

- by Jonathan Boonzaier -

Ed. Note: With the proliferation of party boats in lake ports, some of which have been successful while others have failed, we thought readers might like to read about the trials and tribulations of a party boat in a far-distant port. Things work the same everywhere, it seems...

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Durban, South Africa, would appear to be an ideal location for a large sight-seeing and pleasure cruise vessel to operate. The huge, almost landlocked port is the largest in Southern Africa and the city is one of South Africa's most popular tourist destinations, with a Miami-like beach-front and skyline. Nevertheless, for many years it lacked any type of sightseeing cruises with the exception of government-owned ferries which operated scheduled services around the port. It was no surprise, then, when in late 1981, it was announced that a small cruise ship would be based in Durban for short excursion trips. The ship, named ROYAL ZULU, was to become the port's dreamboat, cruising in and around the bay on starry nights. But the dream turned sour and, in the end, all that remained was a rat-infested shell of a boat with a trail of bad debts in its wake.

ROYAL ZULU had been built for the Spanish Compania Trasmediterranea by Union Naval de Levante, of Valencia, Spain. At her launching in 1963, she was christened SANTA MARIA DE LAS NIEVES. The ship measured 1201 Gross Tons and could carry 333 day passengers. She was 67.06 by 11.08 meters, with a draft of 3.175 meters. Power was provided by two 8-cylinder La Maquinista diesels which provided 1750 bhp and an operating speed of 18 knots. Along with several sisterships, SANTA MARIA DE LAS NIEVES operated short ferry runs within the Balearic Islands archipelago in the Western Mediterranean. By 1979, however, the need for larger tonnage on the Balearic Islands routes had rendered her redundant. In February of that year, she sailed for Barcelona, where she was laid up and offered for sale.

In late 1981, SANTA MARIA DE LAS NIEVES was sold to a newly formed South African shipping company, Lloyd Coast Lines. It purchased her for R800,000 (at that time, R1 = U.S.\$1.15) and, after renaming her ROYAL ZULU, sent her on the long voyage to South Africa. She arrived at Durban in February, 1982, and promptly was sold to a syndicate of investors for R900,000. It later was claimed by legal representatives of the ship's leading creditor, Finansbank, that this was a "fictitious price which had been calculated to be advantageous to the purchasers for the purpose of tax relief". Indeed, all of the syndicate's members also were involved with Lloyd Coast Lines.

While all this legal wrangling was taking place, ROYAL ZULU was sent to a shipyard for refitting. She had arrived in South African waters in very poor condition and, in the words of one shipyard engineer, "The more work that was done to her, the more work was found to be necessary". However, after a few provisional repairs, ROYAL ZULU began operating short cruises out of Durban. These excursions were quite unsuccessful. Her first trip out of the harbour could only be described as catastrophic; both the air conditioning and the ship's stabilizers failed, resulting in mass seasickness. Furthermore, the entertainment proved to be quite dreadful. On most cruises, there were reports of nauseous passengers hugging sanitary bowls as the ship sailed along the Durban coastline.

Shortly after the ship entered service, though, the bills started to come in. Claims from repair yards, ship chandlers, catering companies, and officers and crew brought the total liabilities to well over R1,000,000. When it became apparent that the owners did not have sufficient finances to cover these debts, various creditors, through Finansbank, had the vessel arrested for debt and put up for sale. Three months after her debut, ROYAL ZULU was unceremoniously withdrawn from service and laid up at the Ocean Terminal.

Four months later, Finansbank conceded that there would be little chance of