

Home

“DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS..... TO THE HAVEN WHERE THEY WOULD BE”

ONGOING DIARY COLUMN (No. 1)

To Boldre, England from Melbourne, Australia by Freighter

Andrew Neaum



Photo: © Lester Hunt Marine Traffic.com

5 June, 2013

The time for our departure from Australia draws close. Details of our embarkation on a sizeable German freighter, the “Bahia”, are becoming clearer. We are likely to board the ship in the early afternoon of Monday the tenth of June and sail twenty four hours later. We linger around New Zealand for a while, calling in at Dunedin, Napier, Tauranga and Auckland, presumably to pick up or deposit cargo and then, as far as we know, we head straight for the Panama Canal. After this there is a call to Cartagena in Colombia (once notorious for pirates and now for illegal narcotics) and then head through the Carribean and up to Philadelphia. There we have a possible eight day break, before catching another ship to Antwerp.

In Philadelphia we are to be met by Peter French with whom we will be staying at nearby Princeton, as too will son David and Rachel, by happy chance. With a bit of luck we might manage a visit to New York. Once we arrive in Antwerp, around the end of July or the beginning of August, we will make our way to London to stay with family or friends for a day or two, and then we head for the south coast to settle in to a “House for Duty” post in the Diocese of Winchester, to which I should be licensed on the 28th of August. I shall be looking after an ancient church, St John the Baptist, Boldre, plus a small chapel very close to Lymington, which is a yachting centre on the Solent overlooking the Isle of Wight.

We hope the long voyage will provide a chance to relax, chill out and accommodate ourselves to what hopefully will be a very different pace of life. On the voyage Diana and I intend typing up my mother’s Tristan da Cunha diaries as well as my own from the time I spent on the Island of St Helena. We hope too to be doing lots of reading. I might even sort out the chaotic filing system on my computer and we could too name and catalogue all our digital photographs. Communication from the ship is likely to be limited, but I do hope to be able to get out an email diary fairly regularly and eventually put it on the web.

Our last days in Australia, after a week or so spent visiting friends in Canberra, my son Peter in Tamworth, my brother Pete and his wife Sue in Brisbane and friends of Diana's in Sydney, are with Elizabeth and Nathan in Benalla. We delight in their hospitality and three lively, irrepressible and very lovely little girls. Their role in and contribution to our retirement has been huge because living a mere sixty kilometres from Shepparton they have had to bear the brunt of our wilful nest destruction. Diana and I have more or less dispossessed ourselves. We are determined to travel into retirement and to England with no more than the contents of four suitcases and two haversacks.

The family home is no more. Poor Lil and Nathan, with Peter in Tamworth to a somewhat lesser degree, have taken possession of most from our family that is valued (not the same as what is valuable). Our offloading has not all been to Op Shops and to the annual Parish Fete, it has also been to them on behalf of their siblings in England, with a few bare essentials in storage for us, should we want to set up home in Australia again eventually. Diana left similar essentials in England for just such a venture as this, our return (cutlery, bedding and what not). The last few months have been liberating and difficult, wearying and invigorating.



Last view of Melbourne

At Sea: 11 June, 2013

We are now aboard the Bahia and in open sea. Our cabin is on the top deck, up six flights of stairs totalling ninety six steps from the upper deck and ship's office. We have determined never to use the lift so as to keep our muscles limber. Out of our three forward looking cabin windows we have a splendid view over containers to the bow. Being in the centre of the ship (from port to starboard that is) we will be on the fulcrum of any lateral rocking, a comforting thought because the lateral roll is the worst for seasickness. Our cabin comprises an en suite bedroom, with plenty of cupboard space and two three quarter size rather than full double beds. Then there is a lounge and office area with a spacious desk upon which we both can type away at diaries and letters. There is a cabin video set and a large library of DVD's. I am likely to leave this voyage more movie literate than at any other stage in my already long life. Mind you, we have played a Maggie Smith movie twice already, something to do with a house in Umbria, and on both occasions have managed to sleep through it as much as watch it, very good though it seems to be.

We arrived at the docks in Melbourne on Monday evening, thanks to Lil, and had to wait a fair while in the Security Office. When eventually the ship docked and after we were allowed on board as darkness fell, there was no inclination at all to get

off before we left at 2.30pm on Tuesday. Instead we watched the new world of slick container loading and unloading fascinated. A container is picked up and placed either on or off in one minute and twenty three seconds. At times there were four great gantries performing this little miracle of ordered industry at once, the operators of the gantries in little glass pods high above the ship and supplied by an endless stream of robotic single container carrying vehicles about twelve metres high. When we were in Benalla and walking with little Meg and Susan they viewed the world as startlingly new, every little detail sparkling enough to be noticed and commented on. We viewed this world so new to us with a similar fascination.

On the way through and out of Port Philip Bay, Diana phoned Heather Fitzgerald in Mornington and she and Kevin came down to wave to us and the ship as we passed close to shore before turning towards Point Lonsdale. As they did so she and Diana had a chat by phone. Then the computer-whizz that is Pete contacted us to say he had our ship in view from Point Lonsdale and that we needed to be on deck because he had hooked the view up to the Benalla family and Ray and possibly even the London family. So up we went to wave from the side of the bridge. He tells us we were visible as black and gesticulating blobs! As we passed under the Gateway Bridge I felt a great stab of sadness at leaving a land that has blessed us all in so many ways, but then anticipation of the adventure ahead mercifully healed this fleeting wound.



Through Port Philip Bay

On this first morning in open sea the movement of the ship is slight, the sea pewter coloured and astonishingly tranquil. The dawn, as so often at sea, is glorious and if the weather stays mostly clear the ocean will soon be dazzling blue. Although the ship is German owned and run, the officers are for the most part Polish and the crew are Filipino. They are all very friendly and helpful, though animated conversation is unlikely to be a feature of the voyage because accents are fairly thick. There are twenty five crew in all and we are the only passengers. The food in the Officers' Mess has a distinctly middle European bias. Cheeses and polonies and tinned herrings and herring and beetroot salad feature at breakfast, as well as eggs to order and more usual fare. Today, our second breakfast, I again managed to resist eggs in order dutifully to eat muesli, but then indulged in the beet and herring salad which is very good. All my pre-voyage jokes about likely food were trumped at lunch yesterday when we were served pork knuckle, boiled potato and sauerkraut - the last was fine but the first looked disgusting: glistening, blubbery porcine skin stretched tightly across fatty and cartilaginous meat and bone. The little blobs of meat that could be extracted were tasty.

Friday 14 June, 2013 7.05am - Approaching New Zealand

7.00am and another lovely dawn enjoyed through the window of our lounge. A ribbon of pink cloud over a crisp horizon, the sea early morning's dark pewter.

Some time today the horizon should reveal the southern tip of New Zealand as we head for the strait between the mainland and a southern island that I was unaware of until we looked at our course on a chart on the Bridge. We appear to be welcome at any time on the Bridge, and one of those regularly on watch is the Third Mate, a Filipino called Jim whose English is excellent and who appears to enjoy our company. As on the M V Agulhas last year, the Bridge is high tech and spacious. It covers the full width of the ship offering a magnificent view. We will be able to stand there when we go through the Panama Canal.

The sea remains tranquil for mid ocean in mid winter, the ship's movement regular and untroubling. We are fortunate that neither of us feels at all queasy. The Captain told us yesterday over lunch that a few weeks ago they experienced a not violent but unusual motion which made quite a few of the crew queasy, and that on their trip to New Zealand they met really foul weather with six metre waves which also put some of them to the test. So it is no good being lulled into thinking we are now good sailors. We might well again have to resort to the pills we have already abandoned at some time.

We have put our watches forward an hour and will need to do so again before long today. Oddly this was done the first time during the afternoon, between 14 and 15 hundred hours, rather than in the middle of the night.

Later 11.08am

Have just returned from the Bridge where we spotted land, the fiord cut, south western, mountainous curve of New Zealand and Providence Bay about fifty miles away. We travel at a gentle speed of 11 knots, down from 16 in order to get us to port at the right time, which is 1.30pm tomorrow. The breeze is a gentle 12 knots, the sky largely blue and the temperature about 14 degrees. We will pass in daylight today through the Foveaux Strait, between the mainland and Stewart Island which is a large island about eighty miles north to south and with one of its mountains rising to 3000 feet. It is the sort of place I would like to live! What a bind being unable to call up information about it on the Net!

We learn that Jim, the Third Mate is a born again Christian with pastors in his family. Gospel music playing up on the Bridge gave Diana the temerity to ask him. A lovely, knowledgeable and friendly fellow. There is a bond between fellow Christians, even of different denominations.

There are more birds about as we approach land, one or two of them possibly wandering albatross, though my eyesight finds adjusting to binoculars very difficult these days. Once we leave Auckland we have about 6,500 nautical miles of ocean to cover and will see little except islands in the Tuamota group. We pass just too far north of the Galapagos islands to view them.

The Captain departs the ship in Auckland to be replaced by a German who lives there and who apparently is married to the Tongan Prime Minister's sister. Karolina,

the only female crew member departs in Panama, but on our ship's return journey. The Chief Engineer has just come back on duty after leave. He works four months on and four months off, because, he says, "you only have one life". Others do far more, especially the young Filipinos, a 40: 60 ratio, or even more.

We have now taken a walk the length of the ship to its bow, under the containers. The walk is fairly low down, but right round the ship, a trip not to make in really rough weather. The ship at present is riding high for we are relatively empty, this to be remedied in New Zealand. From high up, through the windows of our cabin, the ship seems hardly bigger than the Agulhas, but walking its length from bow to stern brings a greater realisation of its true size, 354 feet in length and 32 wide. At full steam we burn about a hundred tons of fuel a day, a more reasonable speed uses not much more than half that. To meet pollution standards a different sort of diesel is used in European and American waters.

We are settling into a routine. I get up first, shower and tap away at the diary or listen to a Cantata, then when Diana is up we go down for breakfast at 7.30am. We are usually there on our own and still resist eggs and anything cooked. Meals are oddly timed, a cooked lunch at 12 noon, and dinner at 5.30pm. We return from breakfast to say Mattins from two old Service Books. It is lovely to be back to the old psalter and to hills that hop and skip like rams. We then settle down to type old diaries, a longer business than we had thought and so I might have to abandon my own old ones so as to finish Dot's Tristan ones with Diana, our first priority.

*Bahia
Our Cabin*



Trips outside up until now have been fairly limited. It has been cold and fairly blowy. Yesterday we headed into a twenty two knot wind which, with the speed of the ship, adds up to a fair breeze indeed. In the evenings we tend to watch a film and last night two! During these Diana knits away like Madame de Farge. The first, called "Rendition", was well done, gripping and posed interesting questions. In the second Peter O Toole played an old man (prostate operation, catheters the lot) developing a non-sexual though tentatively physical relationship with a young woman, this film called "Venus" was funny and poignant.

Saturday 15 June, 2013 7.15am

It is still dark, we have put the clocks forward for the second time - again in mid afternoon. I have showered in good, hot and well pressurised water. Diana now arises to shower. Breakfast in 15 minutes.

We watched last night the film "*La Vie en Rose*" an excellent evocation of the life of Edith Piaf, a fascinating story brilliantly acted and utterly engrossing. I begin to see why a significant proportion of even middle class humanity doesn't bother ever reading books. They have been superseded by film. Deplorable, but understandable.

Now near New Zealand the sea is still beautifully tame and there is a mountainous landscape thirty miles away on the port side. It looks not unlike St Helena from a similar distance because the mountains we view are much the same height as St Helena's. We learn this from the charts on the Bridge. There is also a very small and rugged, rock-like island to starboard. Sadly the ship has now heaved to and is stopped for the rest of the day, before going through the narrow Foveaux Strait as we are well ahead of schedule. We thought we had stopped to enable or facilitate an emergency drill, but not so, we were still stationary as night fell.

This morning though, and for most of the night, we have been steaming gently ahead. The drill was a simulated fire in a hold. All we had to do when the alarm went was take our life belts and repair to the bridge, the most interesting part of the ship and close to our cabin, up one flight of stairs.

At dinner we were discussing the economics of cargos and containers with the Captain and Chief Engineer (in conversation they take a bit of warming up and have to search to find an odd word or two, but become quite animated once we've ignited their interest). Their knowledge of such things is very general because all the decisions about cargo, costs and rendezvous are made by the Company. The ship's officers have very little to do with them. However they told us that a single trip through the Panama canal costs possibly a quarter of a million dollars. The Engineer told us that early in his career, the engine on his ship gave way and stopped in the first lock. It was a catastrophe because it meant being tugged out and having to queue again, as well as pay the canal rate a second time. Not good for a chief engineer's career prospects. I said that at such a cost, why did more ships not go round the Horn, but of course it was a stupid question because the cost of fuel is the crucial and determining factor. A single round trip such as ours, (which is fairly standard for most similar ships) probably costs between two and three million dollars in fuel!

They were unsure as to the cost of freighting a single container, but suggested something over a thousand dollars. When dealing with figures such as these, that seems modest and of course might be inaccurate. No Internet for me to check it out!

Later: 8.25am. Back from breakfast to a glorious dawn through our cabin windows. On the Bridge we learned that our speed is 12 knots and that the estimated time of arrival at Port Chalmers, the dock for Dunedin, is 12.28pm. Piotr, the Chief Engineer, says Port Chalmers (not Dunedin) is a mere village. There is a great inlet called Otago Bay made by a very irregular but extensive peninsular called the Otago Peninsular and the dock is half way up the Bay, Dunedin at the top.

Sunday 16 June, 2013 7.30am Port Otago (Port Chalmers)

It is still dark outside. All activity to do with loading the ship seems to have ceased during the night and presumably we are ready to sail. The Captain said we would depart at about 7.00am, but there is no sign of that yet. We must be off to breakfast.



Approaching Port Otago (Port Chalmers)

[Home](#)