

# doctor on board

Struggling as an overworked medico, **Joanna Nell** found an escape in the ultimate sea change.

**S**easickness and sunburn. Elderly Americans. Lusty sailors. My medical friends did their best to dissuade me. The general consensus was that running away to sea would ruin my career. But in 1996, after five sleep-deprived years working as a junior doctor in Britain's National Health Service, I was willing to take the risk, justifying it as the gap year I'd never had.

Hungry for adventure, I boarded a bright white ship at the dockside in Singapore. With 2000 passengers and crew, she was the size of a small town. A behemoth.

To my relief, the hospital was well equipped with an X-ray machine, blood analyser and even an anaesthetic machine. More worryingly, it also had its own morgue, which I was reassured doubled as a handy champagne locker.

That first cruise was a steep learning curve, a tight schedule of crew inductions and safety drills. There was so much to take in. Even working out which of the uniforms to wear each day – tropical whites or formal – was a challenge, as was remembering to turn my clock forward or back an hour as the ship crossed time zones. One morning I arrived two hours early for work, a few days later, two hours late.

The senior doctor attended to the paying passengers during office hours and as “Baby Doc” I was responsible for the 600 crew including waiters, engineers, cooks, dancers, hairdressers, entertainers and navigators. At night, I was on call for the entire ship.

The crew, theoretically all my patients, were a melting pot of nationalities and cultures. For many, English was a second language, as I discovered when a blushing Filipino bedroom steward dropped his pants and announced, “Doc, I have a burning desire.” To my relief, on double-checking the dictionary,



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I was able to cure his amorous declaration with an anti-itch cream.

Far from treating seasickness and sunburn, as I'd been warned, the caseload was wide and varied. The ship's medical centre was essentially a floating emergency department, albeit without a surgeon, ICU or team of specialists on hand for a second opinion.

For this reason, the company ensured all medics undertook the very latest life-support and trauma training prior to joining the ship, although none of the courses prepared me to perform CPR while wearing heels and a full-length formal skirt in a crowded dining room.

With long and unpredictable hours, it certainly wasn't a job for the faint-

hearted. Neither were the infamous parties in the officers' wardroom.

Thankfully, there were several unexpected perks to the job, and as an officer I regularly availed myself of the passenger facilities, including the gym, spa and deck buffet. I even hosted my own table of passengers in the evening, half expecting the cast of *The Love Boat* to appear at any moment.

On rare days off I volunteered as a tour guide on passenger shore excursions. Flying over Alaska in a seaplane, watching the ballet in St Petersburg or eating fresh lobster in Maine – there were worse ways to earn a living. Consulting from a hammock slung between two palm trees in the Bahamas, it was

easy to forget the interminable ward rounds and overcrowded outpatient clinics of the past.

As predicted, many of the passengers were elderly. Strokes and heart attacks showed no regard for geography, and emergency evacuations would regularly test the ingenuity of even the most resourceful doctor.

I recall one such patient, who was disembarked on a stretcher halfway through the Panama Canal. After a white-knuckle ride in the back of the rickety ambulance, I was relieved to hand the patient over in one piece when we arrived at the hospital in Panama City. My relief was short-lived, however, as I watched the ship sail off towards the sunset without me.

A young woman in a white uniform, alone, carrying a bag full of medical drugs, I didn't exactly blend in on the oily dockside. Luckily, I managed to hitch a last-minute ride on the pilot boat and several gut-churning minutes later we drew level with the moving ship. To my horror, someone threw a rope ladder down and shouted for me to start climbing.

Uniform skirt tucked into my underwear and not daring to look down, I scaled the side of the ship to raucous cheers and applause from the audience of passengers and crew on the boat deck. The coxswain greeted me cheerily at the top, “Welcome home, Doc.” In that moment I realised that being a cruise ship doctor was more a way of life than a job.

My gap year became two. Thankfully, the doubters were as wrong about my career as they were about the seasickness and sunburn. I managed to avoid the lusty sailors too, and fell instead for an officer and a gentleman. And reader, I married him. •

*The Last Voyage of Mrs Henry Parker* (Hachette Australia) by Joanna Nell is on sale now.