

Travelling to England on the Union Castle ships by Estelle Lewak Geva

My maternal grandparents lived in London and so, every few years we travelled by ship to visit them and our family in England.

The Union Castle Line had a weekly mail ship between Cape Town and Southampton sailing every Thursday.

My first trip was with my mum in 1955 at the age of 14 months so much of that trip isn't remembered.

In 1958, when I was four, we travelled as a family for the first time – mum, dad, my sister Suzanne who would turn two whilst we were in London and me.

I can remember climbing the gang plank to board the ship. All the passengers were on the decks standing at the railed side of the ship and on the dock below were all those there to send us off. Rolls of colored crepe streamers were thrown from the ship in the direction of the dock and if lucky, someone would catch hold of the other end of your streamer until the ship moved away and the contact was broken. Tugboats would help maneuver the ship out of the harbour. Once out of the harbour, the ship would sound its horn and we were out at sea and on our way.

The ship was our home for the two week voyage. Our cabin had bunk beds and we used a communal bathroom and toilet further along the passage as we were in second class.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner were served in the dining room. We would eat at the children's earlier sitting for dinner which allowed the parents to dress up for dinner which was a formal meal - "jacket and tie"; getting invited to sit at the Captain's table was an honour. I remember the beautifully illustrated menus with the Union Castle insignia and the name of the ship on the cover. I can still conjure up the special smell the dining room had and the excitement of going there for meals and being on our best behavior. The friendly white jacketed waiters would serve us our many courses - we usually sat at the same table and had our favorite waiter throughout the voyage. The tableware was silver and the silver cutlery heavier than our bone handled cutlery at home.

When lying in my bunk at night before going to sleep I could really feel the rolling of the waves unlike when I was running around the decks - it was a strange feeling and I worried that I might roll off my bunk - it never happened.

There was plenty of fun and games on board. I remember the adults playing deck quoits and shuffleboard. There was always a fancy dress show. The kids were also entertained and there was childcare for a few hours in the mornings where we had puzzles and games and all sorts of activities to occupy us.

On the ship there was a shop and on passing by I spied in the window a tiny doll in a carrycot with a pink blanket and pointed it out each time we walked past. Imagine my delight when one morning mum pulled the suitcase out from under the bunk and on opening it I saw the carrycot and doll. My excitement was short lived when mum said it was for my little friend Marilyn and not for me. My disappointment and tears didn't go unnoticed and I too was given a doll in a carrycot with a blue blanket.

What I most remember about the voyage was the crossing of the line ceremony – when we crossed the Equator. The crew would dress up as King Neptune and his entourage. All the passengers would gather on the deck where the swimming pool was, in anticipation. I clearly remember waiting for King Neptune to appear and in my imagination they all emerged, rising from the sea but now I realize that they just ascended the staircase from the deck below! Part of the ceremony for the adults involved smearing them with shaving cream and then tossing them into the pool. For the little kids there was a small paddle pool where we were dunked in a sort of christening ceremony – I was terrified! We were given a certificate signed by King Neptune and the captain of the ship. I can still see King Neptune with his white beard and crown and large trident. It was a lively ceremony.

The ship would stop off at Las Palmas or Madeira. Little boats would appear alongside the ship and the local children would dive into the sea to catch coins thrown overboard. The locals would come on board and display their wares – colorful hand embroidered table cloths and blouses, baskets and many other things. A troupe of dancers would give a performance with their singers and musicians. Some passengers would go on land and do a day trip seeing the sights of the island.

I remember on one of our trips a passenger jumped overboard. I can hear the ship sounding the horn, and feel the ship turning slowly around and watching a lifeboat going down with the doctor and a few crew members. They threw her a life buoy and pulled her over to the side of

the lifeboat. They lifted her in and wrapped her in a blanket and she lay on the bottom of the boat till they were all hoisted back on board. She had apparently had a bad break up and was heartbroken. My dad had filmed the whole incident so that's how I remember it so well.

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### **Travelling to England on the Union Castle Ships**

**Written by Estelle Lewak Geva in July, 2025**

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Estelle Lewak Geva was born in 1954 in Cape Town and grew up in Claremont. She made aliyah to Kibbutz Nir Eliyahu in 1975 (as part of Garin Lahav from Habonim S.A) where she still lives today. She is married to Miki and has three children and four grandchildren. Today she is a retiree after working for 49 years in the accounting department of the plastics factory on the kibbutz.