



From one grande dame to another

The old-time Athena stirs fond memories of girls at sea, writes **Mal Chenu**

WHEN 20-year-old Shirley Johnson last took a cruise, her dad gave the steward 10 quid to keep an eye on her. She never saw the steward again. It was the autumn of 1952 when the cargo vessel Moreton Bay left Melbourne, taking Shirley and her friend Norma on their grand adventure to Old Blighty, where stuttering George VI had just died and postwar food rationing was still in force.

It was about this time the MV Athena first went into service as a trans-Atlantic vessel under the name the MS Stockholm. Both Shirley and the ship have had a few makeovers since their maiden outings but they both scrub up quite well and neither looks her age.

Athena is promoted as an "old time" cruise ship – they still fling streamers over the side to those waving goodbye from the wharf, although Shirley's throw barely reaches the pool – and the smaller, more personal experience it offers is indeed in stark contrast to most of its modern, monolithic rivals.

In summer, the Portuguese-



“ Shirley sounded like Old Rose in an early scene in *Titanic*.

registered Athena operates from Fremantle (and next year from Adelaide) in a niche market that avoids the keen competition on the eastern seaboard. Shirley (I call her mum) and I took a four-night round trip from Fremantle with the

wonderfully named Captain Pedro Pinto at the helm, taking in stops in the southern West Australian towns of Albany and Bunbury.

As a departure point, Freo's Victoria Quay is no Circular Quay but, then again, nothing is. The Fremantle Passenger Terminal is haunted by the ghosts of cruises past, its architecture and photos from the '50s and '60s and its rows of ceiling fans a reminder of the days of more genteel cruising. This is a wholly suitable introduction to the Athena, which features many a nod to bygone days.

A turn around the wooden deck with painted shuffleboard courts gives Shirley a nostalgic reminder of her weeks aboard the Moreton Bay, as does the bath in our cabin, complete with spa jets. "Loo-xury!" Shirl intones in her best Pythonesque voice, recounting how, "in her day", she and Norma would fill their bath with buckets of heated seawater. Our junior suite outside cabin also contains twin single beds, a sofa, a desk and chair, a TV, wardrobe, safe, bar fridge and bathroom, complete with bidet.



Athena can carry 550 passengers, about one-fifth the capacity of today's mega-liners, and while there are drawbacks such as the single, small pool, there is no queuing for drinks or meals, little or no waiting for the table tennis or shuffleboard, bopping space on the dance floor and plenty of deckchairs. Also, the staff get to know you and remember how you like your coffee or your favourite pre-dinner tippie, which is nice. Other facilities include a fitness centre, sauna, cinema, beauty salon, nightclub, casino, show lounge, library, internet cafe, kids' club, two restaurants and five bars.

The food is very good; bread and biscuits are baked daily and room service is an option. Dinner at Olissipo Restaurant is especially impressive. The complimentary Portuguese wines are a bit chewy but Australian and French alternatives can be bought at restaurant prices.

Over dinner, Shirley shares a few

Moreton Bay reminiscences with our table, sounding like Old Rose in an early scene in the movie *Titanic*. Kate Winslet as Young Rose might have had her passionate moment before an iceberg ruined her party but Young Shirl managed a fling with the third engineer, who was "quite dashing but no Leo DiCaprio". "And Norma got the purser, so she won," she says. "They were both gentlemen, to a point."

Our fellow passengers are an eclectic lot, with about 70 per cent from WA. All generations are represented but the bulk, as on most cruises, are baby boomers. A group of about a dozen women known as the Red Hats (membership rules: over 50 and single) are highly visible in their purple outfits and, well, red hats. They change their dress code only once, to all don dresses with shapely, brief bikini-bod motifs front and back, which is both inspirational and disturbing.

The on-board entertainment

ranges from the exceptional to the mundane. Paraguayan harpist Segio is superb, Jose the pianist and Ines the vocalist leave the audience entranced and the Latin rhythms of Los Paraguayos seduce the tipsy Red Hats into a hip-endangering salsa routine. Romao the magician appears, appropriately, from nowhere for impromptu card tricks and there's a different cabaret show in the show lounge nightly. The Mr and Miss Athena pageants are a hoot. There is always something going on.

Athena might lack the wow factor of today's floating cities but its intimacy and ties with cruising's grand old days stamp it with a personality to be admired and soaked up. They don't make 'em like this any more.

The writer travelled courtesy of Classic International Cruises and Tourism WA.

Trip notes

Get on board

- ▶ Classic International Cruises' Athena will operate from Fremantle and Adelaide during 2011-12. The Australian calendar runs from December to April, with 17 cruises from two to 38 nights. Fares start from \$450 a person for a two-night cruise.
- ▶ Bookings through travel agents only. classicintcruises.com.



Personality plus ... (from far left) Shirley Johnson's 1952 passport; relaxing on the Athena's deck; it's always show time in the lounge; sweet temptation; cocktails.



