

Reina del Mar sails for the Caribbean sunshine isles

New ports wait for Union-Castle's popular cruise ship on her March 1973 sailing. K. J. Brett describes the planning, the places, and some of the problems

On Friday March 9, *Reina Del Mar* will leave Southampton and head down Channel and through the Bay of Biscay on what would at first appear to be one of her familiar cruises to the Atlantic islands. Her first port of call will be Tenerife, a course to which she is so accustomed that one fancies she could make her own way there without the guidance of her captain.

Then the picture changes as, instead of making for Madeira or the North African coast, she will find herself dipping westwards into the wide Atlantic, bound for the blue Caribbean and the colourful islands of the West Indies. Thus she will be making B&C history as the first of our passenger vessels to operate in these waters, although they will not be new to the *Reina Del Mar* herself, as during her earlier career with the Pacific Steam Navigation Company she had been engaged in regular liner service from UK to South American and Caribbean ports.

What influenced the decision to enter for the first time into a cruising market that on the face of it seemed pretty well filled already? The first consideration here was how best to employ the ship after completing the two voyages from the Cape to South America which comprise the essential part of her South African cruising programme; hitherto the programme had been made up with one or more cruises to Mauritius and Portuguese East African ports, but increasing competition in the Indian Ocean had seriously diminished bookings to the extent that this operation became uneconomic and it was therefore necessary to look for alternative employment before the start of the UK summer season.

Further study revealed that, although there are many vessels operating in the Caribbean during the winter months, most of them are on fly-cruise terms or based in ports in the United States, and that there are few direct sailings from England for those who prefer to travel all the way by sea. This seemed to offer an opportunity for *Reina Del Mar*, and so it was decided to



■ Union-Castle's 20,747-ton *Reina del Mar* at sea. Picture: Skyfotos.

bring her back from Cape Town immediately after the South American programme in order to catch the winter-weary Britons who had time and money to spare for a leisurely voyage to the sun. To cater for what would obviously be a more leisured and moneyed market, certain adaptations of *Reina Del Mar*'s traditional cruising pattern appeared to be desirable, and the decision was taken to reduce the capacity of the Caribbean cruise to around 650. This allows more room for everybody and provides a number of single cabins which had not hitherto been available in *Reina Del Mar* (although this facility will now be extended to the 1973 summer programme).

The reasoning appears to have proved correct, as within a short time of announcement, and even before publication of the brochure, Caribbean cruise bookings had reached the halfway mark. At the time of writing they are well on the way to capacity. A gratifying feature of this response is that it includes many regular *Reina Del Mar* travellers, which says much for her continued popularity with those who know her.

Having decided in principle to go west, the next problem was to plan an itinerary in a part of the world which was quite new to us and the business of finding out became a fascinating and rewarding exercise. The first thing that became apparent was that the term Caribbean covered a much wider area than one had realised, and that places like Jamaica and Bahamas were beyond the

cruising range of *Reina Del Mar* in the time at her disposal. In the event, this was no great loss as we still had a choice of that diversity of lovely islands that make up the Eastern Caribbean; the Windward and Leeward Isles, the French Antilles and Trinidad. Within this area there was still one limiting factor in the necessity of choosing ports where a ship of her draft and size could go alongside, or failing that an anchorage with adequate launch facilities, as *Reina Del Mar* does not carry her own boats for landing cruise passengers.

Armed with these facts and a few romantic notions of what the Caribbean is all about, we pored over maps, distance tables and guide books until finally a programme emerged, giving a 28-day cruise with calls at five West Indian ports. To these were added the regular favourites of Tenerife and Madeira, on the outward and return journeys respectively. We assumed that the chances of favourable weather would be brighter on this more southerly course, and the calls provide breaks in the Atlantic crossings.

The original programme included St. Lucia, and this is shown in the brochure. But several months later we were told that the launch service which had been promised at this anchorage port had since been reduced to an extent that made the call impracticable. The St. Lucia visit had to be abandoned but fortunately a substitute was found in Martinique, without altering the rest of the itinerary, and our five Caribbean