

Ferry Business

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A DIVERSE FUTURE

Stena Line's female leaders discuss why the ferry operator is focused on inclusivity and the guest experience



SAFER SHIPPING

Mike Corrigan of Interferry talks new initiatives

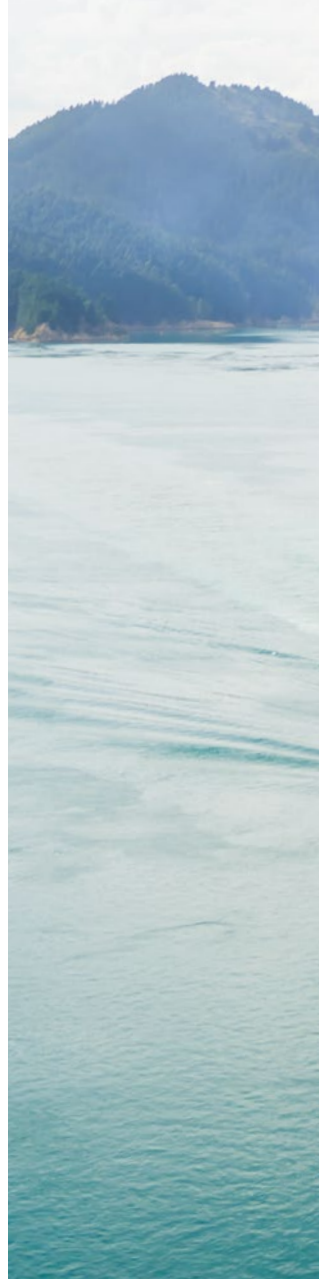


CUSTOMERS FIRST

Will Dady of StraitNZ discusses the ferry passenger experience

Serving the strait

Will Dady of StraitNZ gives Simon Johnson an insight into why New Zealand's Bluebridge Cook Strait Ferries is prioritising both efficiency and the customer experience



The Cook Strait divides the North and South Islands of New Zealand, making it an essential throughfare for travellers and goods across the country. Delivering reliable and efficient ferry services across what can be an unpredictable stretch of water is a challenging task. State-backed operator Interislander has been doing so since 1962. Yet in 1992, Jim Barker, the owner of a road freight company, saw an opportunity to found a competitor service and established Strait Shipping, now StraitNZ.

“The Barker family was frustrated at the service and rates they were receiving for moving their livestock between the North and South Islands,” says Will Dady, chief commercial officer of StraitNZ. “Next

thing you know, the family bought and began operating its own ship on the Cook Strait. The business was focused on freight for the first 10 years but formed Bluebridge Cook Strait Ferries in 2002 to take passengers across the strait. Since then, Bluebridge has gone from strength to strength and there's a real sense of loyalty that exists in our customer base because of our origins.”

Bluebridge now offers eight sailings a day, departing from Picton on the South Island and New Zealand's capital Wellington on the North Island. The operator takes hundreds of thousands of passengers on the three-and-a-half-hour voyage across Cook Strait each year, as well as thousands of tonnes of freight and livestock.

The company expanded its fleet by acquiring ro-pax ferry Connemara from Stena RoRo in 2023. Connemara is now Bluebridge's largest and fastest ship, with its extra capacity proving to be a major benefit for the company's operations.

“The arrival of Connemara has been critical for us,” says Dady. “We have such significant freight volumes that, in the past, our lane metres would be exhausted by freight. That meant that even though theoretically a ship could take 330 passengers, realistically, you'd only be able to take 200 because most of the lane metres were filled with freight and it's difficult to find 150 walk-on passengers. With Connemara we have a lot more lane metres to play with, which means we can take the freight volumes we need to while



Acquiring Connemara has allowed StraitNZ to increase the number of passengers it takes across the Cook Strait

also providing enough space to allocate to passengers.”

With Connemara now an integral part of the fleet, Bluebridge anticipates a record year ahead.

“We expect to take approximately 400,000 passengers across the Cook Strait in 2024, up 80,000 from what we would have expected from before acquiring Connemara,” says Dady. “I then expect us to continue expanding our share of both the freight and passenger markets even further in the following years.”

To maintain this success and retain a competitive edge over Interislander on the Wellington-Picton route, Bluebridge must present its service as a distinct experience, Dady explains.

“We have to provide key areas of differentiation to demonstrate our value,” he says. “To achieve that, we focus on what we can offer to our customers rather than using our competition as a benchmark. For example, people want a private space, so we’ve invested heavily in promoting cabins to provide a comfortable experience in a way that our competitor doesn’t. We’ve leveraged our cabins to provide a fantastic product for passengers.”

Bluebridge is also improving the online ticket reservation experience by implementing Hogia Ferry Systems’ Bookit system. The booking system handles the complete booking process and also allows Bluebridge to sell closely related products, such as onboard services and accommodation. Dady, who first



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joined StraitNZ in a role focused on the online experience, believes the partnership with Hogia will help Bluebridge to improve its product offering.

“We partnered with Hogia because the strength of its platform gives us an incredibly solid base to build on,” he says. “This gives us more flexibility in terms of our ability to innovate and develop the new products that we want. The application programming interface suite is very strong, and some of the stuff we’ve seen already has been a significant step up on what we had previously. The partnership with Hogia will allow us to evolve and develop further over the coming years.”

The ports of Picton and Wellington are also very important partners for Bluebridge. Fostering a good relationship with the port authorities has led to valuable opportunities for the company, including chances for expansion.

“We’ve grown our footprint considerably in Wellington over the last three to four years to deliver more operational space for handling freight, which then freed up different areas to marshall our passengers,” says Dady. “Instead of trucks being packed up on the wharf, they’re now consolidated in a single space. It can’t be underestimated how important that kind of layout is in getting the ships away on time, ensuring

an efficient operation and improving the overall experience.”

While delivering efficient operations both in port and onboard the vessels is crucial to meet the expectations of passengers, it’s the services provided by crew members that make the Bluebridge experience memorable, suggests Dady.

“It all goes back to people,” he says. “We deliver a great customer experience through the friendliness and authenticity of our staff. Our terminal manager, for example, has worked here for 20 years and is legendary for the way she welcomes our customers. It’s that personal touch you can’t put a price on that truly drives our success. We can never forget that.” **CFR**