visited several of Colin's ships before, but this one would be my home for the next three months; I was excited, but a little apprehensive as I looked around and wondered how I would fit into this all-male environment. I had never left my home-shores before, and this was the biggest adventure of my life!

We sailed the following day. I can still hear the sound of clinking chains and raised voices echoing across the distance of nearly 40 years, feel the sudden lurch of the vessel as she slipped her moorings, the gap between ship and shore widening as we pushed on out through the harbour entrance and onto the choppy open sea. I always stood at the rails to watch arrival and departure, it never lost its interest for me (when we left Liverpool on the Tongariro for my second voyage across the world, we put one of our big Bang & Olufsen speakers at the open cabin-porthole and played 'The Leaving Of Liverpool' at full volume. The song echoed all round the busy port and soon, sailors on other ships came out on deck - there must have been well over a hundred people waving us off).



Tongariro

Living on a ship was something of a cultural shock for a passenger, or 'supernumerary' like me (not a very flattering term - surplus to requirements), straight from bedsit-land to ocean-going cargo vessel in one giant leap! I missed my friends and family, going to the shops - all the normal, everyday things people generally take for granted but soon enough, life assumed a different sort of normality: the wall became the bulkhead (why?), the floor became the deck. I soon realised that 'port' was left in the glass, etc. etc., and quickly found my sea-legs, being fortunate never to suffer from seasickness even in the most violent of storms - which a few of the men did for a day or so, even some who'd been at sea for a long time.

A personal routine soon established itself; my only jobs were tidying the cabin and doing our laundry, and my routine was to do them whenever I felt like it! One of the two wives on board on my second trip tried to establish a rota for using the laundry-room, but neither the other wife nor myself wanted to be regulated in this way, much to her disapproval! Neither did we wish to be part of a rota for cleaning the bar - that was the steward's job, and how the officers liked to keep their bar was really nothing to do with us. The Westmorland was the only ship I sailed on where there were no other wives on board and later, for various reasons, I decided that I preferred it that way; women can be strange creatures at times and are not always good to one another, especially in a strongly male environment. Perhaps it's a reaction to so much testosterone in a relatively confined space!



Ashore in Curacao

In many ways it was a strange way of life; the normal, everyday business of the world went on somewhere far away and we knew little about it. A curious

sense of detachment soon took hold - if there was bad news when we left, there it remained without us and we more or less forgot about it. There were obviously no newspapers, and no TV except in port, and even that mostly in a foreign tongue. We had a humorous and imaginative Radio Officer on board the Wild Auk who regularly pinned his own version of The News to the notice-board, which was probably more interesting than the real news! It always made us laugh and was a distraction when the days became a bit humdrum, as they sometimes did on a long haul (the longest we spent without seeing land was the 10 days between California and Nagasaki). Upon reaching home at the end of my first trip, we discovered that a major political scandal had broken some weeks before, concerning the US president Richard Nixon, something about a place called Watergate....

Returning to England was exciting after several months away; I appreciated anew how green the landscape was, how fresh it smelled after rain. Once, I had an argument with a village postmistress over the price of stamps; the cost had increased substantially during our absence because of 1970s runaway-inflation, and I felt that everyone was trying to rob us! With friends, it was as though I'd never been away. I remember feeling quite crushed, thinking nobody had missed me; they showed little interest in my foreign adventures either! But, of course, life had continued for them, too, while I'd been away.

On each voyage we took with us a number of reel-to-reel films, which the Chief Steward relayed from an ancient projector onto a white screen in the lounge. These were carefully rationed throughout the trip. The films were seldom new and most of us had seen them before, but it didn't matter, they were important events on our rather thin social calendar. Often, accompanied by groans and cat-calls, the projector broke down and we had regular intermissions for drinks and snacks, just like at the cinema, though we missed the usherette with her tray of ices!

Social life was quite good; off-duty time not spent sleeping or eating mostly centred around the bar, and I was astounded at how cheap the drinks were - a fraction of what I'd been paying down the pub. I reflected how easy it would be to slip into the temptations of an ever-open bar with cheap alcohol and become a raving drunk, but nobody I knew at sea ever did (except the odd cook, who in any case usually had his own private supply). The officers and crew mostly kept to their own bars except on Saturday nights, when they took turns to host the entertainment. Then there was the odd drinking session, naturally, all of which depended on who was off-shift at the time. It was a bit like going to the pub, off to the local to join the regulars leaning on the bar, except that it was just down the corridor. Saturdays, whether the sea was lumpy or calm, we played Bingo, or sometimes just put on loud music and danced and sang raucously. Neil the cook and his steward friend entertained us greatly one night, singing along to Bachmann/Turner Overdrive's 'You Ain't Seen Nuthin' Yet', accompanying themselves enthusiastically with a yard-broom and a damp floor-mop, which was very amusing to everyone except the Chief Steward, beneath whose dignity it plainly was. He hated modern music, it really riled him. He perched on his bar-stool and scowled, but we ignored him and eventually he got up and left in disgust. When we docked back in England he brought his young wife and baby daughter on board for a short while, and I remember looking at the little girl and thinking that I didn't envy her.

We had our meals in the Officers' mess. The food was generally quite good, but its quality depended on the penny-pinching or otherwise of the Chief Steward (otherwise known as the Chief Thief) and often, the level of drunkenness of the cook. If he was having a bad day, dinner could be served swimming in a pool of grease and was almost inedible, and

in such a case, breakfast was probably the best bet of the day. One particular cook, who seemed to drink the clock round, was found to have emptied the fridges and replaced all the food with cases of beer! It was always good practice not to fall out with the cook, and to keep in mind the various meat-cleavers and other deadly items at his disposal in the galley ... cooks were often disposed to tantrums upon receipt of complaints about their cooking!

Separation of officers and crew was normal; as well as different bars, the Officer accommodation was better, on the whole, with a little more cabin-space - a reward of long service and seniority. On the Wild Auk, though, we encountered a bit of good old-fashioned snobbery too. We both got along particularly well with Neil the cook and one of the stewards - we were all around the same age and shared the same tastes in music etc. Since Colin's promotion to 2nd engineer, we'd had more space to entertain in the two-roomed cabin that went with his seniority, so they visited us socially some evenings, and we'd play music or have a game of cards. We had a small celebration one evening after Neil heard from his wife that, after four daughters, she had finally given him a son! We laughed as he crowed with delight, strutting like a cockerel about the cabin, displaying his muscular arms victoriously - "I've got a son! I made a boy! I'm a man!"



I've got a son !!

This fraternisation made Colin very unpopular with the other senior officers, who felt that social mixing between officers and crew threatened the conventions of professional demarcation. He was called to see the Captain and Chief engineer, who made their opinions very plain - but they were wasting their breath. Colin felt that unless his friendship with the cook and steward in any way affected how he ran the engine-room, which of course it did not - they were not engine-room staff, after all - who he chose to spend time with was his own business. They couldn't order him to stop, but were hostile thereafter and their disapproval was made clear in the Chief's end-of-voyage report, though nothing ever came of it. What nonsense it was!

To many of us, the 1970s represented the last dying whimpers of Britain's 500 year-old maritime tradition. Some of the lads at sea told me they were already making plans to get out and had advised their own sons that there was no future in the merchant navy. I was extremely lucky to go to sea when I did, before the steep decline gathered pace and



the busy dockyards began to empty. I saw the days of silver-service and crisp white table-linen in the mess, with meals served by stewards in smart white uniforms, and sailed with a company who genuinely cared for its fleet and personnel.... when to be an officer of the British merchant fleet, carrying centuries of tradition on his shoulders, really meant something. It's all gone now, I'm told, along with most of the personnel, and our remaining ships are mostly flagged-out abroad nowadays. Such a shame to have let it all go, and with barely a whisper imagine an

Island nation without its own strong merchant fleet! Henry VIII must be spinning in his grave...!

In the 1970s, cargo ships had full complements of officers and crew and everywhere was noisy and bustling and busy. The officers all looked fine and elegant, especially in their spruce whites, the uniform upon approaching the tropics. No Engineering-Officer was allowed in the mess or in the bar until he'd cleaned-up and changed from boiler-suit to uniform; mealtimes were quite formal, because standards were important and everyone respected that. Life on board ship must be a lonely existence nowadays, given how few people are needed to man the vast container ships of today's dwindling merchant fleet.

For exercise we had the long expanse of deck, of course, and many ships had a big lounge with a Table-Tennis table, which was interesting during stormy weather with the ship rolling! A rowing machine was discovered lying about somewhere in the bowels of the Westmorland and, of course, everybody wanted to use it at the same time, which caused a certain amount of friction, until one day it disappeared and was never seen again. We had an energetic fitness-fanatic on board and we suspected it was stowed away in his cabin and used as part of his daily exercise regime, evidence of which was heard nightly from the bangs, thumps and groans emanating from his cabin above the bar. We also had a small library of books kindly lent by the Mission to Seamen, whose unflagging dedication to seafarers remains legendary. While between ports, Colin and I often stayed in our cabin playing Scrabble and Canasta (that's when we discovered I'm a bad loser), filling our glasses from our own supply of Portuguese reds; almost every sort of drink was available in the bar, but ship's wine was pretty basic stuff. Not so many people drank wine in those days, preferring beer and spirits.



Run ashore in Curacao

Our first stop when crossing the Atlantic was to take on oil in Curacao. As 4th Engineer, this was Colin's responsibility so he had to remain down below to supervise; that meant that I could either stay on board and watch foreign TV, read a book, or accept the offer from some of the officers and crew to join them on a trip ashore (with generous but sinking hearts, bless them). So, we disembarked and made for a busy tourist bar with colourful umbrellas over patio tables, where we sat outside with our drinks and made conversation in the warm tropical evening.

Of course, I realised that my companions probably wouldn't be at this bar if I hadn't joined them, so after a while I suggested that we should go wherever they normally went and not to worry about me, I'd just tag along. Well, things perked up then; eyes brightened, drinks were abandoned and off we went at breakneck-speed to a quite different bar, where the prostitutes lived and plied their trade in rather less salubrious surroundings. Drinking rum and coke in a brothel on a tropical island was not something I'd ever expected to be doing, so I settled myself comfortably in an armchair to watch this new kind of life unfold, while the lads went off one by one, each returning a little later beaming broadly and downing a well-earned beer. Then, when I went looking for the loo, I was suddenly accosted by a very determined local man - I shrieked and fought him off as he grabbed at me, expecting any moment to be dragged off to some seedy room where I'd be forced to become part of the night's takings - when suddenly the door flew open and the crew, having heard my cries, poured into the corridor intent on my rescue! But before violence could ensue, we discovered that the man was only trying to stop me going into

the men's toilets! Everyone had a good laugh except the poor man and me - he was understandably alarmed at the sight of several burly sailors bearing down on him, and I felt like a complete fool! Which I was, of course.

Thereafter, all the lads were happy to take me ashore with them, knowing that I was not easily shocked and wouldn't let my presence cramp their style! Later that night, on my way out of the bar, I was propositioned by the owner, who told me he could make me rich



Panama Locks

if I'd stay on for a while - white European girls, he said, were very popular - and he offered me \$50 on the spot! I was dumbfounded, amused, flattered ... at the time that was a fair sum, and more than twice what the local girls were getting! My huge delight at this unexpected offer greatly amused my companions! However, I politely declined and, more than a little drunk, eagerly returned to the ship to convey to my husband how lucky he was to have me ... so eager in fact that I climbed down four flights of greasy engine-room steps to tell him so!

To my disappointment, his reaction on turning and finding me standing beside him was sheer horror, and he immediately and very carefully escorted me back up the four flights of greasy steps. "I was offered \$50!" I cried happily. "That's nice for you", was all he said, shaking his head and returning down below.

We anchored off Panama for a day or two, most of which I spent on deck, watching in fascination as one after another of the many vessels at anchor entered the first canal-lock; the gates were secured, then slowly the ship would rise with the water until it was level with the next lock, then the gates would open and she'd move on into the next one. All day I watched as ship after ship went through, until finally it was our turn.



Panama Canal

One of the cadets had been scrupulously saving bread for the mules, and as we prepared to pass through the first lock, up on deck he came, with a bulging bag of crusts ready to feed the poor weary animals he'd been told would be attached by ropes to pull this 10,000 ton cargo ship through the locks! How crestfallen he was when he saw the machines, or 'mules', pulling the ship and everyone laughing at him. But he got over it, and no doubt will have played the same trick on many a green recruit in his time. And so, through the Panama canal and out onto the Pacific ocean, which, to my disappointment, looked exactly like the Atlantic ocean.

During my time at sea I passed through the Panama canal three times and from both directions, and it was endlessly fascinating. Twice we made passage during the hours of darkness, and I sat awake on deck all night in a deck-chair, while Colin worked down in the engine-room or slept off his shift in the cabin. In my mind I can still hear the hum and buzz of myriad tropical insects, and the echoing calls and shrieks of unknown nocturnal animal-life away deep amongst ancient, impenetrable trees, against the steady throb of

ship's engines, as the equatorial rain-forest glided slowly by in the darkness under starry skies, ever mysterious, always exciting.

Our first proper port of call on the Westmorland was 'windy' Wellington (though the weather was bright and calm during our visit). I was full of suppressed excitement, trying not to let it show (oh wow! I can't believe it! I'm in New Zealand!), looking out through the bar doors at the wide, beautiful harbour with its tall fountain playing on the waterfront.



My Family in NZ

I went ashore at the first opportunity, on my own, as Colin was down in the engine-room. I walked into the nearby town and stopped at the first coffee-shop I found and went inside, listening happily to all the strange kiwi accents around me. I ordered a filter-coffee, and for some reason was very impressed to find a choice of milk, and whipped or double cream (wow! I'm in New Zealand!).

After dinner in the mess that evening, we went into the bar where a few of us sat quietly playing Scrabble, a favourite on-board game. All of a sudden the door flew open and five or six boisterous women blew in, shrieking their pleasure at seeing the men they recognised. They turned and spotted us in the corner "Colin!" they squealed, pushing past me and piling on top of him, smothering him in kisses. They carted him off, protesting feebly and unconvincingly, to the bar, where they proceeded to monopolise him. Poor Colin, I think he forgot for a moment that he'd got married since he last saw this group of female fans but I very soon jogged his memory!

I loved NZ - what a beautiful country! My family took me touring in their battered old Rover, which had one door tied shut with rope (it being often difficult to obtain spare parts for these much-loved old English cars), and we visited hot volcanic springs, saw various ancient Maori artefacts and buildings. We took a look in Auckland's Modern Art gallery, where my Uncle took out a bit of old rubbish he'd picked out of a roadside bin and surreptitiously placed it amongst a display of contemporary sculpture, where to our great amusement it remained for some weeks before it was spotted and removed!



Me on an Aussie Beach

We hired a car on NZ's South island and went touring for the weekend (whilst in port, those not on watch or loading-duty usually had the two days free). Thanks to the 'Lord Of The Rings' film trilogy, most people today are familiar with NZ's wildly beautiful and mountainous landscapes, but in the largely un-travelled 1970s this paradise remained little-known outside the Antipodes. I was immediately struck by its similarity to the English Lake District (though with a friendlier climate), with its sheep-covered hills and little farmsteads dotted about on green pastures. We found a hotel for the night and ate rump steak and eggs for breakfast the next morning, which was delicious (if a bit strange)!

During our times together at sea, we often sailed with lads who were buying, or had bought, building plots in NZ, planning at some future stage in their lives to emigrate and build their homes there. Having a plot of land gave them an anchor in the country, but it

was never something we thought to do, though I often wish we had. There must be many retired British Merchant Navy personnel and their families living in NZ now, having had the foresight to invest so wisely in that young country when they themselves were young.

Part of our cargo from NZ to UK was Rump steak, and most of us on board got in our own supplies to take home, as it was very cheap. I will never forget the astonishment and delight on my parents' faces as we tipped out 10 lbs of frozen prime beef rump onto their kitchen table! On the same trip home we carried a cargo of pistachio nuts, and one whole large cask after another of these lovely fresh nuts mysteriously found their way into the bar. We dipped liberally into the casks as we sat drinking and playing cards round the coffee table, and as soon as one was emptied another appeared, all the voyage home!

During our visit to Auckland that first trip I was threatened with a broken bottle by a hostile Maori woman who came aboard in a sort of job-lot one Saturday down in the crew bar, where we were all spending the evening. The woman sat in a corner casting filthy looks in my direction because one of their number had taken a fancy to my husband! I indicated my wedding-ring, at which she shook her head furiously. Colin tried to remonstrate with her but got the same reaction - this lady was definitely out to get me! Turning to the 2nd Steward, sitting next to me, I asked him how I should deal with this unwanted attention, and he patted me on the shoulder: "Don't you worry about it," he said, "we know what's going on we take care of our own!" So I ignored them, though when my gaze accidentally strayed their way it was creepy and a mite disconcerting to find six or seven pairs of eyes staring at me! When, later, I got up to sit on a bar-stool, one of them crept over and bit me savagely on the backside, which was a bit of a shock - but after they'd all had a good laugh at my reaction, everything settled down. Afterwards I thought, how many Englishwomen can say they've been bitten on the bottom by a Maori?!

On the evening before we left NZ on the Tongariro, Colin and I went to the cinema where we saw the recently released film The Poseidon Adventure. I emerged from the building shaking and terrified of leaving the next day blubbing like a baby, scared half to death, convinced our ship would sink in a storm probably not a good choice of film to see just before we left to sail across the Pacific ocean!

On the Wild Auk, we loaded a cargo of bananas in the port of Bolivar (Puerto Bolivar), in South America. I was appalled at the poverty evident everywhere; born and bred in prosperous England, in my naivety I had never imagined that such conditions existed in the 20th century. The wooden shacks (on stilts to keep out the pigs) which were home to the town's population reminded me of the sheds on our gardening allotments in England, except for the TV aerials sticking out of their roofs. Even today, decades later, the sight of an allotment always reminds me of Bolivar's central street.

We heard warnings from other sailors of how some Bolivians would steal aboard ships and take anything they could carry away - dirty, oil-smearing engine-room overalls and shoes, even empty cola cans, sometimes climbing into the funnel to gain entry. We lost around £40 from our cabin after I left it for a few minutes to make tea. We heard about the time their Government attempted to bring mains water to the town: labourers came and dug trenches throughout the area over the space of several days, and pipes were laid ready to be connected the next day before filling the trenches in. But when the men returned to complete the job, they found that overnight all the pipes had been stolen. So, at the time we were there anyway, the people still had no piped water in their homes.

The mosquitoes in Bolivar were an absolute nightmare! They were huge and they were everywhere, breeding in vast numbers in the area's many swamps. We had no mosquito-nets to disappear under at night, so that there was no respite from constant biting. Our medical supplies contained insufficient repellent and lotion, and we were forced to beg more from another ship. My bites were bad enough, but for some of the men it was sheer misery: their backs in particular were red raw from bites and I regularly bathed their skin for them, applying soothing Calamine, which helped only a little but was better than nothing. I suspect that the salve being applied by female hands was of some comfort too! Colin, as I recall, received only one mozzie bite - on his head, where his hair was thinning! They didn't seem to like him much, but they liked me! To this day, the site of a particularly nasty bite on my right foot flares up and itches in the heat of summer.

The only night-life available in Bolivar was in the brothels, some of which could only be reached by crossing dodgy, rickety wooden bridges over swampy water. Many of the prostitutes were beautiful, but very quiet, and disturbingly young hardly more than 15, I thought, wondering briefly where their parents were. What were their mothers - their fathers - thinking of, letting their daughters enter this seedy occupation so young? It was explained to me that prostitution was about the only escape route hereabouts for girls who wanted something more from life than the inevitable, endless round of childbirth. It enabled them to save some money, and after a couple of years in the trade most of them left for the city, where they hoped to find a better life. Naturally, this suited the brothel-owners - they were guaranteed an endless supply of compliant, nubile young girls who left as soon as they matured into grown women...

Unlike most of the locals, who lived with their numerous children in tiny shacks along the muddy roadside while pigs wandered around amid the squalor, the prostitutes lived in a relatively smart apartment block near the harbour - the only one in town. Along with the taxi-drivers, who always seemed to have fistsful of notes, they prospered more than most, at least in the port (we never ventured into the countryside). They didn't turn a hair at the presence of a woman who wasn't one of them; I smiled, and they smiled shyly back at me. Colin and I sat at a table drinking heavy dark rum and coke while we idly pushed 3-inch cockroaches off the table with drinking-straws. They scurried everywhere - over the furniture, across the floors if there was a quiet moment between the music we could hear them clattering speedily across the room. It was odd, really - smaller cockroaches, when rarely seen here in the UK, freaked me out - but in the tropics those giants of the species somehow seemed perfectly normal and didn't bother me overmuch.

One night at a brothel I was mistaken for a prostitute - though why, in my frilly, flowery Laura Ashley dress, I had no idea! All the brothel girls wore very short, revealing clothes - they were selling sex, after all - while my demure skirts covered my ankles. The man was a Swedish sailor with no English whatsoever, and very keen! "I am not a prostitute!" I shouted, offended, which response only appeared to excite him further, and he did his idea of a sexy dance in front of me before whipping my cigarette from my fingers and smoking it suggestively. I tried by every signal I could think of to tell him that I was a married woman, visiting this South American brothel with my husband (who'd gone off to the loo) and therefore unavailable for hire! But he didn't give up until the other lads saw that he was about to lift me bodily from my chair and make off with me, and intervened to stop him. He spent the next hour casting dirty looks in our direction, until he finally chose a local girl and disappeared with her instead. He was so arrogant he no doubt considered it my loss!

Later the same evening, spotting Colin's furtive, drunken attempt to fondle the breast of a passing prostitute, I flew into a rage, and instead of giving him the kicking he deserved, unwisely ran off in a blind fury, stomping off in the mud among town shacks and pigs' tracks, arriving eventually at the dark, smelly harbour. But the ship was anchored offshore and there was nowhere else to go. As I looked around, still angry, I heard a male voice from behind and turned to see a uniformed Bolivian police-officer beaming broadly at me. Unable to explain in language he would understand what I was doing down at the harbour alone at this late hour, I became frightened, especially when he took out a large revolver to show me! Not knowing what his interest was, conscious that I could be in trouble here, I let him place the heavy gun, of which he was clearly fond and very proud, in my hands. I'd never seen a real gun close up before, let alone held one! I considered my situation: I could shoot him if he got difficult, which of course would have been a bad idea and I'd no idea how to shoot anyway. I thought, what the hell am I doing here? I'm a country girl from deepest Somerset! He led me to a bench at the edge of the wharf, me still clutching the gun, my heart hammering as he continued to jabber on animatedly. I had not the slightest idea what he was saying. He sat me down and put his arm round my shoulders. I moved away and he snatched back the gun, replacing it in its holster. My mind was in turmoil and I was very scared.

Then, out of the blue, a voice behind us: "Hello!", said Colin. I had a rapid adrenaline rush and nearly fainted. Oh, thank God, thank God! "I've been looking everywhere for you!" he exclaimed. Clearly disappointed, the crestfallen officer nodded, smiling weakly. He murmured something but I didn't stop to listen, tucking my arm quickly into Colin's as we made for the little ferry, which had been waiting close by just on the other side of the wharf the whole time.

I remember being shocked at the size of families and the male attitudes in South America, where the men equated manhood with the number of children they could produce. Our own modern, educated ideas regarding over-breeding and its subsequent poverty were completely absent from the male mind-set. A taxi-driver we hired was truly shocked to learn that, although we'd been married for two years, we were childless and in no hurry to reproduce. He would have at least 12 children, he declared confidently. You could almost hear the howling and chest-beating! But I thought of the small boys I'd watched that afternoon - boys who, in England, would have been at school - as they ran back and forth to the ship, laden and bent, carrying whole hands of bananas to the wharf over their small shoulders.

This particular cargo of bananas was bound for Japan and it was, for me, without regret that we at last sailed away. As we began to approach the islands off Japan, we were shocked to learn that an official had come aboard and opened up some of the cargo for inspection, and had rejected it. What, the whole cargo? We stared in disbelief. Yes, the entire load. He'd discovered one or two bananas in the opened crates which were not entirely dark green, their skins showing slight spots of yellow, and therefore the entire load was refused.

It was shocking to learn that the cargo we'd spent nearly a week in port loading would now be consigned to the sea! I couldn't believe it. The stewards and cooks took several hands to the galley, and each and every one of us had more bananas in our cabins than we could possibly eat. There were green bananas absolutely everywhere on the ship. I stood and watched all through that afternoon and into the night as crate after crate was hauled up from the hold and thrown overboard. We were all a bit subdued; none of this cargo would reach its intended destination, not even to distribute to charities and the

region's poor. No, we were told, it would bring down the price of bananas, which would interfere with normal commerce. I felt sick with shame for the way the human race conducted its business.

So, as they began to ripen in the sun, for the rest of the trip we had bananas with curry, bananas with breakfast cereals, chicken and nut stew (with bananas), banana fools, banana and ice-cream-sundaes, fruit salad (mostly bananas), fried bananas with maple syrup - if banana could be introduced into any recipe, it was. And, of course, bowls full of bananas everywhere about the ship. Surprisingly, we got through a fair number of those we'd saved from the sea. And then, of course, there were the hands of ripening bananas we had in our cabins, just in case we wanted a banana snack! At one memorable point in our banana-fest we heard a shriek from several doors down - the Radio Officer had found an enormous tropical spider nestling in between the bananas in his cabin - I was very glad it was in his, not ours, and kept a wary look out from then on, just in case...

Of all the countries we visited, North American Customs was the most scrupulous, the most officious, even, in their dealings with in-coming ships and personnel. They set up an office on the ship, and nobody was allowed to go ashore until all our passports had been thoroughly checked out and details minutely recorded. They kept the passports temporarily and issued each of us with official, signed papers instead, for use ashore and for entering and leaving the port.

Armed with my papers I left the ship to have a look around and, most importantly, to buy some wine. I soon found a large supermarket and wandered round, astounded at the huge, colourful displays and varieties of everything on the shelves and fruit stalls (at that time in the UK the supermarket culture was still in its infancy). I went to the wine section and filled my basket with six or seven bottles and went to the check-out, where the assistant asked for proof of age. She scrutinised the official document containing my details suspiciously, then refused to serve me when I couldn't produce my passport. My protests that the details had been taken from my passport by US Customs fell on deaf ears. Then the manager came to see what the fuss was about and a heated argument ensued between the three of us at the checkout at one point I feared I might even be arrested, so gave up and left, fuming and wineless. Much good the Customs' official documents and assurances were! On my way back to the dock, I passed a small general store where I purchased half a dozen bottles of wine with no problem whatsoever.

The following evening we decided to forgo the cook's offerings and have dinner in Long Beach instead. After we'd ordered, the waiter brought us each a glass of water; we tasted it and found it had a disgusting chemical taste - to us it was undrinkable! It was midweek and the restaurant was almost empty, so when we'd eaten, the young waiter sat down to chat with us over coffee. Since it was a bit early to go back to the ship, we asked him where we could find an open bar, as everywhere appeared to be closing. He suggested we accompany him to a bar he was heading for himself in downtown LA, so we flagged down a yellow-cab and drove into the city together.

The customers in the bar seemed to be all men, which seemed a bit odd I looked around but could see no women anywhere. On closer inspection, we realised that things didn't seem to be quite right some of them were obviously men but looked sort of like women....

I may be a bit dim; only slowly did it dawn on me that our waiter had brought us to a city gay bar without even telling us (remember, this was 1973)! Not only that, it was a MALE

gay bar! That explained the invisible knives flying in my direction then - the hostile glances I got the distinct impression that I was not welcome.

Colin, though, was very popular! "Oooh," said a voice close by, beneath the thump, thump of heavy rock music, "who's that he's brought with him?" I looked round, realising with a jolt that he was referring to my husband! "Mmmm..." said his companion admiringly, "haven't seem him before..." I moved quickly to Colin's side and claimed him before somebody else did! Fortunately, our waiter had seen our difficulty and moved swiftly to the rescue, introducing us to his friends. The atmosphere then improved somewhat until two young men, who'd been watching us closely, approached me: "Are you English?" asked one. I replied that indeed I was. "Well," he said with a snarl, "I'm Irish!" His companion furiously nodded his agreement and they both fronted-up to me, swaggering.

I was alarmed and astonished at the implied threat. The 'troubles', as we knew them, were very marked in the 1970s, but I'd certainly not expected to encounter them thousands of miles from home. There was no time to think; I shrugged, and said brightly, "Well, bully for you!"

There was silence; they stared blankly then suddenly both of them burst out laughing and others joined in, which immediately diffused a very uncomfortable situation. Whether it was my use of such a quaint old English expression or my refusal to be intimidated I couldn't say, but the atmosphere lifted. I wondered if they realised that, politics apart, the English and Irish generally get along very well together? I got the impression, from those two men at least, that Irish-Americans had a huge and damaging misunderstanding of Anglo/Irish problems; but they were congenial thereafter, and we spent a pleasant hour or so drinking American lager and telling Irish jokes!

On returning to the ship, we were prevented from approaching it by a dockyard guard with a rifle trained on us, which was quite alarming. Again we were forced to justify ourselves, this time by an armed official with an ego inflated by his own importance, who scrutinised our papers doubtfully with plenty of "hmm, well ... I don't know about this...", pointing his rifle at us the whole time, before reluctantly lowering it and allowing us through the gate to board our ship. Absurdly, the following day a group of noisy, eager young women came aboard without any problems and appeared to come and go just as they pleased.

Just down the road from Long Beach harbour, strangely hidden away behind some sheds, we were astonished to find an olde-worlde English village street. We came upon this little gem quite late one evening, attracted by the hazy light from its old-style street lamps. It was like stepping back in time - cobbled streets, tiny little shops with square-paned swirled-glass windows... I half-expected ladies in long Edwardian gowns to appear strolling along the street, but it was empty of people and all but one of the shops were closed and darkened. This one was a glassware shop and we went through the door into a small room filled with glass shelves and displays carrying glassware of every description. There were no lights on at all, only candles, whose flickering flames sent light sparkling and leaping off shiny crystal glasses and bowls as we moved around the shop. The effect was magical, and I often wonder if this museum-street is still there, nearly 40 years on.

With the exception of those on watches, all work was suspended for the inevitable Crossing The Line ceremony (a compulsory ordeal because every time was viewed as the first time), for the serious business of Having Some Fun. Crossing-the-line ceremonies always involved a great deal of soft-soap and buckets of sea-water! We carried a passenger on my first trip back who was determined not to be a victim of this, and locked



Got with the bucket of water

himself in his cabin; but when someone shouted that a pod of Whales had been spotted, out he rushed only to be met as he stepped on deck with a face-full of soft-soap and half-a-dozen buckets of cold sea-water from the deck above and from either side. After that he gave up and joined in. It was a hilarious few hours, but it took me ages to get rid of the soft-soap in the shower afterwards because my hair was very long and stuck out with thick clumps of the disgusting stuff!

Homeward-bound on the Westmorland, as part of our cargo we carried a beautiful Golden Labrador, who was kept on a loose chain in his bespoke wooden kennel on the deck just outside the Officers' bar. He was a young dog, about three years old. A member of the crew was detailed to exercise him up and down the length of the ship every day and to feed and clear up after him. The dog's owner was flying back to the UK from New Zealand, but it was hard on the dog who, after a month on board a rolling ship among strangers, then faced six-months quarantine in England. But his owner clearly loved him - the cost of passage would have been considerable. I've always been fond of dogs and he was an affectionate creature, as I discovered when I crawled into his kennel to make friends and sit beside him. Immediately, he moved close and cuddled up and I stroked and massaged his ears and neck, his nose wet and shiny and great tongue lolling about. He was a dear thing, and he and I became great friends. Every time I passed the kennel or called his name he would rush out to greet me, trembling with excitement and pleasure!



Soft soaped crossing the line victim



Me and the Dog

Not so with Ian, the Chief Electrician, however. Afraid of dogs, he wouldn't go near the kennel if he could avoid it, and would hover fearfully at the door of the bar until he could be sure the dog was safely inside the kennel, then, flat against the bulkhead, he'd stealthily, one step at a time, move away from the door before making a break for it!

Naturally, the dog soon got wind of this: he began to hide by the door of his kennel and lie in wait. Everybody (except Ian) knows that it's not a good idea to show fear towards a dog you don't know, and one day, just as he thought he was safely

past, the dog suddenly flew from the kennel and with a furious bark, sank his teeth into Ian's generous backside! There ensued much howling and lamentation - not much of it from the dog - and much laughter as the lads poured from the bar to see the Lecky, red-faced and spluttering with rage, hopping up and down clutching his bottom.



Dropping off cargo at Pitcairn Island

And so this pantomime continued: every day Ian would eye the quiet kennel from behind the bar door before making a run for it, every day the dog would rush out barking and make an attempt at him the odd thing was, although most evenings he came in the bar with us for a bit of company, the dog otherwise completely ignored his enemy, never even glancing towards where Ian sat at a safe distance eyeing him distrustfully. Nobody else on the ship had these problems with the dog, and although he'd been bitten, it hadn't broken the skin and he'd only suffered mild bruising. We assured him it was only a light, warning bite; if the dog had been serious about it he'd have taken a chunk out of his arse!

On the voyage home from my first visit to New Zealand we carried a passenger, a resident of the lonely and isolated Pitcairn Island, by the name of Young - a direct descendent of the original Young who'd taken a central part in the mutiny on the *Bounty*. He'd been away on a course of study in New Zealand. When we dropped him off at Pitcairn we picked up his sister, Glenda, who was returning to the UK with us to marry an Englishman she'd met when he came to the island to carry out some geological surveys. This was all very official, with arrangements made between the NZ and UK governments for her migration for the purpose of marriage.



Glenda

Glenda came aboard as her brother left, on one of the dozens of long-boats which came out to the ship from Pitcairn to trade. We carried a part-cargo of wood-planking for the islanders, which was all heaved overboard for them to gather from the sea and man-handle ashore tied to their swiftly-moving long-boats. They brought us baskets and boxes of tropical fruits in return - some varieties little known to us - tiny, creamy wild bananas, and breadfruit, a strange taste to our English palates. Few ships visited Pitcairn, and they happily traded their stamps and wooden carvings for tinned foods and sundry items of on-board stock (we suspected that we might be on short-rations for a while, noting the enthusiastic trading of the Chief Steward). We floated off the island for a few hours until business was done (there is no harbour or anchorage at Pitcairn, it's just a piece of volcanic rock sticking out of the sea), then we were seen on our way by the Islanders, who all came out to wave goodbye in their crowded long-boats. Glenda stood at the ship's rail tearfully taking leave of her family and friends, perhaps for the last time.

All the Pitcairners are English-speakers; their island is administered by the NZ government, so communication was not a problem. Glenda was quiet and shy for the first few days and much attached to her cabin, venturing out only for meals. Then, on the Friday, she took up my offer of a game of Chess. We played for a while, then to my surprise she curtailed the game suddenly at 6pm, solemnly announcing that it was now the Sabbath and she must go to her cabin for the next 24 hours, to read her bible and pray. Thus we discovered that the Pitcairn Islanders are all Seventh Day Adventists, and from sundown on Fridays to sundown on Saturdays they must be at their devotions. We never did finish the game.



Crossing the line water fun

Glenda soon adjusted to life on board; she enthusiastically joined in 'crossing the line', getting soaked to the skin and slimy with soft-soap, shrieking and laughing loudly with the rest of us in the general mayhem, skidding across the slippery deck throwing buckets of sea-water at everyone. From then on she integrated fully, becoming part of the furniture like me, though continuing to isolate herself on Sundays. I think it's fair to say that she probably had the time of her life during that trip with us. How different it must have been from her limited existence on that tiny Pacific island!

I've thought about Glenda many times over the years, wondering how things turned out - did she marry her geological surveyor? If not, did she have to return to Pitcairn? Immigration rules were very stringent back then. Nobody knew where she went after initial reports in the press about her arrival on these shores. We docked, we disembarked and didn't see her leave. The next time I saw her face it was in a national newspaper report of her arrival. I hope everything worked out well and she

had a good life.

The Wild Auk, which turned out to be my last deep sea ship, was a modern-day 'tramp' ship, meaning that it often had no designated cargo, so would wait for last-minute orders to come through. It was the best of all the vessels I was privileged to sail on, though it almost didn't happen. I'd been ashore visiting my parents and on the way back to port, my taxi was held up in Cardiff traffic. The ship was due to sail in minutes and the driver was doing his best to force a way through bumper to bumper vehicles, with me hysterical in the back seat - all my belongings were on board.... we screeched to a halt at the wharf just as the gangway was going up and Colin was worriedly handing over my passport to the harbourmaster. One minute more and I would have been too late.

We sailed.... then dropped anchor three miles out! We didn't yet have orders for a cargo, so there we remained for three frustrating weeks, still in sight of the city, its nightlife, shops ... then everybody began to run out of cigarettes. The Captain was unable to open the bond because the ship was still within the 12-mile limit, and relations between smokers began to get a bit strained. If we'd known we were going to be at anchor we'd all have stocked-up ashore, but it was normal practice to wait until we were at sea to buy our cigarettes and tobacco because there was no tax to pay once the 12-mile limit was passed, which made them extremely cheap. So we had to eke out our dwindling supplies, and the worst thing was that we had no idea of when we'd get moving.

We all began collecting dog-ends, removing the remaining bits of tobacco and re-rolling it in fresh papers. The lads began to spy on one another, trying to find out who was secretly hoarding cigarettes. Those who had some were keeping quiet - they denied it, but the smell gave them away, and some small hostility began to develop as suspicions grew. They'd go about the accommodation sniffing, sometimes accosting fellow-smokers and accusing them of secretly smoking. We were relieved to set sail at last, and queues quickly formed outside the Chief-Steward's office 12 miles out, the Captain opened the bond, and out we stumbled with our 200-packs (and Rowntrees fruit pastilles and Smarties and vacuum packed tins of salted peanuts), and the air inside the ship became

thick with smoke as we rapidly made up for the nicotine-deficit, and the atmosphere quickly recovered its normal congeniality. Even the non-smokers were glad to give up their clean air in exchange for even tempers!

I enjoyed my voyages on the Wild Auk most of all because, being a tramp ship, we never knew where we were going until the last minute, and even then, sometimes we were part-way to one country when orders suddenly changed and we'd turn about to head for somewhere else. It was so exciting being in the middle of the ocean somewhere in the world, out on the sunny deck, hanging over the rails watching out for flying-fish and dolphins and whales, waiting to hear of our destination! I reflected smugly that some people paid thousands of pounds to travel the world on luxurious ocean-going liners, and even then didn't have the wonderful and unusual experiences I was having - free of charge - on general-cargo vessels! I certainly wouldn't have swapped places with them for a mere bit of luxury!

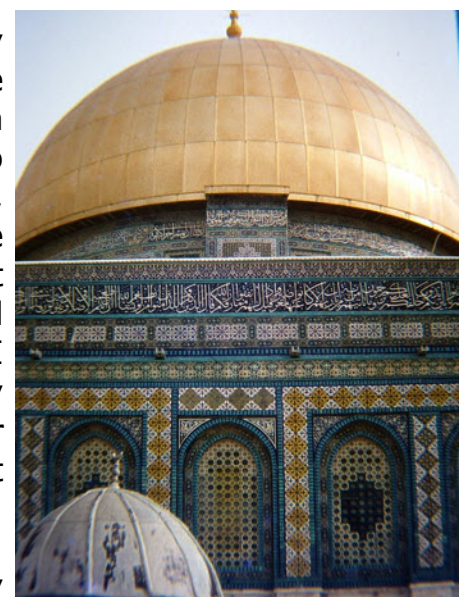


Church of the Nativity

Our first port of call on the Wild Auk was Israel. The day after we docked, we found that P&O had kindly organised a trip for us all at company expense (they did that sort of thing in those days) to visit the Holy sites in Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The drive from Ashdod was terrifying; there appeared to be few, if any, rules of the road and we felt very vulnerable in our mini-bus, but despite our fears we arrived safely at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, a town which at that time was quiet and peaceful. From there we went on to Jerusalem, which I fell in love with and decided to return alone the following day to do some sketching. It didn't turn out very well; every single place I stopped to draw I was immediately accosted by various 'guides' who wouldn't leave me alone. I became irritated and angry after an hour or so of this, and the last straw came when one of them chased me up some winding steps inside a tower and attempted a molestation. I shouted at him and he stalked off, muttering: "You English girls you all the same, you lead a man on....."

I escaped into the bustling Arab Bazaars of the Old City thinking I'd be safer among lots of other people, only to be followed by yet another young Arab, at whom I unleashed a torrent of invective. "You must be British because you're so rude!" he exclaimed in almost perfect English. I stopped, momentarily speechless, and regarded him with surprise. He introduced himself and his friend, both of whom had spent some years in the UK and US and were Oxford-educated, and asked if I would allow them to show me round the Old City. I agreed, and during that afternoon they took me to many places, and showed me aspects of Arab life I would never have seen on my own. They were most amused by my quaint English habit of shaking hands with everyone I met!

We visited some of their relatives, who lived in a two-storey house up in the hills which surround Jerusalem. A third storey was under construction, for their eldest son, their uncle told



Dome of the Rock

me, who would marry soon. Apparently, when a son marries, a new floor is added for him and his wife - there were three sons, so presumably this house would grow twice more. We were served Turkish coffee and little sweet cakes by their quiet and very polite aunt. It was a little uncomfortable, to be truthful; none of us knew what to say to each other, the cultural divide seemed verbally unbreachable. As we left their house to find a taxi to take us up into the hills, one of my companions pointed to three women passing by in the distance, all dressed in burqa and niqab. "Look at those women," he said, shaking his head in sad disapproval, "there is no need for them to dress like that any more - times have changed - we're in the 20th century now!"



We climbed into a three-tier taxi (shared by several other passengers, as they do) and drove off. For a second, I wondered whether I might be putting myself in danger - nobody back on the ship knew where I was - but my instinct was that I would be very safe with these young men, and the three of us spent a wonderful day together. We returned in the early evening to the Old City via King David's Gate, where we drank fragrant tea served in glass cups in the family's tiny ladies-clothes stall in the crowded, noisy bazaar. The ancient, wizened grandfather told me, cackling with glee, how they immediately doubled their prices when serving American tourists, but he'd cut me a special deal since I was English, he said. But I was not in need of another kaftan, however brightly coloured, I so didn't buy anything. As my taxi dropped me off at Jerusalem bus station that evening and I boarded the ramshackle old bus back to Ashdod, my handsome young companion told me that if my marriage failed I should come back and look him up. This was no life for a woman, he said, wandering about the world, no home, no children WHAT??!

I returned to the ship quite late and was surprised to find myself unpopular with the lads, who had become concerned for my safety. The Radio Officer was particularly annoyed, accusing me of being thoughtless and selfish. Looking back, I realise that he had a point: I'd been gone since 10am, using unfamiliar public transport, alone in a strange foreign city miles away from the port; they'd expected me back before nightfall and it was now close to 9pm. The only one not overly concerned was my husband, who I'm sure everyone thought was quite mad! At the time, with typically youthful thoughtlessness, I felt that they were behaving like a lot of old women. Thinking it would help to explain what a lovely day I'd had, I then made matters worse by confessing to having gone off into the hills in a taxi with two young Arab men and several others, all complete strangers to me!



Me on Church Stairs, Jerusalem

During the week the ship was docked in Ashdod we celebrated our second wedding anniversary, and spent the night in an Arab hotel in Jerusalem. For dinner we ordered shish-kebab, which was the only item we recognised on the Arabic menu, and we could in no way make the waiter understand that we wanted some rice. Each time we tried to order it he returned with yet more shish-kebabs, until eventually we were full of lamb chunks and nothing else, and received an enormous bill.

That night in the hotel the heat was so sticky and the room so stifling that we opened all the windows wide. At intervals throughout the night, across the city from all directions floated the sound of the Arab muezzin calling the faithful to prayer, cutting through the eerie silence of the city, and it was hard to sleep. The following day we visited some of Jerusalem's many Biblical sites. We bought a bag of avocados and sat on a rocky outcrop at Golgotha amongst raggedy sheep, surveying the beautiful old and new cities below as we ate them (the avocados, not the sheep).



Avocados - Yum!

One place I will never forget is the Holocaust memorial. Situated below-ground in a cavern accessed by a flight of stone steps, I hadn't known it was there and came upon it quite by chance. The dark cavern was furnished only with headstones and was, quite literally, silent as the grave. Lighted candles stood on shelves cut into rock all around the room, giving just enough light to study the stones; each of them spelled out the name of a concentration or work camp and details of the numbers who had died there. I stayed for some time in deep contemplation, all the more shocked because of its unexpectedness.

Something which struck me about Israel was the variety of different religions represented and practiced there. A people who, throughout history, have been denied religious freedom everywhere, they willingly extend that freedom to all, as evidenced by the many mosques, temples and churches of all denominations which have their place there. Somehow, I hadn't expected that.

When we docked in Tampa, Florida, P&O arranged another trip for us and we travelled by mini-bus to Disneyworld, where we all thoroughly enjoyed the day. The Americans are very good at Leisure and promoting the atmosphere of Constant Fun. I'd thought it would be just a sort of smart fun-fair, but it was nothing like anything I could have imagined; I became immersed in a total suspension of reality, amazed at the technological wonders evident all through the park, and enjoyed it so much that I returned the following day with some of the crew who'd been working previously. We were also able to visit Disneyland during our stay in California, though we arranged that ourselves.



Me at Disney World



Me at Disney World

I went off on my own a lot; nearly every day we were in port I went somewhere. Travelling the world was such an unexpected and amazing experience that I was determined to make the most of it, and I did! On one trip, the two other wives on board found they had a lot in common and became instant friends; but neither of them seemed to share my sense of adventure and often

remained on the ship while I went off exploring. "I suppose we'd better go ashore, just to say we've been..." , I once heard one say. I was appalled! To travel the world FREE and not see EVERYTHING was beyond my comprehension!

While docked in Sheerness waiting to sail on our second trip on the Tongariro, we nipped into Rochester and purchased two bicycles, which we took on board and stored in the engine room cross alleyway. They came half way round the world and back with us. I've cycled in Bermuda, Australia, New Zealand and Holland, sometimes with Colin, often alone. The freedom was wonderful. It's amazing how much you can see on a bicycle that goes un-noticed in a car. In the port of Vigo, Western Spain, after a good long cycle we left our bikes outside a bar/restaurant and went inside for some dinner. This was not a tourist area. Nobody spoke any English, we spoke no Spanish, and all we recognised on the menu was 'Paella'. The middle-aged, floral-aproned maitre'd shook her head vigorously, and using sign-language told us there was no Paella on today. She was adamant. "NO Paella!" We begged, we pleaded, we almost got on our knees. "NO PAELLA!" We were



Me with our two bikes in Vigo



Me in Vigo

nearly in tears. Other customers drinking at the bar stopped talking and stared at us with curiosity. We felt they were on our side as they began to murmur and nod their heads, though in reality they were probably just agreeing how crazy the English are! She tried everything to make us accept the unavailability of the dish: "NO NO NO!!" "P-l-e-a-s-e.... P-a-e-l-l-a!" She stared - she muttered a stream of words under her breath - she threw her arms in the air - "OK! OK! PAELLA!" Defeated (again!) by the English, she retired to her kitchen and cooked up a large, delicious concoction of rice, saffron, fresh seafood, chicken and peppers, just for us! I suppose it was either that or throw us out! We waited an hour for it and drank copious amounts of local red wine, but it was worth it! We ate as much as we could, ashamed

not to finish it. I think the remainder was shared amongst the other customers! We complemented and thanked her profusely, even managing in the end to coax a smile!

We wobbled back to the ship only to discover that the cook had Paella on the menu for dinner. Bet it wasn't as good as ours, though!

I'd only recently finished reading 'The Bermuda Triangle', all about strange disappearances in the region of aircraft and ships together with their crews, so when orders came to pick up a cargo in Bermuda I viewed the crossing with some trepidation, half-expecting at any moment to be beamed up into an alien spacecraft or dragged below the waves by some malign, unseen force, but the journey passed uneventfully, and to my relief we arrived safely.



Me in Bermuda



Snorkelling/Drowning in Bermuda

We spent almost a week in Bermuda. Colin got everyone below working overtime, getting all outstanding jobs done so that most engine-room staff could have the weekend free, and off the two of us went on our bikes with small packs containing a change of clothes and swimwear, to find a B&B for the night somewhere on the island. But at the dock-gate we were stopped and ordered back to the ship because Colin's sleeveless tee-shirt was judged to be improper dress for this small, conservative island. We wondered if this quaint old-fashioned view applied on the beaches too, but apparently it did not. He changed into a tee-shirt with short sleeves, which was acceptable - no scandalous bare shoulders on view - and they let us pass. We had dinner in a country bar that night. It was some while before Bermuda went through its period of serious race-rioting, but from listening to heated conversations between drinkers at the bar, it was plain that seeds of dissent were already there.

We heard an angry reference to 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'. The atmosphere was quite tense, and since we were the only white people there we finished our meal and left. We booked into a small B&B that night but got little sleep from being the tasty prey of hungry mosquitoes. The black Bermudian couple who owned it were very impressed that we were from England! It seems strange now in these days of international travel when going abroad is no big deal, but in the 1970s it was relatively rare to travel so far afield and to such exotic places, and most visitors from our part of the world were more likely to stay at one of the fashionable hotels on the coast, rather than a small B&B out in the sticks.

Many of Bermuda's beaches were owned privately or belonged to hotels, but we easily found a beautiful and surprisingly empty public beach, and I had a try at snorkel-diving. I did not enjoy this experience, finding it alarmingly disorienting, so returned the snorkel to Colin and he spent several hours underwater, swimming among rocks and shoals of brightly-coloured fish. It was dusk by the time he got out of the water and night falls quickly in that part of the world. We then realised with dismay that we had no lights on our bikes, so were forced to push them on dark empty roads for several miles until we reached port, hungry and aching.



Me in Bermuda



Colin in Kings Park Perth

As soon as we docked in Fremantle, Western Australia, Colin was granted a few days leave to visit his parents, who lived just outside Perth on their five-acre smallholding. His dad and an old business-partner, who lived with Colin's mum and dad, made wine from anything and everything, including an especially luscious one made from oak leaves; a shed the size of a small factory was packed to the gills with various home-made wines which, contrary to my expectations, were absolutely delicious! His family were very fond of their wine; in fact, I've never seen anyone drink so many bottles, so

often, and remain standing! They must have had hundreds of gallons of it, and we soon set about helping them drink it. His dad kept the sediment from the bottom of each bottle until he had sufficient to make a rich, dark brandy, and we had glasses of this to round the evening off, retiring to bed feeling mellow and sleepy. No hangover in the morning, either!



Colin's Family Paddock

We went shopping at Holy Joe's, a second-hand-shop which seemed to sell just about everything under the sun, and bought an electric frying-pan for three dollars - we were robbed, his mum said - which came in very useful later on the voyage. We kept this pan for years afterwards and I used it frequently in my own kitchen, for anything from

boiling eggs to slow-cooking stews, until one day I dropped its heavy glass lid and smashed it. As I sadly put the broken pieces in the bin, it almost seemed like the end of an era.

From Freemantle we proceeded, via Adelaide and Melbourne, to Sydney, where there was no available berth, so we anchored out for three days in the beautiful harbour. There were frequent little ferry-boats passing to and from the many anchored vessels, so I was not confined to our ship, although of course taking my bicycle was out of the question. I went ashore by myself every day. Several times I took the Manley ferry, and as we chugged across the harbour I watched the window-cleaners at work on the Sydney Opera House. It looked a never-ending task, rather like the Forth Rail Bridge. Manley was very pretty with its wide, white beaches. But it was really the ferry trip I went for, just to look at one of the loveliest harbours in the world passing by. Not everyone likes the design of the Opera House, but I do. It's a modern city and the building sits well against its clean, white skyscraper cityscape, and complements the Harbour Bridge superbly.



Sydney Opera House

We took the little ferry ashore together one evening, a group of us going out for a drink, and in a bar in the city I discovered the 'Sting', a tall glass of blackberry liquor, champagne and freshly-squeezed orange juice over ice. I had a few of these delicious drinks, not realising how heady they were, and before I knew it I'd become quite drunk! That was OK, it was fun being out on the town with everyone, until we returned to the ship anchored out in the middle of the harbour and we had to step across from the little boat onto the bottom rung of the gangway. I don't think any of us realised quite how drunk I was. With one leg over the side and one hand on the rail I slipped. The sea was choppy and the ferry rolled a lot, and suddenly in the darkness all I saw was the black water rushing up



Sydney Harbour

towards me, then hands grabbed my arms and hauled me roughly back up. I fell into the boat with an almighty thud, not feeling a thing, anaesthetised by alcohol! Whoever grabbed me undoubtedly saved my life, for I was a heartbeat away from falling into Sydney harbour.

The following day we got a berth at the dock, but I never got that drunk again! My back was very sore from my fall into the boat, a sobering reminder of my foolishness!

The weekend we were docked in Sydney we took our bikes out and cycled along its beautiful northern coastal road, meeting up with one of the officers at his sister's home, from where the family took us to an Ozzie working-mens' club overlooking the sea. Outside it looked like paradise, but inside it was just the same as any working-mens' club anywhere. After dinner, Colin and I got up to dance. During our early-to mid-20s we spent a lot of time dancing, and Colin in particular was an enthusiastic and energetic mover, almost acrobatic, I'd say! He seemed to need much more space than anyone else, and other dancers tended to give him a wide berth for fear of possible injury! Suddenly, mid-rotation, an old fellow strode determinedly across the floor and took him roughly by the arm. "Straighten up, young man!" he said disapprovingly, looking him up and down, "Straighten up!" Then he turned and walked back to his seat, a satisfied expression on his face, as if to say "That told him!" Colin immediately saluted and stood rigidly to attention for a few seconds, then carried on as before. We often think of that time, now that Colin is 62 and our dancing days long over. But every now and then, when I disapprove of something, I still say to him, "Straighten up, young man, straighten up!" and we laugh.

Going out of the club for some air later that night, we sat for a while in the darkened sand dunes watching dozens of keen surfers still out there riding the high waves in, though it was approaching midnight. I thought of the chilly sea on the Welsh coast where Colin sometimes surfed, emerging from the water with tiny coal-dust particles over his skin from the power-station just up the coast. Nowadays, he has a body-board and enjoys this less strenuous way of riding the waves as a Silver Surfer, once a year down in Cornwall where the sea is as blue and sparkling as anywhere in the world - though each year his wet-suit seems to get a little tighter and takes longer to get into!

During the times we spent in Oz and in NZ, we frequently indulged ourselves with burgers and milkshakes from the numerous Pie-carts to be found almost everywhere, especially down by the harbours! We've never eaten such delicious (or so many) hamburgers, and drunk so many gorgeous milkshakes. Blended with great dollops of ice-cream and served in enormous cardboard cartons, a milk-shake was, along with a burger, the surest way to cure a hangover! I'm told that these Pie-carts are, sadly, no longer a feature there thanks to an overbearing Health & Safety culture similar to our own, which has been allowed to interfere with popular tradition.

As we came in sight of the Japanese coast, as usual I went out on deck to watch our approach. But Tokyo was virtually invisible, enveloped in a huge cloud of dense smog. We anchored off and went ashore in a small ferry-boat, watching the city begin to appear as we ourselves became enveloped within the smog. As we scrambled off the boat onto the wharf I felt the ground tremble beneath my feet a weird feeling, and immediately wanted to get back on the boat and return to the ship! But nobody else seemed concerned; it's said the tremors are a good sign, because the earth is relieving the pressure below rather than storing it up for a massive quake, and I soon learned to ignore the trembling ground.

Tokyo, with its bright lights and crowded streets, was fascinating. We ate corn-on-the-cob cooked with fragrant spices on street-barbecues, and wandered into the Sony building to hear superior-quality sound from the latest in Speaker technology. We soon learned to bow, as all Japanese do, and it was impossible to equate these polite, charming, graceful people with the horrors we'd been told of during the war. On his day off, Colin and I took a trip on the Bullet train. We disembarked to climb aboard a bus which took us up into the mountains - a terrifying trip on narrow, precipitous roads whose edges plunged into misty valleys far below. I peered out of the window with wide and nervous eyes! We had dinner in a restaurant high in the mountains where, through the window, we saw the tip of Mount Fuji appear briefly through the thick clouds which always surround its summit. It's said that if you catch a glimpse of the Sacred Mountain it means that you will return to Japan ... but we never did. We bought a yo-yo in a gift shop and strolled, playing with this childish toy, through the chill air beside a perfectly still mountain lake, on which small fishing boats sat lazily in the late afternoon sun, their occupants eyeing us with curiosity as we passed. We were the only foreigners there and we must have looked pretty silly, walking along playing with a yo-yo!



Colin at Mt Fuji. Lake Yamanaka

Deciding not to risk the return trip back down on another bus, we took a local train instead. It was a chain-railway, and to our horror the descent was near-vertical! We clung to the seat-poles for dear life as our train hurtled down the mountain creaking, squealing and lurching sideways. I was sure we were going to die, but we reached the ground in one piece and shakily returned bows to our unperturbed fellow passengers, for whom the bone-rattling journey was clearly nothing out of the ordinary. Then we rode speedily and smoothly back to Tokyo on the Bullet train. A waitress served us coffee in sturdy paper cups, which we placed in the slots provided and stared, impressed, as not a single ripple disturbed the surface. It was another unforgettable day.

The following evening, we went into Tokyo to sample some local cuisine. The city was quiet and peaceful, though reasonably crowded; somebody told us that Tokyo There were numerous restaurants offering different kinds of far-Eastern menus, and we picked a Chinese one, since we'd heard that the Japanese often ate their fish raw and we didn't fancy that then, in the days before Sushi bars became popular (we still don't).

Those superb Chinese dishes, cooked and served quite differently to the way they do it here at home, were the best we've ever eaten before or since. The proprietor and other diners were fascinated by us, smiling their encouragement as we tackled our meal with the wooden chopsticks. Western visitors were uncommon then, and they were all so friendly that we didn't mind at all being their entertainment for the evening! When we'd finished, the waiter proudly brought us a pot of green tea - on the house - and everyone watched intently to see how we liked it, chattering and gesturing excitedly to us to drink up!

It was awful - a bitter taste quite alien to us. But we looked at them all watching us hopefully, our waiter hovering close by - and we knew we had to drink it. So we did, every drop, fixed smiles of enjoyment on our unwilling lips, making exaggerated noises of approval as we swallowed the hot, bitter tea. Diners crowed with delight, heads bobbing up and down rapidly as they chattered to each other. The atmosphere was almost festive

by this time. When, as we'd feared, the waiter offered us another pot we shook our heads and groaned, patting our stomachs, joining in their laughter. When we left it was almost like we'd been to a party!

On a shopping-trip in Tokyo I spotted some interesting-looking curry packs which looked exactly like bars of chocolate, so I decided we'd try some. That evening, we didn't go into the mess for dinner. We'd bought some beef from a local supermarket and I got out the electric frying pan we'd bought at Holy Joe's, to make us a curry instead. I used just half the bar and added some water (a guess - the instructions were in Japanese), wondering if it would be enough for two, but it grew and grew until the pan was overflowing with the damn stuff - I had to keep adding water because it was so thick, and we decanted half of it into a bowl but it continued to grow and expand until we had bowls and mugs full of it we ended up with enough curry to feed about eight more people, and we still had half a bar left! So it was that several of the lads on board, attracted by the delicious smell, had an extra and unexpected supper later in the evening. And it certainly was delicious! I think curry in a bar is a brilliant idea - compact - just snap off what you want, like pieces of chocolate - the easiest (and the largest) curry I ever made. But though I looked everywhere, I never found it for sale here in the UK.

It's astonishing to experience the literal meaning of the phrase "ships that pass in the night". Sometimes a haunting, lonely feeling comes over you when you stand out on deck late at night gazing round at the vast, dark ocean, the only sounds the steady 'thrum' of ship's engines from down below and the gentle 'swish' of waves breaking against the hull, and the occasional, lonely cry of a seabird.... Alone, staring up into infinite space, breathing the purest, sweetest air on earth beneath its biggest, starriest skies, you feel you could be the only person alive in the world. Then, suddenly, in the dark distance, lights.... faint and blinking at first but gradually growing brighter, and it comes to you that there IS someone else on that vast ocean besides you after all another ship is on the dark horizon. Slowly, eventually, she draws level and you guess what she might be ... a passenger liner, another Merchantman? You can't judge her size in the dark with only her lights to go by, and though she looks about two miles distant you know that she's probably ten miles away then she passes and draws off, her lights growing ever fainter... until she is gone.

Later, you learn that greetings were exchanged between your two vessels, the Radio officers in contact; sometimes, as once happened to us, reports of a man overboard, please to keep a look out....

Night falls swiftly in the tropics; there really isn't an evening in the way we know it. I was told to watch out for a green flash at the moment the sun dips below the horizon, but although some of the lads insisted they'd seen it, I never did. Another of the many myths and legends surrounding the sea perhaps? Occasionally, on a warm, clear night when the sea was very calm we'd have a barbecue out on deck (next to the bar, for obvious reasons); the bar-doors were thrown open so we could hear the music and dance if we felt like it. Those were great social occasions; the crew were usually invited up, and I was never short of a dance partner, even if Colin was on watch.

We spent two Christmases on board ship, the first tied up in Rotterdam, where we put a tiny, festive tree in the corner of our cabin and drank Champagne and ate Continental chocolates for breakfast in bed on Christmas morning. We spent three days in port, during which time we shamelessly and greedily devoured vast quantities of chocolate and beer (as you do)! The second was out on the ocean somewhere in the world, where work must

of course continue as on a normal day. But we had a splendid five-course Christmas dinner just the same, albeit between different watches, and the senior officers did all the clearing up (as was the custom), with a wonderful cold buffet laid out for supper. We gave a round of applause for the cook and galley staff, who had really pushed the boat out (so to speak).

It's hard for men to be separated from their families at Christmas, and a bit of festive cheer helps to take the mind off the loneliness of separation. When the children and I were at home alone at Christmas some years later, I watched several TV programmes featuring men whose occupations meant working away from wives and families over the Yuletide season, such as fire-fighters, the armed forces, oil-rig workers, etc.; but never once did I see any mention of those who served in the merchant navy.

Also customary was the birthday 'shout', where whoever had a birthday bought all the drinks in the bar for the entire evening. This did not apply ashore of course, where a small mortgage would have been necessary, but on board ship with a tot costing 3p and a can of beer 10p it was easy to be generous!

During my last ever trip, homeward-bound on the Wild Auk, we were hit off Japan by the tail-end of a hurricane. We sailed into mountainous seas and howling, shrieking winds. The ship was in chaos, the accommodation a mess - everything, everywhere was all over the place. There was no let-up for two days. Lying in our bunks we were at the mercy of the ship's motion and slid helplessly up and down, rolling over from one side to the other and back again relentlessly as she corkscrewed, sleep an impossibility. It was exhausting, especially for those who had to work in it! The ship pitched and tossed heavily, seeming to smash herself down hard on the sea after the passing of each monstrous wave. I managed to get up the steps to the empty Owner's cabin on the top deck where I stared, terrified, out of the wide windows as the bow of our little ship plunged into gigantic waves, wall after wall of water hitting and momentarily darkening the cabin as they swept over her. I'd never been so frightened in my life! It was all I could do to remain standing; one minute we were falling, the next we were climbing, and I slid carefully, gripping the stair-rails tightly, back down the stairs to the main deck.



Bit Rough !!

I got to the lounge and sat clinging to the arms of my chair watching, mesmerised, as hundreds of oranges, ejected from their up-ended boxes, hurtled backwards and forwards, smashing themselves to pulp against the bulkheads. Streams of juice ran onto the heaving floor, then suddenly the chair tipped me out and I was down amongst the mess myself! I stayed there for a while trying to steady myself before crawling to the door, where I managed to haul myself up and stagger along to the bar, which was in turmoil. There was broken glass everywhere, surfaces sticky with spilt beer and spirits which had come loose from their optics and rolled around the floor. Everything not yet broken was held or tied down or put on the deck. Most people not on watch had gathered in the bar, but Colin was in the engine-room and I hoped he was safe down there.

As we tried to hold on to fixtures or wedged ourselves wherever we could, there was an unusually slow, heavy roll to port which didn't stop ... the ship carried on tipping further and further over.... everyone froze where they stood; we held our collective breaths as the vessel gave a sudden lurch and hung there for what seemed like an age, making up her mind which way she would go. It flashed through my mind that if these seasoned, experienced sailors were anxious, then we must really be in trouble....

At last, she gave a heavy shudder and decided to come back up ... everybody breathed again and we waited nervously for the corresponding roll to starboard, which, to our huge relief, when it came was not as bad as we'd feared. From that point on, the storm slowly began to abate as we made headway out of it. Incredibly, there was dinner on that night! What heroes we had in the galley! But even though the table-sides were up we still had to hang on to our plates or they'd have been on the floor. There followed lots of silly (and a few sick) jokes about various methods of carrying food from the galley into the officers' mess, which I'm sure everyone is familiar with! I wasn't sure, during the worst of the storm, exactly how much trouble we were in, but Colin later told me that there had been a point when it really was touch and go...

I remember how we all got 'the channels' several days before we came in sight of home. It was quite peculiar as grey skies began to appear on the approach to the English channel, moods lightened, people became chatty and excitable, bags packed and ready to go quite different from the sombre, sober faces often encountered on the way out...

During the industrial troubles in 1970s UK, wild-cat strikes, work-to-rule and so on also spread to the dockyards and ships. Relations between sea-going personnel and dockers were not that good anyway - there was a joke among mariners that the dockers had a man perched on top of a pole with a pair of binoculars scanning the horizon for the merest sighting of a cloud, at which everybody would down-tools and disappear for a fag and a cup of tea. Things were further soured by the disruption to leave, and with the shipping companies' tendency to anchor offshore during dockyard strikes instead of tying up at the wharf, thus avoiding needless port fees; life was difficult for officers and crew who wanted to get ashore, especially so with those who'd just returned from deep-sea.

The future Labour MP John Prescott, in his former incarnation as a steward on continental ferries (short runs only - he got to go home every night), was a rabid union convener, and once famously accosted the crew of a cargo-vessel which was docking after a long voyage, demanding that they join the picket-line! He must have been barking to imagine that these men were going to delay going on leave after three or four months at sea to join his picket, about which they knew little and probably cared less! I believe they regarded him with incredulity and told him to **** off!

Various women come and go when cargo ships are in port; some are there for parties, a few are prostitutes - then there are the wives, girlfriends and families who come down to the ship on its return after a long voyage. Dockyard workers enjoy themselves immensely when they spot a woman entering or leaving a ship - lots of whistles and cat-calls, plenty of shouted comments, often crude and disgusting. This was infuriating to the lads - who rightly felt that the ship was their home - and they were entitled to have what visitors they liked in their home without them having to run the gauntlet of dockers' filthy remarks. I was the victim of this myself, often nearly in tears, as these encounters made me feel dirty and somehow shamed; but when anybody went to investigate, the men involved had usually melted away.

Several of the sailors decided they'd had enough of these insults to their womenfolk, and decided they would give the worst perpetrator in one port a taste of his own medicine. Somehow, they managed to discover where he lived and went in a group to his house, where they hung around outside the gate and waited for his wife to appear. When the woman emerged, they subjected her to the same insults that her husband had been giving women down at the ship - wolf-whistles, crude laughter, insulting remarks....

The poor woman was distraught - well, she would be! It wasn't kind, it wasn't nice, but they were angry. Her husband came out in a fury to his wife's aid, whereupon the men calmly explained that this was payback for what he himself did daily down at the port to THEIR women, in THEIR home!

The man was stunned into silence. Having apologised to his wife, the men left him to think about it and returned to the ship.

Something I thought tedious, annoying and pointless was compulsory fire-drill. At 10 o'clock every Wednesday morning at sea I reluctantly made my way to my allocated fire-station where, rain or shine, we patiently went through the same old drill week after week. On the Auk, the supernumeraries - the 3rd engineer's wife and their two young children, two other wives and myself - gathered on the bridge where we hung around chatting until the bell went and we could return to whatever we were doing. What a waste of time, we used to mutter to each other.

Homeward-bound on the Auk one Saturday, heading for Liverpool from the Continent, most of those not on watch gathered in the bar for the usual evening of Bingo. It was the crew's turn this week. Maureen's children were in their cabin asleep, we'd got our drinks and sorted out who was to be the caller for the first game and were getting ready to begin, when one of the crew realised he'd left something in his cabin. To groans all round, he opened the door to the companionway and thick, choking smoke billowed into the bar. We all stood up in great alarm, game abandoned, and made our way out through the smoke. It was getting quite difficult to see, but since we all knew where we were heading there was no panic. Colin was detailed for fire-fighting duty, so I had to watch him go off with the others, and followed Maureen along the smoky corridor to their cabin where we met the anxious, white-faced 3rd engineer at the door. Giving us a relieved glance, he dashed off to join his detail while we gently lifted the sleeping children from their bunks and, a child each in our arms, followed the route we'd taken on so many Wednesday mornings up to our station on the bridge, where we found the other two wives already there.

It still amazes me how calm we all were. Sitting in chairs on the bridge, the only concerns we expressed were regret that we'd not thought to bring blankets to cover the children, who were shivering in our arms. We had no idea what was going on or how dangerous the situation was. We were in sight of land, so perhaps that knowledge helped to dispel thoughts of panic and we stayed up there quietly, cuddling the children to keep them warm, for about two hours until the all-clear bell sounded.

The fire had started in the engine-room-changing area, full of greasy overalls and shoes, while the Watchman was doing his rounds down at the aft end of the ship. This explained the slight delay in sounding the alarm and when the fire-detail reached it with their equipment, the area, leading directly into the engine-room from the accommodation, was fiercely alight. The alleyway side of the wall, was hot but the fire hadn't yet had time to break through, so we were lucky, and the men successfully brought it under control

despite several appliances not working, and despite several members of the crew ignoring procedures and going direct to the lifeboats, in which they were later found sitting and looking very guilty!

It was thought that the fire had been set deliberately; there seemed no other possible explanation those who work in the engine-room are exceedingly careful, knowing the area's extreme vulnerability to fire. Rumour had it that one of the crew had had a bitter altercation with the skipper a few days before we were within sight of land and there was a reasonable chance of rescue had it turned really nasty, so he wouldn't have been compromising his own safety too much... but there was no proof, and we were just a day away from port. We don't know if there was an investigation - we went on leave and forgot all about it.

As we were leaving the ship, the 3rd mate took Colin aside and told him of his relief on seeing me help his wife take the children to the Bridge during the fire, leaving him free to do his job without dilemma, and please to thank me. Well, I never understood why, if he felt the need for thanks, he could've have come to me in person. I shall never understand men!

During my years at sea I adopted a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of the ship, remaining aware of my status on board and staying out of any occasional conflict or disagreement. For the most part, the men were happy to have some feminine company around, and I got along well with the lads on every ship I sailed on, and they seemed to enjoy my company too. It might sound a mite dated to say so, but in all the time I was at sea I never once heard anybody use heavy swear words; when I remarked on this, I was told that there was plenty of cursing down in the engine-room, but when there was a wife on board that's where it stayed. I was pleased to receive such unexpected consideration - so unlike the world outside!

Not that life at sea was always sweetness and light. On one of our ships there was some bullying of a young cadet, and what started as a bit of good-natured banter gradually escalated into something rather less friendly. He was a small lad, shorter and slighter than the two other cadets, and as such was an easy target for picking on by older men who should have known better. Although well-liked, he nevertheless became the butt of some of the more senior deck officers' jokes and pranks, and though he always laughed it off, I could see that inside he was finding it difficult to cope with. It was hard for others to intervene, but when one night in the bar the ring-leader of this bullying (though I don't believe he viewed it as bullying, just a bit of fun but at a vulnerable lad's expense) picked the boy up and lowered him by his ankles into a barrel and forced him to stay in there upside down, the atmosphere became tense. I think everybody thought it was getting out of hand. The trembling voice down in the barrel pleaded to be let out, but the officer ignored him, and the set look on his face dared anyone to interfere. The bar fell silent as the small and increasingly desperate voice from the barrel continued to plead. After about 10 minutes of this, Colin suddenly got up from his chair. "For God's sake, that's enough!"

He strode to the barrel and helped the boy out. The officer immediately got to his feet, his face ugly with rage. "Who asked you to interfere? Why don't you mind your own bloody business!" He was a big angry bloke and some of us were a bit wary of him, and there was a second when I thought the engineering and deck officers were going to take sides - but thankfully, everyone realised what was happening and backed off. An unspoken acknowledgement existed that such a close community cannot thrive unless all are willing

to go out of their way to avoid potentially aggressive situations, and that was the only time I ever witnessed that sort of tension at sea - though at the end of any voyage there are always going to be people you're glad to see the back of, and some you pray to God you'll never have to sail with again!

During Colin's leave when we'd left the Wild Auk we bought a house in the north of England, and I never went to sea again. His next trip was to the Gulf, and I chose to stay behind to see if I could cope with life alone for long stretches, and I decided that I could. The inevitable next step was to fill our home with little people, and then with dogs, and that was that. Pregnant wives are not permitted to travel, though when I was expecting our first child I did stay briefly on board the Belle Rose while she sailed round the home coast. We had Christmas and New



House in Maryport - Lake District



Christmas on the Belle Rose

Year in

Sheerness, which we shared with a great crew - mostly Mauritians, whose particular fondness for music meant that there was always dancing and singing, and a lot of fun. Status Quo's 'Down Down' was out at the time and we played it over and over. They claimed that Colin was the best 2nd they'd ever sailed under, and presented him with the gift of an enormous lace tablecloth. I still have it, though it's a bit tattered and torn now.

All this was a long, long time ago and I'm at the age where my memory is no longer a reliable friend! To my great regret, I failed to keep a journal of my life at sea, and all I have are photographs to stir my memories. I feel immensely privileged to have sailed on board some of the ships of Britain's great and proud Merchant fleet, and terribly sad for its demise. I'm happy to have known the officers and crews who shared those times with me, most of whose names I've sadly forgotten, and hope that any who remember me feel the same.

Lorraine