

THE RETURN OF THE FLOATING PALACES

Three American-flag luxury liners will cruise the waters of Hawaii

By Brian Nicol

"Steamships will not suffer from postwar transoceanic air travel because of the discomfort of air travel. There is a problem of getting stuck at an aerodrome for days because of fog. You can make planes, but you can't make weather."

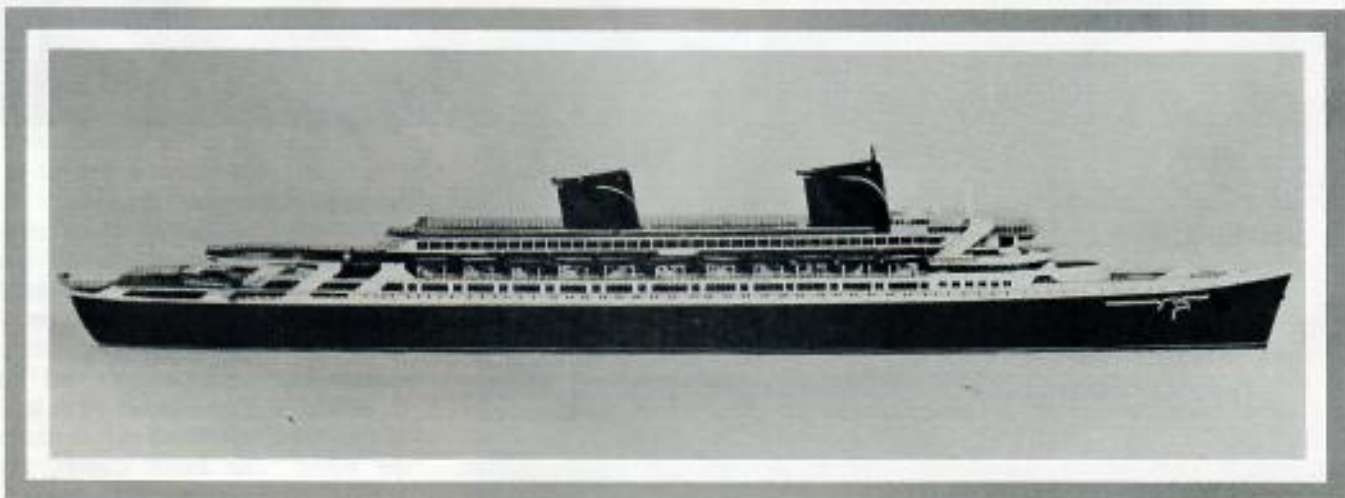
That 1946 quote, notable for its lack of prescience, is from C.M. Fuller, then captain of one of the Atlantic's most famous ladies, *Queen Elizabeth*. Jet engines, radar

screens and modern airports quickly proved Capt. Fuller wrong, of course. The jumbo flying machines soon whisked passengers across oceans; the steamship leviathans sat aging in dry dock or glided gently around the Caribbean. In the wake of man's desire for speed and efficiency, the slow-moving ocean liners had become obsolete relics confined to the backwaters. The airlines dominate over-the-water transportation, but the luxury liners,

now pleasure cruisers and love boats, survive. And Hawaii will be seeing more of them.

United States, *Monterey*, *Oceanic Independence*. Three glorious names in maritime history are again flying the American flag and will again be sailing the waters of the Hawaiian Islands. *Oceanic Independence* eased alongside Aloha Tower last June and received a rousing reception

Scale model of S.S. United States, currently in the final stages of a \$75-million overhaul.



worthy of Boat Day spectacles from past decades. The ship now sails Hawaii's interisland waterways on regular, week-long cruises. Sometime early next year, *Monterey* and

United States will steam past Diamond Head and into Honolulu Harbor for their own Boat Day welcomes. American-owned luxury liners are back.

"The most ambitious ship in U.S. history"

During the 20th century's first 50 years, the European liners ruled the Atlantic. Ships like *Vaterland*, *Ile de France*, *Bremen* and Cunard Lines' two famous sisters, *Queen Mary* and *Queen Elizabeth*, offered complete comfort and sophisticated service as they sped between Europe and America. Only one U.S. ship, *America*, competed with her sisters from the Old World. But the legendary Blue Riband, the coveted prize earned by the ship making the Atlantic crossing in the shortest time, was continually held by one of the European giants. Then in February 1950, United States Lines laid the keel of the ship that was to be the ultimate liner in the Age of the Great Liners.

"*United States* is a ship, not an ancient inn with oaken beams and plaster walls," said her designer, William Francis Gibbs. The vessel would be a true symbol of America: sleek, functional, nearly soaring over the Atlantic's crests. She would disdain the frivolous decadence of the Old World liners for modern, efficient service. *United States* would represent Yankee ingenuity and American pride. She would be built like no other ship and would be faster than every other ship.

Gibbs and United States Lines worked closely with the U.S. Navy. The new liner's construction was shrouded in secrecy. World War II was too recent for ship owners and the Navy to forget the wartime service of the ocean-going giants. If the bullets began to fly again, *United States* would be quickly converted from passenger liner to troop transport. A floating palace for 2,000 pleasure seekers, she could become, if needed, a speedy Atlantic ferry for over 14,000 GIs.

In order to be the best liner ever, in war or peace, *United States* would have to be the fastest. She would have to win the Blue Riband. A fast ship is a light ship. Designer Gibbs used aluminum virtually everywhere to keep the weight down. The ship's

lifeboats and oars, the deck rails and davits, and even the 1.2 million rivets in her hull were aluminum. The 1,200 flower vases were aluminum, baby highchairs were aluminum, coat hangers were aluminum. By using the lightweight metal wherever he could, Gibbs was also assuring the ship's fire resistance. He became obsessed with less weight and more fire proofing. Gibbs allowed a mahogany grand piano only after Theodore Steinway offered to douse the piano with gasoline and set a match to it to prove the instrument's resistance to fire. A ship's officer was forced to replace the wooden frame around a family photograph with an aluminum frame. Workers joked that Gibbs would probably turn away a passenger with a wooden leg.

Although *United States'* engine specifications were kept secret for 14 years after her 1952 maiden voyage, the world soon knew of her incredible speed. On July 3, 1952, the sleek ship left America for France under the command of Capt. Harry Manning. More than 2,000 passengers were aboard. She reached Bishop's Rock, England, the traditional finish line for the Blue Riband, in an incredible three days, 10 hours and 40 minutes. She averaged about 37 knots, or 41 land miles per hour. She had topped *Queen Mary's* 14-year-old record by more than 10 hours. Most of her passengers stayed up through the night to witness the historic moment; Capt. Manning later admitted that "my hands trembled with excitement as we passed Bishop's Rock." President Truman's daughter, Margaret, pulled the ship's horn and sounded the news to the world. *United States* had captured the Blue Riband. She would never relinquish it. No ship ever came close to *United States'* mark.

William Francis Gibbs had eliminated over 2,500 tons with his weight-saving measures. The ship's four powerful turbines generated 240,000 horsepower, 100,000 more

"... Now more than a decade after her ignominious end, *United States* has a new life..."



“... The Boat Days were over when Matson sold *Monterey* in 1970, but the story has a happy ending...”

than any other ship. There was indeed no other vessel like her in the world. Said one British observer: “After all the loud and fantastic claims . . . it comes as something of a disappointment to find them all true.”

But the glory days were short-lived. By the late '50s *United States* was losing money as more and more passengers opted for the high speed and low fares of air travel. Publicity blurbs no longer touted the ship's speed but her luxuries: “You're just fifteen gourmet meals from Europe . . . caviar from Iran, pheasant from Scotland . . . you can choose superfood from all over the world, another rewarding experience in gracious living . . . There's a pool, gym, 2 theatres, 3 Meyer Davis orchestras. It's a 5-day adventure in the lost art of leisure.” It had cost over \$80 million to build *United States*, but soon her owners could not even pay the interest on their loans, much less pay off principal and make a profit. On some voyages, crew outnumbered passengers by three or even four to one. The U.S. government's \$9.7 million per year subsidy kept *United States* afloat for a while, but the federal aid only delayed the inevitable. In 1969, 17 years after her

spectacular maiden voyage, the “speed queen of the Atlantic” was moth-balled at Newport News, Virginia.

Now more than a decade after her ignominious end, *United States* has new life. A West Coast real estate consortium, headed by Hawaii's Richard Hadley, has purchased *United States* for \$5 million from the Federal Maritime Commission which had taken possession of the dry-docked giant in 1973. Hadley's corporation, United States Cruises, Inc., is spending more than \$75 million to overhaul the ship. Sometime next year *United States* will begin inter-island cruising in Hawaii. Also planned are West Coast-Hawaii and around-the-world voyages. Honolulu will be the ship's home port.

To help finance the expensive overhauling, United States Cruises is selling 15 percent of the cabins as shares in a “cruising society.” The concept is similar to time-sharing condominium sales with members paying from \$12,500 for an inside single cabin to \$150,000 for seven-room suites which once housed the most well-heeled of the Atlantic's voyagers. In return for their thousands, members get preferential two-week reservations at a 60 percent



Left: S.S. Monterey will be a regular guest at Aloha Tower's Pier 10, beginning sometime next year.

Above and right: S.S. Oceanic Independence seven-day Island cruises have been at or near capacity since June.

discount for 20 years.

United States, once trim and 1950s modern, will now have a 1980s look. Athletics will be emphasized; there will be two full-size tennis courts, two racquet ball courts, a basketball court and a quarter mile jogging track. Although this famous giant will sport new features and will sail a new ocean, much of William Francis Gibbs's aluminum will remain. And although she will glide leisurely between islands, *United States* will always be the record-breaker, the speed queen, the holder of the Blue Riband.

"One of Matson's grand ladies"

Decades before *United States* sped the Atlantic, the ships of Matson Navigation Line were plying the
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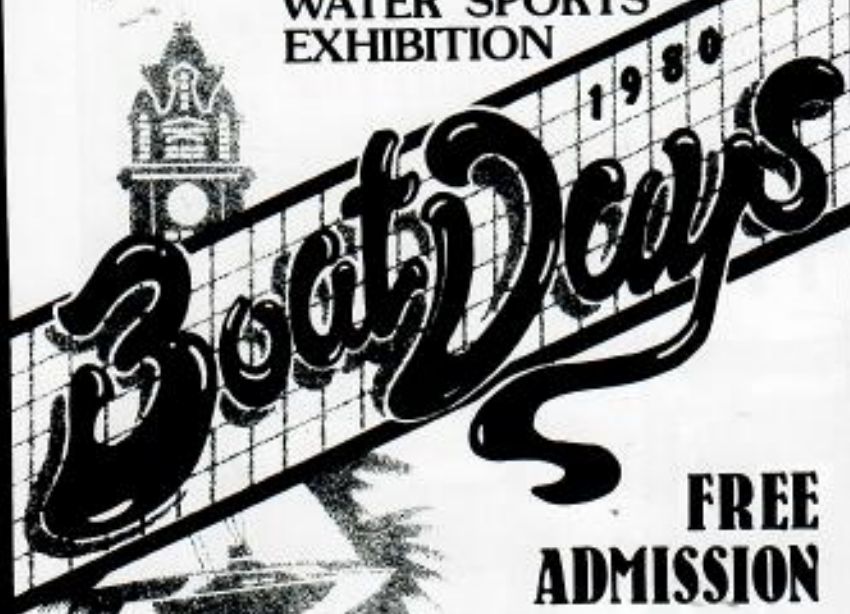
Brian Niccol

"... Although the psychedelic *Independence* was not deadsville, it was flopsville ..."

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Ships

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Pacific. In 1932, in the days when the Scotts and Zeldas still danced till dawn in the ballrooms of the Atlantic's luxury liners, Matson sent its newest creation, *Monterey*, steaming from New York to join her sister ships in the Pacific.

Her maiden Pacific voyage covered the thousands of miles from Los Angeles to Honolulu to Pago Pago to Australia and New Zealand. Capt. Andrew Townsend skippered the liner; 384 of her 498 passengers were bound for Honolulu. She traveled at an impressive 23 knots. Said her chief officer: "She cut through the water like a knife."

When *Monterey* reached Aloha Tower, Hawaii greeted her in typical Boat Day fashion. Local people offered leis, lovely maidens danced the hula, the Royal Hawaiian Band played "Aloha Oe."

For the rest of the decade, *Monterey* connected California and Hawaii to the islands of the South Pacific. She and the other Matson liners gave Pacific travelers a taste of luxury at sea. But during World War II the ships were pressed into service as troop transports throughout the world. The trappings of fine ship-board living were removed to make way for the thousands of male bodies off to do battle. In her finest moment, *Monterey* rescued over 1,600 survivors from the torpedoed and sinking *Santa Elena*. The two ships were part of a large convoy carrying troops and supplies from Scotland to Gibraltar [see HONOLULU, November 1978]. After the war, *Monterey* was reconverted and became the postwar *Matsonia*. She later was renamed *Lurline IV*. In 1957 Matson christened a new *Monterey*, and the famous name was once again serving the Pacific.

But as in the Atlantic, transportation economics forced Pacific ship owners out of the passenger business. In October 1970, Matson sold *Monterey* and *Mariposa* to Pacific Far East Lines. Earlier that year the company had sold *Lurline* to a Greek shipping line. Said a Matson spokesman: "We're putting all our eggs in one basket and concentrating on freight traffic between here and the Mainland." For the first time since the 1880s, Matson would no longer be carrying human cargo throughout the world's greatest ocean. The Boat

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Days were over.

Again, the story has a happy ending, a new beginning. Pacific Far East Lines went bankrupt and sold *Monterey* and her sister, *Mariposa*, to World Airways. Royal Hawaiian Cruises, a San Francisco-based company, is negotiating the purchase of *Monterey* from World Airways. Royal Hawaiian plans a \$6-million renovation after completion of the \$3-million sale. Announced cruise packages include seven-day interisland excursions, West Coast to Hawaii trans-Pacific voyages and monthly two-day "party cruises to nowhere" along the California coast. Sometime in 1981 *Monterey* should again be a regular guest at Aloha Tower's Pier 10.

"Hawaii's floating island"

The moment her huge white bow, adorned with a giant red, white and blue lei, appeared at the corner of Pier 10, the Royal Hawaiian Band struck up "Aloha Oe." As the tugs eased her in, the hundreds on shore shouted and waved to the hundreds on board. Colorful streamers soon formed a web between the ship and the building. The thousands of paper streamers seemed to be pulling the huge liner gently up against the pier. The band played, the girls danced, the cameras clicked. It was Sunday morning, June 15th, 1980, and *Oceanic Independence* had reached her new home.

Like *United States*, *Independence* was first launched during the liner-building heyday of the early 1950s. She was owned by American Export Lines; she was designed by Henry Dreyfuss, the high-priced and famous industrial designer. Dreyfuss' plan was "modern American living at sea." Each detail of the \$25-million liner was carefully considered and coordinated within the total scheme. The beds in her staterooms converted to sofas for daytime use; her two swimming pools were the latest "Hollywood-style"; her open deck space covered 23,000 square feet (six football fields). Construction and design plans for both *Independence* and her sister, *Constitution*, required over 80 tons of blueprint paper. American Export Lines' twin sisters were fine additions to the fleet of



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Atlantic luxury liners.

When its once-booming business slumped in the 1960s, American Export sought any solutions, even the most far out. The company renovated and restyled *Independence*. When the "new" ship entered New York Harbor in late April 1968, even the staid and nonplussed citizens of the Big Apple felt their jaws drop. Painted across 500 feet of her 683-foot hull was a huge orange, yellow and raspberry sunburst with two leering eyes peering from the center. A giant banner urging "Turn On!" waved from the stern. *S.S. Independence* had become *S.S. Psychedelic*. Throughout the ship the decor was go-go, right-on and hip. The swimming pool bottom sported a huge pop-art "SPLASH," rock and circus posters graced the stairwells and corridors, bathroom doors said "Bonnie" and "Clyde." Publicity brochures, obviously geared towards America's pot and Pepsi generation, announced "the end of the shuffleboard era." Declared a full-page ad: "People don't take our cruises for their health. We've got live entertainment and a couple of really great late night bars." William Denis Fugazy, the ship's general passenger agent, said simply, "We're aiming at the youth market, the young people who always felt that cruises were deadsville."

Although the psychedelic *Independence* was not deadsville, it was flopsville. The first few marketing months were successful sellouts, then the youth of America became bored with the razzle-dazzle and the hype. They stayed away in droves. *Independence* was shuttled off to retirement.

In 1978 a group of investors purchased *Independence* from the C.Y. Tung Group of Atlantic Far East Line, then owners of the ship. *Independence* had been rechristened *Oceanic Independence* in 1974. The new owners, American Hawaii Cruises, petitioned the federal government to recommission the liner as an American-flag vessel. In November 1979, President Carter signed the bill and *Oceanic Independence* flew the Stars 'n Stripes once more.

American Hawaii Cruises restored the liner's former elegance and brought her from dry dock in Kobe, Japan, to the island waterways of Hawaii. The ship is now a complete resort, a true hotel on the sea. Facilities include two saltwater pools, three bars, a disco, ballroom, theater, solarium spa and fully equipped

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gym. The meals (five per day) range from formal sit-down dinners in the Palms Dining Room to bountiful midnight buffets outside the Latitude 20 bar. Live bands and professional entertainers perform throughout the afternoon and evening. Passengers can choose from a jammed schedule of activities, or they can sit back in comfortable deck chairs and watch the islands of Hawaii slip by.

Oceanic Independence's seven-day cruises begin and end in Honolulu. In between, the ship circles Molokai, sails around the south side of Lanai and past Maui's Kaanapali and Makena, then on to Hilo and Kona on the Big Island, back to Maui, across to Kauai and then returns to Honolulu. Passengers disembark for sightseeing in Hilo, Kona, Kahului and Nawiliwili. Since *Oceanic Independence* cruises began in June, occupancy has been at or near capacity (750) despite a slow tourism summer in Hawaii. Prices range from \$645 for a small inside cabin to \$1,750 for a deluxe suite on the Sun Deck. The 300 crew members are mostly young and mostly enthusiastic. During the summer months many college-age passengers kept the bars and disco rocking into the night. Now in the fall months, more older people are signing on. The cruises seem to have settled into a comfortable, well-organized pattern even though P.A. announcements like "Bob the plumber, please report to room 416 immediately!" point out the daily difficulties on a floating hotel.

Passengers on their first luxury cruise are awed by *Oceanic Independence's* majestic furnishings, plentiful meals and splendid service. But as always, people are the best attraction. A retired couple from Portland, a bank manager from Vancouver, a single girl from New York, a waiter from Kailua, a teen-ager and her grandmother from Chicago, a travel agent from Osaka, a writer from Honolulu—all are strangers who quickly become friends.

Oceanic Independence is the first American ship to return to the Islands' ports and seaways. *United States* and *Monterey* should follow in the coming months. The fortunes of each of these liners have been as up and down as the troughs and crests they all sail. The 1980s and the Hawaii waters may be the time and the place for the three white super-ships. Perhaps these floating chandeliers have at last found a home.

HONOLULU

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