



Spirit rekindled

Multi-million makeover enhances Tasmania cruise experience



✦ The new Spirit of Tasmania in dock in Port Melbourne.

PHOTO: SHIRLEY SINCLAIR



TRAVEL with Shirley Sinclair

OUR family of four wide-eyed, first-time cruisers heads off in a Kombi into the great unknown of Bass Strait. The year is 1996 and we've driven on board the original Spirit of Tasmania ferry on the second-last leg of our year-long round-Australia adventure.

With a casino for the adults and entertainment for our youngsters – not to mention a cafeteria for dinner and snacks – we think all our Christmases have come at once.

Just like in the movies, we stroll the decks, stretch out on a lounge, and fill our lungs with fresh air as we leave dry land in our wake.

When Mr Two and Mr Five are all tucked out, they are more than willing to discover the novelty of sleeping in bunk beds with the gentle rock through Port Phillip Heads for company.

Best of all, we simply hop back in the Kombi and drive off the ferry toward Stanley in the north-west for an immediate start to our first holiday in Tassie...

We didn't know it then but that 15-hour overnight voyage ignited our love of cruising.

And this year, hubby and I returned to where it all began. The 2015 adventure starts with a lazy Brunswick Bitter beer and Yarra Valley chardonnay at The London pub, right across the road from the entrance to Station Pier in Port Melbourne.

Just before 5pm, a procession of 4WDs, campervans and caravans passes by the hotel's outdoor tables, making their way to the line-up for the ferry.

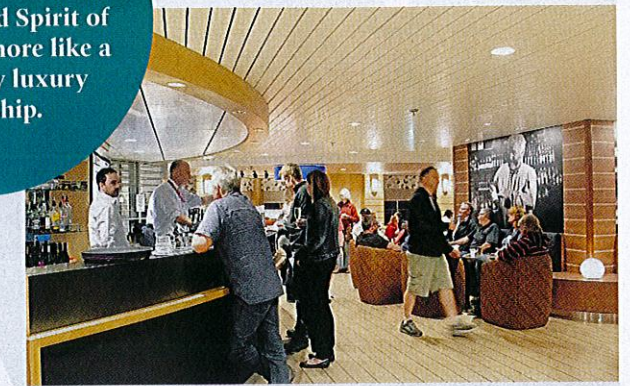
As walk-on passengers this time, we simply finish our drinks, head on to the pier and up to the Spirit of Tasmania office to get our boarding pass where we wait for the 6pm call for boarding.

Our clean and comfortable twin-bed cabin with ocean-view window is easy to find from the escalators once on board: straight past the Tourism Hub travel desk, Reading Room, reception and The Pantry, hang a right at the cinemas, and down on the right.

The captain announces that we will be cruising at an average speed of 23kmh and 1-1.5m seas are forecast (read: like a millpond) for the 429km from Port Melbourne to Devonport.

The school holidays bring a mix of passengers like any

FERRY RELAXING:
The revamped Spirit of Tasmania is more like a modern-day luxury cruise ship.



New Spirit of Tasmania

THE new look has emphasised open spaces, with varied comfortable seating options in the lounge and dining areas, and numerous large flat-screen TVs play cable sport and lifestyle and free-to-air channels around the ship.

The first major refurbishment since the vessels arrived in 2002 also has included the new TMK – the Tasmanian Market Kitchen restaurant area offering an extensive selection of buffet dishes using fresh produce and showcasing a Tasmanian signature dish of the day.

Alternatively, The Pantry offers convenient “grab-and-go” food and beverage options and Tasmanian products as well.

SPIRIT of Tasmania I and II ply between Port Melbourne and Devonport daily. Visit www.spiritoftasmania.com.au

cruise ship but especially extended families and student travellers.

We soon realise that what we loved about the Bass Strait crossing that first time has remained true but the new Spirit of Tasmania II takes ferry life to a whole new level.

Did I say “ferry”? This is no everyday ferry – more like a modern-day luxury cruise ship but in a simplified form.

All passenger decks including the cabins on Spirit of Tasmania I and II were given a multi-million-dollar makeover from April to September this year to refresh the look and enhance the passenger experience.

As for entertainment, the two new cinemas screening latest-release movies certainly are a godsend for the families while other young passengers usually make a beeline for the kids' zone and teen areas.

Couples young and old and groups of friends seem to prefer the lively Bar 7 on Deck 7 or the more laid-back and funky feel of The Terrace Lounge Bar on Deck 9 to read a book, play cards or chat about their trip. Others enjoy a flutter on the pokies.

After a short reconnaissance of the ship, we head to the bar.

After all, no “sailaway” is complete without taking a beer or champagne in hand, toasting the sunset and wishing each other a pleasant bon voyage.

Just don't tell the 20-something kids how much fun we're having without them.

* The writer was a guest of Spirit of Tasmania