

CONTAINERSHIP OPERATIONS CONTINUE GROWTH

Deepwater port Ngqura carries potential, says Maersk

Traffic at the Waterfront end of the harbour is a growing nightmare as the Cape becomes swamped by the tourist tsunami. Pilots being transported to and from the Alfred Basin or berths on the western side of the Victoria Basin during peak hours had best go by launch!



Through that traffic I drove to a meeting, mindful that, with the afternoon queues not far off, I would have to hasten to the airport immediately after the meeting. I was glad to have endured the traffic for I enjoyed a most pleasant meeting with Per Heisselberg, Managing Director of **Maersk South Africa**. Our discussions had a positive vibe, for while there are obvious matters that need attention in South African ports - notably the delays to containerships at Durban and the overdue extension to Cape Town's container terminal - exciting times lie ahead for the South African trade.

Although it is old news, shippers and ship-spotters alike will have been glad to hear that Maersk Line, MOL, Safmarine, and Deutsche Afrika Linien will resume a weekly frequency for their joint intermediate service between South Africa and Europe. With the lines' weekly core service - operating for nearly 30 years - the entire European service now offers two sailings per week, and will be better equipped to meet the demand for increased capacity during the fruit season.

The motor industry in East London will also benefit from the improved frequency, not only for the import of vehicle parts, but also to enable them to export containerised cars.

Back to my meeting with Per Heisselberg, a stalwart of 25 years' service with the A.P. Moller Maersk Group.

He is particularly excited about the future of **Ngqura** which he describes as a "healthy development" for container shipping. Besides extensions to the Durban container terminal to incorporate Pier Number 1 and the plans for Cape Town, a terminal at **Ngqura** will help to address the challenges of South African container facilities.

According to the upbeat Heisselberg, Ngqura with its potential for three container berths and its deep water offers the chance for proper planning of a modern container terminal that could become a hub for southern Africa. An efficient and direct rail link to Gauteng, he believes, must be part of the Ngqura development, thus facilitating greater container rail transport.

If the Alcan aluminium smelter does come to fruition, container-loads of palletised aluminium ingots or bars should be available to swell export cargoes from the region.

The North American service is also poised for growth, some of which reflects increasing volumes of eastbound container traffic for trans-shipment to Angolan ports.

Since he has spent a sizable slice of his career in China and Bangladesh, he is well-placed to promote the company's services to the Far East and the Indian sub-continent, regions of predictable growth for South African trade.

At 291 metres, the largest Safmarine vessel calling at South African ports, the South Korean-built **Safmarine Meru**, will make her Cape Town debut in mid-January on the Far East trade. Her service speed is 25 knots and she has a nominal cargo capacity of 4150 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEU), although her actual TEU capacity when carrying some empty containers could be much higher. A

second ship in her class is under construction and four ships with a similar container capacity will probably operate on the trade. The four Big Whites, nearing 30 years in service, will move to a second string service to the Far East, indicative of the anticipated growth in trade with the Orient.

No doubt ship photographers will be out in force when the Mega-White arrives, and when the Big Whites make their final voyages, possibly towards the end of next year.

Observers believe that apart from the burgeoning South African trade with China, Chinese interest in both Central and West Africa (notably the Angolan oilfields and various other major Chinese investments in the region) will generate significant westbound cargo for all lines, either by direct call at West African ports, or by trans-shipment for onward movement by feeder services who are enjoying good cargo volumes.

Although ships are reasonably full on the foreign legs of their voyages, competition on most routes has dampened freight rates a little, off-setting what could have been another remarkably profitable period for owners.

On another note, I hear that **Maersk** have sold a quartet of ageing vessels, including ***Nedlloyd Clement***, a 2003-TEU boxboat they inherited when they took over P&O Nedlloyd. ***Nedlloyd Colombo***, a slightly smaller vessel, was one of the original Safari ships that initiated the fully-cellular container service between South Africa and the Far East in the early 1980s.

Her forerunners were the "Smart Straats", those Royal InterOcean Line freighters that traded between the Far East and South America with South African wayports. Others went to West Africa while the combined Safmarine-RIL service to Australia operated several RIL vessels and Safmarine's jumbo-ised ***SA Nederburg*** that became ***Safoccean Nederburg*** for the service across the Indian Ocean.

The service was plagued by politically inspired action against the South African vessel. Aussie activists delayed the ship for reasons that included a cracked toilet bowl - and curiously, the crack occurred while a docker was using it!

Frustrated by the obstructions rolled in their way, Safmarine withdrew from the service where few shipping lines have profited.

I remember driving to the Breakwater to watch ***Safoccean Nederburg*** sail, a splendid sight with her white hull and Stulcken derricks that were useful to handle containers.

Not much vehicular traffic around East Pier then!