

# What luck to spend the night on a Victorian coal steamer on Lake Titicaca



Dawn on Tuesday last week found me bobbing around in a small sailing boat in Sydney Harbour, yards from the wash of two of the world's greatest liners: Cunard's ocean liner *Queen Mary 2*, and the company's enormous new cruise ship, the *Queen Elizabeth*. They were entering the harbour together, and we'd sailed under Sydney Harbour Bridge to watch what the local papers called the Royal Rendezvous.

The occasion, which I wanted to write about for the *Times*, was breathtaking. The *Queen Mary 2* is the largest liner ever built; the *Queen Elizabeth* dwarfed the harbour buildings; and the combined manifest of the two vessels — some 6,000 tourists — looked set to take even worldly-wise Sydney by storm. I felt proud to see a bold 'Southampton' lettered beneath the names of both ships on the stern. The canvas arrayed before me on a grey and rainy dawn was rich in spectacle, symbolism and scale.

But it was a detail on that canvas that made as sharp and lasting impression on my mind as the two great ships themselves. Scores of pleasure boats, ferries, water-jetting fire-tugs and small craft had come out into the harbour to join the fun. Sweeping the scene, my eye lighted on a tiny detail: a vessel that seemed to have been photoshopped into the picture from another century.

And she had. The coal-fired steam-engined tug, *Waratah*, was launched in Sydney in 1902; nearly scrapped in 1968; then saved by the Sydney Heritage Fleet and completely and authentically restored. She makes her living today from private charters, and was carrying a party of sightseers drawn to the arrival of her two great, distant and much younger sisters. The *Waratah* is about 100 feet long; the *Queen Mary 2* more than 40 times that length. The *Waratah* carries 49 passengers; the two great ships some 3,000 each.

But for character and grace she outstripped every vessel in the harbour. This elegant little tug, with her clean lines and long, raked funnel, was in a class of her own. You can find online an arresting oil painting by the

Australian artist Robert Wilson of the tug in her young days in a wild sea, preparing to tow a great square-rigged sailing ship into port. Hats off to the Heritage Fleet for this great work of restoration and preservation.

And as I admired her, and the Fleet's efforts, I couldn't but think of an incomparably greater feat accomplished in incomparably more difficult circumstances by an incomparably smaller and less well-resourced team. The salvaging, saving and total, faithful refurbishment of the Victorian coal steamer *Yavari* on the waters of the highest navigable lake in the world, Lake Titicaca in Peru, by the Englishwoman Meriel Larken and her valiant, tiny band of associates, deserves a chapter of its own in the annals of maritime restoration. I saw it last year.

The *Yavari* was built on the Thames in 1862 for the Peruvian Navy, then completely disassembled, each part numbered and shipped to the Pacific coast in 2,766 boxes small enough to be carried by mules and llamas. From the desert port of Arica this enormous kit was transported a year later by rail across the Atacama to the foot of the Andes, in nine carriages.

The next leg, 190 miles up steep, winding mule-tracks 12,500 feet into the sky, almost sank the whole endeavour. Mules, llamas and muleteers died. Peru kept going to war. Five years later there were still boxes of ship lying beside the bridleway along the route. It was not until eight years after her construction that, reassembled by the Lake Titicaca, the *Yavari* was launched, and blessed by the Bishop of Puno. On her maiden voyage in 1871 it became apparent that her demand for coal

was greater than any feasible supply. So for more than half a century after that, she ran on llama dung bought from villagers all the way around the lake's 699-mile shoreline.

I was there in 2010, just off the small port of Puno high in the Peruvian Andes, a day's journey from Cuzco and Machu Picchu. Entirely by chance my partner and I (we had heard of the *Yavari*) called ahead to see if she could be visited. Yes, they said, and you can stay. A day later, hot and dusty after a bus ride from Bolivia, we walked nervously down a long wooden jetty off the shore of a smart hotel on the bay beside the town, guinea pigs nibbling the lawn. Moored at the end of the jetty, a long sleek streak of freshly painted black Victorian steel plate, with a tall red funnel and low superstructure astern, rocked gently in the swell. How could something bolted together after being transported in bits by mules — and almost 150 years old — have acquired such grace? A beautiful sight.

We stepped up onto the shiny steel deck. A whistle blew to welcome us. And there waiting, in a skipper's cap, was a slip of a woman. She's the captain — Giselle, formerly in the Peruvian merchant navy, and the first woman skipper ever accredited to that body of men. But why the ceremonials? To our astonishment we were her very first overnight guests: the refurbishment of the ancient cabins had just been completed. Our phone call, so timely, had come by chance.

We inspected the shipshape engine room with its historic working Swedish Bolinder hot-bulb semi-diesel engine, the oldest and largest of its kind in the world — installed in 1914 after the llama-dung boilers finally gave out. We admired the framed letter of good wishes from Prince Philip. And later that night, candle-lit in the little mahogany-lined mess room, we were wined and dined by Captain Giselle — our dishes brought by waiters from the hotel. Snug beneath blankets in our narrow bunks, we watched a cold moon rise over the reeds fringing the mirror-calm lake, and counted ourselves the luckiest tourists in the world.

