

## A Voyage to England March – April 2019



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An account of a voyage from Singapore to Southampton onboard the “Sapphire Princess” of Princess Cruises.

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**16 March 19:** Our epic adventure started with our Qantas flight to Singapore from Brisbane. We must say that the food on the Qantas flight was surprisingly good for economy and a flight attendant told us that they had changed caterers, and a new menu, which shows!

Arrived Singapore at 5:25pm and checked in by 6:45pm for two nights at our favourite hotel, the Swissotel Stamford. Had a great room, freshly renovated on one of the top floors with stunning balcony views over the city, the Marina Bay complex and across the Straits to Indonesia.

Next day we took the Hop on/Hop off bus around the city, all 5 different routes, which gave us a different perspective of the city because usually we use the very efficient and comfortable MRT.

Sunday we took a walk around the city over to Boat Quay before a taxi to the Cruise Terminal to join the Sapphire Princess, with Queen Mary 2 on the opposite side of the wharf to us. My heart skipped a beat! Anyway, we love the Sapphire Princess, very happy with the food, our cabin with a big window looking out over the ocean, in fact everything about her.

Had a day at sea through the Malacca Strait to Phuket. Like glass, but humid. Sad thing though, so much floating garbage all around us. Plastic drink bottles, polystyrene boxes, you name it.

Phuket next day was sunny and hot and we took a taxi from the port into the disgustingly dirty and smelly city of Phuket Town. We have seen some grotty cities around Asia, but this one wins the award! Happy to get back to the ship for lunch and remain onboard for the rest of the day. The beach resort of Patong is on the opposite side of the island, and having been there before, really didn't feel like a return visit.

Then two days at sea to Colombo, calm seas, blue skies and hot. And yes, the trail of garbage still followed us across the Indian Ocean, so sad! At around 8am on the first sea day we passed the southern end of the Nicobar Islands with the rugged interior quite pronounced along the shoreline stretching away to the north.

Next call was Colombo, tick that one off the bucket list. Took a 4.5 hour tour around the city which was great value and a fabulous experience. Colombo is a city with a dual personality. Much of it is as you might imagine, overcrowded footpaths and roads, smelly, crammed with many narrow laneways with riots of colour, stalls and pokey shops, merchandise sprawling out onto the narrow footpaths, men pushing huge carts and wheelbarrows of goods and others with goods balanced on their heads, tired old Dutch and British colonial buildings....you get the

picture! Seemingly poverty everywhere you look, and traffic that defies every single road rule imaginable, there simply are absolutely none at all. It makes Vietnam look positively sane and orderly!!

The other face is a city experiencing a growth spurt, much of it funded with Chinese money. There are a lot of new high rise buildings either recently finished or under construction, particularly along the sea front where there is also a huge sea reclamation project underway to build a vast port city. Speaking of the port, it is huge with massive container ships coming and going at all hours.

Visited a number of interesting sites, one of the main Buddhist temples in Colombo with its highly colourful statues and wall decoration, passed a tall mosque with amazing colourful external walls, and the very educational museum that traced the early history of this island nation. Morning tea at the conclusion was at the elegant Kingsbury Hotel.

And so, today. At sea with another blue sky and hot day. This morning at breakfast we saw several large pods of dolphins doing all sorts of antics, jumping high out of the water, twisting around in the air, and many surfing on the waves, just beautiful. We are sailing up the coast of India to our next port tomorrow, Cochin. Immigration procedures before going ashore are beyond belief! The contentious US\$80 pp visa fee for an 10 hour stopover had most of the passengers quite disgruntled for good reason. Whether you went ashore or not (and many didn't) you must hold that visa or be denied boarding prior to leaving Singapore. The heaps of paperwork you need to take through immigration before setting out on our tour is incredible, but more of that later. (And as we were repeated told - we MUST NOT fold the paperwork) !!!!!

**19 March 19:** So, here we are in the Arabian Sea, our last port, Cochin India two days behind us, and still with calm seas and blue skies, although we notice that it is starting to cool down a bit as we head north. Yesterday 27c and today 25c, but then again, it is just the start of the northern spring.

Now for Cochin, well what can one say? There's no doubt you are in India, although Cochin is 10 degrees north of the equator and we are sure that the further north you travel through India the scenery would be very different. Cochin is very tropical, in fact 37 degrees the day we were there.

Our tour there went about 90kms south of the city to an area famous for its network of waterways, in fact all of this area including Cochin city itself is built on canals. Our first stop was the historic quarter of Cochin near the narrow entrance to the Cochin harbour where the Portuguese (15<sup>th</sup> century) Dutch (17<sup>th</sup> century) and British (18<sup>th</sup> century) had in turn set up their colonial headquarters. We visited a church where Vasco Da Gama was temporarily buried after dying from malaria, then to the beach where ancient Chinese fishing nets (introduced in the 13<sup>th</sup> century) were operating. These are huge cantilevered affairs suspended over the water and drop the 10 metre wide nets into the sea, then they are pulled back out using large stones to balance the weight of the net and catch as it rises up again. Fascinating!

Our 90 minute drive out to the village of Alleppey was another experience altogether! Forget the kamikazes of Colombo, these guys add another dimension to the art of staying alive whilst trying to kill everyone else on the road – and off it. Apparently you just drive at top speed any side of the road you fancy straight towards oncoming cars, buses, tuk-tuks and bikes until you see fear in the whites of their eyes, the rules then proscribe that someone must lose their nerve and swerve out of the way right on the death-knock. If you want an adrenaline rush....this is it!!

The dusty roadsides are filled with hundreds of people in very colourful clothing, particularly the saris, going somewhere, or maybe nowhere. Little shanty stalls continuously line the dusty roads selling all kinds of goods from fruit to pots and pans to furniture, hardware to handbags, and garbage is absolutely everywhere!! On the side of the road, heaped up along the walls of buildings, all over vacant land...no matter where you look, you can't not see it. And we had just read that Cochin is the 3<sup>rd</sup> cleanest city in India!!! REALLY??? We asked our tour guide how often the garbage is collected – he replied "every day"!! Somehow I think not!

Particularly colourful were the long Hindu processions along the side of the road going to their temples, everyone carrying colourful banners and other arrangements, mostly floral. Interestingly in this part of India 35% of the population are Christians, so lots of churches together with mosques, Hindu and Buddhist temples.

The canal boat trip was interesting, literally hundreds of large (about 60' long) two story barges closed in with thatched roofs and windows, and open decks fore and aft. Each has several bedrooms and toilet facilities and a

kitchen. Many locals live on these barges on the network of canals, and others are hired out to local holiday makers for around \$450 per night for 6 people including all 3 meals, a cook and crew. Only for the wealthy here methinks!

Once you sail down the canals and away from the town of Alleppey and into the countryside, the canals sit above the expanse of rice and barley fields which are watered by the canals during the dry season (which ends in April).

Our departure from Cochin at 6pm was memorable for the many, many hundreds of people who either lined the shoreline or stood knee deep in the water of the very narrow entrance to the harbour to wave to us as we headed out into a stunning sunset into the calm Arabian Sea.

We are just getting into the swing of things as we have just entered the Piracy Danger Zone as we near Dubai, we arrive there the day after tomorrow. We had a lecture yesterday from the Chief Security Officer explaining the defined danger area we will be sailing through, basically along the coasts of Oman and Yemen, then through the entrance to the Red Sea. He described the procedures the ship will take if there is a possibility of attack. High pressure hoses have already been set up along the promenade deck and loud speakers to emit high pitched noise that apparently befuddles the brain and creates confusion for them. The ship will also do a series of fast twists and turns if necessary which would also make it hard for any pirates to board. We know we are really in trouble if they start to roll out the razor wire!!!

Today we had to go through a drill where every passenger, on hearing the warning siren, had to go straight to their cabin and be accounted for. Now, after all those dramatics, I have to admit that there is little chance that we will be attacked as we are far too big, and they are really after smaller tankers and container ships with valuable cargoes. But hey, it does make for a good story!

Once we depart Dubai it's time for me to perform my role as Enrichment Lecturer. I have nine lectures scheduled in the Princess Theatre between Dubai and Rome. Interestingly, by far the largest nationality onboard are Australians (and most apparently are from Brisbane!!), followed by Americans, then Canadians and Kiwis, and some Brits.

So that's it for now, next update of our adventures on our way to the Red Sea after calling into Dubai and Salalah (Oman). Then we can let you know if we were attacked by any pirates.

**22 March 19:** Well, no sign of pirates yet, but certainly some very dodgy looking craft approach us from time to time then turn away, curious local fishermen we think, no.... make that hope! After we left Dubai we went back into the Pirate Danger Zone and the forward end of the promenade deck that goes around the bow, and the after end overlooking the stern have been closed off. This has created a serious crisis for those early morning walkers, no more fast walking around the entire ship in an orderly continuous loop (3 times around equals 1.8kms), rather, back and forward along either deck side attempting to avoid each other. There's going to be a major incident sooner or later!!

So, what did we think of Dubai? Well, it's big! Both vertically and horizontally. As we approached the port in the early morning haze, tall buildings of many interesting designs started to emerge directly in front of us, the very modern financial centre of Dubai, but to our right and left, many more tall towers seemed to stretch away to the coastal horizon, mainly residential. The tallest of them all, the Burj Khalifa, in fact the tallest in the world at 830metres and 164 levels (plus a slim spire on top to make sure their bragging rights remain intact for the foreseeable future) stood out like an upturned needle. It sits beside the Dubai Mall – more of that in a moment. Another intriguing building is in the shape of a rectangle with a very large hollow centre to it. You could fly a large plane through the centre no problems. No boring standardised building shapes here!

Another obvious feature was the incredible amount of cranes across the skyline, a quarter of all the world's cranes are at work; construction is everywhere as they desperately try to fill in all the sandy blocks of vacant land around the city.

We took a tour around the city, and noticed two things instantly; one it's clean, hardly a scrap of rubbish anywhere, and two, the roads are excellent and nobody appears to be out to kill their fellow citizens.

There are two parts to Dubai city, separated by the wide Dubai Creek which we would definitely call a river. The old city on one side with some remnants of typical Arabian architecture of old, the sort you see in movies, but mostly

older shops and buildings from the 1960's when Dubai was just a twinkle in a sheik's eye, and then there's the new city that grew from the discovery of black gold – oil.

The old city also houses the different souks, all under cover. Stalls for spices (hmmm!), gold (had some problems with Julie here), linen, hardware, etc. So crowded, and guys in their kaftans trying to pull you into their shops. But the one reassuring thing is that crime of any kind is very rare in Dubai, the penalties are severe. They have stopped cutting off one hand for theft, but nobody wants to push their luck!! Things like showing affection to a member of the opposite sex, drinking alcohol in public, disparaging remarks about the ruling family, and so on will land you in jail. There is no visible sign of police, we are told that all of them are under cover and everywhere, watching everyone.

It's a very benevolent society, but only if you were born here. Only 30% of the population are Emirati, the rest are from Southern Asia (majority from India and Sri Lanka) and a small enclave of Europeans. Emirati are given a home for free when they marry, and a cash payment to go towards a dowry on condition they marry another Emirati. If not, then nothing, nada, nien, nyet! They are paid high wages, whilst the imported workers are paid a pittance. An Indian bus driver told me that if he cops a speeding fine, then that's two months wages lost for him! Probably why they drive so carefully!

I mentioned Dubai Mall, one of several huge and lavish shopping malls in Dubai. It is vast, you could quite easily get lost as there seems to be many malls within malls within this mammoth tribute to capitalism. The interiors are stunning, polished marble everywhere and intriguing art works, much of it suspended from the high ceilings. Luxurious spaces to just sit, relax and contemplate which of your children you are going to sell when you discover you have maxxed out your credit cards. All the world's high-end shops are here, and the place is always crowded with tourists and locals who appear to be very cashed-up. There's even huge ski slopes to do a little downhill slalom skiing whilst the temperature outside the mall hits 44c or higher. And there's a huge aquarium over 10 metres high with the most amazing fish, including sharks, sting rays and large schools of what look to be similar to tuna. Heaps of tropical fish also get a gig. You can even take a ride in a mini submarine to get a closer view.

So that's it for Dubai. Last night we transited the Gulf of Hormuz between Iran and Oman and now sailing down the coast towards Salalah, our next stop in 2 days' time. Today is the first in 12 days on this ship where there sky has been overcast and the temperature has dropped down to 23c. And still calm seas every day, hardly a wave in sight (which, perversely disappoints Julie and I). Great turn-up for my first lecture "Unsolved Mysteries of the Sea" this morning, around 550 people attending, but expecting a lot more now the word is out.

**24 March 19:** Well, there do be pirates, and we've seen them! As we sailed down the coast of Oman yesterday morning, we sighted a large vessel stopped in the water ahead of us. As we neared, two high speed boats came out from behind it and raced towards us with quite a number of dodgy looking individuals in each. They sped up close to the ship, checked us out, then thought the better of it and sped straight back to the mother ship. Phew! That was a close thing, there are only so many empty wine and beer bottles on board that are available to throw at them.

Well, that's the story that raced around the ship for the rest of the day anyway! Everyone all-abuzz with tales of how they saw the pirates thinking better of a planned assault. The story had to be discounted by the 1<sup>st</sup> Officer who announced that what we had seen was most likely smugglers from Iran checking us out. They often find large ships to check out and hide behind if there's a surveillance vessel around.

Well, two lovely days at sea as we headed to Salalah, which we reached at 7am this morning. The port is 14kms from the city around a wide-curved bay with sapphire coloured water, low-laying whitewashed buildings strung along the shoreline, and very high, dry, rugged brown mountains sitting directly behind the city. These form a barrier to the vast uninhabited desert behind, shown on maps as the "empty quarter" of the Arabian Peninsula. Sand, and more sand, just like the topography of Salalah itself. Outside the relatively small city centre, where most buildings (except for hotels and some apartment blocks) don't reach much higher than the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, houses are scattered on large vacant parcels of very dry and dusty ground. Not a blade of grass anywhere, gardening does not seem to be a pastime here! Most of them are in the typical Arabian style, very ornate but modern mostly 2 story affairs, and all very much separated apart from their next neighbour. The city has wide, excellent 4 lane roads leading everywhere in grid formation, with green lawns along the median strips and curb sides. The men all wear

long white garb right down to their ankles, and the women are all dressed in the full hijab and niqab, only the eyes showing.

Our tour here took us first to the Sultan's Palace, a huge high-walled property with white walls about 10 metres high and massive solid timber gates. The compound is vast, about the size of a very large retirement village with many separate buildings (judging by the many roofs one can see over the wall), a very high ornate Prayer Tower and brilliant blue domed mosque very visible from the outside by us mere mortals.

From there we went to the Grand Mosque, all in white marble, everything! You step through the timber doors at the front through a portico that goes right around a wide square courtyard, and that's about it! Would love to have gone right inside the central mosque itself which leads off this courtyard, they say that it holds 14,000 (yes! 14,000) worshippers at a time.

Next stop, the partial remains of their traditional souk beside the beach. Around 10% of it, about 40 shops (read pokey little rooms) have survived the devastation of two cyclones in 2018, one in May and the second that did the most damage, in October. On what was the large area of several acres that housed this huge souk, now you see sand and rubble. It was constructed in stone, and now most of it is no more. Most of the remaining stalls sell frankincense, a rather pungent scent, bled as sap from the local trees like rubber and dried in the sun for 5 days until it looks like pebbles. Everyone here burns it in a special little cup with a lid – in their homes and also curiously they stand over it to smoke their clothes they are standing in, several times per day. Apparently it is one of the major exports from Salalah to other parts of the Middle East. We took the opportunity here to purchase 3 very colourful and beautifully stitched shoulder bags for our three precious granddaughters.

Next stop, the archaeological diggings of an ancient city, Al Baleed just outside of Salalah, active from around 900 AD to 1500AD. Earlier cities on this site also included the capital ruled by the famed Queen of Sheba. It stretches for over a kilometre along the ocean front, and whilst you could walk it, the lazy option is in a golf cart, which is what we did. It's too hot to be brave! Anyway, I do my rounds of the prom deck each morning before breakfast, and I reckon that's enough for me! You may be surprised to hear that my pedometer tells me that I cover over 11,000 steps per day just walking around the ship, so I don't get the guilts from all that eating. Anyway, I digress.

Last stop was the adjoining Frankincense Land museum which was very modern, very professionally done, and very interesting. Particularly the maritime section with many models of ships....oh yes, and then there were displays of other interesting stuff as well.

Drive back to the ship at 120kms per hour, glad I didn't read the bit about Oman having a road death rate 6 times per head of population of that of Australia until our return to the ship!

Back on board for lunch, and we sailed at 1pm. Next port Aqaba in Jordan, right at the very top of the Red Sea in the Gulf of Aqaba on the Sanai Peninsula – 3.5 days away at full speed apparently as we have quite a distance to cover.

**29 March 19:** Well, today we have reached the half way mark in our voyage to Southampton, and I am slowly sliding into a state of deep depression with only a mere 19 days left of the cruise. Julie seems to be handling it much better than me! But then, we get to see our family, so that's a positive that we can look forward to, and that cheers us up.

So, three days at sea since leaving Oman, and still calm seas, blue skies and very warm, well up until today where the temperature has slid to a very cool 23c! First day out from Salalah we headed to the very narrow entrance to the Red Sea, the Straits of Mandab, a choke point for vessels either heading to, or away from the Red Sea and Suez Canal. Passing heaps of large container ships and mammoth tankers at 24 knots (that's very fast for a ship, about 44kms/phr) all the way up to the Gulf of Aqaba at the top of the Red Sea.

No, the sea isn't red...well, it is for a brief few minutes at dawn when the sun comes up over the Arabian desert on our starboard side. It gets its name from the red sandy terrain on both the African and Asian sides.

We were out of the sight of land until yesterday when we sailed up into the Gulf of Aqaba which veers off to the right near the top of the Red Sea. You can stand at the bow of the ship and look at shorelines of four different countries at the same time, as the boundaries of Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia all converge at the head of the Gulf which forms as a wide circular bay only a few kilometres wide. The terrain is breathtaking, mammoth mountains within a very short distance from either side of the ship. As the veil of dawn gloom lifts we can see

barren, dry brown ranges weathered into hundreds of strange shaped gullies, running straight down to the shoreline on both sides of the gulf, and behind that even higher ranges of the same again, several thousand feet high and darker in colour. Impossible to climb these as they are so high, so steep and so desolate. Simply stunning. And to think that behind this on the Egyptian / Israel side is the vast and barren Sinai Desert, and on the Saudi / Jordan side the sandy emptiness of Arabia.

We docked at Aqaba, Jordan at 8am, a smallish city of several hundred thousand, much of it white low-rise houses and shops reaching up the feet of the dry rocky mountain range immediately behind that seems to dominate the city. Several high rise hotels stood out along the left hand side of shoreline, the remainder of the shoreline taken up by lots of restaurants strung out around the curve of the waterfront, for this is the only seaside holiday resort for Jordanians. The landlocked capital, Amman lays 340kms to the north.

Once docked, we can look over to the right hand side of the narrow headwaters of the Gulf of Aqaba, and there lays Eilat, one of Israel's tourist resorts, the others being further away over on the Mediterranean coast. This looks much more like a holiday city than Aqaba with many large modern hotels and a sprawling suburbia. If you look further back down the coastline you can see where the Egypt border starts for that is where the resort developments end.

We took a 6 hour tour to the famous Wadi Rum, a world heritage area preserved and famous for the absolutely incredible terrain (insert any other colourful superlatives you can think of here) – we are at a loss to try and describe in full what we saw. We will never see anything remotely like this again in our lifetime. Dry flat desert with the most amazing geological formations raising a thousand feet or more straight out of a sea of sand. Many hundreds of these standing alone, many more forming groups of mountains with narrow canyons weaving through them. One of these formations, "The Seven Pillars of Wisdom" is particularly imposing. This is where Lawrence of Arabia hung out with Sharif Hussein to kick the Ottomans out during WW1, and thus form the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, still ruled by the Hussein family. The current King Hussein is the great grandson of Sharif Hussein. Wadi Rum is also famous for the movie setting for the film "Lawrence of Arabia", and for the recent movie, "The Martian" starring Matt Damon.

We jumped onto the back of a clapped-out Toyota ute and went haring across the vast desert in convoy deep into the various mountain formations, oohing and aahing at what we saw. Several stops were made at Bedouin camps to have a cup of the local tea and yes, be fleeced as we purchase several handicrafts. Or should I say, Julie purchase and I forked out the US dollars for! And yes, there were camels, lots and lots of camels. Three hours of this, and then we were back on the bus and headed for the 1.5 hour drive back to Aqaba.

I went back into the city centre in the late afternoon for a walk around, and to do a spot of shopping for wine, and cans of Pepsi. We have a sunset drink at 5pm on the Prom deck each afternoon as we sink back into a deck chair and stare at the waves. Sad really.

The streets of Aqaba are a little chaotic, wandering in many directions, and the footpaths broken and a little dangerous in places. On the positive side, they are lined with trees and several of the wider ones have very European outdoor style cafes and parks for just sitting in and relaxing, along the centreline of the divided roads.

So, we left Aqaba at 9pm last night and today we are headed up the very narrow Gulf of Suez, passing many ships of all shapes and sizes, fleets of fishing craft, and oil rigs. The coast of the African continent on one side, and the Asian continent on the other are so near you could see the villages and larger towns on either side of the Gulf right through the day.

The captain has advised we will anchor off the town of Al Suez at 5pm this afternoon to wait until we join the northbound convoy heading up the canal early tomorrow morning. A southbound convoy will depart Port Said on the Mediterranean end at the same time and we will pass each other about half way. Our transit will take all day, and we will enter the Med at 5pm tomorrow afternoon, then bound for Athens, our next port of call with a day at sea in between. In accordance with a tradition that goes back well over a century, Egyptian vendors will come onboard tonight whilst we are at anchor to sell their wares. Rules of engagement include energetic bargaining as an absolute necessity.

**31 March 19:** Sand...sand...sand! We are so over sand! From Dubai, via Salalah to our exit from the Suez Canal yesterday afternoon, 12 days in the Middle East, and so much sand!

My last blog left us about to anchor at the mouth of the Suez Canal, oddly enough sitting within sight of the twinkling lights of the city of Al Suez. During the night 37 other vessels of all shapes and sizes started to pull up around us and drop anchor, many very close.

We were woken up at about 4am to the sound of the anchor being pulled up and the bow thrusters turning the Sapphire Princess in the direction of the narrow mouth to the canal. As dawn crept over a very hazy and rather tan dusty sky, we crawled slowly up to the entrance, Al Suez city on our port side (left...you landlubbers) and the Sinai Desert on the starboard side (work that one out for yourselves landlubbers). We were second in line, about a kilometre behind a very large US Naval supply ship, and behind us giant container ships in a line stretching into the distance.

Al Suez is quite large and sprawled out, most of the buildings being about 2-3 stories high. The waterfront looked rather run-down with a few maritime buildings strung along the edge of the canal. Muslim minarets, looking like pencils standing on their ends, popped up in many locations in the background, the tallest structures on the skyline.

After the city slipped astern (the back of the ship you landlubbers) we started gaining some speed, up to around 8 knots (about 15 k's p/hr) with high sand banks on each side and soldiers holding serious looking guns and dressed in camouflage uniforms including metal helmets, standing at intervals of 150 metres between each other, on top of the banks on both sides. Lookout towers and military bases containing several buildings were also a regular feature – would you believe all the way to the other end of the canal.

By this time a bitterly cold wind was howling across the Sinai Desert on our right, whipping fine sand up and making it rather uncomfortable out on deck. If you wanted a free facial dermabrasion, the windward side of the ship was the place to be. Break out the cold weather gear!! Suddenly shorts and t shirts were no longer in fashion, jumpers, jeans and jackets are now the rig of the day.

Over the top of the banks on the left side (OK, enough of the nautical terms) of the canal were dry sandy stretches with little green patches of vegetation surrounding small villages, and on the bleak Sinai desert side, guess what? Yep, lotsa sand! The gale-force wind blowing clouds of the brown powdery stuff across the surface of the ground, across the canal, and across the ship. The decks were covered in the stuff. The sky was a dull brown colour with the sun desperately competing for a look-in.

After about 2 hours we crossed the Great Bitter Lake, the surface above its shallow waters just a mess of white waves whipped up by the howling wind. This is the spot where seven foreign cargo ships were stuck for a number of years during the Arab-Israeli War in the 1970's, preventing access to the canal and forcing ships to go around South Africa.

At the northern end of the lake, the canal separates into two channels, divided by a high sand island, so that the southbound convoy can pass the northbound one without interruption. This was only completed in 2015. Before that, one convoy would have to moor against the sandy canal bank to let the other pass. Rather curious to see ships heading in the opposite direction from us seemingly sailing across a sandy desert, as the dividing sand bank hides the bottom half of their hulls.

At one stage we passed a very eerie sight. On the Sinai side (the Asian continent side) literally in the middle of nowhere, a huge city of 10 story apartment buildings, all looking the same, stretched into the distance for several kilometres along the canal bank, about 500 metres in. The city is deserted, not a soul there, and the streets banked up with sand drifts. This was a new city created about 10 years ago that was never finished because of the last financial crisis. The government keeps promising to complete it one day, but one thing is for sure, it's the most remote, depressing, dreary location, with just desert all around it. A hell on earth I'd say. And how could you possibly stop the sand from continually drifting in?

As we neared the top end of the canal the skies cleared up somewhat, but the biting wind kept up. Further along, we passed under a mammoth road bridge that stretches for 3 kms on either side with approach ramps. It's called the Peace Bridge and was built by the Japanese for Egypt. It's been closed for 2 years due to concerns about terrorism, and now the traffic has to line up on either side of the canal to be ferried across on very ancient looking ferries, as the canal intersects a rather large town.

Around 2:30pm we were very close to the end of the 198 km Suez canal, and houses, roads and a rail line all busy could be seen along the left bank (the African continent side). More and more houses, date palms and green fields as we neared Port Said which unfortunately with the realignment of the canal entrance, is some distance away on our left from the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea. I had hoped we might see the famed city as we departed the channel, but not to be. Got a few hazy shots with the telephoto lens anyway. So been there, done that. Whilst the canal transit was very absorbing, I would love to have experienced it in the way I imagined it would be, hot, clear steely-blue skies, glaring desert sand and still air, but wrong time of the year. Anyway, another tick for the bucket list!

Today, for the first time, there are whitecaps and a moderate sea as we head across the Med towards Athens, due there tomorrow. Sadly, the ship is slicing through it with hardly any movement, rather disappointing really as it is nice to feel the movement of the ship underfoot. It's cold outside, and we have been told that whilst it will only hit 17c tomorrow (brrrr!) it will be a fine sunny day in Athens.

**02 April 19:** Just love Athens! Spent a lot of time there in the previous millennia, particularly on the Greek islands, and as we sailed past Crete in the afternoon I was stuck with a wave of nostalgia for the warmth and generosity of the locals I experienced on that island in the early '70s. Bet today you wouldn't get kids swarming outside your tent, pitched on the local beach, each day begging you to come to their home for lunch – no strings attached, just because you are Australian and they want to entertain you. There's no beating a warm welcome and beautiful home-cooked Greek food prepared by mitera. Nor seeing a yellow Valiant Charger with NSW number plates speed past on a dusty road, on its way to the local taverna, a gift from a Greek couple who made lots of money from a fruit shop in Coogee, and brought it back to give to their family! I recall a rather enjoyable afternoon at that taverna with them and their extended family as though I had known them all my life!

We berthed in Piraeus harbour (the port for Athens 12kms away) at 8am yesterday morning and the first thing that strikes you is the amazing amount of quite large passenger/car ferries racing in and out of the very narrow harbour entrance to & from the plethora of Greek islands. Be still my heart!

The other thing is the ring of high rugged mountains in the middle distance that circle most of Athens itself. All the buildings seem to be rather white, right up to the foothills out there in the haze.

Our coach into Athens followed a coastal route past a very large marina, home to the yachts (nay, mini liners) of the mega-rich, before going over a steep hill that became a wide and congested highway in to the Athens CBD. Two things struck us there, the long rows of orange trees on both sides of the road either flowering or heavily bearing fruit, and the amount of sex shops and "clubs" blatantly advertising their offerings either on large billboards or over the entrance to their establishments!! Really in your face (so to speak).

Once in the centre of Athens we found ourselves alighting right opposite Hadrian's Arch and not surprisingly right where the Hop on/Hop off buses depart from. We're learning the seasoned travellers lingo now – they are referred to as HoHo's for very obvious reasons.

We hoho'd (alright, it's not actually a word) onto one of those and went all over the city, which we would never have managed to cover if on our own. Observations: 1) there are very smart monied parts of town, 2) there are very grotty parts of town adorned with excessive amounts of graffiti, 3) the real centre of town is chaotic with cars parked up on footpaths everywhere as there is very little available parking space – or in reality too many cars for the city to handle, and 4) a very large population of Athenians live in apartments within the CBD, either run-down or very posh.

We took a break half way through our HoHo (are you getting the lingo?) and got off in the fabulously busy and quaint Monastraki area, a type of open plaza area with lots of fruit and vegetable barrows, cafes with outside seating, shops selling crap that they swear is made locally by ancient Athenians, and alleyways leading off in several directions with cheek-by-jowl shopettes (yeah, I know, that's not a real word either) selling everything from bags, jewellery, CDs, clothes, perfumes, to recently made antiques. In fact in regard to that, if you looked down into the basements of some of these shops you could see blokes belting metal stuff with hammers, so they must have been the genuine thing.



We did the Greek thing and had a cuppa outside one of these cafes, just so Julie could use their loo. Not many public loo's around Athens, so if you really need to go, you need to buy something to eat or drink. Isn't that what you call a Catch 22 situation??

Right amongst all of this is a fenced off area that is the remnants of Hadrian's Library. Must have been a lousy builder coz there's not much of it left, just like his Arch. But what is particularly impressive is looking up to the very high and large Acropolis with the remains of the Parthenon in full view, standing out in every direction. As it sits right in the middle of the city, it dominates everything. Absolutely awe-inspiring when you look up to the top, with the stark yellow columns against a clear deep blue sky!

Lunch was at a local taverna, saganaki, moussaka and pastitsio washed down with a carafe of rose wine.... well, what else would you have for lunch in Greece? A lovely drop and very cheap...

Back on the HoHo to complete the circuit of Athens, the ritzy part with all the expensive apartment blocks and embassies. Then a walk along a wide boulevard beside one side of the Acropolis, being accosted by ladies trying to sell white, genuinely hand-stitched table cloths that strangely looked exactly identical to the ones the next lady is obnoxiously trying to flog. Apart from that, a bloke dressed up as King Neptune hoping that parents will hand over a few Euros after he has scared the living.....out of their children. It kinda made you think, we were treading over the same cobbled pavement that Athenians trod over all those millennia ago!

A walk around the very picturesque, busy Plaka area, wall to wall gift shops, up-market restaurants both sides of quaint narrow winding streets, jamb-packed with tourists happy to pay double for the same meal they could get for half the price down in the Monastraki area. Speaking of which, Julie paid 5 Euros for a pashmina in Monastraki to keep out the chills of Merry Olde England. The same one was for sale for 12 Euros in the Plaka.

So back to the ship in the late afternoon, and imagine our excitement when we found that there was a Duty Free Store the other side of the Security X-Ray machines in the terminal, which meant that we could buy as much cheap alcohol as we liked and take it back onboard. When the word got around, can you imagine the constant stream of people hauling bags of grog from the Duty Free shop to the ship – and not just one trip either.

We sailed at 10pm last night, and today is fine and mostly sunny with those damn calm seas again. Maybe in the notorious Bay of Biscay??

Last of my nine lectures today and happily I can say they have been a great success, close to full houses every day which isn't bad since the theatre holds 840 people. In fact some passengers have been asking the Cruise Director to arrange for me to do more, but no time to fit me in. From tomorrow we have seven ports in a row!! Then three ports for the last week before we reach Southampton.

Tomorrow we arrive in Malta where only 14c is expected, but a fine day.

**03 April 19:** Just when you think that nothing could be more amazing than what we have seen so far on this incredible voyage, a port comes along that beats everything to date!!

Malta is marvellous, magnificent, magical!!

We entered the incredible (OK, I'm done with the superlatives) harbour of Valletta, the capital of Malta at 6am, just as the sun was showing its' welcoming face over a clear sky. We slowly glided through the very narrow entrance, the ancient fort of St Elmo reaching out to us on our starboard side (hope you've got it now!), encompassing the breathtaking medieval city built of sandstone, hardly a modern building in sight, sprawling at a great height along the steep bank of the narrow harbour as we glided by.

On the port side, the ancient forts of St Michael and St Angelo reach out towards the ship at the end of two short fingers of land with sprawling suburbs behind them. You really could almost touch them. Each of these three forts were built by the Knights of St John in 1565 to protect Valletta from invasion by the Ottoman Empire. Grand Master Valette and his gallant knights won against an invasion force of 40,000, hence the name of the city.

Valletta Harbour has to be one of the most amazing ports to sail into, although a much shorter trip to the berth, still almost on a par with Venice.

For some reason, Malta has always been on my bucket list, and now I know why. We took an 8 hour tour that first took us inside to the walled city that incorporates St Elmo fort, with streets laid out internally in grid form, but except for the main drag, consists of much narrower streets, all paved with worn down cobblestones in most places. Large marble flagstones pave much of the very wide central corridor street that leads from the entrance gate right through to the fortress sitting at the entrance to the harbour.

Cars are mostly cut off from the central city area coz it's already congested with thousands of locals and visitors. From the very moment you walk across an ancient bridge over the deep mote leading into the CBD (as I said, the central city area is built around Fort St Elmo) the architecture hits you. Such beautiful buildings constructed out of sandstone about 500 years ago, most two to three stories high with grand entrances. The other thing you quickly notice is that most of the residential buildings have a very unique feature, colourful timber closed-in balconies jutting out above the narrow footpaths. And many have a religious feature, either a statue of Jesus or Mary or another religious icon embedded in the wall near their entrances. 98% of Malta is seriously Roman Catholic.

After being absorbed with a deep sense of history there, we were on the bus (oops! coach) to the ancient walled city of Mdina (before you hah! spotted a spelling mistake, that's the way it is spelt) in the middle of the island, with the equally ancient town of Rabat (no, not rabbit, although they do seem to be on the menu quite a lot) around the outside perimeter. Again with the quaint and picturesque!! Another bridge across a wide and deep moat (without the water) into this, the one-time capital of Malta after the Turks rocked up to subdue the unlucky population in 876AD.

And again with the very narrow alleyways all over the city, doors right on the street-front and colourful balconies everywhere with equally colourful flower pots decorating them. Everything spotless. Every so often you walk out onto a beautiful village square, many with ornate doors leading into buildings which at some later stage were the palaces of the big wallahs in the Knights of St John when they kicked the Turks out in 1512.

A dubious modern claim to fame is that a lot of the scenes of Game of Thrones were shot around this city.

Back to the ship at 4:30, rather knackered and dreaming of nice G&T...yes! More tomorrow when we destroy Sicily!

**05 April 19:** What a difference a day makes! Goodbye pleasant weather, hello snow! Yep, snow, and in the very south of Italy!

We docked this morning in Messina, Sicily (home of the Godfather) separated from the Italian mainland by the very narrow Strait of Messina, with Reggio Calabria (his other home) on the opposite shore, also with very high mountains behind. The dock is right in the centre of town inside a small protected harbour, and the streets and houses are so close you could almost say you've been to Messina without stepping ashore. Most of the city is fairly modern (think 1950's-60's) as a result of having the #@%\$# bombed out of it during WW2. Heaps of car ferries scurry in and out of the harbour making the 20 minute journey across the strait to the mainland.

First stop today is Mt Etna (height 10,000' or 3,350m if you think like a Millennial), that very active and troublesome volcano that apparently dominates the skyline, but today, alas not for us.

Our coach took us south down the very steep and rugged coastline strung along the left side of the coach on an autostrada (a dual carriageway you can fang along), just above the roofline of many villages hugging the narrow strip of flat land, before the mountain side climbs steeply up on our right. These villages are rather non-descript, very weather-beaten 3 story apartment blocks hugging each other with either red or black tiled roofs, and the walls of various shades of a dung brown colour. Narrow lanes between them down to the water's edge. Not scenic.

We wound through many, many tunnels penetrating the mountain slopes for almost two hours until turning away from the coast for the steep, narrow and winding road climbing up the face of Mt Etna. At least we presume we did for it wasn't long before we were in fog, then rain, and finally snow – totally unexpected and sort of disappointing because the guide spent considerable time trying to get us to imagine what we could have been looking at had the day been fine. But we did see lots of the lava flows that had destroyed most of the area in the last major eruption in the 1980's. And the landscape was rather eerie with the black lava boulders all covered in snow. We stopped when getting near the top to have a look at two craters through blizzard-like conditions, then into the nearby lodge to have a cuppa. Some genius had planned that 6 buses should all turn up to this very small café at exactly the same

time. Bedlam when everyone is trying to escape the bleak weather outside! Then on for a further climb, feeling a little nervous about the snow on the road and no chains.

Anyway, further on we reached a restaurant where we were scheduled to have lunch (included) which turned out to be quite acceptable, particularly as the other couple sitting on our table didn't feel like imbibing in the litre bottle of rose provided, so Julie and I had to do the honours. Tough life!

Back down the mountain with its hairpin bends and on to the very picturesque and historic (I know I know, I have overworked the words picturesque and historic, but I've had a brain freeze and really can't think of alternative descriptors) town of Taormina, sitting high on a cliff-face overlooking the beaches below. We know we were near the water coz we could see it briefly on the odd occasion between bouts of heavy rain. Anyway, not to be daunted by crap weather, we walked through the arched gateway into the very (once again) narrow streets. These guys must have been poor planners not to have envisaged that one day cars and buses would be invented and wider streets would be required. Not really impressed at all, they only have to look at our streets in Australia to realise they made a huge mistake!

Apart from the lovely colourful main thoroughfare crammed with brightly lit shops full of expensive stuff like glassware, crockery, clothes and anything else you can think of, and very upmarket restaurants and cafes, there's the ruins of the ancient Greek amphitheatre at the end of the main street. It was worth a look, but I suspect we will be totally over ruins (just like we were with sand) after a few days after calling into 3 more Italian ports.

Back to Messina at 5pm and the welcoming sight of the Sapphire Princess, out of our waterlogged clothes and shoes, and into a very stiff and welcome bourbon!

Sailed at 6pm, sailing so close to the Calabria side that you can clearly see people walking along the road beside the edge of the water. Look up, and there's another autostrada hugging the steep coastline with amazing bridges stretching between steep green ravines digging deep into the mountain sides.

Tomorrow, Naples, Pompei and Sorrento!

**06 April 19:** Well again, what a difference a day makes! Yesterday in Messina cold and miserable, today in Naples sunny and 17c. Jacket weather, but very pleasant.

Smooth trip overnight up the coast of Italy, but even though we passed quite close, too much rain to see Mt Stromboli doing its thing, unfortunately. Word was that on a fine night we would usually see the fire from the top of this active volcano that is an island by itself, with hot lava sliding down the sides, but not tonight. Just another 1<sup>st</sup> world problem to deal with.

Berthed in Naples at 7am with Mt Vesuvius dominating the skyline just to the right of the city suburban perimeter, Naples being gazetted in the Red Danger Zone. Thankfully it is dormant at the moment, but there are seismic machines in a number of places carefully and continually measuring it's every mood, even by satellite.

Small busy harbour with many very large ferries coming and going to Sicily, Corsica and Sardinia. You just have to admire the way they come charging up to the wharf, turn around on their length, and back in as if they've done it before! This way they can fit more ships along the dock. They call it Mediterranean style berthing.

On the bus at 8am (yes, this is really becoming a marathon) and off to Sorrento for the morning part of the tour. Traffic is a real challenge on the extremely narrow (often only a single lane with lots of having to give way to oncoming traffic) road that winds along the cliff face, for about 65kms to the south of Naples. It is so rugged that they have built three tunnels through the mountain sides along the coast, totalling 9 kms of tunnels in all.

Mt Vesuvius dominates everything around the spectacular Bay of Naples! Road rules are arbitrary, cars just shoot off in any direction as the mood takes them. 360 degree periphery vision is the main skill here if you are going for your driver's licence, but then, maybe there's no requirement for a licence at all! Only a lot of guts! Every so often you would swear that we were determined to have an accident.

Along the way there are large crosses sitting high up on top of many of the mountains, dedicated to the Allied forces and local paysans who fought to free Italy from the tyranny of the Germans in WW2, well that's the way it was put to us anyway.

We spent the morning in this very picturesque (yeh, I know, another overworked word) but very crowded town of Sorrento. Car traffic is almost non-existent in the town centre, only allowed around the perimeter. Buses have to park outside town but it is a short walk into the action. One part of town they call the "New" section (only a couple of hundred years old) with a wide cobbled street with loads of smart shops just itching to relieve you of your hard-earned cash. You can just smell the money!! Some very expensive five star hotels subtly crouching behind their high stone walls. One where Enrico Caruso came to spend his last days before carking it in one of the rooms, aptly named the Caruso Suite. Premium price for the privilege of spending a night in the same bed with the spirit of Enrico.

Then there's the narrow alleys of the Old Town just a short laneway downhill from the main drag. And I do mean narrow! Julie reduced our cash reserves to purchase a leather hand bag, but way cheaper than if she bought it back home – or so she told me! Leather is definitely a thing around here.

We had a pasta lunch at a laneway restaurant, together with the obligatory couple of glasses of rose (at 11am, but hey, when in Sorrento, do as the locals do!).

Then the challenge (by the coach driver- not us) to navigate the congestion on the road to Pompei. Really, every corner was an new and exciting experience!! But the coast drive was so gorgeous and photogenic!

At Pompei, half of Europe arrived at the same time as us, the other half clearly not far behind! Coaches and cars absolutely everywhere diving across intersections, pulling out of driveways at speed, you get the picture! Any Australian police force would meet its annual revenue target in a day around here.

Stalls and more stalls of chinsey looking plaster statues of everything from the leaning tower of Pisa (really!!!) to the Virgin Mary. And of course, postcards, lotsa postcards.

Our guide navigated us around the ancient remains of Pompei explaining everything, including the red light district where the frescos on the walls were the forerunner of the modern day porno movie! You could tell where the brothels were, there was a rather crude sculpture of a large penis carved into the street surface to show directions to the location for those men and women of yore looking for action!!

We saw lots of temples, some shops where people had been standing waiting to be served a drink or food in the fore-runner of today's McDonalds, and of course, lots of other types of shops, a wide forum, and many, many houses.

We spent 2.5 hours in this fascinating (yeh, another over-worked description) ancient city with several thousands of others, equally engrossed in the experience of treading where the long-since dead had trod back on that fateful day in 79AD.

Back to the ship at 4:30pm, and again that welcome drink!

Tomorrow Rome! Well actually the port for Rome is Civitavecchia, a good hour or so drive away. And yes, more ruins, churches, plazas, and of course vino await us.

**07 April 19:** Our doings for today were just a little different, and we were so glad they were. Instead of the bog-standard ship's shore excursion, we hired a driver to take us to and around the Eternal City with another couple originally from Brazil, in a very comfortable Mercedes mini-van. This was a smart move, as we would never have covered the marvels of Rome in a 44 seat coach shared with our nearest, dearest and disabled. For one thing, a coach could never have negotiated the very narrow streets and lanes as we did, at a great rate of knots, nor given us the freedom to jump in and out at random to gawk at ancient stuff and fire off a dozen photo shots.

The port for Rome is actually an hour's drive away on the Autostrada and David, our driver did it in record time; we pretty much passed everything that had temporarily been ahead of us.

David, a born and bred Roman, was an absolute gem; he knew everything about Rome and how to get to it the quickest way via the back lanes. So we covered every essential sight that Rome has to offer, and there are heaps of them! In fact, to do justice to Rome you really need several days and someone who knows the place and can explain what you are looking at.

I must mention at this point that if you are considering visiting the major sights of Europe between May and September....good luck! Here we are in early April, and everywhere is crowded with bloody tourists like us, rugged up against the cold. Not just in the hundreds, literally in the many thousands, a sea of people every place you go!! Europeans, Brits, Australians, Kiwis, Yanks and Canucks, Asians (by the millions), you name it, they're here already. I have absolutely no idea how anybody could possibly get within cooee of any of these sites in the European summer.

First stop was the Coliseum, and yes, it is impressive, even though it looks like the builders reneged on their contract before finishing it. Well, that's a bit unfair, it was handed over intact to the new owners 2 months before Vesuvius erupted in 79AD and solidified forever all those Pompeiians, and it wasn't until the 1500's that the Roman Catholic Pope at the time decided to rip the Coliseum apart and use the marble and other bits to build more churches. Complete lack of foresight on his part for future generations of tourists!

A quick walk up to the nearby Palatine Hill where the Roman Emperors had their palaces, because of the fantastic view they had over their domain (or maybe to keep an eye out for anyone intending to do them harm).

From there to the Trevi Fountain passing the ancient race track where Ben Hur (aka Charlton Heston) liked to race his latest model chariot. They say that if you throw a coin in the Trevi fountain, you will return to visit Rome again. It must be true, coz I did that in 1972...and here I am again! I just hope I didn't go and waste another coin this time if it's going to be another 46 years before my next visit!

Then to several large and spectacular piazzas (such as the very wide and long Piazza Navona) with very old and very attractive buildings, and always with some impressive fountain or statue in the middle. By this stage the camera is running red hot! So sorry, I'm really over-working the descriptions, but I am at a loss to stop because Rome, along with other cities we have visited, is really breathtaking (oops! There I go again!).

Climbed the Spanish Steps. This reminds me, I don't think I have mentioned the various tricks played on tourists by the ex-inhabitants of North Africa who roam the streets. Here they rush up to you with a tired looking red rose and thrust it in your hand, then demand you pay an exorbitant price for it as you have accepted it -ie: bought it. Another is for one accomplice to fall onto you "accidentally", remove your wallet and make for one laneway whilst his partner in crime distracts you and races in the other direction so you have no idea which one actually has your stolen valuables. They are both soon lost in the over-crowded streets.

A further ploy is girls under the age of 12 years are sent out to grab your valuables when you are looking the other way or taking a photo, and make off with them. If they are caught by the police, they have to be released as they do not charge children under the age of 12 years for theft in Italy. They're back at work again within 30 minutes! Lesson is, only go out with the bare minimum of valuables, and keep them safely hidden if you can.

Also made a stop for a coffee/tea at one of the many restaurants that surround the Pantheon piazza. The apartments that sit over the top of the shops must be very expensive and perhaps a little cramped, as the buildings go back around 300 years. We were told that anything less than 300 years old is actually considered to still be new in Rome!

The Pantheon is a very, very old circular church with an impressive portico at the front and amazing interior. Very lavishly decorated, very solemn atmosphere inside, including a large circular hole in the apex of the domed roof. I think that is so the rays of light shine down on a particular spot on the floor at a certain time of the day, or am I getting confused with that chapter in "The Davinci Code?" Horse-drawn carriages in the piazza to help our Asian neighbours empty their bank accounts.

After a rather enjoyable typically Italian lunch of pasta and pizza (washed down with a carafe of rose) we headed off for a drive around the ancient (think I've used that adjective before) city wall that surrounds Rome, complete with ancient (so sorry, can't help it) city gates – aka archways.

Last stop St Peter's Square and the Vatican. We had no inclination to stand in the sun in a queue that went forever to get in to the basilica, but nevertheless were quite humbled to be standing in the vast area soaking up the atmosphere. The square is a misnomer, it really appears to be round in shape, particularly with the circular portico around each side with its' dozens of columns and quite intriguing statues sitting on top, every few feet from each other. If we had the time I would have counted them for you....too bad, so sad.

I must mention that there is also a modern side to Rome. Outside the city walls, the sprawling suburbs are relatively new, with apartment blocks and small mini-marts everywhere. Light rail and commuter bus routes, and this tends to be the same with other historic cities in Europe.

The drive back to the port of Civitavecchia was just as fast, the green countryside and occasional villages just a blur, but David delivered us safely to the shipside without incident.

If I bored you to death with all the other notable sights we took in, you would have fallen asleep by now.....OK, maybe you have! So I'll just leave it there, and hopefully you will stay the distance for my future blogs.

I'm warning you now, tomorrow is Pisa and Florence! Over and out!

**08 April 19:** I keep trying to remind myself it's Spring Time in Europe and cold, wet days are to be expected, so I should not be disappointed if once in a while one comes along. Yesterday in Rome was just beautiful, but from the moment we berthed this morning in Livorno, the port for Pisa and Florence, the heavens opened up and it was COLD! It got up to 14c at one stage during the day.

In mentioning this, I am also reminded of a universal European problem for the traveller, particularly if the cold has an effect on your bladder. Public toilets are so rare as to almost be non-existent in Southern Europe, usually only found around transport hubs – and believe me, in some you would rather die than enter those!! So, what to do? Well, the option will cost you money, and in some ways is self-defeating. Restaurants have loos, but to use one you must first be a customer (and this is tightly controlled, in some you have to buy a ticket at the counter beforehand). So it's going to cost you at the very least, a cup of coffee or tea – about 3.50 euros (A\$5.50) which allows you to use their conveniences. Then of course, you have filled your bladder again, so off for the next cuppa and relief!! And so the routine continues.

Julie perhaps wisely, opted out of today's fun activities and had a R&R (sleep) day onboard. Me, rugged up against a biting wind and rain, boarded the coach for a day of adventure. First stop Pisa, about a 40 minute drive from the port. Pisa, like most of the towns along the Mediterranean coast, was originally established by the Greeks as a trading port, but humanity being what it is, many bloody battles were fought over it over several millennia, and at various times in history it was a centre of power, and at other times a backwater. Interestingly now days it is 9.7kms inland from the Mediterranean coast due to the River Arno silting up over time. This also is not unusual for many ancient European cities that used to be on the coast and had a port.

As soon as the coach parked in Pisa the rain thankfully stopped, and although damp underfoot and dull grey above, the 15 minute trudge from the massive car park outside the town through the archway heralding the official entry into the car-less walled city was completed. In front of me stood the large and highly decorated Duomo (very old church for you heathens) in the middle of a wide grass area, and just peeking out behind and to the right as you approach, the leaning tower of Pisa. And leaning it was, having the straight vertical side of the Duomo as the reference point accentuated its angle. We were told that it used to lean much more until some rectification work was done on it recently, and now the angle is about 4 degrees from true. Still looks dodgy to me!

Apparently it was not just the tower that was sinking, all the buildings in this green rectangular area at the side of the commercial and residential streets leading away from the church and tower sank as well due to the site being soft clay. We were told that no-one ever owned up to constructing it, the first guy got to the third level before realising that it was falling over and scarpered into obscurity; so did those who came after. Probably escaping potential legal action? Along with the bad news comes a blessing. Pisa has suffered 3 catastrophic earthquakes since 1280AD, and the only reason the tower still stands is because of the soft ground under it absorbed the shock waves and left it untouched.

Florence was next, a 1.5 hour drive away through the lush Tuscany countryside. Travelling along the Autostrada across a green river plain took us up through some hills and down again into the city of Florence, situated beside the Arno River, where we left the coach to walk the incredible streets, lanes and piazzas of this beautiful city. The architecture of the place is amazing, particularly the large open squares, surrounded on all sides by 3-4 story buildings with their ornate balconies and timber slatted window shutters, the whole area usually crammed with fountains and/or statues.

Heaps of old churches from the middle-ages and earlier hidden down many narrow alleyways , with amazing but fading frescos on the dark interior walls and madly ornate alters looking like they were carved out of pure ivory.

Checked out Michelangelo's "David" in front of the world-famous Uffizi Museum (and nah, it's not THAT BIG! The statue, why, what did you think I meant?). From there it's a short walk down to the riverside and over the famous Ponte Vecchio bridge with its cobbled street and shops and residences on each side over the river. Sort of reminds me of the Rialto Bridge in Venice.

A guide told me that after Italy's armistice with the Allies in 1943, the Germans held on to Florence until forced to retreat in 1944. They were about to blow up the Ponte Vecchio bridge when the consul of a neutral country begged them not to blow it up because of its historical value, so they blew up all the other ancient bridges, and for good measure rounded up many of the citizens of Florence and publicly executed them in several of the larger piazzas just for good measure.

Of course the Duomo in Florence is one of the masterpieces of this city of incredible architecture and history. I walked around the corner from a street leading into the Piazza del Duomo and there it was in front of me, the church in all of its incredible beauty! I never swear (well....) but I couldn't help it this time! It is gob-smackingly amazing, so huge, and so marvellously decorated in such intricate detail!

The fine marble mosaic artwork, the finely painted decoration on the walls, the sheer beauty of the stonemasonry (lots of Italian handwaving and gesticulations here as I attempt to describe it!). It is very large and totally dominates the Piazza. I would have loved to see inside, but the queue was so long it would have taken well over an hour to get a look-see. Imagine what it would be like in the tourist season!

Florence is also famous for its leather goods, bags, jackets, belts etc. But honestly, why would you buy there, the prices are no different to Australia, even in the main central market! Having a serious bag fetish, I was very frustrated by this.

This is another city that deserves far more than just a day, and that is a benefit of cruising. You can drop in and have a quick look around, and pick those places that you definitely want to revisit, and those (think Phuket, Dubai and Salalah) that you are very glad to you had the opportunity to see, but would never desire to return to.

Well, again that's it for today. Tomorrow, Monaco on the French Riviera. So, bon soir for now (just practicing) and au' voir!!

**09 April 19:** Another day, another country! This is getting a little confusing. Both of us can honestly say that we can't remember how long ago it was that we entered the Med, and even our departure from Singapore a month ago might as well have been a year ago!! We've lost all sense of time! At least tomorrow we have a sleep-in, with arrival in Barcelona not until midday.

So, here we are anchored offshore at the Port of Monte Carlo, in the Principality of Monaco. If you sniff the breeze, you can smell the hundred dollar bills washing around ashore!

Today sunny, but max temperature of 12c! Another rug-up day. The "Crystal Splendour" must have some pull, coz they're parked at the cruise terminal inside the small harbour, and we are tendering into the dock from offshore which gave us the dubious opportunity to gawk in awe at the multitude of outrageously large and expensive "Yachts" (aka mini liners) parked stern first along the dock as we proceeded into harbour.

Our coach trip today took us along the very mountainous Riviera Coast to Menton (pronounced Men-ton – NOT Mentone) right at the French border with Italy. As our guide kept telling us, this whole coast is full of "old people" who have retired (clearly she's French, no subtlety at all considering the average age of those on the coach)!

The drive along the high road way up the mountain side is spectacular (haven't used that one for a while, have I?) looking up the mountain face and down into the valleys at mansions (most obscenely grand) desperately clinging to the cliff-face. And yes, once again the road is narrow and the traffic takes its leisurely time to move along, but that's OK coz the views are magnificent. Again, camera over-heating!

At Menton we stopped along the foreshore, and first thing we notice is that 1) it doesn't look at all like Mentone in Melbourne, and 2) the large pebbles on the beach would be bloody uncomfortable to lay your towel on.

We walked around the (again) narrow lanes and stopped for a very nice coffee/tea, sitting in the sun trying to warm ourselves up. The ornate town market in the central square, built in the 1800's was only partially open but the cheese and meat sections were impressive for their apparent quality of presentation.

Back on the coach and up the mountain side to take the freeway back the other way towards Nice, stopping along the way for the obligatory visit to a perfume factory. This is where our relationship with the tour guide broke down. Apart from the fact that it was totally unnecessary as just about everyone on the coach had no interest in looking at expensive smelly stuff being manufactured and bottled, she told us that we would be here for 90 minutes!! Well, after 30 minutes the whole coachload was getting very agitated, particularly as it was bloody cold, even in the sun, nowhere to sit, and so we started to board the coach in protest. I spoke to the driver who said that if I could get everyone back on board, he would tell the guide that we were leaving. So, off I went herding everyone gratefully onboard.

The indignant guide, who was clearly there just to make some commission on the side on whatever was purchased by our coachload, was not happy, but had to bow to pressure. Her retribution was to ramble non-stop for the rest of the journey along to the stunning city of Nice (which is absolutely Noice!) and back to Monaco, repeating herself over and over and talking constantly about nothing relevant to our tour. (I wish I had been cheeky enough to take a photo of her look when nobody on the coach gave her a tip!)

But, the scenery was again spectacular. Those pretty photos you see of quaint meandering roads with house doors opening up right on to the street, showers of bougainvillea and other colourful exotica hanging over stone walls, the deep blue Mediterranean Sea washing against the stony cliff faces and small, equally rocky beaches hidden in small pristine bays.....is all true!!

Back to Monte Carlo, and since it was 1:30pm and we were about to collapse from lack of food (after all, it had been several hours since we had breakfast), we decided to amble around the waterfront to find that cute little café with the colourful umbrellas outside that you always imagine yourself to be sitting at with a glass of vino whilst watching the world pass you by. Erase that thought! It turns out that the Monaco Grand Prix is on in another 5 weeks, so there were diversions, scaffolding and other barriers to our intentions, in our way. We gave up and headed back to the tender dock, only to find that probably around 600 or more of our fellow passengers had the same idea and were heading back to the ship. Finally got to the food trough up on Deck 14 just moments before we would have collapsed from starvation.

The city of Monte Carlo seems very small by comparison to others nearby, but this is because it sits nestled into a steep circular valley, which means to maximise the land use (the Principality of Monaco only covers 485 acres), the streets are arranged in tiers one above the other. Therefore you either have to be a mountain goat to climb the steep stairways to reach each level, or try and find the carefully hidden lifts and escalators that will get you where you want to go. This requires great stamina, and a very good map and sense of direction. Possessing none of these, we decided that Monte Carlo will just have to be patient until our next visit. So we stayed onboard until sailing at 5pm.

That's it for today, Barcelona tomorrow!

**10 April 19:** You cannot imagine how wonderful it was to have a sleep-in this morning. No getting up early, rushing breakfast and on the coach by 8am today! We had the luxury of a half-day at sea, arriving in the Port of Barcelona at midday. Imagine the thrill of entering the narrow harbour entrance, and there is the "Queen Mary 2" laying alongside the cruise terminal next to us. The last time we saw her was as we pulled out of Singapore a month ago. As we crawled past her to our berth I was on the observation Deck over the top of the bridge, no-one else stupid enough to withstand the bitterly cold wind, camera going gang-busters, shots of her from every angle! Just one of life's little pleasures.

Unfortunately the Barcelona weather forecast was for cold winds, intermittent thunderstorms and a high of 14c and was actually accurate. Yes, I'm just as surprised as you are! Very black clouds, delivering the occasional short downpours, followed by passing bursts of sunshine, was the pattern for the day.

Since we had limited time here, we took a 4.5 hour tour titled "The Best of Barcelona"....and it was! Great tour escort who spoke understandable English, and was very knowledgeable. As a result we returned to the ship feeling



as though we had at least got a feel for Barcelona given the allowable amount of time we had to get a taste of yet another city we would definitely return to if we win Tattsлото. Actually, not if....when!

We passed by Christopher Columbus's Monument standing in the middle of a wide roundabout at the entrance to the port, on a very high column, reminiscent of Nelson's column in London. He is supposed to be pointing to America, but as that would be in a direct line with the mountain range circling behind Barcelona, and might be misconstrued as poor navigation on his part, they had to point him in the opposite direction, across the Mediterranean Sea. I have no problem with that, as I point out in one of my lectures on "Famous Navigators in History", he didn't actually discover America anyway, it was only the Caribbean Islands he discovered, and he was convinced he had landed in the Indies (now Indonesia) because that was what he had set out to find a western passage to, hence why they call it the West Indies to this day. Anyway, I digress.

The first thing that grabs your attention is that the city, for most part has many very wide tree-lined streets, I guess you would call them boulevards, and reminiscent of Paris. We drove around quite a lot of these and the wide open squares that intersected road junctions, including the Las Ramblas, a long and broad pedestrian-only thoroughfare, crammed with high and low end shops, market stalls and the most professional pick-pockets in Europe. You haven't a clue that you have been robbed until you actually get your wallet to pay for something. Apparently the best of the best are Romanian.

Most of the main CBD area of the city is flat and easy to walk around, and unlike the previous cities we have just visited, does not have the cobbled footpaths and roads that have become so familiar. An interesting comment by our guide was that much of what we are looking at around Barcelona is relatively new, only a couple of centuries-old, because wars, including the 1930's Spanish Civil War, saw much of the infrastructure destroyed.

The surviving Old Quarter, which we walked through with our guide, has much narrower streets and lanes, historic buildings such as the palace of the kings in the Middle Ages and an ornate Gothic cathedral with cloisters running around the interior walls with little chapels so you can worship your favourite Saint. A number of these stood out due to the lavish amount of gold used to create images and art work surrounding them. I suppose these must have been the most important ones in the scheme of things, a sort of hierarchy of Saints.

We also visited Gaudi's Sagrada Familia, that amazingly weird cathedral that the famous Spanish architect designed and started construction on in the 1890's, and it's still not finished. It is scheduled to be completed in 2023, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. He was hit by a passing tram.

So far only 8 of the 18 planned towers has been completed, and around \$60 million euros (A\$100 million) per year is allocated to completing the project.

If you aren't familiar with this incredible structure, look it up on the internet, and you will understand why it is yet another tick for my bucket list.

We celebrated having actually cast our eyes upon this intriguing structure by ducking into a nearby bar and having one of those amazing Spanish inventions, Sangria! The rest of the group dived for the nearest loo, but we spent our time far more profitably savouring this marvellous beverage. I need to master it before we return home.

Next stop Montjuic Mountain (700' high, translates as Jew Mountain because in the 1700's the Jewish community in Barcelona used it as their cemetery) that sits close to the port, but does also dominate the city behind it. This is the location of many of the arenas and other venues constructed for the 1992 Barcelona Olympic games. It is also a great viewing point to look back over the sprawling city and across to the mountain range behind it. There are 1.5 million inhabitants of Barcelona central, but if you count the suburbs, that increases to 4 million. The city planners have decreed that is enough development, the infrastructure is a breaking point and have put an embargo on any further development plans. I just wish we had the same determination to tell developers that enough is enough at home!

Facing the reverse side (side facing the port) of Montjuic Mountain there sits a 500 year old fort built apparently not to keep invaders out, but the local population from escaping by sea during one of those frequent periods in European history when tyranny and oppression were favourite pastimes of the megalomaniacs of the past.

Back to the ship at 6:30pm with the intention of returning to experience Barcelona at night as we were not due to sail until 10pm. Unfortunately angry black clouds arrived on the scene as we were about to go back in with crashing thunder, strong winds and pelting rain, so sadly no more Barcelona for us this time!

Tomorrow, a day at sea travelling south-west along the Spanish coast to our next destination, Gibraltar the day after.

**11 April 19:** A day at sea was most welcome and helped to recharge the batteries! Very cool wind blowing, but at least the skies were clear for most of it as we headed down the rugged coast of Spain, every nautical mile putting the grotty weather behind us.

First sighting of the day was the famed party island of Ibiza on our port side at 7am. Then the mainland came into view on the starboard side and we could clearly see the numerous towns and cities along the coastline with the brown mountain ranges behind. Quite a few towns had high apartment blocks along the sea front, sadly a bit like the Gold Coast. Some of these resort towns, such as Benidorm have been favourite holiday destinations for the Brits ever since I lived in London in the early '70s – 13 quid for a return flight and seven days in a hotel back then. As we passed, I reckon you could smell the fish 'n chips from the deck!!!!

On the subject of weather, we have been on board now for 32 days, and really no movement on the ship at all. In fact you wouldn't know we were at sea unless you looked out on deck.

So, today Gibraltar, another bucket list tick! And it didn't disappoint. We were alongside (nautical for parked) at 7am, whilst dawn was just quietly breaking. Leisurely stroll into the town after breakfast, only a kilometre from the wharf, through historic arches and into the Casement Square, cobblestoned and lined on four sides with very European style cafes etc.

Gibraltar is tiny, 30,000 people live in an area of 2.6 square miles, dominated by "The Rock" that towers 1,400 feet above the town. The road out of town to the Spanish border has to cross the Gibraltar Airport runway which intersects the narrow isthmus between Gibraltar and the mainland, so when a plane is taking off or landing, the boom gates come down to stop pedestrians and traffic crossing!! Not surprisingly, it doesn't work the other way!!

The main street, which seems to be the centre of everything, is very narrow to the extent that only delivery vehicles are permitted to drive through it, and runs a couple of blocks back from, and parallel to the waterfront. It used to be closer, but land reclamation for some pretty swanky apartment blocks and a marina development have pushed it inland just a little.

It is about 1.5kms in length with little lanes running off at random intervals, those to the left go uphill a short distance with the steep backdrop of "The Rock" very obviously inhibiting any further progress in that direction. Those to the right drop slightly down to another long laneway with shops, cafes, residences and pubs running parallel to Main Street, but Main Street is THE street with endless duty free shops, a couple of department stores - Debenhams and Marks & Spencer, English-style pubs with fish 'n chips as their specialty, electrical stores offering duty-free discounts, and so forth; you get the picture. Whilst the duty-free grog is certainly cheap, I don't think the same can be said for the electrical goods. Something I have noticed in various so-called duty-free countries is that prices seem to be very similar to what we pay in Australia these days. On the other hand, similar to the rest of the UK, clothing is certainly cheaper here in the department stores.

Main Street is colourful and quaint with its European style buildings with their cute shuttered windows and iron-work balconies from the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, broken along the way by a couple of smaller squares with either a small church or public building facing onto it, and one or more trees near the centre for shade and sitting under.

Nearing the end of Main Street, right where a little cemetery sits in a leafy green grove by part of the town ramparts, with graves of some of the sailors who lost their lives in the Battle of Trafalgar, we jumped in an 8 seat minibus with six others who were standing around looking for another two to join them, and the driver then took us for a 1.5 hour drive up the very narrow and steep road (one way) to the top of "The Rock", stopping for breathtaking views down into Gibraltar town, across the bay to Algeciras in Spain, and across The Strait of Gibraltar to Morocco on the African coast.

One stop that particularly impressed us was at St Michael's Cave inside The Rock. We have visited a lot of caves in many countries including Australia, and this one is awe-inspiring. It was used as a British military hospital during

WW2, and it vast!! High ceilings and many levels down. The colourful lighting effects playing across the stalactites and mites just made it all that more enthralling. Concerts and Operas are performed in the main chamber during summer. Definitely a highlight!

There is an old tradition that if the Barbary Apes ever leave The Rock, Britain will lose possession of Gibraltar. You can imagine how well those apes are cared for by the government!! They are free to wander anywhere they like, and by choice live in groups of 6, but groups socialise together. We saw them up close and very personal at several stops, particularly at the razor-like ridge extending along the top of The Rock. We were told to leave all our belongings in the vehicle, but one person (not in our group) left his back-pack on. An ape came along, opened the zip on the backpack, took out a plastic bag that had fruit in it, and ran away to sit on a rock and open the bag. It then sat there making a meal of his meal!

Another feature of The Rock is the 56kms of tunnels riddled throughout it, some carved out during the 1700's when Gibraltar was under siege for four years, some in the 1800's when again under attack, and the majority during WW2 to defend Gibraltar against German invasion. It was in these tunnels that the garrisons lived, and the cannons were housed to repel invasions.

I should mention here that Britain's hold on Gibraltar has been a very sore point with Spain, over the centuries they have nicely asked for it back but it was part of a deal made with the Spanish monarchy back in the 1700's when it was swapped for the then British-held island of Majorca as part of a peace treaty. In those days Spain saw it as just a useless rock. Because of its strategic position at the entrance to the strait between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean, Britain doesn't want to give it back, and in two referendums, the Gibraltarians have told Spain that they aren't interested either. Another fact, in the UK Brexit referendum 98% of Gibraltarians voted to stay in the EU, so they're just a little pissed off with Britain at the moment.

At 4pm we sailed from Gibraltar under sunny skies, and entered the strait that is the seaway to the North Atlantic Ocean. It's narrow enough that you can see the towns on both the European and African sides, and a string of cargo ships going in both directions. The African side has very rugged dry mountains along the coast, whilst the European side has lush green slopes rising up to equally rugged mountains with many dozens of wind generators standing tall strung out along the coast.

Tomorrow a half day at sea, arriving in Lisbon at midday. Our 2<sup>nd</sup> last port before Southampton.

**14 April 19:** We woke up to the very first movement of the ship this morning, a gentle rising and falling to a low North Atlantic swell as we proceeded north along the coast of Portugal under sunny skies, due in Lisbon at midday.

We entered the broad mouth of the Tagus River just before 11am, the sparsely populated coast falling away to the south on our right with some resorts strung along the Atlantic beachfront, and with the more heavily populated area north to our left. We were later to drive this wealthy section of the coast heading back into Lisbon after a wonderful tour inland to Sintra.

Slowly making our way up the river, it became very evident that Lisbon (pronounced Lish-boa) was going to be a different city. The old and new buildings integrated along the shoreline and up the sides of the steep hills that is a trademark of this beautiful city. Older buildings, constructed after 1755 when a mega earthquake destroyed all but a small section of the city, then followed by a huge tsunami killing over 100,000 residents, are painted various pastel colours, pink, pale blue, yellow, tan, soft green etc., and all with red tile roofs. Many are also decorated with tiles with patterns of many colours. It didn't takes us long to realise that tiles are a big thing around here. And everywhere church spires and domes reached up to be acknowledged over the tangle of roofs and streets below.

As we progressed towards the heart of the city on our left we passed close by the historic Belem Tower, a rather boxy boot-shaped but ornate defence construction from the 1400's, where many of Portugal's famous explorers such as Vasco da Gama (pronounced Vash-co day Gay-ma) sailed from to discover the New World. And across the road from that is the very large Jeronimos Monastery where he spent all of the last night praying before setting off on his adventures. That didn't end well for him coz his tomb is inside the monastery after contracting malaria in Cochin in India.

Next up was the sandstone monument to the famous ocean explorers in Portugal's history, with each depicted in full relief standing in a line looking up towards an abstract form of a ship's bow pointing out across the river.

All the way up river the steeper right hand bank opposite the city side seemed unpopulated, just green and hilly.

We passed under the large bridge that spans the Tagus, an exact but larger replica of the Golden Gate Bridge (because it was built by the same company), and then veered around the left shoreline following the busy city streets all along the way.

At this stage the Tagus opens up to be a very wide lake, with the opposite low shore lined with suburbs housing those who cannot afford the expensive real estate within the CBD. The population on that side is serviced by large ferries shuffling back and forth, and the longest bridge in Europe in the middle distance, a massive 18kms long, 14kms of which is over water.

Sapphire Princess eased into her berth between three other cruise ships, right in the centre of the city which slopes steeply up the surrounding hills. The hill directly across from our berth sports a large domed cathedral in amongst colourful old apartments, and an old medieval fort, Castelo Saint Jorge sitting at the top. As I said, Lisbon is built on many hills (seven to be exact), so a lot of the streets and lanes are best suited to mountain goats. In the commercial centre of Baixa (pronounced Bai-she-a), there is a very fancy wrought iron pedestrian lift to take you up from one street level to another city level on the side of a hill in the old quarter, Chiado (pronounced Chee-ar-dor), which was designed by Gustav Eiffel, who built you know what.

Our tour today took us first around this wonderful city with its plazas, steep roads leading off everywhere, old and new trams fighting for space on the narrow roads and ornate cobbled footpaths with black and white designs embedded within, a different design marking the specific area of the city you are in. It took no time at all to realise that this is a city that requires much, much more of your time if you really want to absorb it all.

Out into the countryside and up into the hills beyond which the magical town of Sintra (pronounced Sintra silly!) sits, nestled into steep hills and valleys. Forget Disneyland, this is the real Fantasyland!!

Think of colourful mansions with little ornate turrets and slate roofed spires straight out of a fairy-tale, ornate carved front doors and windows, narrow winding roads through leafy forests, quaint shops and bars/restaurants, steep winding laneways (yeh, I know, I've been banging on about those laneways for weeks now since we have been in European waters), and a large palace, the summer home of Portuguese kings since the 1400's, right in the middle of it all facing on to a small plaza with roads meandering off in several directions.

Leaving Sintra and descending the mountain heading for the wild Atlantic coast, the forests are a little reminiscent of the Dandenong Ranges with lots of tall gum trees and green vegetation underneath. The eucalypts are losing favour in Portugal since a forest fire killed 75 people several years ago, and this was blamed on the gum trees being highly flammable.

On the other hand, cork is big deal in Portugal. Apart from the obvious cork for wine bottles, they have invented other uses for the product since the Stelvin cap has made inroads in the wine industry. How about a nice wafer-thin cork shirt, perhaps a cork suit, or maybe a cork tie? For women, a cork skirt, and handbag and matching shoes perhaps? Yes, cork is king! The uses are limitless.

Cork trees obviously are everywhere, and the bark is harvested every 9 years. After stripping the bark, a number representing the year it is taken off is cut into the tree, and then they know the next year for harvesting. Eg: harvested in 2019, number 9 is carved on the tree and when 2028 comes around, they harvest and cut an 8 into the tree. Simple!!

Our drive along the coast saw many wide, sandy beaches with rocky outcrops, including the western-most point of continental Europe at Cabo do Boca. From the expensive tourist town of Estoril onwards it's luxurious mansions, hotels and apartments until we arrived in the pretty fishing village of Cascais (pronounced Cash-s-kase) where again everything smacked of money. Picture-perfect, Cascais extends back from a very popular sandy beach (we had coats on, they were sunbathing and swimming!) sheltered by a granite sea wall protecting a genuine fishing fleet, the boats having been handed down from generation to generation. Historic buildings extend around three sides of the esplanade from which several streets full of bars and restaurants lead inland to another tree-filled plaza with market

stalls that look like free-standing dolls houses, and play equipment for the kids. Along the way we were forced to take a break for a glass of rose and a lovely German beer. And so back to Lisbon and the ship.

So from here we have two days at sea before our last port, Le Havre in France, then overnight across the English Channel to Southampton.

**15 April 19:** Again, what a difference a day makes! Left Lisbon in fine sunny weather, and the next two days at sea has been absolutely preparing us for spring in the UK! Pea soup fog and moderate seas until half way across the notorious Bay of Biscay, our ships' horn blasting every 90 seconds throughout the day and night. Glad we aren't located up on the top deck, coz those folks up there aren't getting any sleep!!

As the day has progressed Sapphire Princess started to bounce around slightly, and as I look out our big picture window on Deck 8 I can see grey seas, lots of white caps and visibility now cleared up to about 500 metres under a dull grey sky. Suddenly I see a cargo ship appear out of the mist, travelling parallel to us. I wonder how long we have been travelling together! The noon broadcast from the bridge told us it's 13c and a strong 40 knot wind blowing out there, clearing visibility.

By mid-afternoon the seas get higher and closer to what we have been hoping for, but then another disappointment as we round Cape Ushant and enter the English Channel at 4pm this afternoon when the seas start to abate.

Winding-down time on the ship now, finals for tournaments, end of voyage parties, last Formal Night and Southampton disembarkation presentation in the Princess Theatre. Packing under way, warm weather clothes at the bottom of the suitcase, thinking we may not need them over the next few weeks, until our 2 days in Singapore on the way back home.

We will arrive at Le Havre at 7am tomorrow morning to overcast skies and a chilly top of 11c. Oh! warm sunny weather, why hast thou forsaken me?

We have decided to take our last day easy, and instead of rushing off for a full-day tour to the beaches of Normandy to look at the battlefields of D-Day 6<sup>th</sup> June 1944 like most of the ship seem to be doing, we will just wander into the town of Le Havre, have a baguette, cheese and vino for lunch, and I will try to make a fool of myself attempting school-boy French. I've done it before, I can do it again (make a fool of myself, that is)!

On arrival at the main square in the centre of the city, our plans for the day suddenly change. There is a local tour bus leaving for the quaint and historic town of Honfleur about to depart, a 45 minute drive and with 3 hours at our disposal at the destination. Having read a lot about this township with its picturesque harbour and fishing fleet at the mouth of the Seine, off we went. And we were not disappointed! Photo heaven. Narrow cobbled streets with very ancient shops with residences above, leading off an equally historic waterfront, even an ancient 14<sup>th</sup> century all-timber church in a plaza. The speciality here, apart from the wonderful restaurants, is chocolate and other tempting sweets. Couldn't resist buying two beautifully formed chocolate Easter eggs for the grandchildren.

The drive to Honfleur includes travelling over an enormous bridge crossing the very wide Seine river, broad mudflats on either side. Apart from that, the drive is not particularly picturesque until you arrive at the township, but we were so glad we did it.

We sailed from Le Havre at 8pm for the overnight channel crossing to Southampton still in broad daylight, and I must say that whilst Le Havre is mostly boring post war architecture (as it was almost completely levelled by the Allied Forces when landing to push the Germans back after D-Day) looking back from the deck of the ship, the very wide beachfront and marina did look rather attractive. Maybe next time a closer look.

And so, this voyage is at an end, but it has been such a fabulous adventure. We have seen and done things we never imagined we would do and consider ourselves fortunate to have had the opportunity.

We now have a couple of wonderful weeks in Merrie Olde England to look forward to, before starting our homeward journey via a far less sophisticated mode of travel, the cramped and most uncomfortable aircraft!!