



Huge kiwifruit shipment quick off the dock

by Elaine Fisher

A downturn in the United States new car industry has provided a big opportunity for Zespri in the form of one of the world's largest vehicle/refrigerated cargo ships — the Sunbelt Spirit.

The vessel, which towers as high as many cruise liners, arrived at Port of Tauranga on Sunday and was due to depart today after loading 7500 pallets of green and gold kiwifruit bound for the Belgium port of Zeebrugge.

The shipment was the largest Zespri has sent on one vessel so early in the season and happened because the depressed US economy has reduced demand for new cars.

"The ship's owners were looking for another cargo and Zespri was able to take advantage of the opportunity," said Michael Knowles, Zespri's shipping manager.

"It's good news for all sectors of the industry as this vessel enables us to ship a significant volume of fruit into the European market.

"It's also a credit to the industry that it has been able to supply this volume of export quality fruit so early in the

season," he said.

The shipment of this season's first kiwifruit sailed out of Gisborne on March 20.

Carol Ward, Zespri's director corporate and grower services, said the success of the Sunbelt Spirit shipment was a credit to the industry, from harvesting to packing and co-ordinating logistics.

The delivery of this fruit into Belgium would support a strong start to the early Zespri sales programme in Europe, she said.

The Great American Lines-owned vessel normally transports 5000 new Toyota vehicles from Japan to the United States, returning with her 13 cargo decks filled with up to 6800 pallets of grapefruit from California, said company vice-president Peter Johansen.

Inside, the Sunbelt Spirit looks like a giant multi-storeyed carpark with ramps between decks and storage space for 6200 Corolla-sized cars or 5000 larger vehicles.

Mr Johansen said the vehicles were strapped in place for shipping but once off-loaded, pallets of fruit could be stacked in their place and refrigeration units turned on to keep fruit at the required temperatures.

"We can also transport frozen products if needed," he said.

Because the vessel's cargo decks have straight sides, positioning pallets is simple but the most unusual aspect of the ship is its side loading.

Huge cargo doors open in the hull and cages, lowered and raised by internal cranes, manoeuvre pallets of fruit from the wharf to the upper cargo holds where fork lifts pick up and stow them.

The lower decks can be loaded without the use of the cages.

"I've been impressed at how quickly and efficiently the stevedores have loaded the fruit," Mr Johansen said.

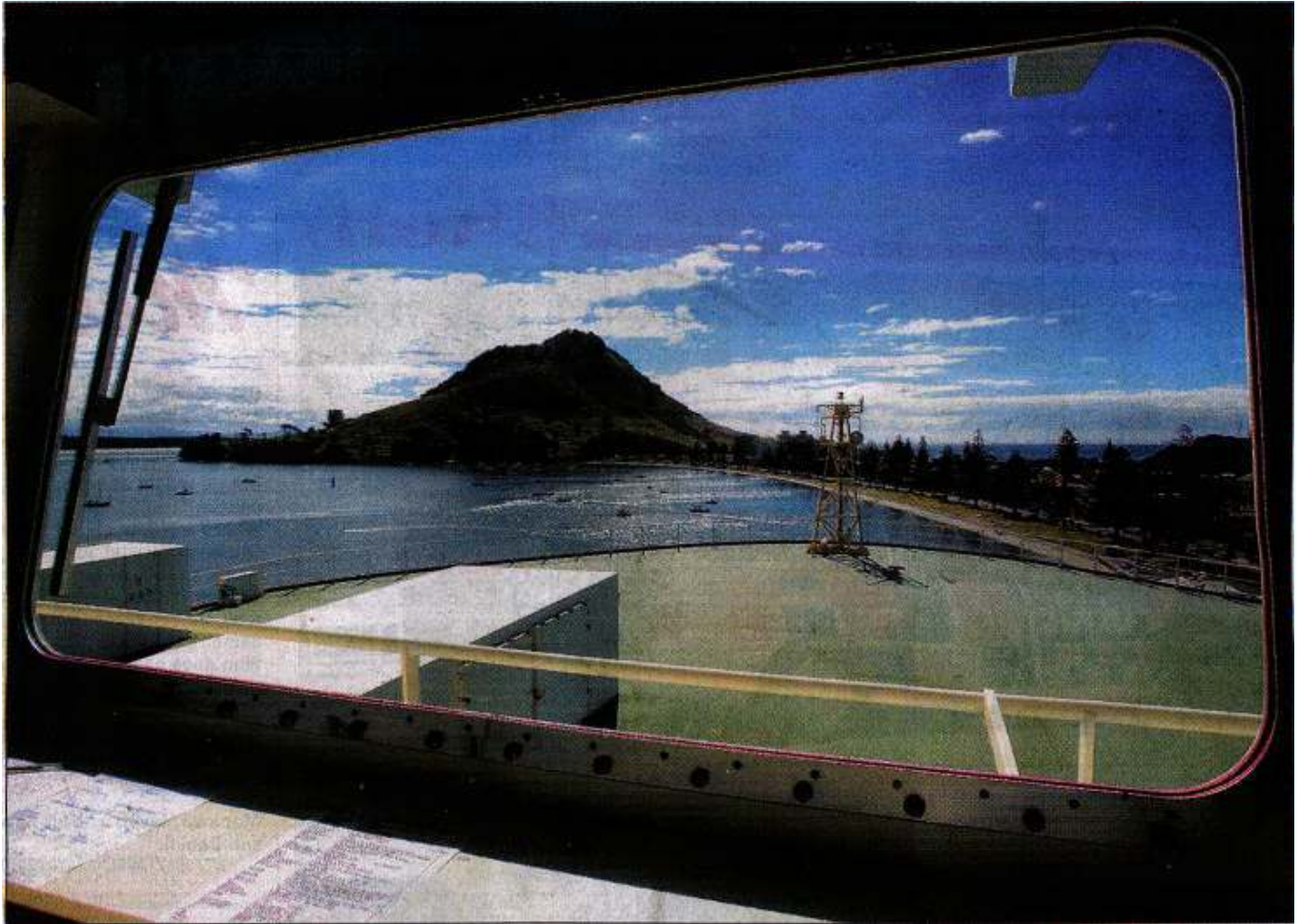
"From 7am to 10am on Monday they were loading 150 pallets an hour with such precision, making the most of the space, it is absolutely some of the best loading of fresh fruit pallets I have ever seen".

Sunbelt Spirit will take about 27 days, steaming at 19 knots, to reach Zeebrugge.

● **BAY MONEY TOMORROW:** We catch up with Satara, a year after one of its Katikati coolstores was destroyed by fire.

SUNBELT SPIRIT

Owner: Great American Lines Inc
Gross tonnage: 60,587
Net tonnage: 23,315
Breadth: 32.26 m
Length: 212m
Draft: 9m
Height: keel to top of mast: 52m



EUROPE BOUND: A view from the control room of the Sunbelt Spirit.

PICTURE / MARK McKEOWN_060409MM43BOP



PACK IT IN: Kiwifruit are loaded on board the Sunbelt Spirit.

PICTURE / 060409MM33BOP



LOAD HER UP: 7500 pallets of green and gold kiwifruit are bound for the Belgium port of Zeebrugge.

PICTURE / 060409MM40BOP



TOWERING: The Sunbelt Spirit is docked at the Port of Tauranga ready for loading kiwifruit.
PICTURE / 060409MM60B0P



PLENTY OF SPACE: The empty car dock on the Sunbelt Spirit.
PICTURE / 060409MM36B0P