

## Little Ladies of the Malacca Straits and Java Sea

By Geoffrey Walker



Painting by Tony Westmore.

### **“MV Rajah Brooke” of Straits Steamship Company anchored mid-stream in the Sarawak River**

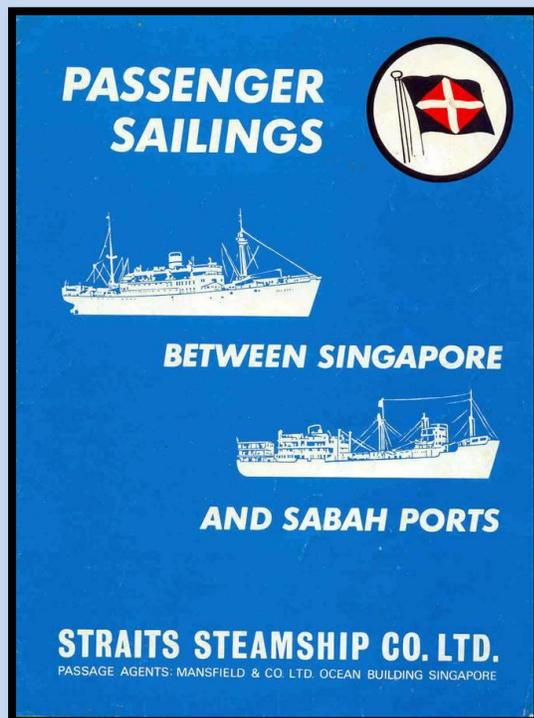
I cast back my memories to when I was a junior deck officer on ships that routinely plied the Malacca Straits as part of their regional trade, during the early to late 1960s. Having crossed the Bay of Bengal from the Indian east coast and made our landfall on the Island of Pulau Wei, situated at the head of the Malacca Straits, we would then proceed south down the Malacca Strait, to Penang, Port Swettenham and on to Singapore. I cast my memories back in time to those golden times which stimulates my nostalgia of the ships usually encountered around those parts. I clearly recall the many hours spent on watch studying these fantastic small ships through my binoculars, from horizon to horizon, as they forged their passage through the flat calm waters of the straits to or from their various ports.

Most of my seagoing years were spent sailing the trade routes of Asia, so I frequently traversed through the Malacca and Singapore Straits. This was the “Headquarters Central” for encountering the quaint and beautiful little inter-island, short sea traders that were prevalent in these waters throughout the 1960-

70s era. It was a fascinating period in the development and coming of age of what used to be known as the “Straits Settlements”, namely, Penang, Malacca and Singapore.

There were two main players in the intra regional trades for this type of vessel **Straits Steamship Company** based and operated in Singapore with its sister company **Sarawak and Singapore Steamship Company**; easily recognizable by their white funnels and black top with a broad pale blue band sandwiched in between. These ships were usually manned by British Officers and Malay or Chinese crews, who were devoted to the ships and trade and remained with them for many years. Then there was the Dutch **KPM (Koninklijke Paketvaart- Maatschappij)**. The Dutch founded **KPM** in 1888 as a regional shipping line mainly to service their interests in the Indonesian archipelago, then known as the Dutch East Indies.

**Straits Steamship Company (SSC)** was formed in Singapore as the **Straits Navigation Company** in 1890. Since the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 had considerably boosted trade between Europe and Asia, and with its Malaya and Singapore colonial pedigree and status of its connections with the Straits Settlements, the company enjoyed a steady period of growth and expansion. The **SSC** operated its vessels between Singapore and the west coast of Malaya peninsula, especially Malacca and Penang, together with several smaller river ports. They also served a number of Ports located in British North Borneo, nowadays known as Sarawak and Sabah.



Left, a **SSC** Poster, advertising its passenger services between Singapore and Sabah (previously known as British North Borneo).

In its first 25 years, the **SSC** transported mainly tin ores, bagged rice, rubber and occasionally livestock. Other staple cargoes included coffee, pepper, and tobacco. Besides goods, the ships also ferried passengers – mostly laborers from China who came to work on rubber estates and tin mines in the region. Due to substantial losses during WWI, the **SSC** again embarked on a period of expansion and diversification of its fleet. In conjunction with its sister company Sarawak and Singapore Steam Ship Company expanded passenger cargo services to encompass services from Borneo and Sarawak to Singapore and the Ports of Singapore, Malacca and Penang. Malaysian Airlines (initially a joint venture between Malaya and Singapore in which **SSC** played a managerial role), had not yet

developed so there was a consistent demand for passenger services between their main trading destinations of Pending, Muara, Kuching, Sibul, Miri and Labuan. After recovery, **SSC** began its path of expansion once again and started to diversify. In 1957, it gave up managing the airline and went public, venturing into the lighterage industry.

Inevitably, **SSC** diversified into other ventures such as property, leisure, warehousing and distribution in the 1970s and '80s. In July 1983, Keppel Corporation Ltd purchased a 58-percent stake in Straits Steamship from Ocean Transport & Trading and in September that same year, Keppel increased its stake in the **SSC** from 58 to 82 percent. In 1989, the ship owning part of **SSC** was split off and named **Straits Steamships Land (SSL)** whilst the ship owning division was separated and rebranded **Steamers Maritime Holdings Ltd**. Alas, in 1997, the Keppel Group realigned its main business focus, SSL became Keppel Land, while Steamers Maritime became Keppel Telecommunications and Transportation (Keppel T&T).

Hence the demise of the fleet of beautiful small ships, an absolute icon of the region and so frequently observed throughout the full range of Malaya, Singapore and Borneo ports, faded gracefully into oblivion and now only remain in nostalgia. One noteworthy point is, towards the latter stages of **SSC's** days of stature and distinction they did acquire some larger tonnage when they purchased several ships from the **China Navigation Company – Hong Kong**. See amongst below images.

A typical early "**Straits Steamship**" passenger cargo vessel the "**Marudu**" depicted in Sarawak working both cargo and passengers during the inter war years, a Painting by Tony Westmore.



A painting by Tony Westmore

Below is the actual **SSC steamer “Marudu”** seen arriving at Sandakan. She ended her illustrious days moored in Singapore, where she acted as a training ship for young seafarers, and met her eventual demise.



Images of **SSC’s “MV Petaling”** (above) and sister vessel **“MV Perlis”** (below) used exclusively on the Penang, Malacca, Singapore and Borneo passenger cargo trade during the 1960-70s. These were very popular little ships offering a 3-5 day transit between Sarawak and Malay Peninsula ports. They were supplemented by slightly larger vessels, namely, **“MV Kimanis” “MV Keningau”, “MV Kunak”** and the **“MV Kinabalu”** which offered a 13 day round trip service which included calls at Tawau, Sandakan, Jesselton and Labuan.



The passenger service was very productive and was supplemented by vessels such as the “**MV Auby**” and larger, but of similar appearance, “**MV Rajah Brooke**”, which was approximately 2300 GRT

An interesting design feature of these vessels is the split fore and aft accommodations. The idea for the bridge being so far forward and high was to provide the Master much better visibility over the tree tops when proceeding to upstream river ports.



The slightly larger “**MV Kimanis**” engaged on the very popular 13 day round voyage service from Peninsula Malaya, Singapore and British North Borneo Ports. These vessels operated well into 1970s.



Above, an interesting caption of Boat Drill on **“MV Rajah Brook”**, taken whilst alongside at Jesselton Quay



The iconic **“MV Rajah Brook”** seen loading a bagged cargo, image possibly taken at Sandakan



A forest of derricks looking aft from Bridge on **“MV Rajah Brooke”**, depicted at Labuan



The **“MV Rajah Brooke”** photographed whilst at the eastern anchorage in Singapore Roads. The extra lofty Bridge is very evident in this caption. The ship was named after the last white Rajah of Sarawak, James Brooke



An interesting portrait of the **“MV Rajah Brook”**. The entire SSC Fleet, all absolute iconic ships of their time.



A detailed image of the SSC's steamer **“Kelantan”** depicted arriving at Sandakan.



The SSC's "MV Bruas", pictured in the calm waters of the Malacca Straits, during a passage to Penang.



Captured at Singapore Roads Eastern Anchorage during the late 1970s, the very handsome  
"MV Straits Star" ex "Kwangsi" late of China Navigation Company – Hong Kong (CNC)



Located at Singapore anchorage during 1978 **“MV Straits Hope”** ex CNC’s **“Chefoo”**

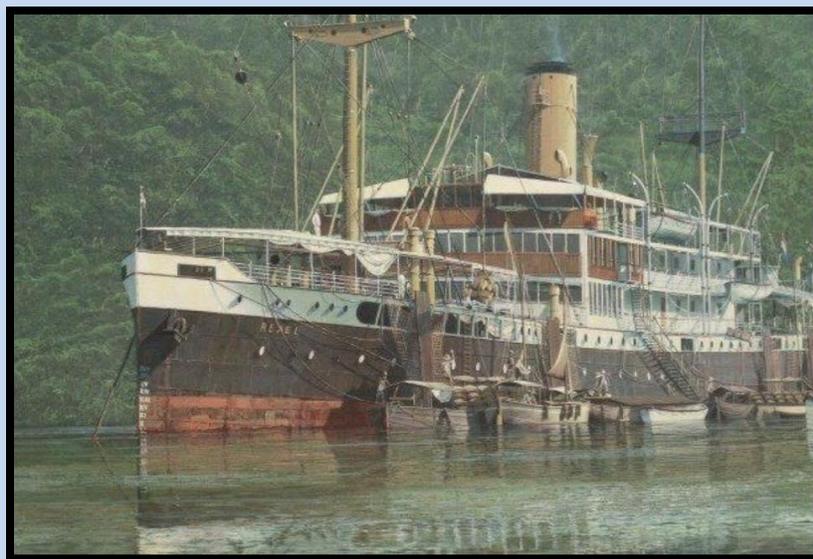


SSC’s **“MV Kilas”** seen in 1970 – the ex CNC’s **“Anking”**

## Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (KPM)



A pre WW11 poster advertising cargo passenger steamers usually used to trade between the various Indonesian archipelago ports, Penang and Singapore during their heyday.



This image of **KPM's Steamship "Reael"** anchored upstream at some Indonesian archipelago destination, amidst the choking heat, mosquitoes and crocodiles, tells the complete story. No air-conditioning, only a fan and louvered cabin doors and windows to assist with the ventilation.



The **KPM** vessel “**Karsik**” departing from Hong Kong in the direction of Lai Yi Mun. Going by the Hong Kong Island skyline the photo looks to have been taken during early to mid 1950s.

**KPM** was founded in 1888 by the Dutch as their dominant inter-island shipping line during their colonization of the Dutch East Indies and operated until 1967 when it merged with the Dutch shipping company of **Koninklijke Java China Paketvaart Lijnen (KJCL)**. During the later part of the Indonesia colonial era **KPM** experienced a bumpy ride due to a threat of nationalization by the Indonesian government. In 1958 as a consequence of Indonesian unrest, the company was compelled to relocate its Head Office and shipping assets to Singapore from where it successfully operated until 1967, when the company merged with **(KJCL)** part of the large **(RIL)** shipping conglomerate, which was very prominent throughout Asia with their extended world-wide services to Australia, Africa and South America at the time. After 1977 they were all to become part of mammoth Nedlloyd consortium.

Seldom a day passed, without sighting one of these small iconic steamers, all immaculately maintained by their long serving crews. Hear say has it, once an Asian crew joined a **KPM** ship they usually remained with it for the remainder of their seagoing days.

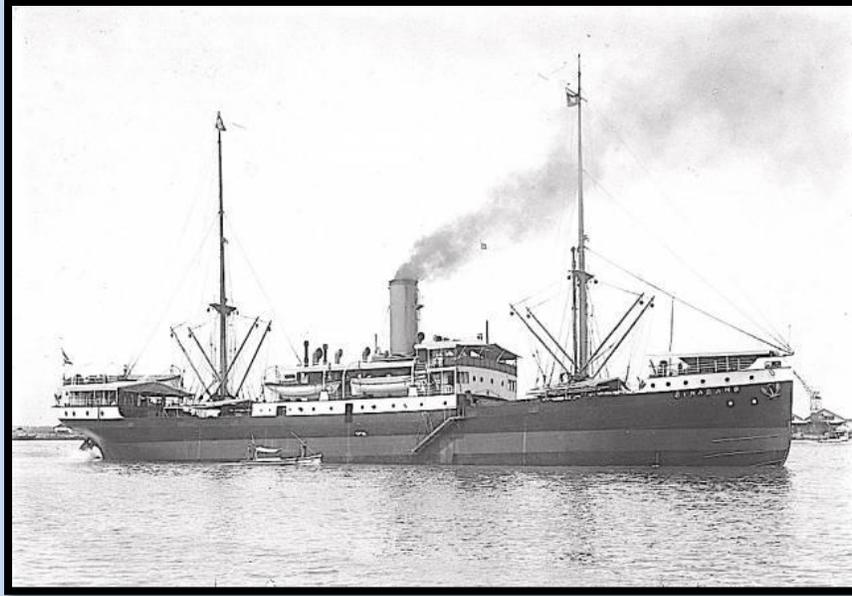
For many years after the demise of **KPM** as a trading entity, the vessels they had were sold for demolition or to other regional shipping operators. These little ladies always remained easily identifiable by their distinctive design features. The cessation of **KPM** was a sad loss and signaled the end of inter-island trade around the Indonesian archipelago, with ship services being phased out. Nowadays, modern container feeder vessels, have replaced them. Below follows a gallery of randomly selected captions of **KPM's** graceful little ladies.



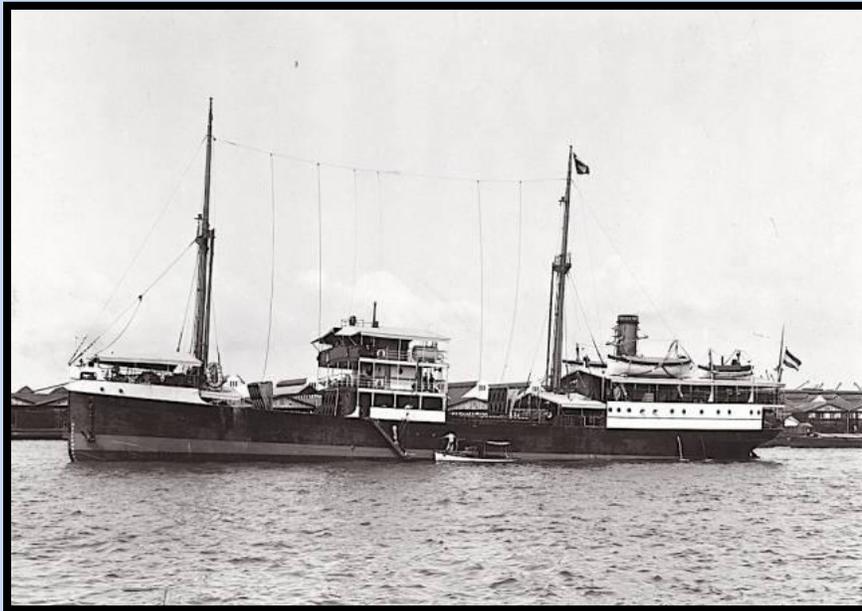
The **KPM** inter-island trader, “**Saioe**” in **RIL (Royal Interocean Line)** colors after **KPM’s** merger with that group.



**KPM’s “Barumun”**. A typical example of an inter - island trader, captured busy working cargo from both jetty and lighters, most likely in Batavia, now known as Jakarta.



Above, the old **KPM Steamer, "Sinabang"**. A Frequent visitor to ports in Java and Sumatra



Another **KPM old timer "Moesi"** from a bygone era, somewhere in Indonesia, proudly displaying the Dutch Ensign



Easily recognizable as **KPM**, with classic lines and buff and black funnel. Their ships were always immaculate in their presentation. Photographed here is their steamer “**Van Der Lun**” laying serenely at anchor working from lighters.



Instantly identifiable, as an ex **KPM** inter-island trader, working cargo alongside the wharf, at Belawan after the demise of **KPM**.



Having seen better days, but still going strong under new ownership, another ex **KPM** merchantman seen at Singapore small ship's anchorage, waiting on cargo



An ex **KPM** vessel, renamed "**Hero**" placed under a new register. Image taken at Hong Kong, whilst secured mid-stream to a Typhoon Buoy and working cargo from barges

**Credits:** Straits Steamship Co. Ltd Public archives

Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (KPM) Public archives

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