ARATERE EXTENSION:
ONE OF INTERISLANDER'S MOST AMBITIOUS PROJECTS

Ferry capacity has been increased in the past but last year's extension of the Aratere at a Singapore shipyard was one of the most ambitious projects in the history of the inter-island service.

The ship went to Singapore's Sembawang shipyard in late April 2011 for an extension that would take six months to complete and add 30 per cent to the ship's capacity.

New Zealanders and Interislander staff followed the progress on a special Facebook site. They were able to see *Aratere* cut in half and a new 30-metre mid-body inserted. While the ship was in Singapore, a new bow and new stern were fitted, improvements made to the propulsion system as well as improvements to the passenger accommodation.

Increasing capacity by adding a new section to a ship isn't uncommon around the world, but it was a first for the inter-island service. In May 1976, the two year old freight ferry *Aratika* went to a Hong Kong ship-builder for a conversion to enable her to carry passengers.

It was completed in time for her to return to service in December. Author Victor Young in his book *Strait Crossing* records that, "she was now a totally different ship and one offering the best in passenger comfort and facilities."

Aratere entered service in 1998. Before her appointment in Singapore, she was 150 metres long, could carry 350 passengers, had space for just over 1000 lane metres for vehicles and 425 metres for rail traffic.

"Increasing ship size and capacity delivers a number of benefits," says Interislander General Manager Thomas Davis. "Bigger ships today mean better productivity.

"The new mid-body increases *Aratere's* capacity by 300 passengers so our limit is now 650, 28 per cent more rail lane metres and a greater uplift in tonnes, as well as 32 per cent more commercial vehicle space allowing us to carry another 12 to 14 trucks."

The decision to increase *Aratere's* capacity grew out of KiwiRail's 10 year plan to create a financially sustainable rail business. One of the most important elements in the plan was creating the capacity to reliably move goods by rail between Auckland and Christchurch.

"Interislander provides that vital link between the North Island Main Trunk line and the Main North Line for premier rail freight services between Auckland and Christchurch," Thomas continued. "There is no other way to get freight wagons across the Cook Strait, other than on *Aratere* and *Arahura*.
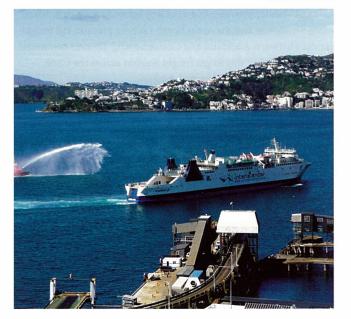
"With the extended and refurbished *Aratere*, we will be able to deliver that rail freight – and our other commercial freight and passenger customers – across Cook Strait more efficiently and with extra capacity."

Losing its most important freight ferry for six months was a challenge, both for Interislander and the wider KiwiRail business. The most significant loss was the reduction in capacity to carry rail wagons.

Interislander managed to lease the ageing *Monte Stello* from rival carrier Strait Shipping and to establish transfer stations in Picton and Wellington to move freight from rail wagons to trucks that were then loaded onto the ferries.

"It wasn't an easy time for Interislander, dealing with a big project based in another country and at the same time, trying

to maintain freight and passenger services while adjusting to a chartered ship," says Thomas.

The project did not go entirely to plan. Extra costs pushed out the overall cost by approximately 15 per cent to $55 million, the result of the need for extra strengthening and changes to the power and propulsion systems.

"We've learned a lot from the project," Thomas added. "But despite the cost increases, we've still achieved a good result.

"We have increased the capacity of the ship, increased its useful working life and improved the productivity of our business."

Aratere was back in service in mid-November last year. She experienced teething problems with turnaround times and her improved propulsion systems but quickly settled down to a routine of reliable service.

A BIG CHALLENGE FOR INTERISLANDER STAFF

Managing the extension of *Aratere* in Singapore's Sembawang shipyard was a big challenge for Interislander staff.

When KiwiRail Chief Executive Jim Quinn visited the yard, he said he was "in awe" at the scale of the project and the focus of the workers doing the work.

"What a terrific job our own team is doing with this," he said. "It's exciting to see it come to life."

Interislander's Marine Projects and Safety Manager Peter Clarke oversaw the project. He said the photographs that came back to New Zealand didn't do justice to the scale of the job.

The new mid-section was lifted by a floating crane, transported to the drydock, and inserted into the 35-metre gap between the forward and stern halves of *Aratere*.

"The whole bow is sheared off and lying in pieces on the dock - it is incredible to see," he said. "*Aratere* is now looking more like a ship again.

Engineering Manager Peter Mathews described the decks and passenger areas as "swarming with hundreds of workers, all beavering away around the clock under the watchful eye of white-helmeted supervisors".

"If you walk into it, your senses are attacked by constant noise, dust, fumes, heat and movement as fork trucks, cranes, and people do their thing," he recalled.

Aratere left for Singapore under the command of Captain Mike Swatridge. It was a familiar trip for him - he took the service's first ferry *Aramoana* there to the same shipyard for its refit in 1978.

A 30-year veteran on the Cook Strait service, he took 24 crew and some contractors on the two-week voyage .

Captain Bob Nixon was master during the return voyage.

He recalled that *Aratere* looked different after being "stretched."

"You stand at one end of the cargo deck and look to the other - they do look quite long," he said. "It makes quite a difference.

"It takes a lot longer to walk down there now."

LEFT: The arrival of the new and improved Aratere