



# The Ship of Dreams

The story of the Titanic continues to captivate the public imagination 100 years after the disaster.

**A**PRIL 10, 1912... thousands of cheering spectators gathered at Southampton harbour to witness the magnificent RMS Titanic set sail on her maiden voyage to New York. Hundreds of passengers waved goodbye to their loved ones, eagerly looking forward to travel to the 'New World' aboard the largest 'unsinkable' ship afloat at the time. Then, four days later, doomsday struck.

## The Ship

The Titanic was an Olympic class ocean liner of the White Star Line. It was practically a floating hotel with eleven decks, eight of which were for passengers. The liner boasted of libraries, dancing rooms, cafes, gardens, a heated swimming pool, squash court and even a barber shop.

The ship was propelled by three engines powered by steam produced from 29 boilers. The hull had 16 watertight compartments with steel doors that could be shut in 25 seconds or less to hold any water that might seep in to threaten the safety of the ship.

What set it apart from other luxury ships was its opulence. The interior decoration was inspired by the finest homes in England. Rich wooden panelling and oak furniture added a touch of class. One of its highlights was the curved Grand Staircase connecting the First Class decks.

The Third Class accommodation was not as luxurious, but it was still better than that of most other liners.

## Tip of the Iceberg

During the journey, the Titanic was carrying over 2,200 people—1,316 passengers and 885 crew. After leaving Southampton, it made two stops before heading westwards.

The first few days of the

voyage were uneventful. The captain of the ship, Edward Smith, steered the ship as it sped full steam ahead at 22.5 knots (41.7 kmph). On the fateful day, April 14, close to midnight, the guard on duty suddenly noticed a floating iceberg in its path. He alerted the bridge. The First Officer immediately ordered the ship to be swung portside (left) to avoid the iceberg, but it was too late.

The starboard (right) side of the ship grazed the iceberg. Five of its watertight compartments were punctured and water was filling in fast. Titanic's design allowed it to float with any three of her compartments flooded at any one time—five flooded compartments spelt doom. Captain Smith told his crew to prepare the lifeboats.

## Watery Grave

The Titanic had only 20 lifeboats, which could accommodate less than half the number of passengers aboard. The crew followed the protocol of 'women and children first' and evacuated the First Class passengers first. By the time the last lifeboat was lowered at 2.05 am, the ship had started sinking. The stern rose up, hanging ominously in midair. The stranded people clung on desperately as the ship snapped in the middle and plunged into the icy depths of the North Atlantic Ocean at 2.20 am. Those who hit the freezing water drowned or died either of hypothermia or cardiac arrest within minutes.

Numerous distress calls had been sent out earlier and flares had been lit. But no ship was close enough to respond in time. The first ship to arrive on the scene was RMS Carpathia, almost two hours after the Titanic had sunk.

Over 1500 people perished that night; only 333 bodies were recovered. The Titanic is one of the deadliest peacetime maritime disasters—only 30% (705) of its

passengers survived to tell the tale.

## Legends

The tragedy gave rise to many tales of heroism and sacrifice. One poignant account revolves around the elderly owner of Macy's department store, Isidor Straus and his wife, Ida. Isidor refused to leave as long as there were women and children remaining on the ship. He urged Ida to board the lifeboat, but she said, "We have lived together for many years. Where you go, I go." They were last seen sitting together quietly on Titanic's deck before a huge wave engulfed them.

Another undying story is that of Titanic's band, which heroically kept on playing until the very end. For years, people have speculated about what their last song was. Different witnesses claimed that the band played either the hymn *Nearer, My God, to Thee* or the song *Autumn*, just before the ship sank.

One passenger who became famous after the disaster was Margaret 'Molly' Brown, an

American socialite who was dubbed 'The Unsinkable Molly Brown'. She exhorted the people in her lifeboat to go

back to try to save more people and even rowed the boat herself for many hours until help arrived.

## Discovery

The Titanic had sunk about 800 kilometres southeast of Newfoundland. The world had given up hope of finding its remains after a number of search teams drew a blank. It was even believed that the ship had disintegrated.

The wreck was found by a joint French-American expedition, 73 years later on September 1, 1985, using state-of-the-art sonar. Thereafter, many artefacts have been recovered from the wreck and displayed in touring exhibitions and museums around the world.

## FAST FACTS

- Belfast shipbuilders Harland and Wolff took three years to build the Titanic at a cost of \$7,500,000. Today it would cost over an estimated \$400,000,000!
- It measured 269m long, 28m wide and 32m high.
- It had four funnels, of which only three released steam from the boilers; the fourth was just for show!
- As a Royal Mail Ship (RMS), the Titanic was officially responsible for delivering mail for the British postal service.

Two films are famous for their portrayal of the disaster—*A Night to Remember* (1958) and James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997). Cameron has unveiled a 3D version of the film to commemorate the event in April 2012.

