

Clear Waters Ahead – GP Glass & Brian Imlach

> Text by Tim Roberts, Photography courtesy of GP Glass

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Commercial Over \$50K

GP Glass experienced the job of a lifetime when they were chosen to play a crucial role in refurbishing the Spirits of Tasmania, the iconic ferries providing daily and overnight services for tourists and commercial freight between Devonport and Melbourne. CEO Brian Imlach discusses the challenges and rewards of glazing on the high seas.

'The UK-based ship refurbishment company Trimline was awarded the tender for the Tasmanian State Government's refurbishment of Spirit 1 and 2, the designation given for each Spirit of Tasmania vessel,' Brian explains. 'Seeking to make the interior lighter, airier and more user-friendly, the clients subsequently requested tenders from local building firms. This was won by Tasmanian building group Fairbrother, who after a tender process, eventually awarded the glazing contract to GP Glass.'

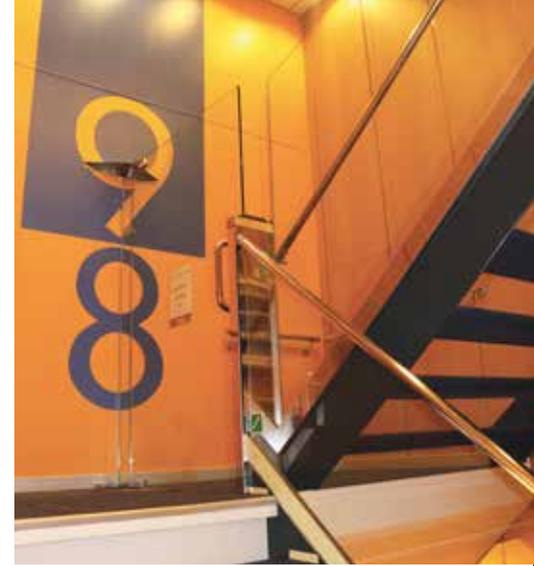
Keenly diving into untested waters, the (usually landlocked) Brian and his colleagues at GP Glass rapidly adjusted to the nautical working environment. 'Working on a ship was certainly a steep learning curve – we had to set aside everything we knew ... or thought we knew,' Brian recalls.

GP Glass's role was assisted greatly by the highly experienced and skilled team at Trimline, gaining from their detailed advice received throughout the project. 'Trimline offered extensive input during the renovation's design and construction phases, which we greatly appreciated,' says Brian. 'As expected, some adjustment was necessary – Trimline personnel had never seen the ships in the flesh before, so it turned out that things weren't quite as shown on the drawings. The intricate design brief was made significantly more difficult by the Spirit of Tasmania's hull's slight curvature in each direction.'

Detailed discussions and planning were carried out before the modifications got underway. 'We were extensively involved in the facilitation of Trimline's plans,' Brian observes. 'For example, we recommended locally sourced components and materials, rather than using the specified European equipment we hadn't worked with or heard of before.'

These requests for local materials fortunately fell on receptive ears, with many major elements of the fitout being sourced from Australian suppliers. 'We were pleased that Trimline

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(Spirit of Tasmania - continued)

permitted us to substitute a substantial proportion of locally made product, mostly sourced via the German chain Hafele,' Brian confirms.

The collaboration, then, was comprehensive. 'We worked with Trimline's architect, who was very receptive to our input,' says Brian. 'The architect was quite taken by the fact that a small company from Devonport, Tasmania could reliably provide accurate information and drawings while sourcing quality products to meet a challenging schedule - all while the ship was sailing!'

On commencing the renovation, GP Glass were quick to realise the delicacy of their task. 'We were over-eager with the hammer drill at first ... but that got thrown overboard in short order!' Brian reminisces. 'We weren't allowed to drill holes in anything; instead, we had to weld brackets onto the hull, then bolt onto each bracket.'

The logistics of working on an ocean liner tested the company's expertise to its limits. 'Access to the site certainly proved challenging,' says Brian, with typical understatement. 'Given the onboard security protocols, all works needed to be undertaken between scheduled sailings while the ship was docked. Our employees sometimes travelled to Melbourne on the Spirit as it sailed back and forth between Victoria and Tasmania.'

The scope of the renovations required from GP Glass was daunting. 'The whole ship was essentially gutted from one end to the other,' says Brian. 'We were tasked with making the restaurant and dining area as open as possible while remaining enclosed, so everything had to be glazed for maximum visibility.'

'To realise this brief, we provided a fully operable 10mm toughened glass walling system that increased available natural light and offered easy access, incorporating the contours of the ship's wider environment - all while retaining the peerless practicality necessary in this unique setting,' he explains. 'The walls had to match exactly with the Hafele top and bottom running tracks we had specified, which were machined into the top and bottom rails.'

'Our work on the Spirit's interior extended to providing the ceiling glazing to the guest information area, glazed partitioning to the guest lounge, mirrored glass to the dining and bar areas, and frameless

curved and segmented glass sliding and stacking wall systems to the dining and retail sections.'

The fitout contains many of the company's innovations. 'A technical highlight of our involvement was creating a louvre package from scratch to replace the existing roll-down blinds covering the dining area windows,' says Brian. 'Unable to procure adequate replacements, we ended up designing a small-bladed, CNC-machined elliptical louvre with a central and end bracket. We then contacted a Melbourne company called Aluminium Industries, who made us a mock-up overnight with their 3D printer. Within days, we gained architectural approval to manufacture 100 sets - an amazing turnaround time.'

'We were also involved in fabricating the ship's toughened frameless glass shower screens, which presented their own unique challenges,' Brian expands. 'The doors must be able to hold shut while the ship

is pitching and rolling - also needing to be heavy, or they would tend to swing open due to the increased mass. To solve this, we designed a magnetic catch system that prevented the doors swinging open in heavy weather, while still remaining reasonably easy to open.'

Getting all this heavy glazing equipment on board was highly involved. 'Obtaining access was very difficult,' notes Brian. 'We craned most of the glass onto the top deck and brought it down in the ship's service elevators. Everything was done by hand, which was very labour-intensive - aside from the crane, there was no mechanical assistance.'

Renovating both ships required extensive coordination. 'We had one crew working on Ship 1 and another on Ship 2, with four tradesmen per ship,' he notes. 'One ship was dry-docked in Sydney while the hull was refurbished; we worked on it when it arrived ... not realising it was docked in a Navy base. Without passes to get on and off, we were essentially prisoners, told to stay below decks like our forefathers on the First Fleet. Fortunately, we avoided the lash and no sign of leg irons!'

GP Glass deserve commendation for their award-winning improvements to an Australian icon. **GA**

