

THE EDINBURGH CASTLE

It always struck me as odd that I can't remember anything about the journey from Bulawayo via Cape Town to Southampton, but remembered so much about both trips heading south. Perhaps anticipating sunny skies focused my mind better than anticipating grey ones.

That's not to say I didn't look forward to returning to England. Mum had sold me on stories of the Tower of London, the British Museum, Madame Tussauds, and Hamleys, London's world-famous toy shop. I enjoyed my time in England, but Africa exerted a greater pull.

Our second voyage from Southampton to Cape Town would be on the Edinburgh Castle.

It was a gloomy autumn day in the south of England, and the sea reflected the iron-grey sky. A chilly breeze carried the seagulls, calling and swooping low overhead. The smell of the salt water and the ship's paint combined to create a heady mix for the excited travellers.

I remember being impatient for the ship to sail. As the departure time neared, people threw coloured paper streamers, connecting them to their loved ones on the dock. The gaudy scene looked celebratory, but I couldn't help thinking it must have held sadness for many. In those days, people regarded a trip across London as long-distance travel; something they'd seldom do. On the dockside stood many people who'd never see their loved ones again.

A major concern nagged at me. I remembered the last trip to South Africa when I spent almost a week ill with seasickness. My mother told me to not think about it. It was all in the mind. I hoped she was right, but within two hours, my seasickness started, and I couldn't face dinner. By now, I realised it was the stuffiness of the claustrophobic tourist class cabin on the ship, and we'd booked a cabin without a porthole. It's too late, once seasickness begins, to try to battle it with positive thinking. Nausea and a bile-bitter mouth would occupy the next four days.

On this voyage, we stopped in the Canary Islands instead of Madeira. I was disappointed to not see a single canary. Perhaps Madeira would have been a more enjoyable stopover.

As on the earlier voyage, the weather improved as we sailed south. The Crossing the Line ceremony came and went, and I collected another certificate.

Now, I was feeling better, and I discovered there was an upside to seasickness. Halfway through the voyage, the kids were getting bored with each other's company. Suddenly, in the second week, a new kid, me, appeared out of nowhere. Everyone wanted to be my friend.

No sea voyage is complete without descending to the hold to retrieve something from your trunk. We'd done it on the last voyage south, so it was off to the purser's office again. On this occasion, it was a similar, though simpler, process, without the threat of rationed visits. There's something reassuring about seeing your trunk resting amongst hundreds of others in the hold. At least you know it didn't lie abandoned on the dock.

Every afternoon, the pool would be partially drained to ensure the kids' safety. None of us could swim, so we played in the shallow water under the watchful eye of a sailor. But the greatest fun was when, towards evening, they filled the pool for the adults. With the roll of the ship, as it filled, one moment the water lifted you to the edge of the pool, and the next, you stood on the timber bottom. When the sailor decided the water was getting too deep, he banished all the kids from the pool area.

On board was a German family with twin boys a little older than me. The boys kept running to the edge of the swimming pool, laughing, and spitting in the water, competing to spit the farthest. The parents said nothing, so I reported it to the sailor on duty. He said, 'Don't worry about it. The War is over now.' Somehow, I don't think he got my point. I would have complained about boys of any nationality behaving in an antisocial manner.

Arrival in Cape Town remained a little uncertain. Rumours of bad weather and high seas circulated, and passengers speculated it might prevent us from disembarking. It sounded good to me because I was enjoying life on board with my newfound popularity. I was in no hurry to leave the ship.

Birds appeared, signalling the proximity of land, and the next morning there was no delay in disembarking. I'd found my sea legs and discovered, to my surprise, dry land swayed just like the sea.

Docking in beautiful, sunny Cape Town was an experience. From the ship, Table Mountain and the city looked like a painting. The balmy air felt inviting. The immigration procedures took place on board before we descended the gangway. Several customs officers stood on the dock behind a row of half a dozen tables in a huge open-sided shed, running almost the length of the ship.

There was a problem. I noticed several passengers walking to the edge of the dock and throwing their cameras into the water. They included box and concertina cameras, and others I didn't recognise. The owners removed the film rolls and dropped the cameras over the side. What a terrible waste! Imagine the import duty that led to even the most expensive looking cameras meeting that fate.

Once again, we headed straight to the railway station to buy our train tickets and drop off our luggage before catching a taxi to Table Mountain. For me, the cable car was the most spectacular part of the visit. The views from the top of the mountain were breathtaking, but a cool breeze soon sent us into the tearoom for shelter. After something to eat and drink, we caught the cable car down the mountain. We returned to the station, this time to catch the Bulawayo train.