

Monday 5 January 2009

It's freezing cold and we are busy packing; somehow Rick has managed to cram three and a half months of stuff into one suitcase. I am not worried as it is all the more room for my 17 Formal Evening dresses, 19 Dinner Dresses with matching handbags and shoes together with the usual shorts, teeshirts and day dresses. I honestly didn't realise I had so many dresses and have only treated myself to two new ones, both at half price. Our first stop is Grand Canaria on Sunday. The 4 days at sea will give us time to settle in and a chance to work off last year's excesses in the gym. I expect Rick will get all competitive about it and start devising weight and body mass spreadsheets for us to fill in. Yes, I am sure that will be his first objective as he won't be able to do his internet betting on the ship. We are extremely organised and wish it were today that we were going, it's a long day just waiting.

Round The World

Tuesday 6 January 2009

It's still freezing cold, the temperature has reached as low as -11°C in some places. Alan kindly gave us a lift to Southampton where we found The Black Watch moored in the "Queen Mary's" berth. As soon as we drew up the porters unloaded our 5 suitcases, it's exciting, an adventure but 97 nights is such a long time to be away. Check in was easy and we eyed up our fellow passengers who mostly seemed to be 70 plus. One man had a wonderful set of huge eyebrows shaped like a colonel's moustache, each end culminating in sweeping upward points. The extra £200 for an outside cabin proved worthwhile as we have a bath and the wardrobes managed to take all my clothes but the shoes and extras had to be stored in a suitcase under one of the beds.

We met an interesting father and daughter at the boat drill, he was a young 84 year old with twinkling eyes. His opinionated and determined daughter drives a van for a Kipper shop in London and smokes roll-ups. It's a lovely ship, a bit old fashioned but comfortable and almost everyone is British and friendly. I thought they were joking when we were told to hold our nose and jump off the side of the boat in an emergency, never been told that before. What about the railings? Apparently they can be lowered. Someone slipped on the ice on the top deck.

Pete (Harley Davidson) and Lyn were on "The Black Watch Round The World Cruise" this time last year and suggested that we try to beat their 40 page bar bill!! It's great that you don't have to sneak your bottles of gin in as you can buy them onboard, we got a bottle of Bombay 47% for £13.50. The bar prices are also reasonable £2.50 for pint of Stella and £2.75 for a gin and tonic and £3.50 for a cocktail.

A Jazz Band entertained us at the Champagne Welcome Party. It's not my sort of music but they are a talented bunch, all of them have previously played with famous orchestras and bands.

Wednesday 7 January - 11°C bright and sunny

There are loads of activities but quite a few clash. We both went to the shore lecture after which Rick listened to a lecture by Stuart Boreham who was the first handicapped person to row single handed across the Atlantic while I enrolled us both on the Fitness Package. I ran up and down the stairs with the Fitness Group while Rick went to an Art Class but we started to get confused with what we were doing next and just wanted to relax and read a book. The ship had started to move on a sea swell and I started to feel funny in the afternoon but it didn't hit Rick until after Pilates. Yes Thyra, Rick's metamorphosis is not yet complete; he is now taking art classes, Pilates and is going to try yoga. Poor Rick felt so dreadful that he had to take a pill which made him sleepy and he couldn't even work up any enthusiasm when the gin bottle arrived. I watched "The Deep end of the Ocean". It was a formal night, we were late for the Norwegian Captain's Champagne Reception but managed to watch a fantastic black lady singer at the after dinner show. The Kipper lady and her father were having troubles with their table, they should have taken our advice and got a table for two.

Thursday 8 January - 11°C cloudy with light showers, brighten up as we left Bay of Biscay

We overslept and missed the Pilates class, never mind we did 20 minutes in the gym plus having walked up 6 flights of stairs to get there. Jane Asher was sitting behind us at breakfast. Came very close to that extraordinary set of eyebrows when he asked us about the internet. It was difficult to concentrate as I kept eavesdropping on people's conversations. Massage appointments were being rescheduled as they clashed with the Cha Cha Cha, yesterday it was the Waltz, oh and "are you going to line-dancing" and so on. Did the mile walk round the deck to work up an appetite. Rick has started hand-writing his diary. Straight after lunch it was back to gym for Exercise of the Day when we had to do all sorts of movements whilst sitting on a big ball and trying not to fart. Onto the Watercolour Art Class where we sat next to Manchurian Mavis who takes the Craft Classes. This is her 11th World Cruise, what a wonderful job. She was dressed in her matching top and earrings decorated in bright red poppies, all made at her classes. Rick is quite taken with the art classes and I was most impressed with his delicate line of trees, much better than my weak splodges. Running up and down the stairs clashed with the art class but we made up for it by attending the Stretch and Relax Class with Michael. Rick says he prefers the laying down exercises but they make him a bit dizzy. Unfortunately, Rick fiddled too much with his pedometer and it went back to zero, mine is now at 4006 steps. We were given the pedometer as part of the fitness package and get a recognition stamps and sometimes a prize for reaching goals. We walked .4 of a mile round the deck but Rick will have to give his pedometer lots of shakes to get it back up to my reading. Gosh, it's so exhausting what happened to just lying down and reading a book. Listened to concert by Francisco Yglesia who is a clever, entertaining Paraguayan harpist. It's not so rocky now that we have passed the Bay of Biscay.

Friday 9 January - 13°C – bright and sunny with a few clouds

Set the alarm for 7.30am so we wouldn't miss the yoga at 8am. Yoga is a first for both of us but having Rick lying on a mat next to me gave me the giggles. There was time for the mile walk (5 times round the deck) before breakfast. Sat next to a couple from Portsmouth, she's a teacher and a bit weird with a stud in her tongue, he's a diabetic with a long straggly beard that he wears in a pony-tail. About 290 of the 600 passengers are going all the way. It seems impossible to read without falling asleep and I woke up to find we were sitting with the art teacher and his wife and next to Stuart Boreham the motivational speaker with whom we spent about an hour having a good laugh about our respective travel experiences. Oh no, my pedometer has also clicked back to zero, I now have to shake it about 4500 times to get it back to where it was but it looks as if I am suffering from Parkinson's as I am continually shaking my wrist. At lunchtime we met a guy from Holland in a Harley teeshirt. He did the Route 66 in 2003 which was the 100th year anniversary. He went to the convention where there were 2 million motorcycles, it was amazing but the noise was deafening. They had to camp at each stopover during the 3 weeks it took to make the trip from Chicago to Santa Monica. Rick's really got into the art classes, his paintings are so much more delicate than mine. He has recently mentioned that he wants to paint Arundel scenes.

Sat next to Jane Asher and her husband at the classical concert but wasn't too keen on the soprano so joined Rick at the Pilates class. I had another fit of giggles watching Rick taking all this exercise so seriously; he even insisted we walk another mile. Everyone is friendly and we seem to have spent most of the day chatting. Chatted to a retired London bus driver who has been living very happily in Malta for the past ten years. He was offered a job as a bus driver there but was put off by the 3 euros an hour pay. We have found the first thimble for Carol and delivered the letter to Ramesh. The roll-up smoking Kipper girl has befriended the aging Thai bride who has hair down to the back of her knees.

Saturday 10 January - 18°C – bright and sunny with a few clouds

Early breakfast followed by Oxygen Relaxation and mile walk. There seem to be plenty of places where you

can smoke but that is only until the end of April. We avoid these areas as it affects Rick's asthma but the smokers always look relaxed and are often found propping up the bar and engaging in idle conversation. We have a cabin stewardess as have most of the other cabins which is a first for us, it's usually men. However, we have only caught sight of her once. We have noticed that the staff, who are mostly Filipino, are not so attentive as on other cruises. However, they are not trying to sell you things all the time and

taking your photo at every opportunity, well not yet! After Stuart's question and answer session we sat on deck, fully clothed and I chatted away with Jane Asher's husband about people watching and how we are giving some nicknames. Our activities start up again after lunch. Exercise for the day is always at 2.30pm followed by the stair challenge. It wasn't until after Jane Asher's afternoon session that I found out that her husband is actually the famous cartoonist Gerald Scarfe. He was the animation director for Pink Floyd's "The Wall" and did the title graphics for "Yes Minister" and "Yes Prime Minister". Jane Asher started making films when she was five and her career spans over 57 years. She stills looks good. I never realised how many films, TV programmes and plays she has been in. She has also written books, been made famous for her cakes and recently been in The Maestro. Another mile walk and back to the cabin so Rick can show me the picture he painted this afternoon. It's very good; he is so keen that I can see our cabin walls soon being covered in his efforts. Gladdin and Ramesh were pleased with the photos from Pete and Lynn. The weather is warming up nicely but the forecast for our first stop tomorrow in Las Palmas, Grand Canaria is only 17 degrees and cloudy. All these activities have made the 4 days at sea fly by, it seems that we have been away for ages. Just off to see Martyn Dominique, he was a Mario Lanza finalist in one of the first "Stars in Your Eyes". Looking forward to Grand Canaria where we can catch up with our emails and phone calls. Antigua and the Caribbean is only a week away.

Sunday 11 January Las Palmas, Gran Canaria - 17 C – cloudy, windy, dull with showers

It is said that there are no canaries in the Canary Islands but that they are named after a dog i.e. canine. Gran Canaria has a round shape and is of volcanic origin, mostly made of fissure vents, there is no active volcano. The north tends to be cooler while the south that is warmer and sunny and is where most of the tourists head. The east coast is flat, dotted with beaches while the west coast is rocky and mountainous. Gran Canaria has the responsibility of controlling all the Canaries air traffic. As it was Sunday the shops were closed but the market was doing a roaring trade with the locals. They weren't selling food just the usual rubbish but not much touristy stuff. We took the local bus 1.20 euros each to the old walled city of Vegueta to see the cathedral that is made of the local volcanic rock. Being a Sunday a service was being held but the town was really quiet. The bus took us back towards the harbour and we stopped off at Parque Doramas near a 5 star hotel where we were entertained with locals singing and dancing. It was colourful but didn't last long as it was rained off. I am sure that it is a vibrant city on a weekday as there were lots of shops and a huge shopping mall. We spent a frustrating afternoon trying to get connected to the internet. Many of the couples on the ship walk about holding hands, it's so sweet. One 87 year old man couldn't stop to help his wife sort out her new camera as he was off to play tennis. Someone said that lots of people were now downsizing and spending their money on enjoying life and that often included cruising. One couple sold up, put all their possessions in storage then took a world cruise, and as on their return they hadn't sorted out any alternative accommodation they decided it was cheaper just to take another world cruise – the world is changing. I left Rick sorting out the computer while I went to the gym, despite all the exercise we are not doing too well on the weight front. I don't want to sound like a social climber but we had pre dinner drinks with Jane Asher and her husband. Kipper girl wanted us to join her for a group quiz at 10.30 pm followed by the disco. We have been to nearly all the late night entertainment but still been in bed just before midnight, after all we have to be up for the 8am exercise class. Stuart, the disabled motivational speaker has been in the bar up to 3 and 4pm with some of the staff. The entertainment director said that over Christmas some passengers were staying up to 1, 2, 3, 4 and even 5 past 12. Each evening I like to watch the 6pm film and I am also enjoying lots of the Vicar of Dibley episodes. Rick is busy reading the notes on his art class or just practising.

Monday 12 January – At Sea - 21 C – cloudy with sunny intervals

It was still dark when we set off for the 8am Yoga session and our mile walk. Sat in on a lecture by a Graphologist that Rick thought was a load of rubbish and spent rest of morning reading on deck, not quite bikini weather yet. Colour mixing at Art. We had lots of laughs with the Portsmouth couple (Helen and Nigel) about The Vicar of Dibley episodes that are being shown before the evening meal. Helen recalled how she and Nigel met in church when the priest was lying prostrate on the floor and Nigel was holding the wooden cross, it was love at first sight. We got lost a few times when she went off at a tangent. After another mile walk it was drinks with the Kipper Lady, Dutch Hank, Patricia and the Customer Relations

Manager who looks like Superman. I misunderstood, Kipper Lady does not sell kippers; it is just an expression of a quiet time for business i.e. January and February. Her name is Liz and she has a small shop in Wandsworth where she makes leather clothes to order. She has some famous customers and once made a pair of leather trousers for a member of Prodigy. Initially she refused because she doesn't like their lyrics but changed her mind when she met them. Watched a comedian.

Tuesday 13 January – At Sea - 24 C – cloudy with sunny intervals

Clocks went back an hour but still set alarm for 7.30 as Pilates started at 8pm followed by mile walk. Spent morning on deck. Exercise of the day was on the machines. Watched a slideshow on how to introduce light into our paintings. We are pacing ourselves with the gin but a couple of old ladies on deck this morning said "I have a terrible headache" to which the other replied quite seriously "It's all those jigsaws". It's sometimes difficult to understand the Norwegian Captain's twice daily announcements and he does tell us some strange things like how much the propeller weighs. Had a really good evening. It's such a small world, met up with a guy called David Harrold who is a neighbour of Joe Weed from FSL, he plays golf with him 3 times a week. We are only having a bottle of wine with our meal on Formal Dress Nights and this was one of them. Went to the Lido bar, actually that was after the show. Gladdin and Ramesh the barmen are looking after us very well. Made friends with Gerry and Mike who is a retired dentist, they are on Deck 8, we are on Deck 4, we are now fraternising with the elite. Gerry acted as my chaperon when an eighty something man started to dance with me. We talked with Harpist and Stuart the solo rower and it was 3am before we knew it.

Wednesday 14 January – At Sea - 27 C – cloudy with sunny intervals

Clocks back an hour again. Feeling fragile, Rick woke up 30 minutes before me and practised his Pilates. He is taking his activities very seriously and has also been practising his painting. Couldn't face the gym but managed to do the first mile walk after the Port lecture. Phone call from Bill to say that sadly Roma, Erica and Uncle Eric's brother have all died since December. Exercise of the day involved lying and sitting on a long cylinder shaped piece of foam. Rick's legs still ache from overdoing the leg press. He told Gerald Scarfe how much he liked the Pink Floyd "Wall" graphics. Practiced painting sky and trees in art lesson. Somehow managed to walk the second mile. Early night, hopefully we will feel stronger tomorrow.

Thursday 15 January – At Sea - 27 C – cloudy with sunny intervals

Carol texted to say we have burst pipe outside kitchen, fortunately managed to get Tony to sort it out. Yoga and mile walk. Exercise of the Day (aerobic machines), followed by lecture on Panama Canal then I listened to the classical concert while Rick went to art. Had the launderette experience, it's very narrow, very hot, very busy and very frustrating. Clocks went back an hour again and we had early night.

Friday 16 January – At Sea - 27 C – cloudy with sunny intervals

Woke early so did mile walk before pilates. Curacao port lecture followed by Jane Asher talking about her cakes, books and charity work. Had pre dinner drinks with Stuart, the Canon, Jane Asher and her husband and someone who used to work for Sonicaid. Stuart mentioned to me about helping him with his project for handicapped people. More lying on long bits of foam and then art. Sunset was just after 5pm.

Saturday 17 January – At Sea - 27 C – cloudy with sunny intervals

After 3 laps we joined the Tone Zone Circuit and then the Oxygen Meditation Class that was held on the tennis court. Spent the rest of the morning reading on deck. Then it was back to the gym to have our metabolism and BMI measured. It was a bit pointless really as we both know that we are overweight but it forms part of our Fitness package and you never know it may motivate us to something about it. Tony showed us how to paint a beach scene. It was Farewell showtime as most of the entertainers were getting off at Antigua.

Sunday 18 January - Antigua –English 28 C – cloudy with sunny intervals



Walked over 2 miles round the deck before breakfast. I expect you are thinking what's happened to those two, they are getting so boring. Well, it's back to normal today and what a great day it has been. As we entered St John's, Antigua the water turned to a turquoise blue just the same as I have been trying to paint for the last few days. St John's is the main port and capital of Antigua but being a Sunday there weren't many shops open. There must have been a church service on nearby as there was an awful lot of gospel singing going on, in fact they were working their way into some sort of frenzy. We booked the "Swimming with Stingrays" tour that took us through the middle of the island which was good as we got to see how the real people live.

Christopher Columbus landed here in 1493 and named the island Santa Maria de la Antigua after a church in Seville, Spain. For over 300 years it was a plantation island growing sugar, cotton and tobacco but when slavery was abolished in 1834 there wasn't enough labour to work the land. As a result there is very little agriculture now with most goods having to be imported; most people prefer to work in the tourist industry. 91% of the population are Black or Mulatto with the rest mainly being of British and Portuguese descent. Tourism dominates the economy; Antigua is famous for its many exclusive resorts. The national sport is cricket and they have produced several famous cricket players including Sir Vivian Richards, Andy Roberts and Richy Richardson. We passed the new Vivian Richards stadium.

There is lots of barren land with a few goats on what I expect were the old sugar plantations. Our guide was black but very diplomatic and didn't mention the slave trade but it was obvious that it played a very important part of the history of the island. Antigua is not a volcanic island, it is made up of coral and limestone. The Trade winds blow most of the year making the north-east coastline rather wild. The sandy, sheltered beaches are found on the other side of the island close to St. John's. Although the local tradesmen are somewhat pushy the island is relatively safe. They have their own currency but will take American dollars. Did you know that the American Dollar is waterproof? It rains quite frequently here but is always warm. The hurricane season is from June to October/November and should they experience one they usually recover fairly quickly.

The Stingray centre was quite low key in natural surroundings with facilities where we could shower. The speed boat ride was a highlight in itself as we were racing with another boat through the mangroves. An area of the ocean had been cordoned off for us to swim with the stingrays. They were soft and spongy but I was still terrified when I tried to hold one. A lady tried to make me go under water to look at them with them but we had blown our life jackets up too far and found it difficult to go down, also I forgot about my mascara and it was all over my face. Rick had a go at feeding them; they just suck up the food. One sucked his arm as it thought it was food and left Rick with what looked like a love-bite or hickey. Then we started chatting to Ted, one of the Dance Hosts, who worked at the Dorchester for 50 years, gosh he had some stories to tell. He trained at Len Goodman's studio and said that Bruce Forsyth is a snob. Many glasses of rum punch later a little old lady called Joyce joined us, 180,000 gallons of rum are produce here each year. She must have been quite a girl and still is as she was flirting outrageously with Ted. He was telling us about his Christmas cruise on the Saga Rose. A huge wave hit them while they were in the Bay of Biscay, all the tables were upturned and the crockery broken, it was complete chaos, broken arms and legs and that's not just the tables and chairs. We made a dent in all that rum punch and there was lots and lots of reggae singing on the way back. Had lunch with Stuart, the Stars in Your Eyes singer and the comedian also

stopped by. More drinks later we sat in a local bar and did our emailing. Judith from our art class stopped by with her husband, I think she fancies Rick as she says he looks like Harrison Ford and she keeps complimenting his artwork. Rick is very keen on his painting, it's making him look at the scenery in a different way. For instance he said "Look how green those trees are" he does take everything so seriously. The whole afternoon was a blur, Rick was convinced he had only had a pint of Stella since the rum punches but the photographs tell another story! Rick was suffering from a bad case of hiccups; we couldn't eat much and fell asleep and missed the evening entertainment.

Monday 19 January – At Sea - 28 C – cloudy with sunny intervals

2 miles before yoga and breakfast. Listened to lecture by Jock Reid who was a test pilot for Concorde and Jacques Arnold a former MP and former Thomas Cooks' Regional Director for Latin America and Africa, neither of them not quite me. Michael gave us a personal exercise that has frightened the life out of Rick. The rumour is that this evening we have been invited onto the Captain's table and sure enough when we get back to our cabin the posh invitation is waiting for us. I know it is a great honour to be invited but it was a bit of an ordeal as the Captain is so difficult to understand. We were joined by Bill and Linda a couple from Portsmouth and also two sisters and their partners. They went on a catamaran trip yesterday and were also plied with the rum punches, an 87 year old lady had to actually be carried onto the coach. This is the first cruise for all of them and they are loving it. Mandy and Mike live in Spain, they have come on the cruise to escape the doom and gloom and although they have only booked as far as Tahiti they are trying to go all the way but at the moment it is all booked up. I should think they will try and accommodate them as they are working their way towards Pete and Lynn's 40 page bar bill already. Fortunately, Mandy kept the Captain entertained and hopefully we laughed in all the right places. Lovely wines though.

Tuesday 20 January – Willemstad, Curacao - 31 C – sunny with showers

We are celebrities; everyone is asking how come we had dinner with the Captain, am I someone famous. It has even been suggested that Rick bribed him with one of his paintings!

Curacao is the largest of the six islands that comprise the Netherlands Antilles. It gained autonomy from the Netherlands in 1954 but the Dutch influence is still very visible in Willemstad's architecture. Many of the people speak four languages, Dutch, Papiamentu, Spanish and English.

Willemstad has an excellent natural harbour and it played an important role in the slave trade that made the island affluent and led to the construction of impressive colonial buildings many of which still stand today. Large numbers of slaves were brought to Willemstad to recover from their journey before they were shipped to various destinations in America and the Caribbean. The end of slavery in 1863 caused economic hardship but in 1914 oil was discovered in Venezuela and Royal Dutch Shell and the Dutch Government built an oil refinery on the former site of the slave trade market as the excellent natural harbour could accommodate large oil tankers.

Willemstad boasts of a floating bridge that can open and close but is now only used by pedestrians, We berthed underneath the new road bridge and by the oil refinery. This island that is famous for the Curacao liqueur is now expanding its tourist industry. Curacao is also renowned for its coral reefs which make it an excellent spot for scuba diving. Today, it enjoys one of the highest standards of living in the Caribbean. Prostitution is tolerated and they even have a large open-air brothel near the airport. By monitoring, containing and regulating it, the prostitutes are given a safe environment and access to medical facilities.



The floating bridge

We booked a beach tour but didn't read the write up carefully enough. A boat took us to a man-made resort that was part of a 5 star hotel complex. We were ushered to the yellow sunbeds, then as there weren't enough, onto the blue ones. We were surrounded by Americans off of another cruise, this was not the idyllic surroundings I was expecting. It kept tipping down with rain but we still had a swim in the sea. We decided to make our own way back as it gave us an opportunity to see a bit more of the island. It was a long, hot walk and we passed lots of colourful houses, some of them in a bad state of repair. The area was busy with traffic, some places felt a bit dodgy and seemed a bit run down with litter everywhere. In previous times all the houses were painted white but one of the governors who suffered from bad headaches was encouraged to decree that all the houses must be painted in different colours. The owners of the paint factory are the richest people in Curacao. The main streets in the town were colourful. The Venezuelans come in their small boats and form a floating market selling tropical fruits and vegetables. We walked across the floating bridge back to the boat very tired, with sore feet and clothes soaked in perspiration. Made up for it with a huge lunch and decided the emails could wait; we would laze about on deck instead.



The floating market



A sewing and washing machine enterprise

Although the buildings were attractive we just didn't get that happy, tropical, party atmosphere, perhaps it was the lack of rum punches!

Watched Obama's inauguration on BBC World News also caught up with the depressing economic news.

Off to Santa Marta, Colombia onto Colon, Panama, through the Panama Canal and then after 9 days at sea we will reach Hiva Oa, Marquesas Islands.

Wednesday 21 January -Santa Marta, Colombia – 25 C Cloudy



Clocks went back another hour and we are now 5 hours behind. We started the morning off in the gym following the workout that Michael had devised for us. It's the first time that Rick has ever followed an exercise program and he found it hard but is convinced he will have a six-pack after only a couple of sessions.

Santa Marta is a seaside resort for local people in what was a small historical city. As a result of improved security in Columbia cruise ships can now stop in Cartagena and Santa Marta. Although the problems with drugs are not so bad on the coast it is still not the sort of place where you should wander around and get lost, you need to be aware of your surroundings. You also need to be wary when using the ATM's or your credit cards, as Columbia is the counterfeit capital of the world. Santa Marta has narrow streets and has a general run down appearance. Nearby Taganga beach is a popular resort for backpackers some of them stay for a few weeks at a time in Tayrona Natural National Park.

With all the talk of people ready to shoot or kidnap us we were a bit wary of walking into town. However, the most frightening bit was walking out of the port area where we were pounced upon by tour and taxi operators. The locals seemed friendly and didn't persist once you said no. We walked along the fairly busy beach but it wasn't appealing enough for us to want to stay. When we walked further into the town it became quite lively with roads full of noise and market stalls. There were quite a few shops selling dress material. The hotels were not attractive; in fact some of them looked like prisons with iron bars at the windows. Perhaps some of the high-rise buildings in the distance were modern hotels. The town itself was very much like other South American cities we have visited, although Cartagena in Columbia had a much more colonial feel to it. There were lots of internet cafes about but we used the one inside the port as we didn't want to walk through the city carrying our laptops.

Back to the Black Watch for the "Sail Away" party and more food.



Colombia (pop 44m) is part of the Pacific Ring of Fire a region of the world subject to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The government have begun to implement the Plan Colombia initiative with a dual goal of ending the armed conflict and promoting a strong anti-narcotic strategy. The improved security measures have shown a decrease in reported kidnappings from 3700 in 2000 to 800 in 2005, a decrease of more than 48% homicides and a 50% decrease in insurgents. Columbia's economy is fuelled by abundant natural resources and a highly literate population, over 93% can read and write. Their main exports are manufactured goods, petrol, coal, sugar crops, coffee and unofficially illegal drugs are also a major export. They export 50 million tons of coal a year. Columbia is one of the largest producers of pop-up books in the world. In 2006 Columbia received 1.5 million international tourists, an increase of 50% from the previous year. Lonely Planet picked it as one of their top 10 destinations.

Thursday 22 January –Colon, Panama – 25 C Wet

Frustrating morning as I think Rick had jet lag or was just tired so we didn't keep to our programme, then I found he had thrown away my Panama notes. Never mind, we still managed to hear the second part of the Panama lecture, part of the South American talk and had a full gym session..

It was tipping it down with rain as we arrived at the port of Colon that is 79 km from Panama City but close to the entrance of the Panama Canal on the Atlantic side. We were advised not to walk the short distance into town as crime rates are high and should we decide to risk it, not to take any valuables, stay on the main streets and not take unnecessary risks even in daylight. There was a large building inside the port that we were told should keep us entertained for quite a few hours but it proved to be a great disappointment as hardly any of the stalls were open and the internet centre wasn't working. A few duty free shops and a bar were open but I couldn't see that there were any real money savings to be had. There were a few tribal Indians selling handicrafts, the woman had bare breasts and the men just had a piece of material covering their bits. Their bodies were painted in intricate patterns with henna but they looked so bored. We were promised that they would perform some dancing for us but we got a Caribbean type band instead. I would have liked to have taken a photograph of the Indians but it didn't seem appropriate.

As there wasn't much going on in there we took a \$30 taxi tour into the town. What poverty, I have never seen so much poverty but I am sure we will see worse when we get to Africa. Litter was piled up everywhere and they were living in dreadful conditions. Some were living in burnt out shells, other buildings were untidily patched up with bits of woods, it was dreadful. The locals seemed happy though and were mostly wearing modern jeans with colourful teeshirts but many of them were standing idly around or boys were kicking a football about. Unemployment is 20%, a lot of them don't want to work and are content to live on benefits. If only they could clear the litter and perhaps just paint their places, it would make such a difference. Students pay \$55 a year to go to university but have to work in Panama for 5 years after graduating. A graduate can earn \$400 a month, a doctor \$600 - \$700 but they could earn up to \$1500 working on the canal. Our driver took us past some more upmarket areas which we think he said were mostly owned by the Chinese. I couldn't be sure about this as his English wasn't that good and he spent a great deal of time on his mobile. Other passengers had thought Santa Marta was run down but this was something else. Then I thought about the man who staged his disappearance and was found with his wife in

the Panama, why would he want to live here, perhaps it's not quite so bad nearer Panama City. The buses were amazing, highly decorated with colourful artwork. We were taken past a walled Free Trade Zone that is for the exclusive use of overseas residents and traders.



We joined Michelle and Robin for the 10pm quiz on Tube Stations, Mandy and Mike didn't make dinner as they were sleeping off the afternoon. Stayed up late talking to the girls, turns out I am the eldest and the healthiest, one has had cancer three times, another has had depression and all sorts of illnesses, thank goodness I am only gluten free. Nigel and Helen joined us for a while and he commented that I was a big girl, I thought he meant I was fat but he was looking at my boobs – gone off him.

Friday 23 January –Panama Canal – 28C Heavy showers

We and almost everybody else were up on deck at 7am as we were about to go through the first sets of locks called the Gatun Locks. They raise the ship 85 feet up to the level of the Gatun Lake. Our ship was pulled into and through the 1.6 mile lock by cables attached to a train. Once we were through the lock we found ourselves in the middle of a huge lake with lots of islands full of lush, tropical vegetation. These islands are really the tops of mountains where the Chagres River had been allowed to flood. We're tired as we have been going to bed late, getting up early and doing lots of exercise, decided to give ourselves a day off. It was only April last year that we first went through the canal and this time it appeared smaller than I remember. Most of the day was spent on deck in-between heavy showers and of course any highlight like the crocodiles were always to be found on the other side of the ship. By the time we had raced round it would be gone. It took most of the day to pass through the canal and into the Pacific Ocean where we would be at sea with nothing else in sight until next Saturday when we reach Hiva Oa.





The construction of the canal began by the French in 1880. The diggings were continually flooded and the jungle around them was seemingly impenetrable. Thousands of workers succumbed to yellow fever and malaria. In 1904 disillusioned and bankrupt the French sold their enterprise to the US for \$40 million after they had lost almost \$300 million on the project. The US tried negotiating with Colombia to acquire the rights to build the Canal but reached a deadlock. With the aid of the US a revolution took place and Panama declared its independence. The Canal was finally completed in 1914 and the route from the Caribbean to the Pacific is approximately 50 miles long. The construction of the canal was dependent on the Pacific Coast Railway being built first. Tragically, in the 35 years it took to build the Canal over 25,000 people died from accidents and diseases. Due to Panama's unique geography, there are places in the country where the sun rises over the Pacific and sets in the Caribbean.

We teamed up with Michelle, Mike and Mandy for the 10pm quiz on the Panama Canal. We had all been swotting up and knew we had done well, but the team that marked our paper were very competitive and strict with the marking. In fact nearly everyone was taking it seriously and querying the questions and answers, Mandy was winding everyone up and chaos broke out. We won clearly but had to settle for joint first prize. Apparently it's also competitive at the Bridge and Whist lessons, the choir also has some Prima Donnas. Not going to do that again !

Saturday 24 January – At Sea - 28 C Sunny with part cloud

Oxygen Mediation Class outside. The new entertainers are not as friendly as the last lot and it's going to take a lot to beat Jane Asher who even joined Mavis's craft class and mixed so well with the passengers. Today was a nice surprise as the lecture was by the Technical Film Director, Stuart St. Paul who works on films and also TV programmes such as Emmerdale and Coronation Street. His opening was a shot of him playing a guitar while being on fire. He has won lots of awards for his work and today he described how he put together the Emmerdale Christmas Day scene where someone falls through the ice on a frozen lake. His specialist area is spectacular action and effects having worked on many films including 3 James Bond films, Aliens, Batman, Superman 1 and 2, Robin Hood "Prince of Thieves" and this year working with Anthony Hopkins on Wolfman. Lunch outside by the pool was a little disappointing. Learnt about perspective in art lesson then had our first swim in the pool. It was lovely and warm and sloshed about a lot. Early night.

Sunday 25 January – At Sea - 31 C Sunny and hot

Clock went back another hour, we are now 6 hours behind. Yoga and walk. Today Stuart talked about how they made a film and how different it was to television. The scriptwriters have a difficult job getting anything accepted, he explained the different stages a script goes through up until it is produced. He is in the middle of making a film at the moment called the Bogfather and he talked us through his casting – all very interesting. Too hot to sit in the sun,

Mandy and Michelle's bridge lessons are now lasting 3 hours, much to the extreme annoyance of some of the other players they have started to win quite a few games, some have resorted to throwing their cards away in disgust. We missed the big excitement this morning, Mike thought the place needed livening up and

set up his ipod docking station by the pool. As you can imagine this didn't go down too well with the oldies but some were getting used to it before the battery conked out. One of our gym buddies was telling us about his whist session that is held in one of the lounges. Smoking is permitted on the starboard side and when lots of oldies complained about the smoke he suggested they move to the other side of the lounge. "Oh, we can't possibly do that, we always sit here". Definitely going to stick to art, gym and lectures. It is Burns night and we have a celebration evening with all the haggis etc followed by the quiz on Scotland. Despite all us young un's we don't get the highest score. Off to the Lido lounge and there is the Captain with a couple of his hostess girls, we are invited to join them although he is not one bit interested in anything we say. Nobody is going to speak to us tomorrow hobnobbing with the Captain again. Decided he is definitely "up his own arse" as Jen would say. As soon as I left Rick dancing to The Rolling Stones all the women swarmed in to fight over him - it frightened him !!!!

Monday 26 January – At Sea - 32 C at 9am then dropped to 24 C midday - Heavy Showers

Gdday all you Sheila and Bruce's. today we are celebrating Australia Day. Rick is rebelling against the early starts and had a lie-in while I went to Pilates. Did a full workout later. Confined to barracks as it was too wet outside. Caught up with our art homework, drawing buildings. Stuart, the Film Director explained how they work out the finance for films using the current film he is working on, "The Bogmaster" as an example – such a clever man. I started a cold which is not surprising as there is an awful cough going round. It is the third world cruise for the couple next to us at breakfast, during last year's cruise he put on two stones. The ship is not quite full, apart from the Brits we only have 12 American passengers and about 60 Europeans on board. The food is excellent. Our waiters are Fidel Lito and Dante. Dante disappears a lot and is easily distracted, always up for a chat; he says that the staff are given free condoms. One of the young trainees amuses us as he daydreams a lot, one day he was pouring water whilst looking into space and flooded the counter. They carry a tray piled up with meals on their shoulders and the other day he dropped them all on the floor. I had kidneys for breakfast today and have been drinking beef tea mid-morning – very British. The very tall couple whose table is next to ours fascinates me, she looks like Barbara Woodhouse and I originally thought he looked a bit arty although he has an air of sophistication about him. They have started to speak to us; he is an Interpreter and can speak 4 languages. The trouble is that I can't understand a word he says because he has a large mouth, when he speaks he opens it very wide and does a lot of exaggerated lip movements and the words somehow get lost in the vast void of his mouth. Felt like having a night in and not bothering to dress up but succumbed to another mountain of food.

Tuesday 27 January – At Sea - 32 C Heavy Showers

Clocks went back another hour we are now 7 hours behind. Had to spend 10 minutes admiring Rick's new physique, when he breathes in his stomach now disappears. Unfortunately, not so for me it just increases my chest measurements and the tummy is still there. Rick is so motivated by this new development that he wants to get up early again and has sorted out our exercise programme for today, Oxygen Meditation Class, walking round the deck, Yoga and then the aerobic machines. He even wants to go to the "Understand Your Metabolism" seminar and from now on we are not allowed deserts.

At 3pm we had the "Crossing the Equator Ceremony". King Neptune and his entourage held court and several of the senior officers including the captain were tried. After being found guilty of ridiculous crimes they had to kiss a dead salmon, get covered in food and muck and then were thrown into the swimming pool. We have seen this ceremony a few times now and it's great to see the astonishment of people's faces who are seeing it for the first time. Afterwards Mike rushes off to get his ipod docking station and his 70's dance music starts blaring out. There is a mass exodus from the disapproving majority, including Rick who can't stand clubbing music. We are saved by a heavy prolonged shower. Mandy and Mike are not your usual cruising couple and we have to cringe at some of the things they do. We all rushed undercover to shelter from the rain. An elderly couple were sitting at a table and got up to leave as we all arrived. Mandy said they didn't need to move but she says in a loud voice "I expect you are off for a bit of nooky though". Everyone around us fell about laughing and I have to say they took it quite well. We made a hasty exit as I knew Rick couldn't take his music or them any longer. Early night, fighting my cold.

Wednesday 28 January – At Sea – 26 C Sunny Intervals

Rick felt sea sick again and had to lie down after pilates. Watched “Can’t Cook, Won’t Cook” with the Chef and the two Comedians. Missed art as went to Film Directors lecture instead. Getting friendly with couple from Bournemouth also like Bill and Linda from Portsmouth. It’s strange how the few people that are our age have somehow been drawn together. However, there are also a few to avoid, Helen who is strange and the Salvation Army woman who you can’t get away from. Helen has a throat, ear and chest infection and would like to go home, not much chance of that as the nearest land, the Galapagos Islands, are 1200 nautical miles away. I really like Anne and Fred who celebrated their 47th wedding anniversary yesterday. Anne is way over 20 stones and waddles about but is always cheery, they have a holiday caravan in Skegness. We seem to have lost all concept of time and were surprised that we have only been away for 3 weeks.

I need your help, we have been asked to think up a different title for “The Bogfather” and if it is accepted we could be invited to premier or go on set. This is the plot: Gabe lives in a fantastic house and has made his money hiring out portable toilets. He has worked his way up, looks hard and has contacts in the criminal world. His daughter who is to be married in a few days time is kidnapped by a gang of Eastern Europeans who have no regard for British laws and who are going to sell her into the sex trade. They have picked on the wrong man. The title has to be short and grab your attention, it is a violent film and somehow “The Bogfather” makes it sound like a comedy. Stuart, the Film Director is getting off on 4 February at Tahiti. Look forward to hearing your suggestions.

Thursday 29 January – At Sea – 28 C sunny with breeze

Clocks went back an hour, we are now 8 hours behind. Need to nurse my dreadful cold and cough. There was a special lunch for the all-rounders about 290 of us. The food was fantastic, beautifully presented with champagne and free flowing wine. Had to give art a miss again as lunch didn’t finish until after 3pm. Judith has a suite on deck 7 and their neighbours who have an identical cabin paid £12,000 more than them. The Pacific Ocean is huge, about 32% of the earth’s surface; you can fit all the continents into it and still have room left for say Alaska. Then an extraordinary thing happened, our friends Bob and Leigh emailed me to say that their parents’ friends were also on board The Black Watch. I was wondering how I could locate them out of nearly 700 passengers, I thought about leaving a letter for them in reception. I started chatting to a lady who keeps smiling at me and she was talking to a man who she plays bridge with. After about ten minutes he mentioned his wife Ruth, I thought this might be a long shot and asked him if his name was Michael. He hesitated and then said yes and then I said “Are you Michael Dunn” and he was. Shortly after his wife and Rick joined us – how about that!! Unfortunately, my voice ceased up and I had to take to my bed as I must beat this as soon as possible. Rick spent hours trying to send my emails, even after splitting some of them up some of them wouldn’t go. Room service was a little disappointing but I could only manage soup, must feel better tomorrow.

We are continuing to have a big struggle with the Internet and will send the Colon and Panama sections when we hit the next port if we can find a wifi spot.

Friday 30 January – At Sea – 28 C sunny with occasional cloud



The Captain about to kiss the fish before being thrown in the pool



One of the staff being covered in food

Clock went back another hour, we are now 9 hours behind. Had a dreadful night but could more under control now, however, no exercise yet. This morning it was party time on deck with rum cocktails and dancing. One couple have a severely handicapped boy of about nine, called Sasha. Most afternoons they can be found by the pool cuddling him on their lap and continually kissing and talking to him. They take turns in sitting with him in the spa. The mother is often in the gym and she says that the cruise is working well for them as they can take it in turns to look after him to give each other some time to themselves. This is our seventh day all alone at sea in the Pacific Ocean but with so much going on you can do almost anything except get off!! Back to art and I am determined to finish at least one picture, Rick has almost used his paints up. This is a typical programme for the day: Library, Walk a mile, Daily Quiz & Sudoku, Pilates, Oxygen Mediation, Bridge, Putting, Port Talk, Choir, Yoga, Short Tennis, Shuffleboard, Guest Lecture, Morning Brain Teaser, Darts, Dolphin Racing, Foot Soak, Healthy Hair Seminar, Pub Lunchtime fun, Internet Assistance, Waltz & Square Tango Competition Practice, Film Director's film, Whist, Deck Quoits, Exercise of the Day, Scrabble, Chess, Crafts Exhibition, Watercolours, Table Tennis, Stair Challenge, Carpet Boules, Stretch & Relax, VIP Guest lecture, Crossword Club, Bingo, Feature Film.



Mandy & Mike with his ipod docking station

It was Indian Night in the Garden Restaurant and we were sharing a table with Bill, Linda, Michelle, Robin, Mandy and Mike. Mike was missing when we met up for a pre dinner drink in The Lido Bar. He had been waylaid by a lady in the Observatory Bar but we all reassured Mandy that she had nothing to worry about. When he caught up with us we asked him what she was like “Did she have all her own teeth and did she have her own transport – on board”. Joking aside there aren’t too many sticks and chairs and those that do still manage to participate in many of the activities. There are two doctors and a morgue on board as usually four or five people die on each world cruise – what a way to go though! Rick joined the others for the 10pm quiz and as my voice was giving out again I had another early night.

Saturday 31 January – At Sea – 29 C sunny with occasional cloud

Clocks went back 30 mins, we are now on Marquesas time and 9.5 hours behind. Listen to Port Lecture in the theatre surrounded by a cacophony of throaty coughs, somehow I don’t think Rick will escape the cold for much longer. We have travelled 10,336 nautical miles so far at an average speed of 17.5 knots. Had to decide between Mavis’s Fashion Show, Film Director’s film “Devil’s Gate” or Art. Decided to watch the film and listen to the discussion afterwards. It was a dark drama and you didn’t come away with a feel good feeling. We chatted to him and his wife later after suggesting “Snatched” or “Vice Breaker” as alternative titles for his new film. Michelle and Mandy are addicted to Bridge and having played most of the day they even took part in an evening competition leaving the boys to spend the evening in the bar. As it was British Day we all had to dress up in red, white and blue, there was a party in the Lido Bar and the menu was typically British. Looking forward to going ashore at Hiva Oa tomorrow.

Sunday 1 February – Hiva Oa, Marquesa Islands, French Polynesia – 29 C Sunny

Exercise resumed, Yoga followed by Step but not sure if it did my cold any good. Rick’s back is still dodgy from holding his legs up for too long at the last Pilates class. Michael sometimes forgets to tell you how long to hold a position, this confuses Rick as he likes to follow clear instructions. Unfortunately, the sea was too rough to take the tenders onto Hiva Oa (population 2000) which was a great shame as we were going to explore the tropical forests there. The island is famous for being the home and final resting place of artist Paul Gauguin. Singer song writer Jacques Brel who was famous in the 1950’s is buried close to Gauguin.



The Captain decided to drop the anchor (it weighs 4900 kilos) at the nearby island of Tahuata that was only 12 miles away and this was a real adventure as we are only the second cruise ship to have ever stopped there. Captain Cook in 1774 also found the sea too rough to land on Hiva Oa and decided to go to Tahuata instead.

Tahuata with a population of 638 is the smallest populated Marquesa Island with an area of 26 miles. It was a wonderful surprise and so different from anything else we have ever seen, completely unspoilt. We were taken by tender to the village of Hapatoni with a population of about 60 and there were no bars, no cafes, no restaurants, no shops and no hotels. The island is similar to Hiva Oa in that it is very mountainous and covered in lush tropical trees and flowers. There were coconut trees everywhere. We walked along an ancient path shaded by sacred Tamanau trees and shrubs and flowers that ran along the edge of the sea. Everywhere was very green and lush with grass growing up between the rocks on the path. The locals put on an impromptu show and they had a few stalls set up selling very expensive local handicrafts. A piece of carved bone not much bigger than a thimble was about £120. There was no traffic and all you could hear was the cockerels crowing, the sound of the sea and the beating of the drums for the dancing.



The Captain was also strutting about like a cockerel, puffing his chest out and saying how pleased he was for finding us such a wonderful place. We saw some pigs tied up to trees and a brown piglet was running around loose. There were a few dogs about and they all seem to be of a similar breed, I later found out that these are food for the locals. The rocky volcanic beach had golden sand full of washed up coral and coconuts. The strange thing was that the infrastructure was good with a diesel generator plant for the electricity (the street lights are solar powered), little bungalow type houses, a church, village hall and even a public telephone box. Everywhere was neat and most of the houses had newish looking pick-up trucks outside. The babies were wearing disposal nappies and had modern bikes and toys. The main village, Vaitahu was the other side of the island and as there isn't a hospital the women have to go to another island to have their babies. They seemed a spiritual society made up of isolated settlements in the valleys. Rick got stung by a bee back on the ship but I managed to get the sting out.



Managed to stay awake for the evening show but missed Ruth and Mike in the Dancing Competition, they came second. Rick went on the top deck to look at the stars with the Captain. He is an expert at the stars and knows all the names and shapes. Rick is reading Asimov's "Extraterrestrial Civilizations" so it was quite topical to see the Milky Way in full glory. Excellent day.

Monday 2 February – 29 C Sunny with occasional cloud

Listen to port talk on Moorea and then nothing until art where Tony did a portrait of one of the students. Captain's Farewell Cocktail Party, he did a good job and I am warming towards him.. We sat with the huge eyebrows and at one time I was only a foot away from them. Close up his stomach is more worrying though, it is huge and tight and any minute I expect it to explode and an alien to pop out. He was downing the free drinks and canapés at a fast rate. Mandy also has the ship's cold and as she and Mike didn't make dinner we joined Michelle and Robin. The staff put on a show after but it was nowhere as good as that on The Marco Polo. Then it was off to the Lido Bar until gone 3pm. Think I managed to dance with every available man and some that weren't. Will find out tomorrow as people love to gossip. The holiday is doing Kipper Girl good, she is looking a lot less like a Greenham Common girl each day. We think Ted has a girlfriend, she is a companion to a blind lady on board. The dance hosts think I have rhythm and should go to the ballroom dancing lessons – I may have rhythm but I lack co-ordination.

Tuesday 3 February - 29 C sunny with occasional cloud

Clocks went back 30 mins, we are now 10 hours behind. Watched port talk in cabin as can't bear being surrounded by all those coughs and colds. There have been complaints that Mandy and Mike are making too much noise during their lovemaking. The doctor who is in the cabin next to them actually knocked on their door to see if see was ok. Others were complaining that they were making love in the swimming pool. Mandy was quite affronted as they have never made love in the swimming pool, now the Jacuzzi is a different matter –only joking, she says they were just kissing. As there were only 3 of us at the back clinic lecture Rick had a one to one with the physio, the other man actually fell asleep. She reckons his problems are muscular and regular stretching exercises likes pilates would be a great help. I have been telling him that for years!! The man that fell asleep came up to Rick later and showed him how to release his back by lying on the edge of the bed. There is an end of term feeling on the ship, about 500 passengers get off in Tahiti and a new lot get on. We had a group photo taken in the gym, am hoping that my cold will soon be gone so I can resume those activities. There was an art exhibition but we didn't contribute anything, maybe next time. Sat in for a while on the Grand Tea Dance. Some are worried that they won't be able to fly back because of the snow at home. Meanwhile in Australia they are having a heatwave, it has been over 40 C for 3 days. The entertainers Farewell Show was good. Last years Cruise Director was hit on the head by a falling coconut on Raratonga and had to be flown home and has still not fully recovered.

Looking forward to discovering Tahiti tomorrow.

Wednesday 4 February - Papeete, Tahiti -34 C Partly Cloudy and Sunny

Rick spotted a school of dolphins on the starboard bow as we entered port. They were jumping and diving and putting on a good display. Papeete is the capital of Tahiti and is a busy town with lots of traffic and lots of people. This is because it is the main port and airport and the centre for administration and industry for French Polynesia. It's very French with lots of tabacs and cafes. We headed into town to find an internet café where we thought it was going to cost about £1 for an hour but were taken by surprise when it came to £10. It is really expensive here as they have to import most things and they don't like to barter. Had a quick look at the cathedral but the highlight was the market where they were selling everything from fruit, vegetables, fish, oils, handicrafts, clothes and souvenirs. Someone bought 6 postcards and 2 cups of coffee and it came to £19. There were some fantastic fresh flower arrangements for only around £20. On the way back to the ship I bought a hat made out of banana leaves.



Not a good day for the diet, we had lunch in the dining room followed immediately by freshly fried fish and chips on the top deck. We thought it would be a good idea to cool off in the swimming pool but it was as hot as a bath. It was cooler in the small exercise pools where you swim against a current. Soon after that I had my first proper tea on board as I found out they have a selection of gluten free cakes. Oops, I had three, mustn't make a habit of that. Joined John and Wendy for drinks while keeping our eye on the fire that had developed in one of the buildings across the harbour. Some cars exploded and the traffic was at a standstill. We were eventually rained off and later in the evening some local dancers came to entertain us, the girls looked very beautiful with their long black hair, grass skirts and flowers.

Thursday 5 February - Papeete, Tahiti -27 C Partly Cloudy with showers

Off to the centre of the island on a jeep safari, although there aren't any wild animals here, only goats and pigs. Tahiti is a circular island with a road round running round it and one through the middle but not quite all the way across. We drove across the island through the lush vegetation. We stopped several times to look at the river, scenery, many waterfalls and the eels in the dams. As it is the rainy season most of the times it was absolutely tipping down. The yellow hibiscus is their national flower, it only flowers for one day and at night it shrinks and turns pink. They use the leaves as a serving dish, roots and flowers for medicine and the bark for building canoes and grass skirts.



Since 1980 once the children on the other islands reached ten they all come to Tahiti to complete their French education. They are taken home by the French Navy for the Grand Holiday during December and January. Gauguin paintings are very representative of the Polynesian women who tend to be a little on the plump side but homely looking. They mostly wear bright coloured dresses and some have flowers in their hair, on the left if you are taken and on the right if you are free. Tattoos, or tribal markings are very popular with the men, they are spiritual thing and personal to each concerned. Most of the boys would be circumcised on the beach by a priest when they were 8 and then they would run into the sea water to clean the wound and prevent any infection – ouch!! The old tradition was to plant a coconut when they were born and by the time they reached their eighth year the tree would drop its first coconut signifying the first stage of adulthood.



Contrary to popular belief not all the beaches are of white sand. Some are also privately owned and it's difficult to get to them but it's an excellent location for watersports. Went for a walk along the waterfront where the locals were setting up vans selling food and spit roasting a goat. The deck party was cancelled because of rain.

The ship was busy as all the newcomers had arrived and the others weren't leaving until 9pm. Didn't get a chance to say goodbye to Mike, Mandy, Michelle, Robin, John and Wendy. Stuart, the Film Director says he will have finished his film and had another holiday by the time we get back to England. I wonder what the new guests will be like, they were tired after a 22 hour flight. We sat with a couple at dinner, on their last cruise they sat with an Undertaker who used to bury Dr Shipman's patients. He reported Shipman to the police 5 years previously and a few times after, indicating that there were just too many funerals for it to be normal. We hear there is going to be more snow at home and that the interest rate has been reduced to 1%, the lowest ever.

Friday 6 February – Paopao, Moorea -25C Heavy rain morning and evening, sunny afternoon



Had breakfast with a nice couple who have moved to early sitting dinner because they have a snobby, bully of a lady on their table. We thought a World Cruise was something really special, a once in a lifetime event, but for so many of the other passengers this is their third or fourth time they have done it. Because of the heavy rain we didn't set off for the island until late morning. We had the Captain steering our tender, he was issuing orders all over the place making the usual crew nervous. He noticed that Rick had a similar watch and got quite chatty but every now and again he would laugh in his strange way making me feel uncomfortable, he is definitely in-charge. Moorea is a holiday paradise you dream of, clear lagoons, sandy beaches, lush vegetation and a slow pace of life. The only drawback is that everything is expensive. We had a free lift to the Black Pearl shop but weren't under any obligation to buy, not that we ever could afford any as they are astronomically expensive and I don't really like them. Just a few minutes walk behind the Hibiscus Hotel we found a deserted beach and swam in the lovely warm, clear, turquoise water. Rick tried to snorkel but couldn't get the mask to fit over his big nose, we think perhaps it was a child's one. We then sat at the beach bar with the couple we had dinner with last night, a large beer and a diet coke came to £13. He makes his own cider from windfall apples, water and sugar – 1.333 lbs of sugar to a gallon of liquid. His friend measured the strength and said it was 10%. He has been drinking pints of it and wondered why he needed to go to bed about 7pm each evening. Many of the others went to the big hotels where they had huts on stilts out to sea, some had dolphins and there were lots of coloured fish. It really is such a pretty island with not much traffic but to stay for any length of time you would have to go all inclusive. After a fish and chips lunch and talking to some bridge fanatics we snoozed away the afternoon and then it was back to the gym routine. Rick overdid the exercise and felt faint but he was cured with a pint of Stella. Lots of new faces at dinner, it seems strange that the others won't be holding up the Lido Bar any more. Early night as we didn't like the look of the entertainment.

Saturday 7 February – At Sea – Heavy Showers – 29 C sea temp 32C

I am feeling so much better but Rick has the throat. After speaking several times to Jen yesterday I felt a little homesick. I wonder if the daffodils are out and Rick has started to think about the shed he is going to build. Jen says the country is in a terrible state – it has run out of salt !!!! We hear that Jeremy Clarkeson said that Gordon Brown is a “one eyed Scottish twat” what's wrong with that and what has happened to freedom of speech. It rained quite a bit on and off all day. Back to usual routine, gym, port talk and art, we are now in the advanced class and I actually managed to complete a picture. It was the Captain's Welcome Party and Formal night that means bottle of wine night and good fun in the Lido Bar.

Sunday 8 February – Avarua, Rarotonga – 35 C very hot with odd shower

The inevitable happened, Rick woke up with a cold. Rarotonga is another roundish shaped island, similar to Tahiti and Moorea, with lots of mountains covered in lush tropical jungle. It's the capital of the Cook Islands but because of the limited employment opportunities many of the Cook Islanders live in New Zealand. There is a road that runs around the coastline but the middle of the island is dense jungle with rough tracks. They speak English and drive on the left. We were tendered to the village where there were quite a few shops but being Sunday everything was shut. They are a very religious society as are most of the Polynesian Islanders, the Mormons have a significant presence but there are churches of many

denominations all over the islands. Their houses are of a bungalow design with corrugated tin roofs and usually there are chickens running around. Many of them have their loved ones buried in their gardens, some in elaborate mausoleum type graves. We were booked on a glass bottom boat trip and were taken to Muri Beach by a rough coach without any glass in its windows. The island is surrounded by a coral reef with very few breaks and the beach was just beautiful. Everyone was saying "Wow, we could live here". After a bit of snorkelling and it was a bit with me as my goggles weren't right and I had a lot of trouble controlling the flippers, we were taken to an island for a barbeque lunch, Oh, I forgot Rick held an enormous clam weighing about 19 kilos and we had a peep at a moray eel and saw some oyster beds. While they were cooking our lunch we had a swim in the clear turquoise water. As I didn't have swimming shoes I once again had to struggle with the flippers, what a sight! After a delicious lunch they told us all about the coconuts and demonstrated how they prepare them. Then we were shown a few different ways to tie a sarong. It took ages to get us all back in the tender made worse by the fact that it was sweltering hot. What a fantastic place, I want to go back there again before it gets spoilt. The Sail Away party was good fun also.



Monday 9 February – At Sea – 30 C Slight clouds with occasional shower

Clock went back another hour and we are now 11 hours behind. Rick's cold was worse so he confined himself to the cabin most of the day painting his picture of the Gatun Lock. Left mostly to my own devices I spent most of the day with my head in a book but fitted in a port lecture, yoga and a full workout session. Listened to an amusing lecture by a vet called Malcolm Welshman, who after writing a book called "Pets in Prospect" is being hailed as a modern day James Herriot. Indian Night. Just can't get very enthusiastic about the entertainment at the moment. We are missing the others, the ship has lost a few interesting characters. It's also taking a bit of time to get used to the new faces in the dining room. Ted and dear little Joyce in her summer frock are still about, she is so politically astute but has vulnerability about her. Whenever there is a party she is the first to be up there dancing away and flirting with all the men.



Joyce and Ted



Deck Party

Tuesday 10 February – The Day That Never Was!

We have crossed the International Date Line which is an imaginary line on the earth's surface that approximately coincides with the 180th meridian (longitude) and separates the calendar date.

Wednesday 11 February – At Sea - 30 C light cloud and sun

We are now 13 hours ahead. Yoga, Port lecture, gym. The first of a series of lectures by a couple who sold up and have spent the last 24 years sailing around the world in their own small sailing boat, a 35' ketch. They left England in March 1983 and arrived back in Poole Harbour last August after 65,000 miles. Today they talked about the final part of their journey through the canals in France, this is something that is on my "must do" list. Can you imagine spending that long in a small boat, Rick is quite taken with the idea but it is not for me as I would miss my family and anyway Rick is a dreadful sailor and I can't control my snorkel and flippers. Getting fed up with art but Rick is so proud of his picture; he couldn't wait for teacher Tony to pass his comments. Tony is most diplomatic whereas I said, did he want my honest opinion – it was crap. Actually, the drawing is very good but it's a bit like painting by numbers, a bit flat. Who am I to say that as mine isn't that good either. The dance hosts keep asking when I am going to start dancing lessons, I said I will wait until we have a long stretch at sea as that will give me time to persuade Rick to go with me. Oh, there has been another falling out at Bridge, the lady we sometimes breakfast with isn't going to play any more as it's getting too competitive, which is a shame as that is one of the reasons she comes on these cruises. Early night again as Rick is suffering. Pete will be disappointed with our bar bill as I expect it will only be about 2 pages. We are just finishing our second bottle of gin, only ordering wine on formal nights but we did let ourselves go a bit before the end of the last leg when we were meeting everyone in the bar before dinner. I don't suppose this self denial will last too much longer though. Our love affair with the South Sea Islands was halted a little yesterday when looking at those slides of rural France. What really can be better than being in the French countryside drinking a bottle of wine and eating French bread and cheese, it stills seems so foreign. Anyway, we still have Tonga, Fiji and New Caledonia to experience before we reach Australia next week.

Thursday 12 February - Nuku'Alofa, The Kingdom of Tonga



The Palace

Rick was not at all well today, he had a bit of vertigo during the night. Nuku'alofa with a population of 22,400 (35% of the kingdom's population) is the capital, chief port and largest city in Tonga. Captain Cook thought it was a friendly island but little did he know they were cannibals and the chief was trying to think of a way to put him in one of the underground ovens. Tonga is the only nation in the Pacific to have a monarchy. Reverence for the monarch is likened to that held in earlier centuries for the sacred chiefs. However, the previous king and his government have been accused of making some poor economic decisions, claiming geo-orbital satellite slots and many other ill thought out schemes to raise money. They considered making Tonga a nuclear waste disposal site, selling Tongan Protected Passports and registering foreign ships some of which were engaged in illegal activities. When the expected changes didn't materialize when the new king succeeded his father in 2006 there was an uprising with more than 60% of the downtown area destroyed, although there wasn't much evidence of this today. This is quite surprising as

the Tongans are a gentle race, albeit an extremely large race, perhaps the most obese race in the world and are darker skinned than the Polynesians with short crinkly hair. Tonga kingdom stretches over 500 miles of ocean with 171 islands, 48 of them being inhabited; it is virtually flat but very fertile. Their main export is pumpkins to Japan but there is a fair amount of bartering. The women enjoy a higher social status than the men with the men doing all the housework. They are extremely religious and everything stops on a Sunday. Tonga's economy is fairly dependent on money from Tongans who live abroad. The retail establishments are dominated by the Chinese who arrived under the cash-for-passport scheme but many of the rural Tongans rely on agriculture, tourism is fairly new. There are no Patent Laws in Tonga. Their homes are bungalow types similar to the previous islands; the importance of the men is measured by the number of pigs he owns.

Our tour leader was such a lovely, friendly young man with gleaming white teeth. He was wearing the skirt that the Tongan men wear; his sister was the tour guide in one of the other coaches. They don't have many coaches, most were borrowed from schools and they were very old. He is a Mormon, Tonga being the most Mormon nation in the world, and pointed out his church and the school attached to it. We stopped to look at the Royal Palace but only through the gates as you can't go in and next stop was the Royal Cemetery. Once again you had to view it from a distance. Royalty are buried underground, whereas normal Tongans are buried above ground with elaborate decorations on their graves. On the way to the Seaside resort we stopped to look at the flying foxes. After a buffet lunch of local food we were entertained with some music and dancing, it had a Hawaiian influence. Virgins are highly respected, they are covered with oil, if it sinks into the skin they know she is not a virgin. As the tide was out I just had a paddle in my grass skirt and flower necklace. Our guide was very friendly, smiling all time and couldn't do enough for us, Maggie fell in love with him, he was oozing goodness. He sang lots of songs to us including a love song and the national anthem. When we left he hugged us all and kissed all the women. A brass band played for us before we set sail for Fiji and the Captain was having his photo taken with all the local girls. Watched "South Pacific" film and as Rick was feeling awful we had another early night.

Friday 13 February – At Sea – 29C Sunny with few clouds

Clocks went back another hour; we are now 12 hours in front. It's surprising how many people don't bother to listen to the port lectures or try to find out something about where we are going. The table next to us had a completely different experience to us in Tonga. They took a taxi into town and said that the driver and others hassled them all the time. The taxi was the pits, dirty and you would never guess what – no air conditioning! The shops were nothing like those at home. I said, what did they expect in a third world country, there would be no point in travelling if we were all the same and just wanted to eat in places like McDonalds. A lot of Americans we have met on other cruises have been like that. Rick is still not well and spent most of the day sleeping although he made art as Tony showed us "toning". Rae, Tony's wife has been in bed for 2 days and Ken, Judith's husband is full of cold sores. Rick saw an elderly lady laying on the floor and being given oxygen. I've had a full day: port lecture, gym and double art when I finished my sunset picture. During the day we usually sit in the shade on deck but after 5pm it's safer to sit in the open. Rick said he needed one more early night to sort himself out. Tried on lots of dresses to see what to wear for the Formal Valentine's Night tomorrow, disaster only half of them fit! Another long night in the cabin, consoled myself with a few gins but couldn't stop hiccupping.

Saturday 14 February – Suva, Fiji – 37C Baking hot

Rick had a bad stomach and we reluctantly phoned the doctor just in case he had the Norovirus, if so we would be confined to the cabin for 3 days. Fortunately, the doctor didn't think that he had it and after dosing himself up we set off for the town. We have been warned to be streetwise and be especially beware of the sword sellers. Gosh it was hot, so hot and the police must have rounded all the rouges up as no-one really bothered us. We bought some Kava that is traditionally a gift taken to the village chief. Kava, as a herbal medicine has been banned in Europe as it has caused liver damage in some people but it tends to induce smiling and happiness and has been used for centuries in the South Pacific. We also bought some noni juice

which I am sure is the stuff that Ann from the Black Horse husband Pat takes to keep him young and a cannibals knife and fork. Will have to have a South Pacific Party when we get back, but promise we won't eat the guests. By then I had started to have tummy pains and after lunch we both spent the rest of the day in bed. It was a shame as being Valentine's Day we had ordered a bottle of champagne but never mind hopefully we can celebrate tomorrow instead.



Suva is on a peninsula, almost surrounded by sea but being a volcanic island the nearest beach is 25 miles away. A significant part of the city centre is built on reclaimed mangrove swamp. I always imagined Fiji as one big holiday island but it is an archipelago of about 322 islands, of which 106 are inhabited. They are surrounded by shallow waters, 522 islets and many reefs making it difficult to navigate. The islands are mountainous with peaks up to 4250 ft and covered with tropical forests. There are no mammals. Tourists usually holiday on one of the islands as Suva is the capital and largest city and main port of Fiji. The islands have been occupied for over 2000 years but there have been successive waves of invaders. . We have now left the Polynesians who were gentle cannibals whereas the Melanesians with their darker skin and crinkly hair were much rougher cannibals. They used to be scantily dressed but the missionaries who were clever and worked on the chiefs changed that. The islands came under British control as a colony in 1874 when they brought over Indian contract labourers to work on the sugar plantations. It became independent in 1970 and since then there have been four coups because the government are perceived to be dominated by the Indo-Fijian community. The Fijians were happy living their old life, following the old culture and traditions, but the free Indians were more industrious, setting up shops and wanting to make money and they started to control the place. We weren't there long but it was noticeable that most of the shops were staffed by Indo-Fijians and the markets stalls by the indigenous Fijians. It was so hot, I don't think I have ever been so hot.



Sunday 15 February –At Sea 33C sunny, hot, light cloud sea temperature 33C

Clocks went back another hour, we are now 11 hours in front. No supper and a long, long night. Still feeling a little delicate but we both made Pilates and I managed a workout, Rick has lost 6 lbs. Port lecture on Sydney, the wife of the herbal tea-bag couple at breakfast was telling us how she and a friend emigrated to

Australia in the 60's for a £10 passage, she remembers it as a great adventure taking about 5 weeks to get there by boat, she and her friends worked their way through the cocktail bar. I sort of remember that time but Australia has never really appealed to me, I have always thought it was a man's country, boiling hot, full of snakes and creepy crawlies that bite you. I have read a bit about it now and so am a little better informed. 20 million people in Australia, 4000 miles left to right average 2000 miles top to bottom. 98% live around the coast. In March 1787 the intention of the British Government was to send out two ships to Australia each year. They were mostly pickpockets, petty criminals and Irish political prisoners. It was supposed not more than 1 in 5 would survive the voyage that took a year but 4 out of 5 made it, between 1787 and 1853 150,000 convicts were transported. Building a new country without farmers, carpenters and engineers was difficult.

I opted out of art as I had stomach pains after lunch. Tony the Artist is entering the talent show as he can also sing and play the guitar, some people are so talented. Found out he used to be a fireman and when he and Rae had their first cruise he spent his time painting on deck. Someone suggested he teach it and after taking some exams that's exactly what he has done. What a fantastic retirement job. They have been invited to a Writer's cabin for drinks tonight, we spent the day in Tonga with a couple and he is writing his second novel. Went to a champagne reception in the Spa and then a question and answer session with the Captain and Chief Engineer. Their worse fear is that they have a fire in the engine room, they have both experienced it before. Yet again another early night, hopefully we will be stronger tomorrow. I have read so many books and Rick is now enjoying Little Dorrit. I think we are now more than half way round the world.

Monday 16 February - Noumea, New Caledonia, The Pacific Paris – 34C hot and sunny sea 32C



New Caledonia named by Captain Cook was claimed by France in 1853 and used as a penal colony for 40 years. It is 250 miles long and 30 miles across with a long mountain range up to 5000 ft running through the middle, making the west coast dry and the east coast wet. The coral reefs are second only to the Great Barrier Reef making it very dangerous for ships to navigate. 75% of the 3,250 botanic species are endemic and there are 88 species of birds, 18 of them also being endemic. The economy is based on a big nickel smelting plant, New Caledonia having about one-quarter of the world's nickel resources. Though still the largest group, the indigenous Melanesian Kanak community now represents almost 45 % of the population with Europeans, predominately French, 34.5% and the remainder being a mixture. Many of the Kanak women still wear the Mother Hubbard long, loose, brightly coloured dresses introduced by the missionaries in the 19th century as they wanted them to dress more modestly.



Noumea, the capital and principal port, appeared prosperous with modern buildings and lots of shops selling better quality goods than the other Pacific Islands we have visited. We thought we would be a little more adventurous and took the local bus to the beach called Baie des Citrons. Who should be there but Eyebrows himself, I thought he spent all port time in the internet cafes. He looked after our bags while we had a fabulous swim in the lovely warm water. The French girl and her partner also joined us; he found a really good snorkelling place. It was very hot, 37 C but we sheltered under the trees overhanging the sand. In the afternoon we went on a scenic tour, it is a very beautiful island. New Caledonian's have more boats per head of population than anywhere else in the world. Some Parisians on holiday said it was twice as expensive to eat here than in Paris. We then stopped at a hotel for a cheese and wine tasting session. It was good fun but you could no way call it a wine tasting. You helped yourself to some French cheeses and they poured as much as you wanted of three different French wines. We were discussing the cruise with the writer couple saying how lucky we were to have this experience and hoping that when we get home hopefully it won't seem as if it never happened. That is one of the main reasons I am spending all this time writing my diary. We are seeing places and doing things I never dreamed we would be able to do. Back on the ship we watched the Passenger Talent Show. One chap in about his mid 30's who seems to have difficulty speaking and is disabled in some way, it looks as if he has had a stroke recited a love poem he had written himself. It was a little difficult to understand but then he sang an Irish love song and it was very special, it really got to me, what a brave, brave man.

Tuesday 17 February – At Sea – 28C Cloudy and hot went dull late afternoon

Up at 5.30 am as clocks went back another hour, now 10 hours in front of GMT. Yoga and workout before breakfast then port lecture and art. Quite a few people have had a bad tummy, the Tongan lunch has been blamed. So pleased it wasn't the norovirus, couldn't stand having to be confined to the cabin for 3 days with our meals being delivered on paper plates. Enough of all this sickness, today we are feeling stronger, strong enough to make the Indian Evening and entertainment after. Eyebrows always comes to watch the MCC Arundel match against the tourists each year. He has just resigned from the MCC as he feels that the high level of security and body searching is spoiling his enjoyment of cricket. Imagine having to search that body, his stomach is so big he could hide a town underneath it. He takes his barbeque and makes himself crepe suzettes with Grand Marnier; he said he could have made a fortune selling them. It was still a struggle keeping awake but the coffee helped, if a load of people a lot older than ourselves can do it we must at least try. This is the first time since Tahiti we have been up for the 10.30pm entertainment and it was their Farewell Show, with a magician, comedian, flutist and a Val Doonican look alike. Rick stayed up for some time finishing off his latest painting which he is going to exhibit on Thursday. Lots are leaving us when we reach Sydney on Saturday. After seeing the Fire Dancers a woman had a bit of a scare in New Caledonia yesterday when a snake came up to her whilst she was sitting on the toilet. We still haven't had that Valentine's bottle of champagne.

Wednesday 17 February - Brisbane – 27 C rain in the morning but cleared up later

Pilates and gym before breakfast. We watched the Kangaroo Racing to Rolf Harris singing in the Lido Bar. There are six runners in each race and the results of 3 dice determine how far they move forward. You can put a £1 bet on and the winners seem to win about £8. The commentary made it exciting, but I don't think Rick will get quite the same buzz from it as the internet racing.

Welcome to Brizzy.



Brisbane was once a penal colony but also played a role during World War II as the /south West Pacific headquarters. The World Expo '88 initiated a huge scale of public expenditure, construction and development. Queensland is in the middle of a natural disaster at the moment with 61% suffering from floods but Brisbane seems ok. It was nothing like I imagined, much more affluent and sprawled out and so modern. We took the City Cat up the Brisbane River to the University and back with Gary and Mike (the Dentist) and Sylvia and Vernon (Turkey Neck). It only cost just over a fiver for both of us for a two and half hour journey. There were some great houses with their own moorings and smart apartment blocks lining the river. As we went through the business area we were surrounded by tower blocks which looked fantastic when lit up on the way back. Vernon and Sylvia kept us amused, Rick and Vernon took loads of pictures of some birds and swapped technical details of their camera settings. We stopped at South Bank a leisure area where

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there is an artificial beach, cinemas, bars and many restaurants. It took quite some time to get a drink but never mind we were in pleasant surroundings. What is amazing is that the beach facilities including a lifeguard are free. Everyone appeared very young and there is a general laid-back feeling about the place. There were lots of trendy restaurants and shops in the port and even a cinema but they closed before 10.30pm, perhaps the Aussie's aren't late nighters. Back on the ship an Aussie band played typical Aussie songs, a bit like Chas and Dave, it was pretty awful. . .

Thursday 18 February – Brisbane – 34 C hot

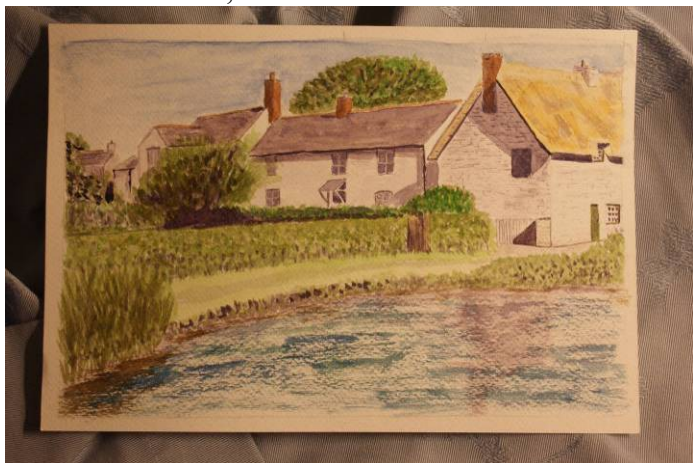


Up at 5.30 am skypping. Shared taxi with Sylvia and Vernon to a Koala Sanctuary where we watched a Bird of Prey show, saw some Emu's, Echidnas, Dingo's and Wombats, stroked a sleepy koala and fed a kangaroo. We haven't really seen a kangaroo though until we see one in wild. Took the slow boat back to town with some Dutch guys and a German couple. The strength of their euro has made Australia good value, we laughed it seems we are now a third world country – what has Gordon Brown done to us! Anyway, it was lovely relaxing in the sun helped by a few beers and a couple of glasses of Oyster Bay. We can feel a road trip coming on. We looked at a few shops; it was very busy, much like Oxford Street and full of young people, lots of Chinese. Where do they keep all the oldies ? We then did a big trek to the Art Shop, it was hot and my feet were killing me. That was it really, no time to have a real good look around or visit museums or art galleries. What with the very early start, the heat and the walking I was exhausted, another no partying night for us again.



Friday 20 February – At Sea – 26C sunny at first but rain later

Overslept and missed Pilates as clocks went forward, we are now 11 hours in front. I had a hair appointment, he did a good job and it was cheaper than at home. Rick did the finishing touches to his painting that he was going to exhibit this afternoon. Mike and Ruth stayed a night with some friends in Brisbane, oh the pleasure of being back in civilisation and sleeping in a proper bed. A couple who have a suite on the top floor with an enormous bed are offering to rent it out to other passengers for £10 a hour! Vernon and Sylvia saw Rick holding his painting and thought he has just bought it, Judith also came up to have a look. I wish I had put mine it now but they didn't seem good enough. Shirley and Peter Billing's lecture "London to New Zealand" was really interesting as they almost followed the Black Watch route with a few detours to other islands, New Orleans and The Galapagos. Their photos were taken twenty odd years ago but many of them were similar to those of ours especially the Galapagos ones where we visited last year. Chatting to the vet and his wife afterwards he was saying that he worked on The Ventura last year and that holds about 3000 passengers. They reduced the prices to help fill it up but this changed the mix of passengers and let in a lager-lout element where fights were breaking out, bottles broken and two passengers were eventually thrown off. John, the writer asked me if I would like to read his novel, that should be interesting.



Rick's Painting



The little one is The Black Watch

Captain's Farewell Party, we are saying goodbye to Eyebrows, we shall miss him, he tripped and dropped his laptop in the internet café and smashed his screen. It's also goodbye to Vernon and Sylvia, Vernon was in the film industry for 47 years editing films, he has his own cinema in his home it probably explains why he was so interested in his and Rick's camera settings. There are lots of others leaving the ship including the Dentist, the young couple from Worthing, the cider couple, the herbal tea couple and our adjacent dinner table. At 11pm the chefs put on an elaborate food display, as if we could eat anything else but I think the staff get to eat the leftovers.

Saturday 21 February - Sydney – 23C dull but brightened up later



View on way to Darling Harbour



View from 47th floor of restaurant

6.30 am left Rick asleep and went out on deck to photograph our entrance into the harbour. Rick's son Lorne, daughter-in-law Carolyn and grandson Homer (aged 14) only live a 20 minute walk from the port. They are tucked away in a little street very much like one you would find at home. Lorne then whizzed us around the city in his 1974 Mercedes SLC. He took us into the suburbs with the nice houses and gardens. We then headed to Watson Bay and walked the South Head Heritage Trail passing the nudist Lady Bay Beach and onto the lighthouse. Carolyn kept saying to Homer that he couldn't wear his thongs when we go to the restaurant this evening and that if he could have way he would wear his thongs all the time. When I looked a bit surprised she explained that thongs were flipflops. Caught up with the news on Neighbours, Ty finished third on Australian Pop Idol but he's left Neighbours now. One of the most popular programmes over here is "Biggest Losers" where 2 teams are put on a diet and exercise regime but are tempted with things like doughnuts. If they resist temptation they are exempt from eviction that week, the winner get \$200,000. We had an expensive fish and chip lunch with a bottle of wine and some beer at Doyles in Watson Bay, it was \$280 with the tip! Lorne showed us where he once lived in Bondi and we viewed Bondi Beach from the top of his road. It's the end of summer here, 1st of March is the beginning of Autumn and the cooler temperature is very pleasant. We dined in a revolving restaurant on the 47th floor called the Summit – very nice and very expensive.



Bondi Beach

Sunday 22 February – Sydney - 27C showery am warm later

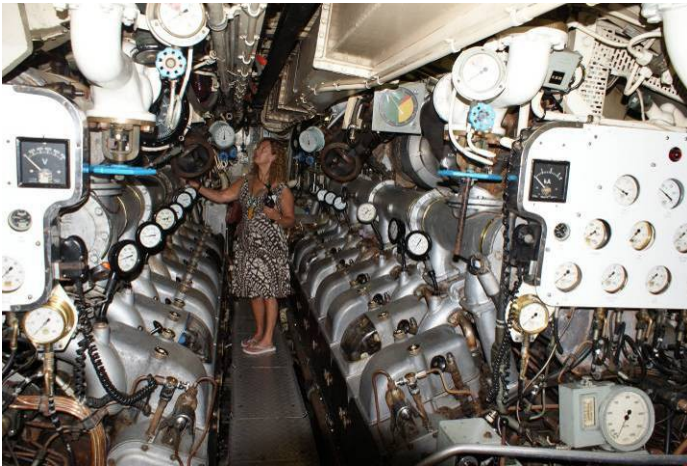
Passenger changeover day and all the flags are at half mast to pay respect to the 200 odd people that have died in the bush fires. There is a memorial concert in the Opera House and they are going to have big screens set up outside. Lorne drove us out of the city through suburbs and countryside that looked very much like England, to Berowra Heights. It was sort of a mini Blue Mountains with lots of Eucalyptus trees, steep rocky mountains covered in trees and windy narrow roads. Most cars have an E Tag fitted that bleeps when you pass through toll areas and your bank account or credit card is periodically debited, it saves having to man toll booths and stops the traffic being held up. We kept passing piles of old furniture, computers, televisions etc., about once a month they have a Council Clean-up Day, before it is collected you can help yourself to anything that takes your fancy. In the more affluent areas you can sometimes pick up some good things. We stopped for lunch at Berowra Creek, a pleasant spot to launch your boat. You can take a little boat along the creek to a very exclusive, very expensive restaurant; Lorne had his office Christmas lunch there. Lorne and Carolyn are considering moving to this area once Homer finishes school. The road stops at the creek and you have to take a ferry to rejoin it on the other side of the creek.



We then took the scenic route to Hornsby so Lorne could show us his new office, we were most impressed. He used to cycle to work over the Sydney bridge and at one time worked in an office that overlooked the harbour. He is a Patent Attorney and is now a partner in a new company. It's much more economical for them to be out of the city and he enjoys the train ride to work each day. They dropped us off at The Queen Victoria Building in Sydney. It was tastefully refurbished and made into shops about 10 years ago and what an absolutely fabulous building it is. There is a fantastic ornate clock with historical scenes hanging in the centre and we happened to be standing right by it on the hour when it springs into action and does all sorts of wonderful things. Just a little further on we looked at an ornate Victorian arcade called The Strand that had also been converted into lots of exclusive shops. Back on deck we had a drink with the Canon and his wife, she drinks pints. Found out there are usually 4 Canons to each cathedral; his is more of an honorary position due to his length of service and contribution to the diocese. In Tonga they were each given a garland and when they started to die off they threw them into the sea off the stern of the ship. Before you knew it there was a rumour going all around the ship that someone had died. We met the Wood-Roe family that evening at a rather good Thai Restaurant where we were able to sit outside. Early start tomorrow as we are going to do the real tourist bit.



Monday 23 February – Sydney – 26C Sunny



Engine Room of submarine HMAS Onslow



The last big gun ship built in Aussie HMAS Vampire

Ran out of time at the Maritime museum, we were so fascinated by the replica of Cook's HMB Endeavour that we came away with loads of books. I am really into Cook at the moment. Had a short ride on the monorail then visited The Rocks. Stopped for lunch at Circular Quay, it's expensive eating in the touristy places and we then took the Water Taxi across to the Opera House, it is a very clever design but unfortunately we didn't have time for a tour. Walked back to the ship through the Botanical Gardens. Homer has a free bus pass for school but if the bus is full they have to give up their seat to an older person. Every Australian citizen has to vote or they are fined about \$100.



Replica of HMB Endeavour



It was all a bit rushed but a great day and we have promised Lorne, Carolyn and Homer that we will be back soon for that road trip. Off to Tasmania tomorrow, then Melbourne, Adelaide, Albany and we reach Perth on 4th March when we change Captain.



Tuesday 24 February – At Sea – 18 C wind force 6

I can't see any like people amongst the sea of new faces. A woman on Deck 9 sat next to the doctor on a boat trip and asked what floor his cabin was on to which he replied Deck 4. "Oh dear" she said "I never speak to anyone below Deck 7" so there are a few snobs on board but not many. Even if someone introduces themselves it is still difficult to remember their names and that is why we give them nicknames. I am quite pleased with ours; Judith and Ken call us Susan Sarandon and Harrison Ford. Sat with a nice couple called Pat and Malcolm at breakfast, he was taking his mother, who suffers from Alzheimer's, to Sydney for a holiday with his brother. He had quite a journey as she kept forgetting where she was and wanted to get off and make a cup of tea. She never slept for the 20 hour journey and woke him up every time he fell asleep wanting to know when they were going to get on the plane. He was a bit reluctant to say what he did for a living but eventually confessed to being a "Banker" – guess what his nickname is going to be?

The ship tossed a bit during the night and on our way to the gym we saw that part of the deck was shut off and the sunbeds all strapped up. We are in the "Roaring 40's" and it's no longer bikini weather. Roaring 40's is given to latitude 40 – 50 south – boisterous prevailing westerly winds, this happens when there is less land mass to slow them down. Rick went to "Bridge for Beginners" to find out what it was all about. He downloaded some info beforehand but said "it's bloody confusing". He has partnered up with a posh lady (must be deck 9) who was wearing lots of pearls. The novelist has given me his book to read, it's called "To Grasp a Shadow" by Jack Gauntlett. His previous novel was "The Company's Prophets". It's a thriller and a romance, quite good so far.

The banker's wife, Pat joined us at art, her daughter is an art teacher and she goes to her weekly classes. She showed me her "Cruise Diary" that she started in Sydney, she mentions that she met us at breakfast and has drawn a picture of me. Tony painted a picture of a sailing boat at sea use different masking methods. Had our usual table at the Captain's Welcome Party, it's the best place for the free drinks. Enjoyed tonight's show, it was music and dancing from musicals. The ship is still rocking quite a bit but it's nothing compared to the storm in Norway.

Wednesday 25 February - Burnie, Tasmania – 25C Sunny



Huge piles of wood chippings at the Port



The Poppy Fields

The port was dominated by a Pulp Mill and two huge piles of wood chippings that have been there for some time. The mill used to employ 3800 people but demand has been gradually reducing and now they only have 200 operators and 200 maintenance staff. The weather was much hotter than we anticipated and we were a bit overdressed for the tour. We were told to put our bikinis away as it was too cold to swim in the sea. The economy is based on Mining, Agriculture and Timber but the lack of opportunities to earn big money forces many of the young people to the mainland. Burnie was once surrounded by dense rainforest but this gradually disappeared over time as felling and milling timber became big business. A popular attraction is the Paper Mill which features life size paper sculptures. There is a thriving shopping centre where there are lots of volunteers to show visitors around. We set off into the countryside where there was little traffic and life was at a slower pace than that of Brisbane and Sydney. Tasmania has 4 microclimates and 40% of the island is a National Reserve. It has 77 golf courses, one being the second oldest in the world with 6 holes and square greens. It has the oldest racecourse and brewery and was responsible for introducing casinos, the lottery, daylight saving and parking meters to the Aussies. It has a clean, green image and the only state that doesn't have genetically modified crops. It is known as "The Garden of Eden" with its 255 vineyards, and productive fields and orchards. It is the world's largest producer of opium for pharmaceutical purposes. We passed lots of poppy fields that are severely policed. It also produces pyrethrum for insecticide, essential oils, tulips, bees for honey, apples, potatoes, truffles (they use spaniels instead of pigs to sniff them out) and most other vegetables. There is a huge market for exporting fish.



Murals and Topiary



A lovely furry Alpaca

Our first stop was the town of Sheffield where the buildings were covered in murals depicting scenes from Sheffield's pioneering past. We collect chickens and I found a metal one that makes a terrible noise when it lays its eggs. Unfortunately, Rick didn't share my excitement; he thought it was completely naff especially as it was made in China. I am going to replace the plastic eggs with chocolate ones for Easter Day. We then went through a nearby village who are using topiary arrangements to attract the tourists, it is a novel idea. In Latrobe there was a shop called the Emporium that was crammed full of novelties, children's games, garden ornaments and lots of paper Maché life size dolls. It was getting hot but we managed to find some shade in a Hotel garden where we had a relaxing drink and snack. We love these one street towns with old fashioned shops.



The weird dolls in the Emporium



A boy's paradise

Next was a ride on the Don River Railway which has some of the most historic engines in Tasmania. Once again this was run by volunteers who took us around the engine sheds and museum. On the way back we stopped at the English style Annsleigh Gardens. In fact everywhere looked very much like England but quieter. Missed the tiny penguins that only come in at dusk. A pleasant enjoyable day all round. The Tasmanians are keen on their Scottish ancestry and gave us a bagpipe sendoff.

Finished the novel, it was all about the Cold War and spies. I said that he must have had to do a lot of research to which he replied that he worked in Russia for some time. "Oh" I said "Were you a spy" to which he sort of smiled. The highlight of the day was the fighting over seats on the coach. A lot of selfish people all sat separately so they could get a window seat and that meant that some couples had to be split up. That may have been OK for a half day tour but it was an 8 hour one. After the first stop the writer and his wife sat together. The woman whose seat one of them took went crazy saying they were selfish and a disgrace to Britain and so on, it was quite exciting.

Thursday 26 February – Melbourne – 24C Sunny

When in 1834 the first European settler arrived with a flock of sheep (there are about 5 sheep in Australia for every person), there were about 200,000 aboriginals. It was the start of the first "land grab" from the aboriginals who didn't understand about land ownership. By 1845 there were about 15,000 Aborigines but by 1880 their numbers were reduced by disease, gunfire, poison and alcohol to about 800. Melbourne was never a convict settlement but when the gold rush began in 1851 it became one of the most chaotic and lawless towns on the face of the earth. We managed to fit in a quick visit to the Old Melbourne Gaol where the notorious Ned Kelly was hanged. The Gold Rush made Melbourne a rich city with huge amounts of money being poured into creating some magnificent buildings.



Melbourne Cricket Ground



St Paul's

There's been a lot of concern about the bush fires but we have been assured that they are about 20 miles north of Melbourne. Victoria is worst state for bush fires as there is lots of rain, lots of vegetation and lots to burn. We couldn't smell the fires but the sky was hazy. It was a beautiful day, warm with that hint of

autumn chill in the air, giving you that back to school, book evening classes feeling. It's back to public transport as we are not being chauffeured about in Lorne's 35 year old classic Mercedes anymore. However, the transport system in Melbourne is good, they even have free inner and outer city trams; their tram network is the largest in the world. We were dropped off at the National Gallery and we thought, ah we should be able to appreciate this now we have been to art lessons. However, Rick was wearing his prescription sun glasses and couldn't see a thing inside. The warden politely asked us to move away from an exhibit as we were right inside the security box. I asked the warden what was with the whole row of empty glass frames, and he said if you look long enough you can see something. There was lots of abstract stuff and Rick by now was getting disillusioned and was wondering where the normal paintings were, we did eventually find a few. We took a pleasant walk through Fitzroy Gardens to look at the Conservatory and Cook's Cottage.

The highlight of the day was a guided tour of Melbourne Cricket Ground (the largest Cricket Ground in the world) where there is a 15 year waiting list for membership. More Australian football is played there than cricket. We saw all the changing rooms, the player and press areas and all the members' facilities including "The Long Room" similar to Lords. There are seats for 100,000 spectators and it costs about £5000 for a seat in a box. The pitches are drop-in replacements. There are lots of practice wickets, all giving varying conditions of spin and bounce. Even though I am not one bit keen on cricket I still found it all very interesting. After a peek at St Pauls Cathedral we had a look at the famous "Chloe" nude hanging in a pub opposite Flinders Street Station. We came across a group of Harley riders who were waiting for the ferry to Tasmania. They were very friendly but most had long beards, tattoos and bad teeth!! They were all sporting tee-shirts with S & M on them, not sure what it stands for – I thought it was some sex game. We have a young couple on board who worked on the Black Watch 10 years ago, with their two little girls, one of three years (it was her birthday) and the other 6 years. They are only with us for a week and were sitting next to us at dinner. The girls were tired and playing up a bit, much to the annoyance of some of the other guests. They are fond of one of the waiters who keeps cuddling them but they won't let him put them down. It must be hard for some of the staff being away from their family for so long.



Flinders Street Station



Our Aussie Harley Mates

Friday 27 February – At Sea – 20C Sunny with clear skies

It was very rough during the night and I had a terrifying nightmare that the sea was going to come crashing through the porthole. I tried to call out to Rick to put the covers on them but my voice wouldn't come out and I couldn't make my legs move. I checked the windowsill to see if it was wet, the sea was rough and the portholes splattered but everything was dry. General feeling was that other passengers were not overly impressed with Melbourne yesterday. We had a lovely full day but are also getting the feeling that Australia is too far away from the rest of the world. In fact, perhaps I am a bit homesick again or maybe just tired as I couldn't settle to anything today. Rick is enjoying his bridge lessons and meeting a whole new crowd, mostly from Deck 9. The temperature has dropped dramatically or perhaps my blood is getting thinner. Tried to sit on deck but it was too windy, went in and put more clothes on and still not comfortable. Retreated to the Observatory Lounge and ordered a bottle of wine. Much, much more comfortable. Managed to see more wildlife through the windows than we have seen throughout the cruise so far. We are in Adelaide tomorrow but after my nightmare last night I am bit worried as we will soon be crossing the Great Australian Bight which is the Bay of Biscay part of this world when it could be a bit rough again.

Saturday 28 February - Adelaide - 25C Sunny with clear skies

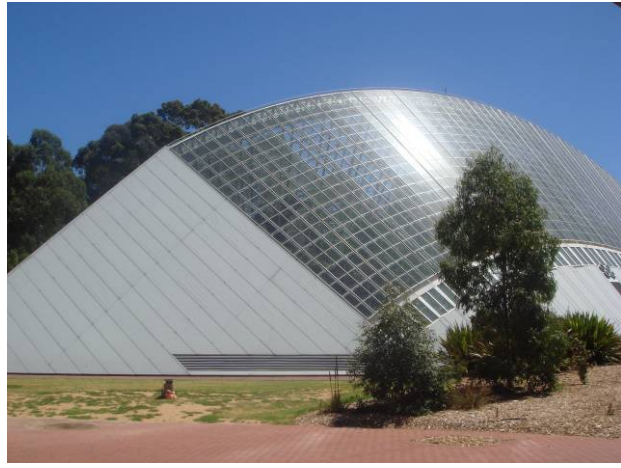


Railway Station Port Adelaide – shipmates waiting for the train

Adelaide Railway Station

Adelaide was never a penal colony and as they needed farmers and tradesmen the British Government encouraged people to pay for land and seek their fortune in a new country. At that time they still had no idea what was in the middle of Australia, the people didn't know there were no rivers flowing through the land and many men died trying to find out what was there. The River Murray comes down from the mountains into Lake Alexandrina and not into the sea and in 1834 the city was put further inland as there wasn't any water near the port.

We were told that Adelaide is a compact and charming city, the centre being laid out as a grid of wide streets with gracious colonial architecture surrounded by parklands and that the Mediterranean climate encourages a relaxed and indulgent lifestyle. It is a city of pubs, cafes, restaurants. The master plan was that we would go into the port to sort out our emails before we took the shuttle or train that takes about 45 minutes, into the town. We were moored behind a huge Princess Cruise ship and after finding there wasn't any wireless internet around the port area we found ourselves on a Princess courtesy coach to the rail station. The station was packed with Americans and before we knew it we were on the train. We thought we would get off when we saw some shops, but there didn't seem any, just lots of brick bungalows and industry for miles. We eventually got off at Port Adelaide. It was about 9.15am on a Saturday morning and the town was soulless and empty, it felt like some of the American towns we have visited. No-one seemed to know about the internet, even the library one wasn't working and Rick was getting grumpy because he hadn't intended to carry two laptops on his back all day. We were saved by a kind man who ran a Computer Repair shop. He let us use his wireless connection and even made us a cup of coffee. Back to the rail station and we just missed a train, it was confusing as it wasn't following the timetable. The station was empty and full of litter and graffiti that is until we were joined by another couple from our ship. They had been here before and enjoyed it so much they had come back, the coach driver did seem surprised at this, however, they agreed with us that it was a dump. We were running between platforms deciding we would take the first train that came in, it didn't matter which way it was going, it was the one into town. Our first impressions of Adelaide were not good; the bins were overflowing and people scruffy. Took the free bus around the city, it was quite industrial and we considered going back to the ship. However, we found the Botanical Gardens with its conservatories were delightful, the best we have seen. The National Wine Centre was disappointing but we recovered our strength by enjoying a few drinks and a couple packet of crisps (too late for lunch) at an Irish Pub before walking down Rundle Mall, the main shopping centre. Back on the ship we shared a couple of bottles of wine with Art teacher Tony and his wife Rae and then a few more drinks with Judith and Ken. Definitely not a no drinking day today!



Two very contrasting Conservatories in the Botanical Gardens

Sunday 1 March – At Sea - 20C force 4 wind – Overcast and almost impossible to walk round the deck

Clocks went back again we are now 10 hours in front. Having a day off the gym. Rick's Bridge partner, Posh Pearls is interesting; she has a home in Chelsea and another in the Lake District. In her younger days when she lived in Hyde Park Mews, her next door neighbour and best friend was Deb of the Year. She was a buyer for Jaeger, and is also an artist and buys and sells watercolours. Rick said she wants to have a look at his painting, she would soon be able to tell if he was any good. She has a share in a Racehorse with some Lord and is often at Goodwood and has been having Bridge lessons at Earnley Concourse. Whilst in Sydney she bought a painting for \$3 and thinks she can sell it for a few hundred. Once she bought a painting at a car boot sale for about £7 and sold it for £1000. She is a boxer, skier and a walker but has slowed down a little now she is in her 70's or 80's. Rick says she is actually really nice but a terrible snob. Kipper Girl is holidaying with Australian relatives and is rejoining the ship in Perth, I don't know what Posh Pearls will make of her as they are on the same table. Listened to Darwin lecture and another lecture by the sailing couple. Put a bit more effort into my art, we have both been painting in the cabin. Celebrated Ken's 70th birthday in the Observatory Bar. It was Mexican Night and tequila shots, very enjoyable. Did the 10pm Welsh quiz with Rick's Bridge opponents, he was an HR Manager for Northern Rock. Had a good laugh about Posh Pearls, they just can't believe she is f

or real. Apparently she asked Rick if he had a racehorse to which he replied "No, I just support the bookies" that comment went right over her head. Then she mentioned to Rick that some Lord has just died and wondered if he knew him. She must have a very high opinion of Rick.

Monday 2 March – At Sea - 20C wind force 6 – too windy to sit outside

Clocks back another hour, we are now 9 hours in front. Since 9/11 the Australians are worried about a possible terrorist attack and there is a high level of security getting on and off the ship. In Sydney there were ramps by the dock that can be raised in an emergency. Posh Pearls has a butler at home and is a member of the Royal Yacht Squadron. A lady said that she lost her ring in the ships shop and after failing to find it she was offered a cabin search. It's all a bit suspicious as it could be that she wanted to claim for it on her insurance. Just finished "Darwin in Australia" and back on James Cook's Journals. While Rick was at his Bridge lesson I listened to a very interesting lecture "My Life as a Cold War Military Spy". At the sailing couples final talk they told us how they were arrested in Eritrea and held for some time as suspected spies. What with the writers spy novel and today's lectures, it's all about spies at the moment. There's so much I don't know and even more, I wish I could remember all I am being told. After Art we made our way to the Observatory to watch the big waves, not easy in the windy conditions, we are well and truly in the Australian Bight. The wind increased and the ship was rocking with the force of the waves hitting the sides, sick bags had been placed at the end of each stairwell. After the Indian Buffet it was straight back to the cabin as it was going to be a rough night.

Tuesday 3 March – Albany, Western Australia – 16C overcast – very chilly



We had a terrible night with 18 – 20ft waves. Land at last! Until the opening of the port at Fremantle in 1900, Albany was the only deepwater port in Western Australia and was the first port of call for ships travelling from the UK to Eastern Australia. It was a vital coaling station once steam ships began to operate on this route. Originally the money came from growing wheat then gold and iron ore were discovered. This meant that Albany had a privileged position over Perth; that was until the way to Fremantle was cleared by using dynamite. In winter Albany and Perth can be quite chilly and often wet and windy, but in the summer it is dry and hot. Albany is a small old fashioned town of about 33,000. Lots of people come to Albany for Whale Watching. The surrounding area is agricultural and has many excellent vineyards. We weren't there long, went to Woolworths to get some washing powder and a Backpackers Hostel to catch up with the emails. We stayed in our cabin for the rest of the day as once we were back in the open seas it was rough and rocky again.

Wednesday 4 March - Fremantle and Perth WA – 28C Hot



[The John Septimus Roe statue and plaque in the pavement](#)

Another rough night, not quite as bad as the previous one but bad enough to make us 3 hours late for our arrival in Freo. It was hot, really hot, thank goodness as we were despairing of ever being warm and on firm ground again. Black Swans belong here. We took the train to Perth where everything looked modern, well planned and sophisticated, it's a lovely city. We were on a mission to find out more about John Septimus Roe, one of Rick's ancestors who was the Surveyor General of Western Australia for 40 years. He mapped the western coastline and laid out the cities of Fremantle and Perth. He helped found Perth's first cultural centre and his collections of botanical, ecological and mineral specimens laid the foundations of Perth Museum. We did very well, the library was particularly useful and we saw his log book and sword in the museum. We didn't have time to see a Roe monument in Kings Park or the Roe School that was some way out of Perth, there is also a Roe Mountain.



Roe Street named after John Septimus Roe

Thursday 5 March – Fremantle – 28C very hot with clear skies



Fremantle Prison



The Gallows

Fremantle was just great, a small town with no high rise or shopping malls. It has benefited from all the money being ploughed into Perth as the town has retained its character. The square was a lively place with a few stalls selling jewellery and paintings, and seats laid out for a lunchtime classical concert. There were lots of small, interesting shops and cafes. We did the Fremantle Prison tour, a notorious violent place with a strict regime. There were some awful riots in 1988 but the prison wasn't closed until 1991. Had lunch in a harbour view restaurant that had beer piped into it from the brewery next door. Met Colleen and Reg who live in an apartment overlooking the Melbourne Cricket Ground. She works in the fashion industry, I thought she was nattily dressed, and they may look us up when they come to England for the Olympics. It was a hot walk to the Maritime Museum and unfortunately we ran out of time. So it was back to the ship.



A Typical Fremantle Street



Forthcoming Concert

We have a new Captain but it's goodbye to Fremantle and Australia. Not entirely sure how I feel about Australia, it's a mixture of the States and the UK. We have only really seen the main port cities and each one is quite different. I am not really a city person but the ones we have visited all have a prison, botanical garden, art galleries and all the facilities you could possibly want, there is no shortage of culture here. It's also all about black pearls, opals and fish and chips. Will have to wait for the road trip up the east coast to see the real Australia. Mauritius awaits us but only after seven days at sea in The Indian Ocean. That means more gym, more Bridge, more art and the chance for Rick to get to know Posh Pearls better. I had better watch out as I think she is priming him up for her next husband.

Friday 6 March – At Sea – 28C Lovely comfortable sunny day with a breeze.

The big news of the day is that pirates tried to board our sister ship The Balmoral near India. 2 hour gym session. Felt very uncomfortable during Pilates as Mrs Fit Couple, who was lying next to me, kept saying in a loud voice that she couldn't take much more of the BO smell and I wasn't sure if it was directed at me, I had showered but was a bit worried about my feet as they had been in trainers without socks. It wasn't until after the session that she explained it was the chap next to me. Posh Pearls wants to know all about Rick's hernia as she is having groin trouble, she asked if he knows her friend Lord Carnarvon. She knows all the top jockeys and when Lester Pickett had to sell his trophies to pay a tax bill she bought the cup that he won for the Oaks for £250, she said she will show it to Rick when he visits her Chelsea home. Practiced painting water. Rick has spent hours trying to get rid of the virus in his laptop that happened when he tried to extend the trial period for his Bridge. He also inadvertently set his mobile off in his pocket and phoned home for 30 minutes, that will be expensive. The Northern Rock HR couple looked into possibly retiring in Australia but you have to put up a non-returnable £125,000 bond that has to be topped up every four years. Dancing until the early hours in the Lido.

Saturday 7 March – At Sea – 25C Sunny with a little cloud

Clocks went back another hour, we are now 8 hours in front. Both a bit fragile from night before. Bikini wax and foot soak. Bought £5 ring and lip glosses. Bridge for Rick, Gym for me. Read quite a bit of Little Dorrit. Started painting Tony's cottage. Caribbean night in Garden Restaurant followed by Magician. Apple, the Drinks Waitress, is like a little doll who they keep dressing up in different costumes each evening.

Sunday 8 March – At Sea – 23C – cloudy with the odd shower.

Clocks went back another hour, we are now 7 hours in front. Maggie joined us at yoga where I strained the muscles at the top of my back. She suggested I buy Rick a racehorse for his birthday and then maybe take him to the Melbourne Cup. Latest from Maggie is that she was invited to her friend's estate, the Duke of Edinburgh carriage racing there that weekend. His butler thought he recognised Maggie, perhaps it was from Harrods. Later he remembered, it was at Kings Road, Chelsea Waitrose. The Duke of Edinburgh chuckled and said "you must have met Maggie at the cashout". Then she found she was in the bedroom next to the Duke so she locked her door – she said he is still very good looking. Listened to lecture by David Bright MBE who worked a double child murder case in the 80's – all nasty stuff. On a much lighter note it was followed by a vegetable carving demonstration. More of Little Dorrit. Continued painting Tony and Rae's cottage. The entertainment was very good – David Copperfield – not the Illusionist but the Unusualist.

Monday 9 March – At Sea – 27C windy

Neck a little better but muscles now ache further down the shoulders. While Rick was at Bridge I enjoyed my half price Balinese Scalp Massage. There were some huge dragonflies on board probably came from a small whirling wind over the ocean that sucks everything up. Another "All Rounders Lunch" and we were once again asked to join the Captain. The new Captain is a bit shy and it was much more relaxed meal than last time. The Norwegian Captain lives parts of the time in Sweden and the rest of the time in Brazil, It's strange that he should choose Brazil as the high crime rate and poverty made us feel very uneasy there. We didn't know anyone else on the table but Charles next to me lives in Lyme Regis and is a bell ringer. I sent the waiter into a frenzy when I told him I was Gluten Free and he didn't cope very well, I missed out on the

soup and sweet. The wine wasn't as free flowing as it was on the independent tables and we got quite a bit of stick afterwards from the well oiled other passengers who couldn't understand how we managed to get on the Captain's table not once but twice! It was Western Night once again and Rick had been preparing himself with a few day's growth to give him that cowboy look. It was cowboy food and I was very hungry after my light lunch and light breakfast. Fred (the French girl) and Dave are vegans, I wouldn't recommend it as he looks like a skeleton and could do with a few steaks or some more red blood to give him some colour. After Cape Town Rick wants me to join him for the Bridge lessons so he has been giving me a bit of private tuition.

Tuesday 10 March – At Sea – 25C windy

Once again we have heavy seas and Rick who still hasn't got his sea legs spent most of the day on his bed. As it was too rough to go outside so I listened to the port talk on Reunion Island, a lecture on the ceramic industry and watched The King and I, Zoolander and most of Breakfast at Tiffany's and continued with Little Dorrit. Rick's still painting his picture of a cruise ship and I started my drawing of The Rialto Bridge. No gym as my shoulder and neck muscles are still a little uncomfortable. The rocking of the ship continued into the night.

Wednesday 11 March – At Sea – 29C Hot and sunny

Phoned Jen early to wish her happy birthday and good luck with the Moores Stephens interview. Step and Pilates. More Little Dorrit in the sun. Skipped art and supported Gladdin demonstrating cocktails. Rick finished his cruise boat picture.

Thursday 12 March – At Sea - 29C Hot with a little cloud

Pilates and workout which Rick went to Bridge. Finished Little Dorrit. Tony's 65th birthday drinks in his cabin. Met a couple both of whom are authors, found out that the Downs man is Henry's son, James and his wife were also there. It was absolutely sweltering in their cabin and the lining of my dress was sticking to me. It was Formal Black and White Night and we sat at our usual table at the Captain's party. Also had some wine for supper and came away with bad attack of hic-cups that annoyed Rick.

6 – 12 March – At Sea – Average temperature 27C

The big news of the day is that near India pirates tried to board our sister ship, The Balmoral. 7 days with nothing but sea and sky, not a ship in sight, it's gone fast though. Weather has improved but we had some huge sea swell making the ship rock to and fro and Rick, who has still not got his sea legs, spent almost two days lying on his bed. We have kept busy with the usual gym activities, although I have had a blip as I hurt my neck after an enthusiastic Pilates session and then had a shock when I put my jeans on for the Western Night and found that the tops of my legs have got enormous, Michael the Gym Manager says its just that they have toned up. Watched loads of films, read lots of books and a Detective told us how he and his team solved a very nasty double child murder. There were some gigantic dragonflies on board that probably came from a small whirling wind over the ocean that sucks everything up. Another "All Rounders Lunch" and we were once again asked to join the Captain. The new Captain is a bit shy and it was much more relaxed meal than last time. He is Norwegian and lives parts of the time in Sweden with the rest of the time in Brazil. It's strange that he should choose Brazil as the high crime rate and poverty made us feel very uneasy there. The wine wasn't as free flowing as it was on the independent tables and we got quite a bit of stick afterwards from the well oiled other passengers who couldn't understand how we managed to get on the Captain's table not once but twice! Fred (the French girl) and Dave are vegans, I wouldn't recommend it as he looks like a skeleton and could do with a few steaks or some more red blood to give him some colour. After Cape Town Rick wants me to join him for the Bridge lessons so he has been giving me a bit of private tuition. Every day he comes back from his Bridge lesson with a new story. Posh Pearls suggested I buy Rick a racehorse for his birthday and then maybe take him to the Melbourne Cup. She was invited to her friend's estate when the Duke of Edinburgh was carriage racing there. She found she was in the bedroom next to the him so she locked her door – she said he is still very good looking. Posh Pearls wants to know all about Rick's hernia as she is having groin trouble, she asked if he knew her friend Lord Carnarvon. She knows all the top jockeys

and when Lester Pickett had to sell his trophies to pay a tax bill she bought the cup that he won for the Oaks for £250, she said she will show it to Rick when he visits her Chelsea home. Rick has spent hours trying to get rid of the virus in his laptop that happened when he tried to extend the trial period for his Bridge, it's kerput until we get home. The Northern Rock HR couple looked into possibly retiring in Australia but you have to put up a non-returnable £125,000 bond that has to be topped up every four years. We've both finished Little Dorrit a big read, our cabin stewardess, Marie is a Little Dorrit, shy and humble. Judith and Ken want to go home. I could go home too but it would be a shame as we still have so much to see.

Friday 13 March – Port Louis, Mauritius - 29C rain – Home of the extinct Dodo



It was raining hard outside. No stories today as Posh Pearls is busy running her sweepstake for the Cheltenham Gold Cup. It turns out that the Sonicaid chap owns 6 racehorses! There is a great young lady on board called Tracey who is a avid collector, she has already given talks on what to look out for at car boot sales and what ceramic and glass to collect. Today it was the history of the handbag and what bags to buy today as a future investment. It was fascinating; she showed us a few from her collection. I was then taught how to fold a napkin in five different ways.

Midday we arrived at Mauritius, this is somewhere I have always wanted to visit. The Portuguese were the first visitor's in 1507, next were the Dutch in 1638 but they were put off by the cyclones and in 1715 the French ruled it until they surrendered to the British in 1815. Under British rule they were allowed to keep their land and property and to use the French language. It became independent in 1968. More than 75% of the population are Indians of mixed origin who came to work on the sugar plantations after slavery was abolished.

Not a beach day so we drove through the roads lined with sugar cane and stopped off at the crocodile farm. It was a great place with luxuriant foliage and lots of crocodiles, giant tortoises, giant frogs, guinea pigs, monkeys and bats. Rick was fascinated by the collection of approximately 23,000 species of butterflies and insects. You can pay £2000 upwards for a crocodile handbag here. We drove through "paradise valley" and stopped for tea at the Maison de Bel Air which overlooked the sea. A short boat ride took us to the island of Ile Aux Aigrettes, a nature reserve that plays host to rare species of Mauritian flora and fauna. Saw more

tortoises, ebony trees and the Pink Pigeon, it was the Galapagos all over again. Must come back, September and October are the best months to visit and the west coast is less windy.



A 250 year old piece of ebony – very slow growing

Saturday 14 March - Reunion Island 27C - torrential rain locally but overcast at the beach – pop 793,000

Clocks changed – now 4 hours in front. I've never heard of the Reunion Island, however, it is very much a holiday island with 85% of the tourists being French as it's a French Island. They wish to stay French as they have access to the EU enabling them to sell their sugar. The population is increasing but unemployment is high, migrants can live off French social security. It has one of the most active volcanoes in the world called Piton de las Fournaise. They grow geraniums for perfume and oil, also vanilla and sugar for the rum. Between 2005 and 2006, 255,000 people on the island contracted chikungunya, a disease spread by mosquitoes, this led to more than 200 deaths.

I am so well up on all the port information that I suddenly found myself organising a group of people but lost them when at the last minute we decided to go to the beach with the HSBC couple. It was a €50 taxi ride to the nearest one but after 3 hours and 3 buses we eventually got there for £1.40 each. The local buses were quite an experience, they were full of people smelling of curry and BO and you had to clap your hands to indicate that you wanted to get off. Had our first swim in the Indian Ocean at St Gilles and lunch in a beach restaurant. Between us we paid the €50 taxi fare back to make sure we didn't miss the ship. As it only took 20 minutes and not 3 hours we had time to have a quick look at Saint Denis. There had been torrential rain there this morning, in fact Reunion Island holds many records for rainfall. The most recent being in 2007 for the most rainfall, 154.7 inches in 72 hours ! It was an attractive town, all very French and very expensive, whereas Le Port where we caught a bus from earlier wasn't a tourist town and everything was much cheaper but the young girls didn't look so chic.



St Gilles



Saint Denis

15 March – 17 March – At Sea – 28C Sunny with occasional cloud

Now only 2 hours in front. Life on board goes on with much the same routine, we still have to admire Rick's changed physique each morning whereas my legs have got fatter his have slimmed down. There is a tiny Brazilian lady in her mid sixties with an excellent figure who has brought 202 dresses with her that is in addition to numerous trousers and shorts. The Canon is such a friendly fellow that he is nice enough to turn you to religion. He thinks that Bridge is the second religion on board. The Bridge teacher has realized that Posh Pearls keeps falling asleep during his lectures and is holding Rick and the Northern Rock Couple (Mike and Anne) back so he has separated them. Good for Rick but I will miss all the stories he comes back with. The latest is that she has a yacht in Sydney where she rents a house for 3 months each year. She once sailed in the Americas Cup acting as Anchorgirl, whatever that is. It's all about Africa now, and I have listened to the David Livingstone and port lectures and am getting into the Wilber Smith frame of mind. Next stop is Richards Bay Game Reserve, followed by Durban where we are meeting Jen's friend Jess and then onto Cape Town. Security has been stepped up as South Africa is a bit of a dodgy place, Jess once told me that if someone wants your watch they will just cut your arm off to get it. Rick is getting carried away with his art lessons and can't wait to get back and paint all the local scenes, not sure if he is quite ready to take commissions yet!



My contribution to the next art exhibition



Rick's contribution to the next art exhibition

Sunday 15 March – At Sea - 27C Hot to start but clouded over later

Clocks changed – now 3 hours in front. The tiny Brazilian lady has 202 dresses in addition to the numerous jeans, shorts and trousers with her. Early breakfast on deck with the Canon who thinks that Bridge is the second religion onboard. He is such a lovely man, nice enough to turn you to religion. Step, Port Talk on Richards Bay then a lecture on David Livingstone “Livingstone I presume”. Posh Pearls has a yacht and rents a house near Sydney where she spends most of the winter months. She once sailed in the Americas Cup as anchor girl. Watched “Four Weddings and a Funeral”. Early breakfast left me hungry all day.

Monday 16 March – At Sea – 28C Hot most of the day and then a shower

Clocks changed – now 2 hours in front. Step, gym, port talk on Durban then talk on “History of Shoes” if I get a chance there is a shoe museum in Northampton. The Bridge teacher has realized that Posh Pearls is falling asleep during his lectures and is holding Rick and the Northern Rock Couple (Mike and Anne) back so he has separated them. Good for Rick but I will miss all the stories he comes back with. Tony demonstrated how to draw a lion. After art went to gym again with Rick. Watched Top Gun. Had a very garlicky cod meal and was sick after.

Tuesday 17 March – At Sea – 29C Hot, got very windy about 5pm

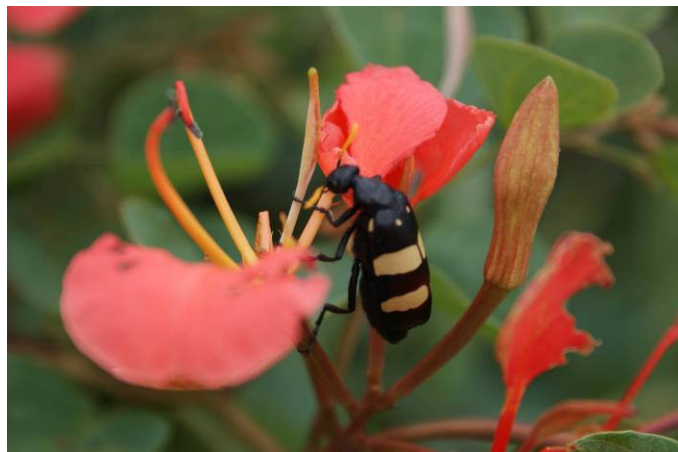
Bought the half price sapphire necklace for £209. Caught up with my sewing whilst watching port talk on Cape Town. Missed the other African lecture as I chatted to Mike and Anne for about an hour. Rick joined us after his Bridge game. Had gluten free pancakes, the first since I have been diagnosed. Finished my cottage and tree picture. Went to gym for 20 minutes after art but left to watch “Beaches”. The wind had really got up by now and everything was rocking about. Rick has got that computer personality once again

as he spent some time today trying to fix his computer again. Went for the Indian Evening with Mike and Anne and as it was St Patrick's Day we joined in the Irish 10pm quiz. The entertainment didn't sound good and the ship was moving all over the place so we went to bed.

Wednesday 18 March - Richards Bay – KwaZulu Natal – Zulu Land – 24C Overcast



A rough night again but at last we have reached South Africa where we are told to be very careful as this is a troubled country with a lot of street crime. When in 1869 gold and diamonds were found near Johannesburg it brought in the workers and the big money and made this part of South Africa rich. Richards Bay is a thriving industrial port with a direct rail connection to the coal mines and other mining exports. Before the downturn they were hoping to export 93 million tons of coal from here this year. There is a very high tech Fertiliser Plant and the largest Aluminium Smelter in the world in the port area. There is nothing old to see in the town but Boardwalk Shopping Mall is worth a visit. Nearer the ship is the Tuzi Gazi Waterfront a smaller version of Cape Town. There are beaches close to the harbour entrance but the waves can get big and you need to beware of sharks. On the way to the Game Reserve we passed miles and miles of genetically engineered eucalyptus trees that were tall and thin with few lower branches, these are grown for paper production. We also passed Zulu settlements, children can walk up to 6 miles each way to go to school. Wealth is measured by the number of cattle they own with the boys acting as herdsman, they sometimes take the cows to school with them. We were very lucky to get a very knowledgeable graduate guide for the Game Reserve. We came face to face with a giraffe and saw monkeys, a hippo, rhinos, lots of different birds including an eagle, zebras and some other animals I can't name. They hadn't seen any elephants for a few days and we were honoured to have a herd cross our path, it was scary, very scary as one of them tried to charge at us. A wonderful experience shared with Posh Pearls and the Northern Rock couple.





A Zulu settlement, the chief has the biggest house, sometimes with a satellite Aerial, the Witch Doctor is still important

Thursday 19 March - Durban – 24C Overcast

Durban has got its own mini gulf stream giving it a lovely warm climate but today it was about 23C and overcast. Gosh, I could write a book about South Africa but I am conscious that you would all be very bored. It's funny when I started writing my holiday blogs it was difficult to manage a few lines, now I am finding myself holding back. Went into the Terminal Building to try to get a wireless connection and was met by a line of computers. I asked if it was an internet café and they said yes, but as we were about to get started they rushed over as they were their security computers. They did laugh though! Today we met Jess, who went to school with our daughter Jen for about 4 years, and her mother Lynn. Durban is not a nice place, there is a lot of crime, there are young, glue sniffing children smashing car windows as you stop at traffic lights. We have only been in South Africa for two days but from what I can make out they all have the opportunity to go to school but the parents don't want them to as they can get more money letting them steal and beg. It's going to take quite a few more years for the younger generation to get educated and want to better themselves. 68% of the population are Black Africans and 20% are Indians. 30% are unemployed with 88% of the unemployed being Black Africans. 63% of the population speak Zulu and 50% are under age 24 and 5% over 65. During Apartheid the whites lived in the towns and the blacks outside. Once Apartheid was abolished the blacks could live anywhere and those that could moved into the towns with their extended families. All the whites then moved into the suburbs, mostly in secured complexes. Even then they still get broken into. Lynn says that they rarely go into the town, it is too dangerous, there are just office blocks in the centre of the city and it's almost totally dead after 5pm. There are lovely beaches, the Golden Mile is famous, but there is lots of surf and you must swim in the places where there are flags and shark nets.



View from Lynn & Charles' building plot



The Casino

We had a look at Lynn and Charles' house; they have a Jack Russell called Jack and a black cat that kept rubbing itself up Rick's leg, funny how they seem to know he is allergic to them. Jess then drove us to have a look at the plot where Lynn and Charles are about to start building their house. It is on a hill, once again in a secure complex, overlooking the sea on one side and fields of sugar cane on the other. Things are much cheaper here, but I suppose it is all relative to earnings. Rick bought 6 polo shirts at £6 each and a wire

chicken made of beads from a Zimbabwe refugee. Lots of eating - coffee and cake in a beautiful garden setting and lunch at the Casino. Unfortunately, the Aquarium was closed for a private function but we sat and had drinks in Mojo's where Charles was joining us for a meal later. Eating out is very inexpensive, I had crocodile and Rick had springbox. It was a very African Restaurant, someone comes round and paints flowers or tribal markings on your face and before the meal they offer you a bowl at the table to wash your hands. We found Jess to be as lovely as ever and hope she will visit us at Christmas. It was good to see Lynn again and met her new husband of two years. I was left with the impression that Durban has a way to go, hosting sporting events may accelerate the process a bit.



The Golden Mile with new football stadium in the distance – Loo sinks in Mojo Restaurant



Friday 20 March – At Sea – 23C

Once again there is motion in the ocean and time to take a pill. The ship must be rattling with the amount of medication the passengers have aboard. Kipper Girl slipped during the torrential rain in Reunion Island and hurt her arm, fortunately she didn't break it but she does have it in a sling. She was amazed how many people offered to give her some pills, even morphine patches. The Captain, Senior Engineer and a passenger who have cabins underneath the Bridge have had to move cabins as a cracks have appeared in their walls, Rick thinks it is as a result of the ship twisting in the storms. Pilates and lecture on Mandela. No gym as ship too rocky. Art Quiz and exhibition. Formal Night and Captain's Farewell Party.

Saturday 21 March – At Sea - 22C Sunny with a breeze

Amazing, Rick has somehow managed to fix his computer. He's been playing Bridge with Sandy and Tony from San Diego. He is 87 and was a WW2 bomber crew in a Flying Fortress at only 21, first as a bombardier and then a navigator. Sparks were flying between Rick's Bridge opponents today, she was very nasty to her husband – it's only a game! It's thought that the bubble is about to burst in Dubai as the ex pats who are working on the building sites are leaving the country in droves because building has been suspended, there were over 3000 cars left abandoned at the airport. We have an American Cartoonist in his 70's on board who wears the most outlandish clothes, bright orange and yellow patterned suits, big medallions and the other day he was wearing a sort of paisley dress. Tony drew and painted a portrait of Rae. Had our goodbye drinks and canapés with Posh Pearls, Mike (Northern Rock) and Anne, we will miss them. Posh Pearls was wearing her £2000 Donald Campbell leopard print trousers – such fun darling! We have promised to meet her for a picnic during Glorious Goodwood Week.

Sunday 22 March - Cape Town – 24C Sunny



As we entered the harbour it was a beautiful, sunny clear day with a fantastic view of Table Mountain and being a small ship we were able to dock right in the middle of the waterfront. It may have been a bit worrying for those looking out of the hotel window to see our bow almost touching the building. Had a trip out to Robben Island to see the cell where Mandela was imprisoned for 18 years. The excursion could be improved a bit as they spent too long driving round the island looking at empty buildings and the odd bird. We only went into a couple of buildings and these had been freshly painted taking away the atmosphere. The ex-prisoner who showed us round left his speech as to why he was there until about 5 minutes before the end. It was a rush trying to find time to see the penguins; one was sitting on an egg and no time to look at the shop. Mandela was truly a remarkable man and it was atrocious how someone could not only be imprisoned but also tortured just for their political beliefs. We didn't come away with the dispirited feeling about the awful conditions as we did from Fremantle Prison.



An ex prisoner showing us around Robben Island



Nelson Mandela's cell

Then it was up to the top of Table Mountain for a salad, crisps and a bottle of wine whilst taking in the wonderful view. Took a relaxing short trip around the harbour in a tiny steam boat with a 100 year old V2 steam engine powered by an oil fired steam generator. Everywhere was buzzing and the prices were good so we had a fish supper in a Belgium Restaurant. What a difference from Durban, you can walk about this area in relative safety.



Monday 23 March – Cape Town - 24C Sunny



Took the open top bus tour past the waterfront, through the city, up to Table Mountain and back down along the beaches. It is a beautiful city and we can't do it justice in the time we have. We passed the 5 star Mount Nelson Hotel where Posh Pearls is staying for a few days, she suggested Rick take me there for tea as it's suppose to serve the best teas in the world. There were some beautiful sandy beaches but the sea here is too cold for swimming. On the coach journey to the Stellenbosch wine area we passed miles and miles of townships, they were quite shocking. I didn't expect to see so many and asked if all the births and deaths were recorded. I was told that it is important that they are as they need to monitor the number of people with aids, of which there are many. I am beginning to get the impression that it is a time for giving back. A lot of the islands we have visited, that were once part of the British Empire, are now independent and now South Africa is being given back to its people. In Cape Town the majority of the workers are Black but the restaurants are mostly filled with white people. There is still a long way to go and even though South Africa is a beautiful country I certainly wouldn't want to live here.



The wine tasting was a bit of a waste of time but I suppose you always come away with a little something new and I now know I don't like Chardonnay. The gardens and scenery were lovely. We then walked through the town of Stellenbosch admiring the Dutch architecture and the Oak trees that lined the roads. In one of the roads we visited 4 houses, beautifully conserved and furnished in period style depicting different

eras. We ate out and had a huge platter of fish each and a bottle of wine for £40 including the tip. After taking two and a half hours for French Fred and Dave to walk up Table Mountain they decided to take the cable car down. We said a sad farewell to Mike and Anne whose parting shot was that I must make sure I buy Rick that Racehorse for his birthday and if not make sure I do for Christmas!

Only 3 more weeks to go, sort of looking forward to getting back but maybe not after receiving the following ditty:

Gordon Brown is my shepherd, I shall not work.
he leadeth me beside still factories.
he restoreth my faith in the conservative party.
he guideth me to the path of unemployment.
yea, though I wait for my dole,
I own the bank that refuses me.
Brown has anointed my income with taxes,
my expenses runneth over my income,
surely, poverty and hard living will follow me all the days of his term.
from hence forth we will live all the days
of our lives in a rented home with an overseas landlord.
I am glad I am British,
I am glad that I am free.
but I wish I was a dog
and Brown was a tree.

Tuesday 24 March – Cape Town -25C Sunny but got chilly when back out into the sea

Walked around the waterfront looking at the shops and craft market. There are lovely shops but at tourist prices. Some promoters asked me to sample the new nutrient enhanced Coca-cola vitamin XXX water and say what I thought of it - suddenly I was surrounded by cameras!! Left it until the last minute to make the final decision to buy a dainty necklace to remind us of Cape Town. We have been careful with our spending, that is until I started to get homesick and ran up enormous phone bills.



Set off for Namibia at 1pm with a full ship (750 with 650 of the passengers being British) and a Sail-away party. Everyone loved Cape Town. The Drunken Table, which includes Kipper Girl, partied the night away in a restaurant on Quay 4 and concluded it in one of the cabins finishing about 6am. We are feeling very self righteous being so well behaved. We miss our pub couple, he had a dry sense of humour and she told me interesting stories like the time she was evacuated as a child. I have started to make a point of chatting to the single ladies especially widow Margaret who is desperate for company. She has been pursuing David a bit too vigorously. He has now flown home but she has left some of her things with him to ensure they have to meet up. Another lady who is 89 and buzzing about on her transport, dresses very feminine with flowers in her hair, lots of jewellery and make-up. Tracy, the avid collector used to do Bob Geldorf's PR; I thought she seemed to know lots of famous people.

Rumour is that a lot of the new passengers have had a good deal, 3 weeks - flying out to Cape Town and onto Namibia, Ghana, Cape Verde, Tenerife, Portugal and finishing at Southampton, all for £795. There is a good holiday atmosphere and the bar is busy. After dinner we went to the card room to have a practice run before tomorrow's first Bridge lesson. Two giant men with earrings and tattoos, Phil and Rodney who live in Brighton but who have wintered in Cape Town for the last forty years asked to join us. They make Rick look like a midget. The room emptied very quickly and I said "I am only a beginner, a complete beginner". Didn't dare refuse, I was very nervous but no need to have worried as they were patient with me. They play Bridge every day in Cape Town and have just won a 45 table competition, Phil was once Sussex champion.

Wednesday 25 March - 18C Cloudy and Chilly

Pilates. Enjoyed my first Bridge lesson, joined Beth and Howard who keeps wanting to throw the cards into the middle of the table. Several people mentioned that they were worried about us last night with the giants and had thought of getting a rescue party together. It was a little too cold to enjoy sitting on deck so we practiced Bridge. Didn't do too well with my drawings of ducks. Formal Night. We sat with Judith and Ken at our normal table, to get the ample free drink supply, for the Captain's Welcome Party.

Thursday 26 March - Walvis Bay, Namibia – Hot and windy 29C

In 1884 Namibia was occupied by Germans, in 1915 occupied by South Africa as South West Africa and in 1990 achieved independence as Namibia. They have never had slavery. 86% are Black Africans, mainly descendents of the original indigenous people with the remainder being mostly European. They've got Diamonds and Uranium. English is the official language. It's 3 times the size of UK with only 2 million people, A

ids is a huge problem. It is nearly all hot and arid, that is apart from the coastal strip that is temperate and arid. The cold, fast flowing Benguela Current keeps the temperature down and produces a lot of fog but very little rain. There is lots of Phytoplankton in the sea by Namibia making it rich in marine life with thousands of sea birds, cape fur seals and dolphins. There are big fishing fleets catching mainly Anchovy, Pilchard, Hake and Mackerel.



The fog lifted soon after our arrival and the strong breeze kept the temperature down. The town had wide roads with dull buildings. Most of the homes were bungalows with sandy gardens. The shops and business premises were spread apart. Being a desert there were very few trees and plants. It was all very bland and could possibly be improved if the buildings were to be painted in bright colours rather than muted shades. We walked through the town to the lagoon to see thousands of sea birds including flamingo's. The tide was out and there were numerous dead jellyfish on the sand. We joined Tony, Rae, James and Leslie at the Yacht Club for a drink. 3 beers, 2 coffees and an orange juice came to about £4.50, the local beer was 70p a pint. Unfortunately, we just missed all the pelicans that eat out of your hand. Spent a relaxing afternoon by the pool on the ship. Everyone seemed to have enjoyed the desert tours, I wish we had booked one but they were expensive and we are still in shock over our mobile phone bills. One chap didn't enjoy it though as he was bitten quite badly on his arm by a bull mastiff in the town and had to be taken to the hospital. The giants joined us in the card room for a couple of games of Bridge, the bidding is very complicated. Rodney was a bit worse for wear, but at least this time they didn't frighten the rest of the room away. It's doubtful whether

we will get off in Ghana as they want £21 each for visas and the trips are all over £100 each. This will mean about 9 days on the ship, I am homesick again!



Friday 27 March – At Sea – 28C Sunny and hot

Yoga followed by Bridge and gym. It's customary to tip your waiter and cabin stewardess £2 each per day, that's £8 a day for us, their wages are low and they rely on their tips. At the end of the last leg in Cape Town only 50% of passengers tipped, leaving the staff with little money to go ashore resulting in a deputation to management. We usually tip the suggested amount and cost it into our holiday especially when you see the long hours they work and how well they look after you. Perhaps this will change in time but it would be difficult for the company to raise their wages especially when they are having to sell the cruises at such discounted prices. At the Indian Buffet we sat next to a Canadian Indian who was a pain the neck and a know-it-all. He has bought some flats in Mumbai which quite quickly tripled in value but now he can't get anyone to either rent or buy them. More Bridge practice but had to find someone to help us with the bidding as the giants weren't about.

Saturday 28 March – At Sea – 28C Sunny with a little cloud

Clocks went back we are now only 1 hour in front. Bridge, Pilates and gym. It was a lovely day but too hot to sit in full sun. We went to the Garden Room with Jean and John for the Gourmet Buffet which was good. Listened to Andrew Robley, who in 1994 was the Phantom in "Phantom of the Opera" – he gave a fantastic rendition of the signature tune.

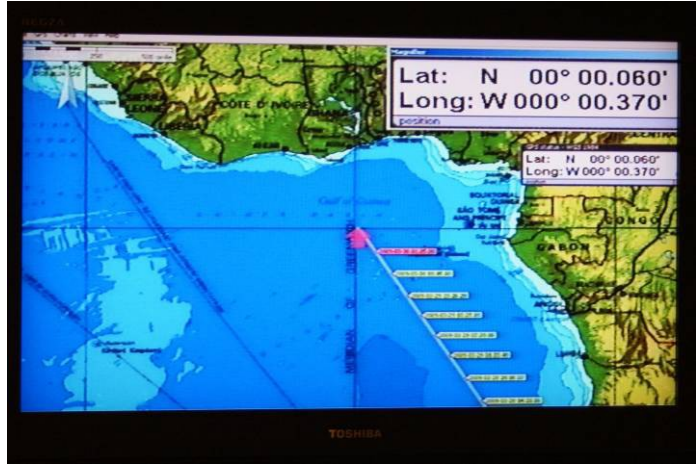
Sunday 29 March – At Sea – 28C Rain

We are now 1 hour behind. Bridge, Pilates and Gym. Not a sunbathing day. Tony did a portrait in oils of Lord Asa Briggs, a notable historian, who is on board. More Bridge practice at 5pm then gym again. Took a liking to Whiskey and J2O. After dinner we played a few hands with Phil and Rodney. Looked in at the 11.30pm barbeque but it is pointless eating at that time of night.

Monday 30 March – At Sea – 29C Hot but clouded over a bit later



Phil & Rodney



Passing Point Zero

Appearances are deceiving; we have two new best friends, the friendly, gentle giants Phil and Rodney. Yoga and Bridge but no gym today, we need a rest. Tony showed us how to put people into our paintings. Yet another visit from King Neptune as we were once again about to cross the equator but this was a very special time as it was at Point Zero, zero degrees longitude and zero degrees latitude. There was lots of fun and frolics by the pool with all those found guilty of crimes against the Black Watch having to kiss the octopus. A few baby dolphins gave a display just at the right time. The Captain, who is shy and good looking got away without being thrown into the pool this time. Brave Yorkshire Mike answered the call for someone to battle with the Guest Relations Manager whilst balanced on a beam over the pool. He didn't put up a very good fight as he was knocked off almost immediately. His lack of stamina was probably a result of too much ballroom dancing. Lots of Bridge practice with Nan and Wendy before lunch and Phil and Rodney after the Thai supper. Rodney doesn't drive anymore, whilst giving the old ladies of the Rottingdean Bridge Club a lift home he engaged in the wrong gear and reversed at speed into a large tree. The women were overcome and ended up on the floor after wetting themselves. Rodney only has one working eye and is not in good shape at all!!



The chef with the octopus on his head



Ruth & Mike

Tuesday 31 March – Takoradi, Ghani – The Gold Coast, The White Man's Grave – 33C humid & hazy



A Township



Cape Coast Castle with the dungeons

Ghana was once quite a wealthy country by West African standards but they haven't done too well since independence. One of the main agriculture exports is cocoa but the price fluctuates a lot, they also produce gold but that price also fluctuates. Despite having had 3 military coups it is surprisingly stable and one of the safest of the African countries. Because of the unexpected visa cost and expensive excursions only 100 of the 750 passengers went ashore. Rick would have been quite content to stay on board and play Bridge all day but I decided to take the tour as we may never come here again and nine days at sea was possibly a bit much when I was feeling homesick,



View from castle at Elmina Castle



Actors portraying Ghana's history especially slavery

A police escort all day helped us through the traffic jams. We saw a lot of poverty and many shanty towns with shacks for houses. First stop was Cape Coast Castle which for some years was a holding place for the slaves before they were shipped off to the West Indies. We went into the male dungeons where up to 1500 men were kept for 60 – 80 days in almost darkness, with just one meal a day. It's difficult to believe that any could survive the dreadful conditions. We stopped at the village of Duakor, a typical fishing community of mud huts with thatched roofs where we were shown how they smoke the fish and prepare gari (grated cassava) that is their main source of carbohydrate. We met the local chief and one of his elders performed a traditional welcome ceremony. An elder who was wearing some very fashionable sunglasses asked several people for their email address. We were told to expect this as despite being very poor many adults and children have access to the internet. The local school children, all looking very smart in their uniforms, entertained us with some singing and dancing. The other children were excited and waved to us from their classrooms. It was really hot and humid and our clothes were soaked. A superb lunch was held in the picturesque Coconut Grove Beach Resort. We sat with Nan and her husband Lesley. Amazing coincidence is that he keeps his bees in Bill Miller's garden. Bill is the ex MD of Prestwick Circuits. Some professional entertainers portrayed Ghana's history through dance. It was very realistic and moving with lots of screaming that frightened the life out of me. We stopped at Elmina Castle to take some photographs. Tuesday is the day the fishermen do not go out to sea so there were dozens of fishing boats although not many with outboard motors lined up in the harbours. On our way back to the ship it somehow didn't seem right when our police escort moved the traffic aside to let us speed through - sort of make way for the white

man. Ghana is a very poor but colourful country and I am so pleased we had a chance to see a part of the real Africa.



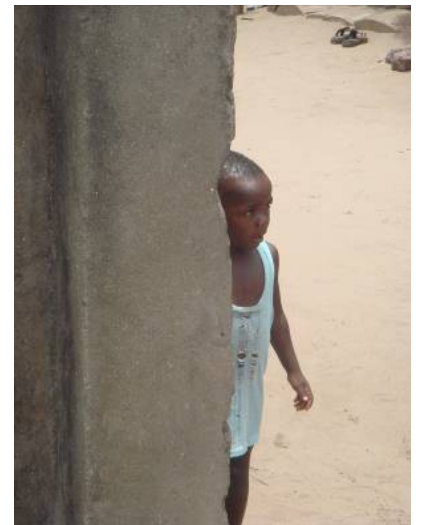
Back on the ship the others were frustrated that as they didn't have a visa they weren't even able to visit the street vendors and small stalls who had laid their wares out by the ship inside the dock area. Doreen, her husband and two Americans were very enterprising and hired a taxi for the day for \$40 and followed our coach. They spent some time in Takoradi market where the locals were fascinated by her grey hair; this is not surprising as half the population are under 15. As she was recounting her day Dennis, the obnoxious Canadian Indian went past. Doreen went into fits of giggles and said that the other day after eyeing up her friend he thought she should know that he was bisexual. I don't think Doreen knows what that is as later in the lift he was flirting with her and brushing up against her friend so she now thinks perhaps he wants to have both of them at the same time!!! He is absolutely awful and so full of himself, no wonder he is having to holiday alone.



Selling hot cross buns



Duakor village house



Wednesday 1 April – At Sea – 27C Rain and cloud

Overslept and missed pilates. Bridge lesson then full gym session. Rick dropped me in it today "As it's raining why don't we miss art and play a few games with the beginners, it will be good practice". Next thing I know I am committed to a real tournament with **novices**, not beginners and have to play for at least two more afternoons as it's the best out of five. Have to admit even Rick came out in a sweat; we managed to win only 4 games out of 15 and are bound to come last. Had a drink in the Observatory with Wendy and her husband who were celebrating their 42nd wedding anniversary. More Bridge practice with Rodney and Phil after supper. Latest gossip is that the Canadian Indian Dennis has been caught cheating twice and has been banned from Bridge.

Thursday 2 April – At Sea 30C Sunny but clouded over later

On the way to breakfast there was someone lying on the floor in the corridor with the Doctor and Nurse in attendance, Rick didn't think he was dead. No gym today as we are fed up of aching all over, it's every other day from now on. Its Bridge, Bridge and more Bridge !!! Rick has spent nearly all day playing it and I have spent almost as long. Today's tournament was not so frightening; the pressure is off as we know we are going to come last. Formal Night and met Jean (generally known as Mrs Bouquet) and John (Spy Novelist) in the Observatory and had dinner with them. A practice game before bed. Biggest surprise of the day is that after checking the scores we find we have gone from bottom to third!!

Friday 3 April – At Sea – 24C Sun with wind

Yoga and double gym session. Then it's Bridge, Bridge and more Bridge leaving very little time for anything else. Everyone is impressed with how well I am doing especially after so few lessons. Rick is trying to test me at every opportunity and has even written me out a crib sheet. It was the Black Watch Annual Country Fayre to raise money for Orphanages in Thailand and the Philippines. The theatre was full of stalls, games of chance like Wheel of Fortune, Fortune Telling, Bric a Brac, raffles, auctions and lots more. The main staircase was lined with unwanted coins and everyone seemed to be enjoying the village fete atmosphere. Back to Bridge, the tournament wasn't being continued today because of the fayre and the afternoon session was supposed to be friendly – take it from me there is no such thing as a friendly. The more you learn about the game the more difficult it is, I went brain dead at one time and couldn't even remember what clubs were called. I kept wanting to call them "cherry trees", and of course as soon as you lose your train of thought the game has moved on too fast. After supper we had a few hands with Phil and Rodney but I was tired and my brain was overflowing. We're both dreaming about playing cards, disturbing but not quite a nightmare!

Saturday 4 April – 25C Sunny but quite windy

Another day dominated by the evil game but at least it is our rest day from the gym giving us a couple of hours free to sit outside in the sun. It was very pleasant as the wind caused a spray that kept the temperature down. I think Rick is beginning to realise that he is becoming obsessed with the game and opted out of the advanced lesson. Howard who comes to the beginners' lesson with us is such a sweetie. At one point in the game we said that he should have called "Alert", so he did, loudly, and nearly had us all rushing for the lifeboats. Day 3 of the Black Watch Bridge Club Championship. We missed the staff Tug-of-War. Gladdin has given up the booze for Lent and thinks he has lost about a stone. He and Ramesh were expecting us to be more lively as they keep saying Lyn and Pete (they were on the last World Cruise) used to spend quite a bit of time in the Observatory and Lido bars, hence the 40 page bar bill. We are on the homeward run now with only Cape Verde, Tenerife and Lisbon to go. I think we have travelled about 30,000 miles already not too good for our carbon footprint. Gosh, just checked the scores and we are still third, what's going on!!!

Sunday 5 April – Mindelo, St Vincent, Cape Verde - 25C – Lovely Sunny Day

We visited here on our way to Brazil in Nov 07 and thought it was a dump so this time we booked a tour, the one and only tour as it's not a very big island. Cape Verde is an archipelago off the western coast of Africa that was uninhabited until it was colonized by the Portuguese in 1460. There are 10 main islands and 8 islets, all are volcanic but only one, Fogo, has an active volcano. They gained their independence from

Portugal in 1975 but still retain strong links. I really don't think that many of the islands that we have visited have gained much from being independent. The real problem with St Vincent is that it has very little rain, it hasn't rained here for six months and in 1820 they went 18 years without any rain and 20,000 people died. Consequently, nothing much grows and they have to depend on fishing and the service industry. Water is now supplied by a desalination plant but it is expensive. However, there are bare football pitches and believe it or not there are two golf courses, one reputed to be the largest golf course in the world without grass. There is sunshine and wind all year round making it a place where world windsurfing records have been set.



One of the main streets in Mindelo



Drying the fish

A rattling old bus took us to several stops in the town but as it was Sunday nothing much was open. There are a few run down colonial buildings one of which houses the fish market. We drove up to a disused 17th century fort, built to ward off the pirates, where we had a fantastic view of Mindelo and the harbour. On our way to Catfish Bay we drove up a winding road through a lunar landscape towards Mount Cape Verde. I cannot for the life of me think why anyone would want to live in such an isolated, bare, windy place with just an odd house or goat for company. They are trying to promote Cape Verde as a holiday destination and there is some quite up-market residential development in the sandy Catfish Bay and Sao Pedro. There seem to be only 2 main sandy beaches but the bars and cafes there are only open at the weekends as there are not enough tourists to support them during the week. The beach at Catfish Bay was packed with locals who had set up their gazebos, tents and volley ball courts. We were ushered off into a cordoned off part of the beach where we were offered drinks and canapés and where you could have your photograph taken with a few locals dressed in carnival costumes. We found a hotel in the town to do our emails. There are lots of families where the men work abroad and send money back leaving the wives to cope on their own. We were constantly bothered by young boys begging for money and you also have to beware of pickpockets. We enjoyed our trip but I think it will be some years before it becomes a successful holiday location. However, there are some other Cape Verde Islands that are green in parts with sandy beaches. Back on board an ice cream stall had been set up and as the weather was fantastic we enjoyed the last couple of hours of sun. We had an early night with no cards.



The lunar landscape on way to Mount Cape Verde



View of Mindelo from the Old Del Rey Fort

Monday 6 April – At Sea – 24C – Sunny with a little cloud and wind

We are crossing boundaries a bit as the people who go to art or the gym don't usually play Bridge. The Bridge players are mostly WI types with names like Dotty, Bendy, Nan or Eileen. Dennis has been reinstated to the Bridge Club, he may not have been cheating after all, it may be that he plays an American system, either way he is still not popular. Actually, not sure that we might go the same way as Howard has us in fits and it must be disruptive to the other players. The cards come pre-prepared to give us a chance to practice what we have been taught in the lesson. You start off with a whole set of a suit, take out your cards from your list and pass the remainder to the next person. Howard got very excited and said he had a wonderful hand, a whole set of Hearts all but the Ace. He didn't seem to realise he should just take out what's on his list. We are all frantically looking for the Ace, he started to use his list as a pretend card but we are stopped by the Gordon the Tutor who gives us another board. Just as we start the next game Rick found the Ace on the floor by Howard, Very slow Wendy and I were just wetting ourselves laughing and Howard is still on about his supposedly wonderful hand of Hearts. The Hostesses are not very sophisticated but very girly. Nancy and Sarah come to mind, Nancy is a scream when hosting a quiz as she can't pronounce a lot of the words, she even got in a muddle serving the ice cream on deck yesterday. They are all very friendly and bubbly and especially good with Sean, a Downs Syndrome man. They include him in lots of the deck games and he even cut the ribbon to open one event. Round 4 of the Black Watch Bridge Championship, disaster we are now last!! After dinner played a few hands with Rodney and Phil, they are just lovely guys.

Tuesday 7 April – At Sea – 18C cloudy and windy with the odd shower

Ricks says he has been dreaming cards all night again, I am having the same trouble, and also there aren't any white people in my dreams. Lost another hour and felt too tired to make the early yoga class. During this mornings Bridge lesson Howard once again had us splitting our sides with laughter. He and Wendy are frustratingly slow. Every few minutes Howard says things like "How extraordinary" and "Oh, that's so clever"; he gets all the cards muddled up and has a memory like a sieve. I must try to stop laughing because I don't want to put him off; he is the highlight of my day. I am enjoying the Bridge but most of them are very serious and I don't hear much laughter. They made about £6500 for the Orphanages at the Country Fayre the other day; an excellent result. Another gym session but I missed out the weights as everything aches; I'm not too sure about all this exercise. We are on Deck 4 and on our way up to the gym on Deck 10 our legs still go at Deck 7. After today's session one of my knees went out of joint and I thought I may have to borrow someone's stick. I thought I played reasonably well in the tournament today but we didn't get many points and are back down to second to bottom. The temperature has dropped quite a bit and it will soon be time to bring out the thicker clothes. The wind got up this afternoon but we managed to keep Rick distracted and stopped him taking to his bed. Played with Rodney and Phil after dinner with Dotty looking on. The rough sea has made the ship slow right down and we maybe late for our arrival in Tenerife tomorrow.

Wednesday 8 April – Santa Cruz, Tenerife



It was a rough night but we've made it in time. We've been to Tenerife many times but just to laze about so it will be interesting to treat this visit in the same way as other ports. In fact because of the heavy traffic and the difficulty in parking we have only made it to Santa Cruz on a couple of occasions. By now we have definitely circled the world, if you remember our first port of call was Grand Canary. The Canaries are oceanic islands and at 12,200 feet Mount Teide is the third largest volcano in the world, it last erupted just

over 100 years ago. When humans first arrived around 3000 BC they would have found no terrestrial animals as the Canaries have never been part of a continent. These were Stone Age people but they must have been farmers growing crops and raising domestic animals as there were no animals to hunt. In the 1400's the Spanish had a lot of trouble conquering them and unfortunately they didn't treat the indigenous people very well and they became extinct very quickly. These people, the Guanches must have arrived by boat, the shortest crossing was about 60 miles and they had to bring animals. The most likely way was by Egyptian raft. They built step pyramids and mummified their dead. Santa Cruz has grown up from a small port serving the nearby town of La Laguna, which it has since usurped as the islands capital and is now an industrial and commercial centre. Nelson lost a battle and an arm here in 1797. There is a tram system that runs between La Laguna and Santa Cruz. It is the greenest tram system in the world powered from 10 turbines.

We have had such a great day, the sun shone for us and Tenerife takes a lot of beating. Had a look at the impressive Opera House and then took the tram to La Laguna, the 35 minutes journey each way only cost 2euros 45. Had a drink in one of the cafes and looked at the shops. Such lovely clothes, oh I wish I were young and thin again. Took the tram back to Santa Cruz and when the train lurched forward Rick was momentarily plunged into darkness by a pair of magnificent breasts. They eventually settled in the seat opposite him and he had to spend the rest of the journey averting his eyes but now and again surreptitiously giving them the odd glance. We just had time to sit in the sun at a café in Santa Cruz and enjoy a drink and snack.

I'm not homesick any more as there is only one more stop, Lisbon, before we arrive back home on Easter Monday. Rick is motivated to do loads of jobs at home, having a bathroom to himself, painting pictures of Arundel and of course he can go back to his Internet Betting. I am relying on that in these austere times to keep me in the manner to which I have become accustomed.



Not the usual wooden carving & necklaces here just cigarettes & alcohol -



Mike & Ruth after a lovely day out

Thursday 9 April – At Sea – 17C Sunny and Cloud

The breakfast table of 4 - Ray, Rosemary, Henry and Pat said "What's all this frivolity coming from the Bridge class, it's unheard off. " As you are now probably well aware, piracy is becoming a real problem, there has been something like 16 pirate attacks near Somalia in the last month compared to 2 each of the previous two months. We had security boats shadowing us for a while. Played Bridge nearly all day but I seem to be going backwards, the more you know the more you get confused. We left poor Howard to sink or swim with someone else. Ricks questioning his follow-up body composition analysis, he has lost 4 inches off his hips. We knew he had lost something because he now needs a belt and his legs are thinner but the readings indicate that he has more fat than before. I'm not going to even bother going there, I know I am full of fat and toxins and that the Bridget Jones knickers will be out for a while longer. Gave Bridge a miss in the evening because as I wanted to see Andy Robley's last show. Checked the scores for today and we are delighted that we are third.

Friday 10 April – Lisbon – 14C Cold wind and showers



It's easy to think that we have been to so many other cities, let's not bother with Lisbon, been there before, but we are back into air conditioned buses, the euro, wonderful buildings and lots of history. Portugal was under Roman rule from 205BC, ruled by a series of Germanic tribes from the 5th century, captured by the Moors in the 8th century and conquered by the Christians in 1147. It was Spain and Portugal that opened up the world for us all; they were first to discover many of the places we have visited on this Round the World Cruise. The Black Watch went under the 25th April Bridge with a little to spare and the Statue of Jesus Christ The Redeemer in the distance.



The old part of the city



One of the buildings covered in beautiful tiles

In 1755 a great earthquake shattered Lisbon, many buildings fell down, then the fires started and to make matters worse in came a Tsunami. Consequently, there isn't very much to predate 1755 but Portugal was wealthy at that time and rebuilt the city in a grand manner.



The Elevator



The Bullring

We started out by walking through the arch into the old part of the city with its patterned cobbled streets and street vendors. Quite soon we found ourselves in a square where we boarded one of the open top buses for a tour. The city has very grand buildings, lots of them fronted with tiles and intricate carvings and statues. It was quite breezy and chilly on top of the bus and it wasn't long before we had a heavy shower and everyone

apart from Rick and another cruise passenger squashed into the lower deck. We didn't get off the bus because being Good Friday everywhere was packed with tourists and there were long queues at the main attractions. We passed The Belem Tower (Portuguese for Bethlehem) built in the 16C at the mouth of the harbour that was once a landmark for many of the early explorers. Here we also saw the Monument to the Discoveries and the Geronimus Monastery, a survivor of the earthquake and the burial place of Vasco Da Gama, one of Portugal's most famous navigators. The tour cost 15 euros each and the commentary was a little disappointing, but we were able to use the same tickets for the famous old elevator that took us into another area of shops, restaurants and theatres. I suppose it was a typical Spring day but I was quite cold and went back to the ship for lunch and to put on some warmer clothes. We are having to gradually acclimatize ourselves to the lower temperatures. Had a couple of rounds of cards with the boys, Rodney has been eating Easter eggs all afternoon and Phil is expecting him to go into a diabetic coma later. Did a bit of packing as Rick is worried that he will be bed-bound as we cross the Bay of Biscay.



Geronimus Monastery



View from the Elevator

Saturday 11 April – At Sea 12C – sea a bit choppy



Canon Rodney & Rosemary – Spy Novelist & Mrs Bucket



Crazy Doreen & husband

Much colder, those bikinis won't be coming out again on this trip. Last night's comedian, John Martin was really good, he started off telling loads of Saga jokes. These are all I can remember: SAGA – sex annually generally August. He likes World Cruises because he can ask any women if she is going all the way. He says to an old lady "I like your blue corduroy trousers", she says "they are my veins". Chat up line: "Where have you been for most of my life" "Well, I wasn't born for most of it". The Saga staff even chew your food for you. Our favourite one may be a bit risqué for some of you: The FBI have now given Bill Clinton the all clear about the stains on Monica Lewinsky's dress, it now been proved to be soup – cock-a-leekie!! We copied some of our photos onto a disc for a couple who had their cameras stolen in Lisbon. They weren't only ones to lose something, we had been warned to beware of pickpockets. We took the morning off as I had an appointment with the androgynous hairdresser who scalped Rick the other day. The afternoon Bridge session was more relaxed hence we are back to the second to bottom position. Sat all wrapped up on deck for an hour in the sun chatting to Very Slow Wendy. She is setting a bad example for us other girls by taking her husband breakfast in bed and letting him spend all afternoon watching the

football. Once again it was the Captain's Farewell Party, the fourth we have been to but this time it really is "goodbye". Wendy has a fantastic ostrich feather handbag that she bought in South Africa, I wish I had bought the fur one I had been eyeing up, Kipper Girl bought two. Mrs Bucket and her husband the Spy Novelist invited us to dine with them again and even bought the wine. It was a most pleasant evening after which we met Phil in the Card Room and played Bridge until 1.30 am. Poor old Rodney stayed in his cabin as he was not feeling too well. Phil is Secretary of the Papillion Dogs Club for the South of England and next month he is off to Belgium to judge a dog show. It was then time to dance the night away in the Lido Bar until we finally gave in at 3.30 a.m. They were taking bets as to whether I was going to pop out of the top of my dress!



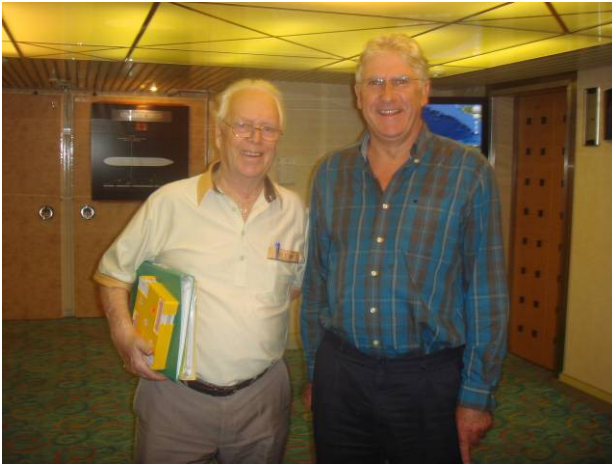
Mavis - Crafts teacher



Michael - Gym Manager

Sunday 12 April – At Sea

We are sailing through the Bay of Biscay and much to Rick's relief the sea is like a millpond. It doesn't seem like Easter so we thought we would attend the Easter Service and see Canon Rodney and his lager swilling wife Rosemary in action. Mrs Bucket was a bit over enthusiastic and kept raising her arm whilst singing "Alleluia". Rick has Googled Lord Asa Briggs and he is the most important broadcasting historian in Britain. He served in the Intelligence Corps and during the war he worked at Bletchley Park deciphering Enigma machine messages. He is a little man and quite unsteady on his feet. Rick says that the biggest thing this cruise has taught him is that old people are such good company. Most of them have lived very full and interesting lives and have lots of stories to tell. They are determined to enjoy themselves and keep their minds and bodies active. The quizzes are always full and despite there being a few sticks and buggies on board, many struggle up to the gym to do what they can. There are also lots of oldies who are in good shape and are regular gym attendees. The late sitting entertainment doesn't finish until 11.30 p.m., this is followed by ballroom dancing and if they are still keen its onto the Lido Bar that is often still going strong until 4am. Sweet smelling Doreen refuses to go into the Braemar Lounge where the pianist Rex never finishes a tune, as she thinks it is full of people waiting for God. Many of the staff are excited at the prospect of meeting their families again. Well, maybe not Sing, our Wine Waiter who is not sure what to expect as last time he went home and saw his brother he was told to call him sister from now on. Sing then gave us a demonstration on his brother/sister's new profile. We are the most popular members of the Novice Bridge Club only because we got absolutely thrashed today and gave away hundreds of points. We mentioned that perhaps we will join a local club but they all advised us against that as it's all too serious. They said look at the serious players in the next room, a fight practically broke out with the Canadian Indian two days in a row. The women are real bitches and the men are ruthless except for our Rodney and Phil. The final evening cabaret was quite spectacular and starred all the entertainers. There were lots of email addresses exchanging and lots of goodbyes to new friends made. It's also goodbye to the staff, some of whom we have got to know well, and some with such wonderful names like: Joyful, Happiness, Apple and Lovely. I can't believe this is our last night. It appears you are never too old for a bit of bed hopping and romance. At least four lucky people have fallen in love during the cruise and are expecting it to last. I haven't included Dance Host Ted's little romance as I think he will find someone new to flirt with on every cruise.



Gordon – Bridge Instructor



James (excellent Artist) & Lesley & Tony – Art Teacher & Rae

Monday 13 April – Southampton – An absolutely beautiful day

We arrived in Southampton in thick fog which soon cleared. We left the ship at 9am, were in the taxi at 9.15am and home by 10.30am. It was so easy and even better, no jet lag.



Mari – our Little Dorrit



Lito & Dante – our waiters

I expect you are wondering what the best place we have visited, and possibly what was the worst. Well, I have been thinking about it and everywhere has been worth visiting. If you want fantastic scenery, the Pacific Ocean Islands take a bit of beating, If its modern cities, then its Australia, it's a young persons country with loads of opportunities. Visiting the poorer countries, of which there are many, makes us appreciate how much we have and how lucky we are despite having to put up with the likes of Gordon Brown. We fell in love with Cape Town and in fact Africa is now firmly on our list of places to visit again. It's all about people though; it was wonderful to see Lorne, Carolyn and Homer and to explore Sydney with them. Even though we didn't like Durban we had a great time catching up with Jess and Lynn. I loved Rarotonga, it was almost paradise but you would get fed up being there all the time. One of the best tours was "swimming with the stingrays" in Antigua, perhaps this was a result of the amount of rum punch that was consumed. However, my heart is in Europe with its seasons, magnificent buildings, history and green fields. I adore France and Italy, just driving through the beautiful countryside, villages and walled cities, it still appears full of character and very foreign. It's lovely to be back home where Spring has definitely sprung, and the air is sweet with the smell of blossom and despite the recession I feel full of optimism.

We have travelled 29,799 nautical miles or 34,292 imperial miles.

I hope you have enjoyed cruising with us!!!!

