

## MEDIA MISS ONCE-OFF SOUTH AFRICAN VISIT BY **BERGE STAHL**



### **Pictures, clockwise from top left:**

*The world's largest bulker, **Berge Stahl**, on her one and only call at Saldanha Bay where she arrived on 18 December to load 140000 tons of ore for Rotterdam.*

*The foredeck of the **Berge Stahl***

***Berge Stahl's** Chef who, with his galley staff, prepared a seven-course meal for the officers and crew*

*The Second Engineer in **Berge Stahl's** engine control room*

*Captain Avinash Kashinath Moghe, master of **Berge Stahl***



Even the Christmas dinner is huge aboard this vessel! A seven-course candlelight meal with all the trappings awaited the 24 officers and crew aboard the massive **Berge Stahl** that loaded in Saldanha Bay last week.

Responding to an invitation to visit the ship, I eagerly took the west coast road, and what an interesting day it was!

At 343 metres - the length of three and a half rugby fields - and at 364 767 deadweight, she is the world's largest bulk carrier, designed to haul 355 000 tons of iron ore from her usual loading port at Ponta da Madeira in Brazil to Rotterdam. (Although she is smaller than the largest containerhips of the Emma Maersk class, and about 100 meters shorter than **Jahre Viking**, the largest tanker - now used as a floating storage vessel in the Gulf - the immaculate **Berge Stahl** remains an impressive ship.)

I had been aboard her slightly smaller consort **Bergeland** - the world's second largest ore carrier - in Saldanha about a year ago, but my visit to **Berge Stahl** was special. No wonder my leg muscles betrayed my advancing years as I clambered up and down engineroom ladders or stairways within the accommodation block, for this vessel from masthead to keel is the height of a 16-storey building. Although I didn't climb the mast or scramble around the deep tanks, emerging from the depths of the engineroom to the main deck required a special degree of fitness.

I am told that at 16000 tons per hour, the Brazilian shiploaders can complete loading of this ship in less than a day!

Her 23-metre loaded draught means careful planning of the voyage as she must negotiate the 60-nautical mile channel from the custom-built loading terminal at Ponta da Madeira to the sea to pass several shallow points with less than two meters under keel clearance at high tide. Similar water depth restrictions apply at Rotterdam where precise timing of her arrival is also essential to co-incide with high tides. Discharge at the Dutch port takes about five days.

To date, she has carried nearly 67 million tons of ore on the Brazil-Rotterdam haul, steaming the equivalent of 73 voyages around the world.

Although she is on a 25-year charter for that service, the Norwegian-flagged vessel made a one-off voyage several months ago, by-passing the Cape with an ore cargo for China where she underwent drydocking for her 20-year survey. Once that had been completed, she sailed in ballast to Dampier, West Australia, to load 183 384 tons of ore that took her to a draught of 17,7 metres. On she steamed to Saldanha to top up with a further 146 000 tons for the final leg of her voyage to Rotterdam with a draught of just over 21 metres, the maximum permissible at Saldanha.

She is manned from top to bottom by exceptionally hospitable, friendly and cricket-loving Indians who naturally were in jubilant spirits after their team's annihilation of the South Africans in Johannesburg a few days earlier. The Indian seafarers had celebrated with their own cricket matches on the vast foredeck of the ship as she passed the southern coast. *(An hour before the start of the second day's play in that test match, I had been on board another vessel, also manned by Indians, and I had tactfully informed the amiable master that his team was not faring too well. Fortunately, I did not return to that ship following South Africa's disastrous second innings collapse at the Wanderers!)*

Hailing from Pune in India and with a distinguished sea-going career spanning 31 years, including nine years in command of **Bergeland**, the master of **Berge Stahl**, Captain Avinash Kashinath Moghe, is an impressive man who rightly is exceptionally proud to command this equally impressive ship, that, despite her 20 years, is in fine nick.

Her engineers have reason to be proud of the massive engineroom where her seven-cylinder Burmeister & Wain main engine produces nearly 28 000 brake horsepower (about 23 100 kW) to turn the 9,5-metre diameter propeller to achieve a service speed of 12,5 knots when **Berge Stahl** is loaded. "*Wipe your feet,*" joked one, mindful of the exceptionally clean state of the engineroom "*before you come in here!*"

Now, before you are frightened off by more statistics of this megaship, bear with me for an interesting slice of information. Below her ten hatchcovers are cavernous cargo holds, and on the return passages to Brazil, she takes on 180 000 tons of water in her 22 ballast tanks - more water than the volume of iron ore most usual callers at Saldanha will load! Because the holds and the ballast tanks are so large, they become very difficult to clean and paint, necessary tasks to prevent insidious corrosion in the remote corners.

On some ships, "*cherry-pickers*" - equipment with a hydraulic lift - are used to enable crewmembers to undertake maintenance work in the holds. But on **Berge Stahl**, Captain Moghe told me, two Polish mountaineers are employed on a fulltime basis to use their mountaineering skills to clean and maintain the holds and the huge tanks. From a network of ropes attached to fixed points within the hold or tank, the men dangle or stand on stages to do their work. And, like the proverbial painting teams working on the Firth of Forth bridge, once the Polish maintenance chaps have finished all the tanks, they simply start again!

As she will spend the remaining eight years of her life on the Brazil-Rotterdam route, **Berge Stahl** will not visit South Africa again.

Thus her one-off call was historic - and unfortunately escaped media coverage. But my trip up the dreary west coast road from Cape Town to Saldanha Bay was well worth the effort as I shall not forget **Berge Stahl**.

A large critter, this one!