

Searching for Kiwis, Kangaroos, and Coconuts

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Prologue

“Please come,” she cajoled.

“I really am not interested,” he replied.

“You’ll love it,” was her rejoinder.

“I don’t think so,” he answered.

“But I *really* want to go there. I have always wanted to go there,” she came back with.

“You can go yourself. You’ve gone on trips alone before,” he explained.

“But I really want your company,” she pleaded.

“It’s a 21 hour flight. NO WAY!” he said, with some emphasis.

This went on at intervals for several months. Then one day, he was searching the Web online, just casually looking at ocean cruises which were a mode of transport that they had recently started experiencing, and he discovered a way to make his wife happy with a minimum of hardship for himself.

Thus, the *Great Pacific Adventure* was born.

“She” is my lovely wife, Donnie. Donnie really, really wanted to go to Australia. As she said, “It’s at the top of my Bucket List.” I wasn’t all that interested in Australia, and it is really a 21 hour flight to get there, or longer. I used to love flying, but the airlines have made that a thing of the past, and after our Japan trip where it was a 14 hour flight one way, I decided I am not going on flights longer than about 9 hours, and even that isn’t really something I want to do. Also, if you read up on Australia, you will find that the main tourist attractions are: beaches, water sports, camping, hiking, surfing, swimming, outdoor activities, etc. Anyone who knows me will say, “Uh... No. Not Jeff... outdoors... water sports... camping... wrong guy.” So Australia wasn’t in my “Bucket List”. It was more probably in my “Trash Basket List”, but Donnie kept pleading, and then I discovered the solution. Here it is in a nutshell...

There is a 20 day cruise on the Princess Cruise Line that leaves from Los Angeles and stops at...

Honolulu, Hawaii

Kauai, Hawaii

Tahiti, French Polynesia

Moorea, French Polynesia

Pago Pago, American Samoa

Auckland, New Zealand

Then, 9 days later, Princess has something called a CruiseTour, which is first a cruise around New Zealand, leaving from Auckland and stopping at...

Tauranga, New Zealand
Wellington, New Zealand
Akaroa, New Zealand
Dunedin, New Zealand;
Sailing through the Fjordland National Park
Hobart, Tasmania, Australia
Sydney, Australia

Then there is the tour part of the CruiseTour which takes us from Sydney to...

Ayers Rock (now called Uluru)
Alice Springs
Darwin
Cairns and the Great Barrier Reef

and then back to Sydney. Then 15 days later, Holland America Cruise Line has a cruise that leaves Sydney and stops at...

Noumea, New Caledonia
Easo, New Caledonia
Mystery Island, Vanuatu
Port Denarau, Fiji
Suva, Fiji
Apia, Samoa
Pago Pago, American Samoa, again
Honolulu, Hawaii, again
Lahaina, Hawaii

and back to LA.

Busy, isn't it. The advantages of this impressive scenario are:

This would mean only a 6 hour flight from NY to LA and 6 hours from LA to NY – no 21 hour flights. Donnie gets to see Australia. We get to see places that we would never have imagined we would see like Fiji and Pago Pago (*twice*). We cross the International Date Line (*twice*) and the Equator (*twice*), again something we never imagined doing. We get to visit 8 countries we have never visited: French Polynesia, American Samoa, Australia, New Zealand, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Samoa. We get to see Hawaii, briefly, which we have wanted to do for some time. Ah, yes, the major advantage: Donnie will be happy. At least until we get back. Then she

already has the next great adventure planned, booked, and paid for. More about that when this one is over.

However there are downsides, which are:

The total trip duration is almost exactly 90 days – three months! That’s a long time to be away. There are lots of issues and problems that have to be dealt with that don’t come up on shorter trips. For example: bills, prescriptions, the amount and types of clothing to pack, etc. Then there’s the cost. If you read one of my previous epics, called “Searching for the Vikings” you might remember that I said that it cost “Big Bucks”. Compared to this extravagance, that one was cheap. I refuse to mention a number. Don’t ask. If I said “guess” you would guess way too low. As I have said before, we are crazy. Even I didn’t realize how crazy.

There you have it. It’s booked and paid for. We’re going. Unfortunately, the time from when we signed up to the actual departure is 5 and 1/2 months. That leaves way too much time for planning, investigating, *obsessing*. We have been doing all three. We have made lists: ‘To Do’ lists, shopping lists, packing lists, etc. As I write this magnificent sentence, there is still a month to go.

Wish us luck.

Chapter One – Heading South

Saturday, September 22 – The Adventure Begins

Finally the big day arrived. The last week in particular was hell. All of the preparation, research, obsessing, etc., had been completed and so we were just *waiting*.

The trip from our house in Northern Westchester, NY to the port of Long Beach, CA almost couldn't have been easier. This is very unusual. Our airport limo arrived fifteen minutes early. Our usual driver, Roberto couldn't make it, so they sent a substitute driver. Her name was Tiffany. She was a slim, almost willowy, young Hispanic woman in a black dress and high heels! Since we had to pack enough clothes for ninety days and many different climates, our luggage was heavy and so I offered to help her lift our bags into the trunk, but she declined my help and almost effortlessly loaded them into the limousine.

Usually the trip from our house to JFK airport takes anywhere from 1.5 hours to as much as 2.5 hours if the traffic is bad. Tiffany made it in one hour, and she wasn't driving fast. After we arrived at the airport, we breezed through luggage drop-off and security. Donnie, my lovely wife, has access to some airport lounges because of her premium credit card, so we went to something called the Wingtip lounge where we had free coffee, soft drinks and snacks. We could have even had free booze if we wanted it. That's nice. Since we guessed that the lounge wasn't close to our gate, we left the lounge about 50 minutes before the departure time, since, in our experience, domestic flights start boarding about a half-hour before departure. It was good that we did. They started boarding 45 minutes before the scheduled departure time and they even closed the door and pulled away from the gate 5 minutes before the scheduled time, something we had never experienced.

The flight was quite smooth and uneventful, which is very much what one wants from an airplane flight. "Events" on an airplane are almost always not pleasant. The only slight hiccup to the whole journey was a delay at baggage claim, which they actually apologized for. We took a taxi to the hotel in Long Beach, checked in, and eventually had a light dinner in the hotel restaurant. It was a very acceptable start to our adventure.

Sunday, September 23 – Long Beach, CA. – Cruise 1 – Day 1

We awoke early and did our morning ablutions (a word I like which I borrowed from the Elizabeth Peters "Amelia Peabody" Egyptian mystery books). We relaxed for a while in the hotel room and checked out about 11 AM. We had a very crazy taxi driver to take us to the cruise port. He drove 80 mph in a construction zone and 70 mph in a 45 mph zone! I actually saw his speedometer. We arrived at the port at 11:30, thankful to be alive.

I won't go into a diatribe about the Princess Cruise Line boarding process, but we weren't onboard the ship until 1:00 PM, an hour and a half after arriving at the terminal. On other cruise lines, this process took ten minutes. Once onboard we found our stateroom and dropped off our carry-on bags. Our luggage was not there yet but arrived only a few minutes later. We went and had an acceptable lunch in the "Horizon Court" buffet. All the cruise ships give names to their various eating locations. The buffet seemed small and cramped compared to our previous cruise experiences. We wandered around the ship, exploring and starting to learn what was where. At one point we had some mediocre soft-serve ice cream. We were both relieved that the free ice cream was so poor. On one of our cruises, the free ice cream they had was really, really good and was right near the exit of the buffet so we indulged way too often. This time it was easy to avoid.

When they announced the mandatory muster drill we had to go back to our stateroom to determine what muster station we were assigned to. While in the room we met our Philippine room steward who claimed his first name was Melvin (really?). We then attended the muster drill in our muster station which turned out to be the theater. After the drill we did some more wandering.

Then we went back to our stateroom to have the glasses of "Welcome Aboard" Champagne that Melvin had provided. We went on deck for the sail away party and Donnie took her usual huge number of pictures while the ship pulled away from the dock and headed out to sea. We went to the early show in the theater which had our singing cruise director, John who was from Trinidad/Tobago and had dreadlocks, and also a comedian.

We had a nice dinner in our dining room with three engaging couples. For the first time of many, we had to set the clocks back one hour tonight, which involved our watches, our smart phones and our cameras. There are too damn many "smart" devices in our lives that have to know what date and time it is. I didn't even bother changing the time on our laptops. There was some movement of ship this evening, making it a little tricky to walk around or even stand.

Monday, September 24 – September 27 – At Sea – Cruise 1 – Days 2 – 5

We had four days at sea before we docked in Honolulu. Every sea day we participated in the morning and afternoon trivia contests. On the first day we met some people who joined us in a trivia team. There was a nice female couple from Queensland, Australia, Mel (Melissa) and Louise, who was originally from New Zealand, and another couple Dee (Delores) and her friend Gene, both from Chicago. On subsequent days we got to know them all. Mel and Louise were a lot of fun. They are both into Science Fiction, Star Wars, Dr. Who, etc. Mel is a mining engineer and Louise does something in health care. They are probably about 50, although Louise has a very young face. Dee and Gene are older, possibly in their late 70's or 80's, but I'm not a good judge. Louise has white hair with some multicolored streaks on one side that she said she did herself. Donnie took a picture to send to our granddaughter, Emily, who likes to dye her hair.

During one trivia contest one of the questions was about which religion was recently added to the census multiple-choice list in Australia and Louise knew the answer because she answered the census by checking off Jedi! May the Force be with her. One of the pre-printed religion choices in the Australia census questionnaire is Jedi – very cool. A fairly large number of Aussie’s have selected this – may the force be with them too. Louise was even wearing a Star Wars dress with an abundance of symbols from the movies. Also, for you Dr. Who fans, one of Louise’s daughters is named Tegan. You might remember who that was. She was another Australian.

Most days we had breakfast in the one dining room that was open for breakfast, because the one breakfast we tried in the buffet wasn’t very good. For most of our meals in the dining rooms we took the option to share a large table with others, rather than have to wait for a table for two. We met and talked with a lot of other cruisers, many of whom were from Australia and New Zealand. Almost all of the people we talked to, either at meals or elsewhere were very nice and friendly, unlike one of our previous cruises which had a lot of rude and unfriendly people.

We tried the pizza that they made fresh in the pizza station outside, right near one of the pools, and surprisingly, the pizza was very good. I’d say it was as good as many of the pizzerias in our home town, or even many in Manhattan. It wasn’t quite as good as the best of them though. The pizza on our previous cruises has ranged from mediocre to terrible. It was sufficiently good that we had pizza for lunch several times.

I had read some online reviews about the ship, the Golden Princess, which had complained about non-functioning toilets in some staterooms. Sure enough, on our second sea day our toilet was clogged. We notified our steward, and that afternoon it was working again. The next morning, however, it was clogged again. This time we notified our room steward, and later complained, politely, to the front desk. After that, it was fixed and as I wrote this it worked for over a week. My fingers were crossed.

Friday, September 28 – Honolulu, Oahu, Hawaii, USA – Cruise 1 – Day 6

We awoke very early because today we were docked in Honolulu Hawaii. We went on deck to see the sunrise but It was partly cloudy and very humid. Instead of a full breakfast we just got coffee and a donut from the International Cafe which is a coffee bar in the ship’s atrium that also serves pastries, sandwiches and salads. Except for the fancy coffee, everything else is complimentary, and for good measure, the cafe is open twenty-four hours a day.

We left the ship about 8:45, so naturally the rain started about 9:00. We walked around a bit and Donnie suggested we take the guided tour of the Iolani Palace which is the only Royal Palace in the United States. The tour took about an hour and the volunteer tour guide was very good. The guide described a lot about Hawaiian history, and the palace interior was quite elegant and well

preserved. Many things had been restored though and were not original. Surprisingly, pictures were allowed. After the tour, luckily, the rain had stopped.

Donnie wanted to buy some gifts for our granddaughters (this, being a permanent desire, need not be mentioned again, so I won't), so we chose to take a bus to the big Honolulu shopping mall we had been told about. We bought day passes on the bus since they only cost as much as two rides. The bus was especially well air conditioned, so it was cool and dry inside, as opposed to warm and very humid outdoors. We got to the mall and discovered that it just had the same old major corporate chain stores with no places where Donnie would find local crafts or tchotchkes for the girls. Also, it was an outdoor mall so it was not air conditioned.

Being thirsty, we just got sodas in the big crowded food court and then left the mall and walked few blocks toward Waikiki and ended up at the huge, very busy Hilton Hawaiian Village hotel where we had lunch just off Waikiki beach in one of the semi-outdoor Hilton restaurants. It was blocked off by netting to keep the birds out, but they got in anyway and there were quite a few birds inside flying around and walking around and occasionally landing on a table that hadn't yet been cleared off after the diners left and feasting on the leftovers.

During lunch Donnie called our relatives who were amazed to hear from us. Modern technology does have some advantages. A phone call from Honolulu to New York works perfectly and costs no more than a local call. When we were young whippersnappers, phone calls that went more than a few dozen miles were called "Long Distance Calls" and could cost a fortune, so you made them only when necessary and talked quickly. A phone call from Hawaii to New York would probably have been very noisy, if it worked at all.

After lunch we walked along Waikiki beach and took pictures of Diamond Head, which is the remains of yet another volcano. At one point we walked out on a small, low, concrete pier where the very clear water was quite shallow and only a couple of feet away from us we saw a very large sea turtle who would occasionally surface for a breath. We also saw some unusual looking black crabs crawling along the rocks right by our feet.

Finally we took the bus back to the ship terminal. Inside the terminal there was a long line for security. They only had one person checking for photo ID's and cruise cards and then we had to go through X-ray and metal detectors in the terminal instead of on the ship. We finally got back to our stateroom about 4:00, drenched in sweat. It averaged 84 degrees and 75% humidity today. The ship didn't leave Honolulu until 11:00 PM, but sunset was around 6:30 so we went on deck to take some pictures of Honolulu at sunset. Regrettably we were docked in an industrial area that wasn't very photogenic.

Honolulu is a modern city, full of skyscrapers, office buildings, high-rise apartments and huge hotel complexes. Still, it is very pretty with a great many palm trees and tropical plants and flowers everywhere. As we had heard, everybody in Honolulu was very friendly. We will most definitely go back sometime for a longer visit.

Saturday, September 29 – Nawiliwili, Kauai, Hawaii, USA – Cruise 1 – Day 7

We awoke off the coast of Kauai, a smaller Hawaiian island. It was overcast, humid, drizzly and hot. Donnie went down to the cafe and brought back coffee and pastries. A little later we went down to the Casino as we had been directed to meet up there for our excursion. The excursion management was a mess. I won't even bother to describe the chaotic situation that was going on in the terminal building. We finally got on the bus, only ten minutes late. As we drove around the island it was still very overcast and drizzly.

Our bus driver was also our guide. He was a native Hawaiian, and was a very good speaker and was quite engaging and funny. He told us about the wild chickens everywhere on the island, which was very evident before he told us. He drove us to the "Spouting Horn", which is a group of blowholes which spout when the wind and waves are right. The Sun appeared very briefly when we were there. Later the bus stopped for a bathroom break which the driver jokingly called "likiliki" (pronounced like LeakyLeaky, some bathroom humor). Donnie bought some gifts in the gift store where we stopped. Later the driver taught us some Hawaiian. For example, pupu means appetizers and pipi means beef so he said to be sure to order "pipipupu" (peepee poopoo, some more bathroom humor).

Then he drove up a mountain to Waimea canyon which was the advertised highlight of the island and the excursion. As we drove nearer it got cloudier and cloudier. Finally we got to the canyon and managed to snap a few pictures before fog moved in and completely blocked anything. We were the last ones to actually see the canyon that day. Kauai is small, not very developed, but very lush with breathtaking tropical plants, trees, and flowers in great abundance. The homes ranged from little shacks that are given free to true Hawaiian natives to the multi-million dollar houses with a sea view.

We liked Hawaii and we will surely go back. Regrettably, we never got a chance to try Shave Ice or Loko Moko or even a Plate Lunch with Spam – maybe next time. We do stop in Lahaina and Honolulu again on our cruise home.

Sunday, September 30 – Thursday, October 4 – At Sea – Cruise 1 Days 8 -12

There were five sea days before Tahiti. The days were filled with breakfast, morning trivia, lunch, afternoon trivia, dinner. Sometimes we went to the evening shows. Sometimes we didn't.

The one major event was on Tuesday, October 2nd, where, at about 4:30 PM we were no longer pollywogs but officially became shellbacks! For you land-lubbers out there, that means that for the first time we **Crossed The Equator!** We even received certificates commemorating the fact. They had a big silly ceremony on the pool deck where they held a mock "court" and covered the

“convicts” with goo and leftover food and then they threw the Captain into the pool. He was a good sport. It was very silly and too long, but decks fourteen and fifteen were absolutely packed with passengers watching and taking pictures and videos. We, admittedly, were there also. I didn’t take many pictures. I’m embarrassed that I took any.

So far, our adventure had been quite pleasant. There were a couple of minor hiccups, like the blocked toilet and the excursion chaos, but mostly we were pleased with the ship, the staff, the food, and the fellow cruisers. On one of our previous cruises with Princess Cruise Line, we were very turned off by the constant hard-sell. They were constantly trying to sell us things: drinks packages, water bottles, “art”, jewelry, specialty restaurant meals, photographs of ourselves, etc., etc. On this trip there was still quite a bit of that, but it was less intrusive and more low-key, so it didn't bother us much.

We only attended a few of the evening shows. One was a comedian, who was OK, not great. Another was billed as a magic show, but the magician was more of a comedian and talked and joked so much that he only actually did about four “tricks” during the forty-five minute show, and two of those weren’t really what you would call magic. His blonde assistant turned out to be his wife, who was a singer and she sang two songs during the show and she had a very pretty, very strong voice. It was fun, but not really a “magic” show. One of the shows that Donnie had intended to go to was billed as Motown music, but she didn’t go, and later Louise and Mel told us it was terrible.

We attended one trivia contest every morning and every afternoon on sea days, with our team Mel, Louise, Dee and Gene. We did reasonably well, but we hadn't won any yet. Our low was 10 out of 20 and our high was 17 but we were almost always only two or three below the winners. Some of the assistant cruise directors who ran the trivia contests were nasty, asking some impossible questions. One asked the name of the President of Madagascar. Don’t ask me to put the answer here as I forgot it immediately. The president’s last name had about thirty characters. The winner of that contest only got 14 out of 20. We got 11.

Friday, October 5 – Tahiti, French Polynesia – Cruise 1 – Day 13

Today we got to Tahiti! We had never imagined we would *ever* be there. We got up very early because we had to be downstairs ready for our excursion at 8:15. We watched the ship maneuver into port. As before, excursion management was a mess. After waiting in the theater for our group to be called, when they called us we naturally assumed that we would be going down to the gangway to exit the ship. We were wrong. We and a large number of others ended up waiting in the stairwell for a long time. The gangway crew evidently hadn’t finished whatever they had to do in the gangway, but the excursion handling people called several groups to go down prematurely.

Finally we got off the ship and onto our bus, where we found that our tour guide was Australian, and was easier to understand than a native Tahitian, since the Tahitians speak either the Tahitian language or French. The tour was engaging but the guide was in a hurry so we didn't spend much time at the sights. Some of the sights we were supposed to see had been canceled because of construction or some other reasons. Some were kind of boring, like the lone, small "blowhole" that didn't actually blow. We learned from the guide that Tahiti is a semi-independent territory of France. They have their own local government, but they can vote in French presidential elections and France handles the education, health, and defense.

After our tour we went for lunch to a restaurant right across the main road from our ship. There we had scrumptious very fresh fish. The waitress didn't speak much English but we managed to get by with a little English and a little of our high school French. Then we had to go to the post office because Donnie *had* to buy stamps. The post office was very modern and efficient and everybody there was very helpful. Afterward we went to the large Papeete open market. Local people were selling fruits, vegetables, fish, but also souvenirs, T-shirts, and presumably local craft items, although they might have been made in China. Donnie bought some Pareo's, which she tells me are like Sarongs, as gifts. They are just rectangles of cloth with many colorful printed patterns. I'm pretty sure they aren't made in Tahiti.

That evening we elected to do something that was recommended by the ship's port expert and others. We went out to the nighttime food trucks. Near the cruise ship the locals set up a nighttime food truck area with about ten or so various food trucks and a large number of tables and chairs. The locals and the ship's crew frequent the trucks as well as the cruise passengers. Many of the trucks were run by Chinese people. The name Food Truck may be misleading. Most were not the full-kitchen expensive large food trucks that are popular in the US and now many other places. They were little vans that just held the necessary ingredients and equipment for transport. The actual cooking seemed to take place on makeshift gas stoves outside the trucks. In some cases, all the cooking and preparation took place on tables outside the truck. Some of them looked a little "sketchy" as our granddaughter would say.

We wandered around a bit and took some pictures. It was a fascinating experience. We finally made up our minds to try some Chinese food from a truck with a half-faded sign that read "Peking". There was a young waitress, an old man who was cooking meats over a grill fed by a big propane tank, and a middle aged Chinese woman who was doing most of the cooking in a big wok nearby, all outside the truck. There was another young man inside the truck getting ingredients ready.

We had figured out that you just sat down at one of the long, shared tables and waited for the waitress to notice you, but eventually it turned out that the waitress was overwhelmed. Not only was she taking orders, and writing them down in a little worn out notebook, and delivering food to tables when she could remember which tables the food was for, but she was helping the cooks and arguing with the woman cook, and generally seemed to be lost. So we went over and told her we wanted one order of "Chow Mein Speciale" (note the French spelling), which was on the

menu of most of the trucks. Nowhere was there an explanation of what was in it, except we could see from the pictures that it had noodles.

We then went back to our table to sit and wait. After a while we were joined by a British couple we recognized from the ship. We explained the ordering process to them and they ordered three items and sat down next to us and we all chatted. It took a while, but some of their items arrived and they started to eat. Our “Chow Mein Speciale”, which we had ordered before the British couple sat down hadn’t arrived yet. We were just about to find the waitress and remind her when she noticed us and told the older woman cook, in French, to make some “Chow Mein Speciale”.

Eventually we got our food. It was a huge plate with a big pile of tasty noodles topped with shrimp, chicken, vegetables, Chinese sausage, cabbage, etc. It was very good. It was not the old-fashioned americanized dish called Chow Mein. We had seen plates of it being eaten before we ordered so we knew this and that it was large and thus we shared one order.

While we were still eating, the British couple, who never got one of their three items but decided they didn’t want it, finished and went up to pay. There was some disagreement going on, and it seemed that the older woman, who handled all the money matters, had assumed that the four of us were together and had added our meal to the bill of the British couple, and there was the matter of the item that never arrived and wasn’t wanted anymore. A lot of discussion among the British man, the young waitress and the older woman cook took place, with great difficulty since the two woman spoke very little English and the man spoke no French or Chinese. It was hard for him to explain that he didn’t want the item that never arrived. We also tried to explain that our food shouldn’t be on their bill. Finally the woman cook understood and it was all settled.

The whole experience was fun, different and interesting and the “Chow Mein Speciale” was pretty good – better than we had expected. Donnie was very brave because she never, never eats “street food” as she calls it, and especially since somehow we had chosen one of the “sketchier” food trucks.

Tahiti is not what you would expect from your mental image from the movies and literature. OK, maybe some parts of it are beautiful, tropical and lush, but most of it is overdeveloped. Even our tour guide admitted it. The city of Papeete is full of stores, businesses, restaurants, and horrible traffic. We counted at least three McDonald’s during our tour. There was a lot of graffiti and a good number of run-down or dirty buildings. Our guide told us that there were three movies made of the “Mutiny of the Bounty” over the years, and that the first two were filmed in Tahiti but the third one was filmed in Moorea because Tahiti no longer had any places that looked like an 18th century Polynesian island. Still we can now say we have been to Tahiti, just like Paul Gauguin.

Saturday, October 6 – Moorea, French Polynesia – Cruise 1 – Day 14

We awoke early again for another early excursion. The incredibly beautiful island of Moorea was outside our balcony. We could tell immediately that it was very different from Tahiti. Most of the island consisted of very steep, tall, craggy mountains that had no buildings on them. The only buildings we could see were small ones on a narrow strip between the mountains and the sea, and even then there weren't many visible. The mountains were surprising in shape and were covered in vegetation. The ship sailed toward it very slowly, probably because it left Tahiti at 5:00 AM and wasn't due into Moorea until 8:00 and the distance between the two was only 12 miles. The inter-island ferry makes the trip in half an hour.

The weather was mostly cloudy but there was a little blue sky off to one side. It was hard to tell if the dense cloud cover on the other side was coming in or going out, which was worrying because we had booked a Photographic excursion where we were supposed to ride 4x4 vehicles to some photogenic sights on the island. If it were a cloudy overcast day I would be very disappointed. This photo excursion was one I had been really looking forward to.

This time the Princess excursion management people got things right and there were no screw-ups. Moorea was a tender port, meaning that the ship had no place to dock and had to anchor offshore and the passengers who wanted to go ashore had to board small boats, called tenders. In this case the tenders were the ship's lifeboats. Some ports have their own tender boats, but not Moorea. The tender ride was longer than we expected because the ship was anchored very close to one side of the bay, but the tender took us to the other side. The ride was uncomfortable and very humid.

We had to wait a little while for everyone on our excursion. The excursion consisted of 15 passengers, two 4x4 vehicles and two photographer/guides. Four of us got in the back of one of the 4x4's. It was like a little pickup truck with bench seats on the sides of the bed and a canopy over them. There were also three passengers inside our 4x4 in conventional seats. Since our truck bed had room for six, the four of us had plenty of room. The other 4x4 had seven people in back, who seemed to be crowded in, and one up front next to the driver. Many people were carrying sophisticated cameras but some had only little point-and-shoot cameras and a few had only smart phones. One person had no camera at all. This was strange since this excursion, which was a little more expensive than others, was billed as a photographic excursion with expert photographer guides to give instruction and assistance.

It was mostly cloudy when we started out, so we were worried that the resulting photography would be poor, but as luck would have it, at most of the sights we visited, the sun came out. The sights were breathtakingly beautiful. Moorea is possibly the most beautiful place we have been yet. Next to it, Tahiti was a dump! They took us to a magnificent beach with many palm trees, clear blue-green water and fantastic views of the steep, craggy mountains. They took us up a steep drive to a tropical garden with extraordinary unusual plants and flowers and fruit trees. They took us to view a small pineapple growing field. They took us to several viewing spots high up on narrow roads.

One place they called “Magic Mountain” and getting there involved driving slowly up a one-way, very narrow, very bumpy, very twisty, very steep “road”, which was partly dirt and rocks and partly a set of two narrow concrete tracks, one for the left set of wheels and one for the right set. Even the concrete tracks were poorly made and were very bumpy. We bounced around in the back of the 4x4 and were certain that the vehicle was going to end up falling down the side of the mountain on several occasions. The excursion description warned that the ride would be bumpy. Perhaps they understated that a little. At one point I tried to point my camera out the back of the 4x4 to take a picture of the vehicle following us on the narrow dirt road, but I couldn’t even keep it in my viewfinder because I was bouncing around so much. I think I got a very good picture of the roof of our truck.

We finally made it to the top of the road to “Magic Mountain” and after we stopped and parked we found out that we had to walk up a very, very steep path with guide ropes to cling to in order to get to the view, but it was all worth it. It was indescribable. “Wow” is the best description I can give. Everywhere our excursion went we were surrounded by these awe-inspiring mountain peaks. We took hundreds of pictures of them. It turns out that we were in the middle of an extinct volcanic caldera and the mountain peaks were what was left of the volcano. This excursion was awesome and our photographer/guide was very good. He didn’t rush us, gave everybody plenty of time to take all the pictures they wanted, gave photographic advice and instruction to those who wanted it and didn’t bother the ones who didn’t.

After the excursion was over, back at the tender dock, we were hot and thirsty and we ran into Louise and Mel who were drinking through straws stuck in a hole in the top of a coconut. They recommended it. So we had fresh coconut milk right out of coconut chopped open by a local Tahitian woman right in front of us. After drinking it, you returned your coconut to the woman to have coconut flesh carved out and put back in the shell so you could eat it. The woman had to work very hard to chop the coconuts and gouge out the flesh. The raw coconut flesh was almost tasteless, though. Somebody asked the woman if she had her own coconut trees, she just pointed to a tree in the parking lot of the tender dock area – whatever works.

We were really glad we had chosen this excursion. As we drove from one photo sight to another, even on the main ring road of the island, it was beautiful and not over-developed. There may have been some towns that weren’t pretty but we didn’t see any of them. Moorea is the place that embodies the phrase “Tropical Paradise”. If it weren’t for the incredibly long plane flight, I wouldn’t mind going back for a longer visit. Don’t bother with Tahiti, except to fly in. Go straight from the Tahiti airport to the ferry to Moorea!

Sunday, October 7 – Monday, October 8 – At Sea – Cruise 1 Days 15 – 16

Sunday was our day of rest. To be honest, all the sea days are days of rest, but this time we rested a bit more. The climbing and bouncing around in Moorea gave us an excuse. We did the usual –

breakfast, morning trivia, lunch, afternoon trivia, other trivial stuff. There were no major surprises, which, on a huge vessel in the middle of the Pacific Ocean is a good thing.

I have become pretty certain that the majority of passengers on this ship are Aussies or Kiwis (New Zealanders). You hear the distinctive accent everywhere. Yesterday I was somewhere and a visibly Chinese woman said something to me, except instead of the familiar Chinese accent, which we have heard many times, even on this cruise, she had a pure Aussie accent, no hint of the Chinese one. It was startling for a second, but I realized that there's almost certainly a lot of Australians with a Chinese heritage.

There were two immensely important events that occurred on Tuesday. Mel and Louise had entered into the Scrap Boat Building competition. They had to fashion small boats from any scrap materials they could find on board the ship, and then compete to see who could sail their boat across one of the swimming pools carrying six cans of soda. Both of them entered. Both of them lost. Mel did get the booby prize for last place. She accepted it placidly. Their losses probably had something to do with the fact that as soon as their boats were placed in the pool with the six cans of soda on top, they sank — quickly. It was a shame since they had both worked hard on them. They had made them primarily from wooden coffee stirrers woven together into flat mats, held up by empty water bottles, which was a lot of effort.

The second event of importance is that during the afternoon trivia contest our team got 14 out of 20. This doesn't sound like much, but the winners won with a score of 15. We were so close.

Tuesday, October 9 – Pago Pago, Tutuila, American Samoa – Cruise 1 – Day 17

We watched the ship sail slowly into the well protected harbor of Pago Pago, which is pronounced Pango Pango by the local inhabitants, who are allowed to pronounce it any way they want. Unbeknownst to many people, including us, this very famous name is not the name of an island. The island is called Tutuila, which extremely un-famous, but the small port town is called Pago Pago, and somehow this is the name that is world famous. The town really doesn't deserve all the fame. It isn't bustling and overdeveloped like the towns on Tahiti, but it still isn't very pretty.

The port guide lecturer mentioned that Pago Pago, unlike other South Pacific islands, doesn't depend on tourism but makes most of its income from tuna catching and processing. In fact two very large tuna companies, Starkist and Chicken of the Sea used to export a lot of tuna from here. Now some other company owns the tuna business here. So the town is industrial and not very touristy or pretty. There were no restaurants or permanent tourist shops, just a small set of temporary market tents set up in a grassy area across from the ship dock.

We elected not to take an excursion tour around the island because the excursions, and in fact all transport on the island is in little, makeshift, old, gaudily decorated, un-air-conditioned,

uncomfortable buses with hard bench seats. Most are open with no window panes. The island is super-humid and it reportedly rains a lot, so the open, hot, humid bus ride didn't appeal to us. So, we didn't see the rest of the island and don't know if it is more attractive than the town.

I must mention where we spent a lot of our time in Pago Pago ... embarrassingly, it was McDonalds. No, we didn't eat there but we, and a lot of other cruise passengers, attempted to use the free Wifi. It was very, very unreliable. You needed to use a password that they gave out, but for the first half hour or so that we tried it kept rejecting it, and eventually we gave up and went for a walk along the main road to a particularly un-photogenic part of the island. Since the area was so uninteresting, we turned around and came back to McDonalds, tried the password again, and finally got connected, we found it so slow that it was almost useless. We did have a couple of small coca-colas to quench our thirst, since we were sweating buckets. I was almost tempted to have one of the special McDonald's breakfasts that you won't see in most McDonald's. It consisted of rice, scrambled eggs, a tomato and grilled Spam. It sounded delicious, or maybe not.

On our way back to the ship we spent some time at the temporary market stalls. I was looking at some Hawaiian-style shirts, but didn't see any I wanted to buy. Donnie wanted to shop more but I was a hot, sticky, sodden mess, so I told her to shop until she dropped and I went back to our nice air-conditioned stateroom.

As I wrote this, it was pouring rain outside. Donnie made it back to the gangway of the ship just in the nick of time. As she was going through security just inside the ship, someone said "It's raining." and she looked outside and it was a downpour.

We ran into Mel and Louise in the afternoon and they told us that they had taken one of the local bus tours around the island. They said that the inside of the bus was covered in plush leopard skin upholstery, including the ceiling, but that the bench seats were very hard and uncomfortable. They also said that during the two hour ride the driver said absolutely nothing. He would stop somewhere from time to time and they just assumed that they were supposed to get out to take pictures or see something. He also played Gospel music the entire time. They said that the rest of the island wasn't any more attractive than Pago Pago. On the other hand, some people at dinner thought that the rest of the island was attractive. Tastes differ.

Two items of great significance occurred this afternoon and evening. First, during afternoon trivia we achieved a score of 16.5 out of 23. It sounds bad, but the winning score was 17 – only one half point away! We'll keep trying.

And then during the evening Pago Pago made up for the less than attractive town by arranging for a very spectacular sunset as we sailed out of the harbor. Thank you Pago Pago. I took about 8 gazillion sunset pictures, or maybe it was 12 squintillion, I didn't count them. I'm certain that when I get home and look over them I will come to the conclusion that they are all "boring sunset pictures" and not use them for anything. Isn't Digital Photography wonderful? It allows one to take many, many boring pictures.

Wednesday, October 10 – Saturday, October 13 – At Sea – Cruise 1 Days 18 – 20

We now have three sea days before we disembark in Auckland, New Zealand. Some of the more observant of you readers are thinking “Dummy! You made a big error there. October 10 through October 13 is *four* days, not three.” Not I, I retort! We are about to cross the International Date Line, which means that there is *no* October 12. We go straight from the 11th to the 13th. We will never experience October 12th, 2018. That day is erased from our lives. Luckily, neither of us has a birthday, or anniversary, or some other significant event that falls on October 12th. I feel a bit sad, and cheated. To compensate, however, on our third cruise we will be getting *two* December 8th’s. So, in effect, we are trading an October 12th for a December 8th. I can’t tell whether we are getting a good deal or not.

On Wednesday evening, there was a very unusual occurrence. About 6:00 PM I was looking out our balcony doors and noticed some small islands near the horizon, not too far from the ship. I wondered what islands they were, so I turned on our TV to the channel that displays ship information including a map of where we are and our course. There were the islands, but strangely, our course had suddenly turned sharp right and we were sailing almost directly toward one of the islands and the projected course on the screen showed us going to the island. This was not consistent with our itinerary. I told Donnie that I suspected that they were going to evacuate a passenger for medical reasons. Sure enough, about fifteen minutes later, the Captain came on the ship’s PA system and announced that there had been a medical emergency and that we were sailing to the island of Tonga for a medical evacuation.

We missed the actual docking with Tonga about 9:00 because we were at dinner, but we did get on deck to see us leave the harbor of Tonga. Donnie wants to add Tonga to the list of the places we have visited, but I disagree since we never set foot on the island. As far as I’m concerned, breathing a little of the air that might have been on Tonga doesn’t legitimize saying we had been there. In fact, I read somewhere once that whenever you take a breath you are breathing in a few molecules of air that have been everywhere and have been breathed in and out by everyone (and every animal) on the planet – yuck.

Today may be Thursday, October 11 or it might be Friday, October 12. Mel and Louise told us that because of the diversion to Tonga last night, we crossed the International Date Line earlier than planned so we skipped the 11th instead of the 12th but to avoid confusion the ship’s time hasn’t reflected the change. I’m even more confused. The Captain just came on the PA and announced that we are going to cross the dateline at 11:00 PM tonight, so I don’t know if Mel and Louise are wrong, or the Captain is lying. I will just hope that we get to Auckland on the 14th of October and I’ll pretend that the days from now to then are anonymous. Oh, and this morning we did really well at Trivia, getting 18 out of 20, but, unhappily, the winning team got 20 out of 20. Still, not too shabby.

Chapter Two – New Zealand

Sunday, October 14 – Auckland, New Zealand – On Our Own – Day 1

We made it to New Zealand! Several people have told me in the past how wonderful New Zealand was and I always thought “That’s nice, but I’ll never get there.” – yet another of my incredibly inaccurate predictions. In this case I’m glad I was wrong.

We got up early because we had to be out of our stateroom before 8:00 AM. We did our morning stuff, washing, etc. Then we had a light breakfast in the buffet and sat around until our assigned disembarkation group meeting time which was 9:25. Then, when our group (Aqua 3 for you useless information junkies) was called, we started the disembarkation process. I won’t bore you with the details, except that it took about an hour from the time we went out on deck to get off the ship until we walked out of the terminal building on to the streets of Auckland.

The weather was a little different from what we had expected, although some people on the cruise had warned us that New Zealand could be cold, even in the Spring. It was partly cloudy, windy, and when the wind blew it was cold. The temperature was in the low 60’s. After the South Pacific islands, this was a big change.

We walked, rolling our suitcases past the terminal building, off the pier, and turned right onto Quay Street and went past shops, cafes and restaurants. We were looking for the Hilton hotel which was supposed to be on the pier right next to the one that our ship docked at. There was a modern, silver colored, long building that covered most of that pier, and some of the parts of the building had signs indicating restaurants and commercial offices, but we saw no sign for the Hilton, so we were not sure where to go. We finally noticed some people coming the other way toward us dragging their suitcases and asked them and they said that we were indeed heading toward the hotel and that yes, there was no sign.

We found the hotel at the very end of the pier and our rooms were ready even though it was early, so we checked in and dropped off our bags. Unusually, our very modern hotel room had fourteen electrical outlets strategically placed all around the room. That is way more than we had ever seen in a hotel room. Regrettably, we only had three outlet adapters for the Australian/New Zealand plugs, so eleven of the outlets were of no use. Wait, I am wrong. Hilton had gracefully supplied one US/European outlet adapter in the outlet near the desk – very nice. After using the free WiFi to check emails and pay some bills electronically, eventually we went out to see Auckland.

We walked around the area nearby called the Viaduct Basin, which was very pretty and inviting. There were a lot of small boats, sailboats, motor yachts – some quite large, even fishing boats. There were a lot of restaurants and bars, and it was very clean and agreeable, unlike most pier

areas. Our hotel was actually at the very end of the Prince's Pier and therefore had a nice view of the harbor. Since we didn't want to spend extra for a hotel room with a view, our room had a nice view of the opposite building.

After we had lunch in one of the bar/restaurants in the wharf area, miraculously, we ran into Louise and Mel again! I didn't know if they were stalking us, or we were stalking them. We chatted briefly and then said goodbye yet again. They were staying onboard the Golden Princess all the way to Sydney. We then walked to a newly renovated area called the Wynyard Quarter, which was formally an industrial area and was now a public space with more bars and restaurants, outdoor sculptures, places to sit, a small park, etc., all right by the water. By now it was late afternoon, and being tired, we walked back to the hotel.

Later, we went down to the lobby and outside on the end of the pier to take some sunset pictures, but the sunset wasn't very spectacular and the part of Auckland that we could see wasn't all that attractive, so we went back into the hotel lobby and sat in the bar and had some drinks and a snack of some cheese, fruit and nuts. One of the cheeses from a New Zealand South Island dairy was called Vintage Windsor Blue and was delectable. Too bad we can't bring some home. We were very tired for some reason, so we went to bed early.

Monday, October 15 – Auckland, New Zealand – On Our Own – Day 2

We awoke late, and Donnie, not having slept well, requested that we get a late start. I, being the perfect husband, acquiesced. I do that a lot, but she might not agree with that statement. You can trust *my* assessment. It was a beautiful sunny day, a little cool in the shade, but just warm enough in the sun. We walked up Queen Street, which is reminiscent of Fifth Avenue in New York, full of high end stores, including Prada and Gucci, etc. Foolishly, we looked inside a store that sells Merino/Possum wool sweaters, etc. They were expensive but very felt very soft and luxurious. Later, Donnie read that the Merino/Possum wool is very warm and durable. I really hadn't wanted to buy clothing on this trip because our suitcases are already full and we already have too many carry-ons to deal with, but these sweaters were so tempting that they are seriously under consideration. We may go back to the store.

After morning coffee at Starbucks, we realized that the weather was perfect to visit the Skytower, a tower similar to the ones in Toronto, Seattle and elsewhere. This one is 328 meters high (1076 feet, for you non-metric Luddites out there). They also allow you to bungee jump from the 192 meter level (629 feet). The cost for the bungee jump was NZ\$225 or US\$150. For some strange reason, Donnie decreed "No bungee jump" even though I offered to photograph her doing it, so instead we went to the 51st level and took way too many pictures and enjoyed the excellent view of Auckland, with perfect weather for viewing. We also went to the top for more pictures. We spent about an hour up there, really having a fun time. We even got to see one person jump, although it happened so fast that we didn't see much of him/her. One other thing we noticed is that Auckland harbor had a large number of marinas, including one huge one that had hundreds

of boats. There are serious sailors in Auckland. Later we learned that one in three people in Auckland owns a boat, and the other two have really good friends with boats.

After Donnie shopped for post cards in the Skytower gift shop (a continuing theme), we walked back down Queen Street. Regrettably again we went past a clothing store which was nefarious enough to have a really nice Disney's Dopey T-shirt in the window. It was way too expensive for just a T-shirt, which means that I felt even more guilty since, foolishly, I bought it anyway. If I continue to buy stuff, I may have to ditch some of the items already in my suitcase (socks? underwear?)

After this ridiculously extravagant purchase (not the last), we walked further down Queen Street and we came upon the nice little pedestrian alley where a Belgian Ale Pub recommended by Louise and Mel was located. It was called the Occidental Cafe and we had lunch there. Donnie had New Zealand Green Lipped Mussels and Belgian fries, along with her favorite: pear cider. I had Belgian sausages with stoemp (Belgian for mashed potatoes) and onion gravy along with some Belgian dark ale. Everything was supremely yummy. We might go back later in the week. We then walked back to our hotel and had drinks in the lobby bar: Pear cider again for Donnie and a good G&T for me.

Searching online, we discovered a possibly compelling and useful fact. Our ship, the Golden Princess, had docked at the Queen's Wharf, which is the pier next to the one where our hotel is located. This pier is called the Prince's Wharf. To get to this hotel we had to walk from the terminal building on the Queen's Wharf pier to the end of the pier, then one block over to this, the Prince's Wharf pier, and then to the end of this pier to the hotel. Donnie discovered online that the Majestic Princess, which we are taking in eight days, docks at the Prince's Wharf, which means that we may be able to walk directly from our hotel only a few feet onto the ship. Now that would be something!

Today was really wonderful. The weather was beautiful and the views from the Skytower were fantastic and our lunch was terrific. Thanks Auckland (and Louise and Mel again).

Tuesday, October 16 – Auckland, New Zealand – On Our Own – Day 3

Here are two intriguing observations about Auckland: (or New Zealand in general. We haven't been elsewhere in the country so I don't know about the rest of New Zealand yet.) One is that in addition to driving on the left (which they jokingly refer to as the right, or correct side of the road), they also *walk* on the left. On sidewalks, in hallways, the Kiwi's walk on the left. Sadly, there are a lot of tourists and foreigners for whom this is not natural, so when walking down the street you are always walking into a stream of people coming the other way. Some places try to emphasize the left side custom. The lines for the lifts (elevators, for us Americans) at the Skytower had little arrows on the floor to show you where to queue up, on the left. In some places they had signs that read "Keep Left".

The other observation, which we still need to confirm some more, is that in restaurants, at least in the casual ones we have eaten at, you don't get the check from the waiter at the table and pay him or her. You go up to the bar, or counter, or cashier and somehow they figure out who you are and what you ate and give you the bill and take the payment. If you wait for the bill to come to your table, you will wait forever. This was very surprising to us, because even with all our travels (43 countries so far) we have never seen this, with the exception of a pub in Dublin – fascinating. Possibly this isn't true in fine dining establishments. We may find out.

Our hopeful conjecture may be true. Early this morning, the Celebrity Solstice docked a mere ten feet from our hotel at Prince's Wharf. The entire dock side of the hotel is closed off with temporary barriers to isolate the Cruisers from us more sophisticated travelers who spend more than several hours in a city. If you look out from the big glass walls in the hotel lobby, there is a huge cruise ship so close that if you wadded up a piece of paper you could throw it and hit the ship, although if you did the security guys wearing the day-glow green vests would probably want to have a long talk with you.

We made the decision to avoid the crowds from the cruise ship and visit some less touristy locations today so we took a taxi to the Auckland War Memorial Museum which is now just called the Auckland Museum, a better and more accurate name. When we arrived, there was some kind of political event being broadcast from the Maori room so we had coffee and a light breakfast in one of the museum cafes while the politicians gabbed and we waited for them to finish whatever they were doing.

Here's another New Zealand observation – revolving doors go the other way. You enter the revolving door on the left side, and the door turns clockwise. All of the revolving doors I have experienced in the US turn counter-clockwise and you enter on the right.

In the ground floor of the museum, the Pacific Island art collection was extensive and phenomenal. All of the early islanders placed very elaborate decoration on *everything*, including practical things, like weapons and boats. The Maori covered everything with incredibly detailed sophisticated, beautiful carving and there were a large number of them, including an entire Maori building. The entire collection was huge. You couldn't possibly see every object in less than several months. We wandered through the collection, snapping pictures like mad and really enjoying the experience.

The rest of the Museum had less extensive collections of various things. We wandered around for about three hours. We went to a temporary exhibit on Volcanos, which had a cool virtual eruption experience. There was a little building inside the exhibit which looked like a small contemporary Auckland house. You waited for a green light at the door and went in and sat down on the couches inside what looked like a normal living room. There was a TV set in one corner and a big sliding glass patio door which appeared to be looking out onto the Auckland harbor. After a few minutes, a newscast appeared on the TV discussing the earthquakes currently happening in

Auckland and an interview with a Vulcanologist about how the earthquake data indicated a volcanic eruption was imminent. Suddenly, the TV went blank, then the room lights blinked off and on again, then there was a big loud bang under the floor. All this was repeated a couple of times. Then in the middle of the harbor visible out the glass patio doors there was an eruption and a volcanic cone appeared in the water and a huge cloud of ash started heading at high speed toward the viewer. Then the lights went out. Shortly the view of the harbor reappeared with a volcanic cone in the middle and everything on the land covered in grey ash. There had been a warning sign before you entered saying that the experience “may be too intensive for some visitors.” Actually, it was fairly tame. They could have made it much scarier, but probably didn’t want any legal consequences.

We then had a light, late lunch in another museum cafe, and then we made up our minds to walk to the next, very-high-priority item on Donnie’s agenda. So we walked two miles in an overcast, chilly Auckland down to a place Donnie had found online, called Giapo Ice Cream. It was a very pretentious place. There was a sign outside saying “Credit/Debit only. No cash.” Another sign indicated you had to wait in a roped-off line to be served. The two servers were not behind a counter, but were each standing next to little high marble topped tables and they wore bright red lipstick, a little fancy for an ice cream place. When you did get to the little tables at the front, a server explained the menu and gave you four flavor tastes in little glass jigger-like cups. Then once you made your choice she entered it into an iPad. She also had to enter your answer to the question “How did you learn of us?” and then you had to wait nearby for your ice cream treat to be delivered to you.

The ice cream came in weird flavors and shapes. One looked like a chocolate squid sitting atop an ice cream cone. It was so delicate they had to give the purchaser a styrofoam tray to hold under it as bits would easily break off. All the tentacles and the head of the squid were pure chocolate, and very brittle. I declined the squid and had a simple cup of a New Zealand traditional treat called Hokey Pokey, which was ice cream with bits of Honeycomb in it. Giapo’s version was also covered in chocolate. It was hard to eat because the chocolate coating was thick and hard to break into. It was also too sweet. The Hokey Pokey was my first New Zealand treat. I had made up a list of New Zealand’s most famous food treats and I intend to try them all if possible.

Donnie had a sugar cone with Chocolate Coconut ice cream. It too was covered in a thick, hard chocolate coating, and came with a little spoon which you needed to try and break the chocolate shell. It was even harder to eat. Donnie couldn’t even finish it. She also thought it was too sweet. They even had wet wipes available because your fingers were sticky after your treat.

We then walked back to our hotel to watch the huge Celebrity Solstice depart. At 6:00 we watched them detach the lines and pull away from the pier, all ten feet away from our comfortable seats in the hotel lobby bar while Donnie had a small pot of Earl Grey tea. It was another sensational day in Auckland.

Wednesday, October 17 – Auckland, New Zealand – On Our Own – Day 4

This morning the iPhone weather app showed showers. A look out of the window showed no showers. One must be right. I decided to go with the out-the-window report. The first thing we did today was to visit the Maritime museum which is right by the shore end of the Queen's Wharf, one block away from our pier. The museum was much better than we had anticipated, and much larger. It was a very impressive museum with well set up exhibits and much fancier and newer than it appeared from the outside. There were sections on the Maori canoes and boats and their migration to New Zealand, and on the immigration of the Europeans centuries later, and more sections on more modern marine-related history, and a lot of boats, of course.

One memorable exhibit was in the area related to the European migration. It was a nineteenth century (about 1850) wooden passenger ship cabin area for third class passengers. It was a very dark, low-ceilinged wooden room, lit by hanging lanterns, with a set of simple cubbyholes on one side for about twelve people to sleep, six upper berths and six lower berths, and a wooden table in the middle for eating, all very coarse, dark, and primitive. There were a few cast-iron pots on the table and a few big brown glass bottles of water. That was about all there was inside, and then you noticed... the room was rocking, slowly and subtly, just like you were on the water. The hanging lanterns were swinging slowly. It was disconcerting, especially since we had just spent twenty days feeling the same sensation, and four days without it. There was even the creaking that we heard in our stateroom. By carefully watching the sills at the exit I could see that the floor was slowly tilting one way and then the other in relation to the floor of the next room. We thought it was very cool.

We spent a long time at the museum, and at the end we went into a little room where volunteer craftsmen build ship models. We were looking in through a window but the man inside gestured for us to come in. He spent a little time talking about the ship model he was working on, and then proceeded to tell us a profusion of stories about his life history. We always seem to find people who do that. One funny thing... he had a strong New Zealand accent but he told us he was originally from Scotland. One of his stories was about the time a short time ago when he visited his birth home which is still there in Glasgow, after over sixty years. He went up to the door and after introducing himself the woman who lived there let him in to see his old home. The funny part was when telling the story, when he was quoting the woman, he reverted to his Scottish accent.

After a light lunch we elected to go to Queen Street again to do some chores and shopping. Donnie needed to go to a Post Office and a pharmacy, which we did. I needed a haircut, so we found a barber/surgeon. Barbers used to be called Barber/Surgeons many years ago. I emphasized the surgeon part because he did a surgical haircut. Something must have been lost in translation when I told him I wanted my hair not too short. He probably was a sheep shearer in a former job. I was shorn. I think he also got out the belt sander. I now knew how a billiard ball feels. Still, there was a good side to it. I could have saved some weight in my suitcase because I

could have thrown away my hairbrush. No, on second thought, that wouldn't have helped. I would have had to replace it with a can of furniture polish and a polishing rag.

Then we were inexplicably drawn back to one of the very posh Merino sweater stores we had visited a couple of days ago. Today I lost all my hair and money. We each bought a very nice, very soft, very expensive sweater, made of Merino sheep's wool and Possum fur. You read that right, Possum fur. Supposedly adding Possum fur makes the sweaters softer, warmer, and more durable. We found out that this was not just a sales pitch from the store – Merino/Possum sweaters are all the rage in New Zealand. We also read that the Possum is considered a pest in New Zealand that has no natural predators and is becoming a nuisance so the government is actively trying to control them, so... essentially we paid a lot of money for road-kill sweaters. Just for clarity, these possums are not the very ugly hairy possums you see in the US. Unhappily, these are cuter.

Some more observations about Auckland... the town was very clean and there was no graffiti. We haven't seen any, even in a slightly less prosperous part of town we walked through yesterday. Another observation is that the Maori language and culture are pervasive in Auckland. There were signs in the museums in both English and the Maori language and many shops and other places have the Maori word for hello outside... Kia Ora! (They pronounce it very quickly as one word – "keeora".) Many places have Maori names.

Another update on left/right – we took an escalator up to a store today, and the up escalator was on the left, the one coming down toward us was on the right. This left/right thing must be imprinted on the brains at an early age. I wonder how the Swedish people coped when they switched from driving on the left to driving on the right, all in one night in 1967. Yes, they really did that.

Today I got a bottle of L&P which is another item on my list of New Zealand traditional treats. L&P stands for Lemon and Paeroa. It's a very popular New Zealand soft drink. Before you get out your Encyclopedia of Exotic Plants and Fruits, I will tell you that Paeroa is not some strange fruit that only grows on one tiny island in the South Pacific, but is the name of a small town in New Zealand which was famous for its mineral springs and is now famous for L&P which was made with their sparkling mineral water. It tastes sort of like the usual lemon-lime sodas, like Sprite and 7-Up, but I think it is more lime-ey, which I like.

I googled it and found out it is now, sadly, owned by Coca-Cola and is produced on the same bottling line as their other products – phooey. This is not the first time we have discovered soft drinks that most of the world has never heard of but which are remarkably popular in their home countries. In Scotland we had something called Irn Bru, which outsells Coca-Cola there. In Austria (not Australia!) we had Almdudler, another soft drink that is popular mainly in its home. In Peru, they have Inka Kola, which isn't cola flavored or colored. I'm not sure if we tried it, possibly because of its weird sickly greenish/yellow color. Maybe tomorrow I will find some "Pineapple Lumps", another item on my list.

Tonight we ate at a Chinese/Asian Fusion, young people, hip, restaurant called White and Wong (I read a review online which complained about the pun in the name. Only after reading this did I realize that there *was* a pun in the name – ugh.) The food was unusual but reasonably good, but the noise level in the restaurant was somewhere between *Tsunami* and *Major Volcanic Eruption*. The place was full of young people, screaming across the table at each other, mainly, I suspect, to allow themselves to be heard over the other people screaming at each other. Donnie and I couldn't hear each other, or the waiter, who also had a mixed New Zealand/Indian accent and who talked very fast. Most of what he said went right past me. A few times when he asked a question, I either nodded or said "yes" or "no". I don't know what he asked, or what I agreed to or rejected. A couple of times he looked very puzzled at my answers. He might have asked if I enjoyed the meal, to which I smiled and replied "No, Thank you."

We did enjoy the meal, despite the noise, but we confirmed our suspicion about paying the bill in Auckland restaurants. Donnie asked the waiter directly if we get the bill from him or just go to the cashier to pay. He said he could get us a bill but we did have to go to the cashier to pay it. He did bring a bill, but when we got to the cashier, Donnie asked her about it, and she said nobody usually asks for the bill, they just get up after eating and go to the cashier and pay. Donnie then asked, "But how do you know who had what?" The answer dumbfounded us. The cashier was also the hostess who seated us, and she said that she memorizes the faces of everybody so she knows when you come up to pay which table you were at. She even wanders around the restaurant from time to time to memorize who is at which table – incredible! This was *not* a small restaurant.

Thursday, October 18 – Auckland, New Zealand – On Our Own – Day 5

Once again the day started out cloudy, windy and cool. We took a taxi to MOTAT, the Museum of Transport and Technology. It's a very nice museum comprised of a number of small buildings with different purposes. It's a sort of combination kid's science museum and technology history museum. There was a building with old cars and one with many historical artifacts related to computers, including an old friend, an IBM System/360 Model 40, a computer the size of a small truck. I cut my programming teeth on IBM System/360 computers.

Other buildings contained antique telecommunications gear including old phone equipment, old radio equipment, and other old electronic devices. Another building, the original one at MOTAT, was a hundred year old steam powered water pumping station, containing a huge gorgeous old steam engine and pumps. It appears that it is still in working order and they fire it up on certain days – not today though. There were a few old buildings like old stores and a couple of old homes Also a workshop where they were restoring a bunch of antique tram cars.

After seeing this part of MOTAT, we wanted some lunch and went to their cafe, which allowed us to complete another of our major goals for this part of our trip. We had Meat Pies, yet another

item on my list. Donnie ordered a Steak and Rosemary pie and I ordered a Mince and Cheese pie (a New Zealand traditional treat) and we shared. They were quite good. I wouldn't mind having them again later in our trip. Meat Pies are considered the New Zealand national dish. They are small pies, about 4 inches in diameter and an inch high, filled with savory stew-like fillings and are meant to be hand held meals. They are very popular and are sold in bakeries and many other shops, even convenience stores.

After lunch we took the antique MOTAT tram. MOTAT has two sites, the second one being their aircraft and train museum. They run antique tram cars from one to the other so we waited a few minutes for the tram to arrive and got on. The driver/conductor, a gentleman of about our age was wearing a typical train conductor's uniform and came through the car checking that everyone had a MOTAT entry ticket, but then he pulled out some tram tickets and punched them with a train conductor's punch and handed them to each of us. There was no fee, and the tickets were just souvenirs – cute.

The tram took us to MOTAT 2, their aircraft museum. It too was nicely set up and fascinating. There were some old WW II planes and other planes important to NZ history, all well displayed in a large, clean, well-lit building. One was a huge flying boat, called a Sunderland V, from the 1940s. It was immense. We were surprised that a flying boat could be that big. They are seeking donations to conserve and restore it. A flying boat is an aircraft that has a boat-like hull on the bottom of the fuselage and it only takes off and lands on water. A sea-plane, on the other hand, usually has a normal fuselage but has floats or pontoons on its landing gear.

We were going to have a ticket seller at MOTAT 2 call a cab for us to get back to the Auckland Central Business District which is near our hotel, but she said that we were close to a bus stop and that the bus would go close to where we wanted to be and that the bus driver would accept cash, so we took a city bus back to only a block away from where we had stopped walking up Queen Street the other day. The bus was modern and very, very clean.

We stopped for coffee at Starbucks (shame on us) and did a little more shopping. Afterward we walked through an area called Britomart which has the local transport hub and also some high-end shopping, including a modern, glitzy shopping mall. Finally, on the way back to the hotel, we went into a convenience store and got more items on our list of New Zealand treats: Jaffa's and Whittaker's Peanut Slabs. We haven't tried them yet as I wrote this. The extensive review will have to come later.

Update: We tried the Jaffa's. They are orange-colored spheres, about a half-inch in diameter. They are covered in a hard, crunchy candy shell and are filled with orange-flavored chocolate. Sort of like a big, orange M&M, only spherical and orange flavored, and the shell is crunchier than an M&M. They were very good and even a bit addictive. We bought a bag that probably has about fifty of them. We will no doubt buy more. I wonder if we can somehow get some home. Whittaker's Peanut Slabs will have to wait until tomorrow.

Friday, October 19 – Auckland, New Zealand – On Our Own – Day 6

It was a beautiful sunny day. We went out to do some chores and we also bought tickets for an afternoon harbor cruise. Donnie did her post office chores, sending gift packages to the granddaughters. She wouldn't tell me how much the postage was, which is a very good indication that it cost way more to send the gifts than it did to buy the gifts. Afterward we had a luscious breakfast at a little French restaurant in the Britomart area.

In the afternoon we did the 90 minute harbor cruise tour. Of course, they kept misspelling it as a Harbour Cruise. It was still a beautiful day, in the low to mid sixties. During the cruise it was a little windy and chilly at times, but we coped. At one point the tour guide on the PA system told us that there were 52 dormant volcanoes in Auckland region. He said he wasn't actually sure if they were dormant or extinct. In my opinion, extinct is better. Dormant is better than Active though. 52 dormant volcanos is still scary. The cruise was fun and we got to see a lot of the area around the bay and harbor of Auckland.

After the cruise we sat for while and had drinks in an outdoor harbor-side bar. Oops, I guess it was a harbour-side bar. There was yet another payment method at this bar. The very young busboy/waiter told us that he could take our order but I had to give him my credit card and he would set up a bar tab and bring me a numbered bar tab card which I had to return to the cashier to get my credit card back. It was strange, but it worked. As seems typical here, it was pretty noisy in the bar, even though we were outdoors. It probably had something to do with all of the young people screaming at each other.

In the early evening we went out for dinner. It being a Friday night, the harbor, or harbour area was crowded with people as were all the bars and restaurants. It became apparent to us that there is nobody over 35 in Auckland, except us. We had dinner in another noisy restaurant. They were playing loud music so everybody had to scream to be heard by the people at their own tables. We couldn't hear our waitress at all. Once again, I hoped that my answers to her unheard questions were not off-the-wall. Now I know why young people are staring into their phones and texting each other, even when they are sitting at the same table. They couldn't possibly *talk* to each other.

Another update on our Treat List: We had to buy more Jaffa's. Somehow, almost by magic, our first bag became almost empty. I don't know how. Also, we found Pineapple Lumps, the last item on our list. We haven't tried them yet, but we did try the Whitaker's Peanut Slabs. They are very thick chocolate bars filled with peanuts. They were good – too damn good. I may have to make more room in my suitcase for heaps of Jaffa's and Peanut Slabs. Do I really need shoes?

Saturday, October 20 – Auckland, New Zealand – On Our Own – Day 7

The weather today was absolutely gorgeous. The temperature was in the upper 60's and there was very little wind. We walked to the La Cigale French market in the Britomart area. The name of the market was strange, as only two or three of the vendors was selling anything that could be called French. There were only about twelve or fifteen food vendors. One that was very tempting and hard to miss was the stall selling bacon sandwiches. You could smell the bacon from a block away. If they didn't have unfortunate toppings like avocado on them, I might have succumbed. At one point, Donnie stopped to talk to a gaudily-dressed black man who was very talkative and colorful and who shined shoes for a living. The man told her his life story, (of course, that happens to Donnie everywhere we go) but one amusing thing he mentioned was that the lady nearby selling bagels was the only one in town, and that most Aucklanders didn't know what bagels were. And I thought Auckland was a very civilized place. I may have to revise my opinion.

We walked around some, took a few pictures and then walked around the corner and had Petite Dejuner (breakfast) at the L'Assiette French Cafe, where we had brunch the day before. Afterward we took the ferry to Devonport, a cute little town across the harbor, or if you prefer, harbour. We walked around town for a while and then sat on a park bench by the water. It was very peaceful.

After a while, we took the ferry back to Auckland and walked back to the hotel where we had drinks in hotel lobby bar. In the early evening I enjoyed a relaxing bath in the large, deep bathtub in our room. We never take baths at home because, even though we do have a bathroom with a bathtub, the tub is so shallow that when you try to take a bath, you barely get wet. We mostly use the shower stall in our other bathroom. So a bath in a deep tub is a sort of a luxury.

Now, forgive me, but I'm going to shatter one of your core beliefs – sorry! It's a very well known, well documented, widely disseminated fact that water drains clockwise in the Northern Hemisphere and counter-clockwise in the Southern Hemisphere. Science writers, learned TV commentators, school teachers and many others describe this phenomenon and some vaguely attempt to explain it by using the term Coriolis Effect. There's only one problem. They are all wrong. I recently read that this is merely an urban myth. I have proof. I carefully watched the water drain out of the bathtub this afternoon. Sorry gang, it went clockwise... in the Southern Hemisphere. The article I recently read explained that there is some very, very, very tiny effect caused by the Coriolis force, but it is completely overshadowed by effects caused by the shape of the drain, and the shape of the tub and things like that. Water will drain in either direction in either hemisphere, depending on shapes and minor imperfections. Please don't cry, and please don't write nasty letters to your middle school science teacher.

Later in the evening, we went out and had a wonderful dinner sitting at the bar in a place called Amano, a lively, modern, youth-oriented restaurant with Italian-inspired food. I had Cacio e Pepe. This is an authentic Roman dish that I first had a few months ago in Rome. I loved it. It's just pasta, Pecorino Romano cheese, and pepper, which sounds very simple, but it's actually tricky to make properly. This one was almost as good as the one I had in Rome. Since we were sitting at the bar, the two young lady bartenders were very attentive. When we sat down they

quickly gave us complimentary, very refreshing glasses of seltzer, which they constantly refilled during our meal.

Another fun part of sitting at the bar was that we watched the bartenders mixing drinks as we ate. Sometimes they spent considerable time and effort just making the garnishes for the drinks. One drink, which must have been very popular because they made several during our time there, was garnished with a slice of orange floated on the top, but it wasn't just a plain slice of orange. To make it the bartender would take an orange slice and lay it on the flat bottom of an upside-down stainless steel pitcher that they used just for this purpose. Then they would cover the orange slice with some kind of sugar, and fumble in their pockets for a cigarette lighter and use it to light a small blowtorch they had nearby and then use the blowtorch to caramelize the sugar on top of the orange slice. Finally they would carefully lift the orange slice off the pitcher and gently float it on top of the cocktail. One of the bartenders even held his hand a tiny distance on top of the orange slice to make sure that the sugar wasn't too hot before he served the drink. All this just for the garnish – remarkable.

After dinner we walked slowly back to our hotel. The temperature was still pleasant, and the lights and lit decorations were pretty. We expected a Saturday night to be very busy and crowded, but we found out that this is a three-day holiday weekend (Labor Day here in New Zealand) and a lot of the locals leave town, so the harbor area was pretty quiet. There were far fewer people around than the night before.

Sunday, October 21 – Auckland, New Zealand – On Our Own – Day 8

Today we went on a bus tour that we arranged last night through the hotel concierge. It's was called the Auckland Wilderness Experience. Since it didn't start until 12:15, we first went back to the bakery side of Amano where we had delicious pastries and coffee. At 12:15 a Mercedes van pulled up in front of the hotel entrance and a grey-haired woman guide driver named Dawn greeted the ten of us who were going on the tour from our hotel. She told us that originally she was from the UK. Years ago she was backpacking through Australia and came to New Zealand for a short visit, and ended up staying 33 years, so far. She certainly had a New Zealand accent, as far as we could tell.

Side note: With the exception of one of the door porters/concierges in the hotel, in the last eight days we have not met a single person born in New Zealand. Even tonight, Donnie asked our waiter at dinner, who had a strong Kiwi accent where he was from. He was from Brighton, England.

Dawn took us through the city streets and out to the suburbs, and, after a brief stop at a bakery where she suggested people could buy something for lunch, eventually she took us to the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park, which is sort of a National Park. There we went on a brief walk through a rain forest where we saw a lot of very strange and ancient looking trees, exotic

plants, and huge ferns. It looked like an illustration about the Jurassic Period. Unhappily, the sky was overcast and the picture-taking light was terrible, so I didn't take any. There were also nice views of Auckland. We spent a little time in a visitor center, which mainly was an opportunity for gift/souvenir shopping, an opportunity that Donnie didn't ignore.

Afterward she took us on a twenty minute ride on a winding narrow scenic drive to the west coast of the North Island of New Zealand. That's right. Auckland is on the East Coast. It's a twenty minute ride to the west coast. It's a very narrow country. We were told that at one point you can walk from one coast to the other in a couple of hours.

She took us to Piha beach, on the Tasman Sea. Piha is a beautiful, huge, black-sand beach with an immense rock called Lion Rock jutting out from the sand. It was spectacular. All of New Zealand is volcanic, and Piha Beach and Lion Rock made that very evident. The beach is black sand, which when dry actually looks dark gray. She took out a magnet and showed us that the sand had a lot of iron in it. She said that offshore they actually mine the iron. Lion rock, she told us, was a volcanic plug. That's the plug of cooled lava that seals up a cooling volcano. The Tasman sea is the body of water between New Zealand and Australia. The Aussie's and the Kiwi's jokingly refer to it as "The Ditch".

She gave us about 45 minutes to walk around and enjoy the beach and the views, but she warned us that the water was dangerous with rip tides and strong currents and underwater holes. After we gathered back at the van, she and another van driver from the same tour company served us tea and cookies – nice.

Officially the tour was over, but she said she was going to take us to one more special place. She drove us further along the twisty winding Scenic Road that winds it's way through the regional park, and finally pulled over into a little pullout on the side of the road and told us to get out of the van but, even though we had to cross over the road, not to do so until she told us to. So we all got out and waited by the side of the road. She said it was a blind curve and that cars were allowed to go 100kph there and that she didn't want anybody to be killed because filling out all the paperwork afterward was a big pain.

She listened carefully to hear if any cars were coming and finally we all rushed to the other side of the road where there was an entrance to a path down to a small wooden viewing platform. When we got there we were stunned. What was there? A tree. I probably need to explain. During our tour, and especially during our rainforest walk, she explained about a native tree called the Kauri. It is the second largest tree in the world, the Sequoia being the only larger one. She told us all about the history of the tree, how the first settlers logged them almost to extinction and now there is a disease that is attacking them. In fact, in order to prevent the spread of the disease, when we entered and left our rainforest walk, and when we entered and left this final viewing path, we had to stop at a special shoe cleaning station where we had to rub our shoes in a brushing device and then have them sprayed with a disinfectant. We saw a number of Kauri trees during our rainforest walk, but she said they were young ones and they were normal tree-sized.

The one we were now looking at wasn't. It was huge, probably ten feet in diameter, and we have no idea how tall, since the viewing platform was way above the forest floor and we couldn't see the bottom of the tree. She said it was about a thousand years old. She told us that in the far north, about three hours away, the trees were three times bigger, and two thousand years old.

We went back through the shoe-cleaning process and carefully crossed the road, except for one elderly gentleman who went ahead of us and just walked across slowly without waiting for Dawn to give him the all-clear. She said she nearly had a heart attack.

Dawn drove us back to Auckland and dropped us all off right at the door of our hotel. She was a very nice, very good guide, and the tour was a memorable experience. The rainforest walk part didn't appeal to me, probably because: A: the photographic opportunities didn't present themselves, and B: I'm not a nature boy. However the Piha beach and Lion rock more than made up for my disappointment. The photo opportunities there were fantastic. The sun even came out for a while. The visit to the giant Kauri tree wasn't photogenic, but was something we won't forget. It was awesome – even for a non-nature-boy.

After a little rest in the hotel, we went out to dinner. We chose to re-visit the Belgian beer pub, Occidental, that we had lunched at the other day after it was recommended by Louise and Mel. Our dinner was really, really good. First I had a Belgian dark ale, called Delirium Nocturnum, which had a picture of a pink elephant on the bottle. Even the glass they served it in had little pink elephants on it. I know what you are thinking, but you are wrong... they were on the bottle and the glass even *before* I drank any of the ale. Then I had Flemish Beef Stew. It was really, really good. In fact, I'm willing to bet that it was the best Flemish Beef Stew in New Zealand.

More breaking news: Tonight we finally tried the Pineapple Lumps. Yes, that is really their name. They are pineapple-flavored, soft chewy taffy-like rectangles covered in milk chocolate. At first, they seemed strange, and were not as immediately addictive as the Jaffa's were, but after a second one, they began to grow on me. Damn. Another New Zealand treat that I like a lot and won't be able to get at home. Time to buy an extra suitcase and fill it up. Hmmmm... I wonder what one of those big steel containers they load onto container ships costs.

Monday, October 22 – Auckland, New Zealand – On Our Own – Day 9

Today is our last whole day in Auckland. We had intended to visit the Auckland Art Gallery but once we got outside we saw that the weather was so nice we changed our minds and took the ferry to Waiheke Island with a combined ticket for the Hop On Hop Off bus on the island.

It was a very nice ferry ride with perfect weather. We exited the ferry and quickly found the Hop On Hop Off bus which we took for a short ride to a beautiful town, Oneroa, with wonderful views out over the water. Since we had skipped breakfast and it was now about 1:00 PM, we first had an exceptionally good lunch outdoors overlooking the bay.

Since we had originally thought we were going to visit the Art Gallery, I hadn't brought a hat, and it was very sunny out, so I bought a baseball cap that says "Waiheke Island, New Zealand" – very appropriate.

After lunch we walked down to the beach. It was gorgeous. We took pictures and sat on a bench and enjoyed the perfect view and the perfect weather. Later we got back on the Hop On Hop Off bus and took it to Onetangi beach. We had intended to stay on the bus and ride around the entire route, but Onetangi beach was so beautiful we got off. We took more pictures and then relaxed in an outdoor bar and had soft drinks.

By now it was late afternoon so we took the bus back to the ferry terminal and took the ferry back to Auckland. While on the ferry it got colder and colder. Interestingly there were a large number of dogs on the ferry. People too. We never found out why. We finished the day with drinks and dinner in the hotel lobby bar. Then, sadly, we did packing.

Waiheke island was exceptionally beautiful, clean (as is everywhere we have seen so far in New Zealand), and had awesome scenery and views of the water, even a distant view of the Auckland skyline. Houses started at only NZ\$700,000. The ones on the water were NZ\$1,200,000 – cheap. Sign me up.

This was our last day in Auckland and it turned out to be perfect – perfect weather, perfect scenery, perfect meals, perfect company. A wonderful finale to our Auckland experience – excellent!

Side note: The hotel and the streets of Auckland were suddenly full of slightly older people, many from outside New Zealand. From brief conversations in the lift (elevator), it appears that *everyone* in the hotel is getting on the Majestic Princess tomorrow.

Chapter Three – Around New Zealand and On To Australia

Tuesday, October 23 – Auckland, New Zealand – Cruise 2 – Day 1

We got up very late. After doing our morning crud removal and other indelicate processes and some final packing, we went outside to take pictures of the ship near the hotel. The ship was bigger than the hotel – much bigger. It was several stories taller and nearly twice as long, and this hotel is not some little B&B. It's the Auckland Hilton. The ship was also about ten feet away from the hotel – impressive – almost scary.

The pier was jammed with a great number of people dragging a large amount of luggage and the usually quiet street next to the hotel was full of taxis, vans, and people. We got back to our hotel room just before checkout time. It took quite a while to get an elevator down as the hotel was packed with people with tons of luggage leaving to get on the cruise, and, happily for no one, one of the two elevators in the hotel was shut down due to construction. We and about six other people were waiting on the fourth floor to go down and after waiting a long time as the elevator went up and down stopping at every floor, when the doors finally opened on our floor, the elevator was full. This happened three times. Finally someone (I think it was me) got the bright idea to push the UP button and catch the elevator on the way up when it was most likely to be empty. It worked.

Incredibly, from the time we checked out to the time we were onboard the ship we spent only 25 minutes, even with the huge crowd. This, of course, does not include the time waiting for the elevator. This included: dropping off our suitcases outside where the porters took them to be loaded onto the ship, having our boarding passes and passports checked once to make sure we were allowed to continue the process, going through the x-ray and metal detector security rigamarole, where we had to unpack our laptops and repack them afterward, going through New Zealand immigration where they checked our passports again, even though we weren't immigrating, handing in the New Zealand government departing questionnaire form, which we only found out we needed this morning, checking in and receiving our do-everything cruise id/onboard purchasing/room key cards, and finally, getting our pictures taken for the ship's security system. Sounds terrible, doesn't it. It really did move pretty quickly. This was one of the fastest, most efficient cruise ship boarding processes we had experienced so far. Kudos to Princess Cruise Lines and the temporary staff at the Auckland cruise terminal.

Onboard, we found our stateroom, which surprisingly was already cleaned and ready, dropped off our stuff, had a quick lunch in the buffet, and went to explore the ship. All of the signs on the ship are in English and Chinese. Actually, a few are *only* in Chinese. There are a large number of Asian people onboard, and a significant number of Aussie's and Kiwi's. Also, based on the accents and overheard complaints, brashness and rudeness, there are a lot of Americans too.

Many things are similar to the Golden Princess: menus, food in the buffet, elevators, locations of some cafes, and bars, the layout of our stateroom, etc. Other things are very different, which is to be expected since this is a very new ship and a bigger one. We explored for a while and then attended the mandatory muster drill which for us was held in one of the dining rooms. After the usual safety drill, we went back to exploring the ship. We found the hamburger and hotdog grill which on this ship also served lobster (not for free). We also found the pizza place, noodle bar, and bubble tea bar. The noodle bar looked like something worth trying. The pizza restaurant was a sit-down restaurant with menus, waiters, cloth tablecloths and had made-to-order personal pizzas, unlike the pizzeria on the Golden Princess which was outside near the pool and served slices of pizza on request. The pizza, pasta, and dessert available at this one was still complimentary.

We then went to a sail away commentary held in a very nice area at the back of the ship called the Hollywood Conservatory. Don't ask me why it's called that. It had a good number of comfortable chairs and tables and some semi-private rooms with couches and other semi-private seating areas. It also had several topiary sculptures, a giant chess set, and several oversized musical instruments for people to play with – strange. We thought it might be an extra cost option but Donnie asked a staff member and we found out it was open to anyone for no charge, however we were told that it gets full very early.

The sail away commentary turned out to be boring. So we left and went to the sail away party around the pool. It was less boring. We stayed up on an open deck and watched the ship sail out of Auckland harbor as the sun set. We bid a fond farewell to Auckland, a very nice city and one we liked a lot. Donnie wished it was closer to home so we could go back more easily.

Wednesday, October 24, Tauranga, New Zealand – Cruise 2 – Day 2

It was very smooth sailing last night. I think our hotel in Auckland rocked more than the ship did last night. This morning we attempted to have breakfast in the buffet before we had to meet in the theater for our excursion today. We still haven't figured out the layout of the buffet. We couldn't find anything interesting for breakfast: no eggs, no bacon. Donnie couldn't find her usual yogurt. We saw people eating these things but we couldn't figure out where they were. Also it was very crowded and crazy. We were in too much of a hurry to try and figure it out. Maybe we will, eventually.

We weren't actually docked in the town of Tauranga but in the port suburb called Mount Maunganui which was very beautiful, with a nice harbor with very large number of sailboats and mountains in the distance. Also, right near the ship was this cool looking conical mountain, also called Mount Maunganui.

We boarded our bus, and the bus driver/guide explained some things about the region. We passed a very pretty white sand beach which he told us extends for 70 kilometers! While on the road

next to the beach we passed a large number of ultra-modern luxurious two and three story homes and apartments with magnificent sea views and most had big glass walls and outdoor decks. Our guide said that this was one of the most expensive dwelling areas in the country. I could have guessed that. It reminded me of the beach road in Southampton Long Island which also has multi-million-dollar “bungalows” right near the beach and each other.

Later we went through a major kiwi fruit growing region, full of vines. I didn’t know that kiwi fruit grew on vines. The guide told us that there are actually two varieties of kiwi fruit: the well-known green and also gold kiwi fruit. Gold kiwi fruit has no furry skin and is a little sweeter. We’ll have to try some if we can find it. A lecturer later in the trip told us that Americans should stop calling the fruit a kiwi. It’s a *kiwi fruit*. A *kiwi* is either a bird or a person.

After a one hour drive we got to Rainbow Springs, a tourist attraction. It was, in essence, a bird aviary and rainforest garden, with a big gift shop. It was pretty touristy. On the way in you had to pose for a picture. We had to stand next to each other with one arm around our partner and one hand out flat, palm up, next to our partner’s hand. Later we found out why, although I guessed from the pose what it was about.

We were then taken into a very dark room with glassed in “natural” habitats to see kiwi birds, in the dark. They are nocturnal and so to see them awake you have to be in a nighttime simulation. It was very hard to see anything in the very dark room. There were supposed to be three kiwi’s inside, but we saw only one. It was the size of a large chicken, but had an egg-shaped body with a round head and a very long, thin, downward curving pointy beak. No pictures were allowed.

We then walked through the rainforest, which wasn’t a real one but a collection of deliberately planted plants and trees. We saw: California redwoods (in New Zealand?), ducks, trout, parrots (including an African Grey, not a New Zealand native), ferns, and many weird-looking native plants, and finally, of course, the gift shop.

Inside, in addition to the usual gift-shop stuff they were selling picture packages containing the pictures they had taken of us, in various sizes. And what about our strange pose with our hands held out flat palm up? Can you guess why we had to do that? Amazingly, sitting on our outstretched palms was a kiwi bird – incredible, no? Some poor employee, during the 45 minutes of our tour, had to manually place a kiwi image in the correct place on all the pictures and then print out several sizes of each one, including a keychain, and then insert them into the packaging, all in the hope that us tourists would be suckered into buying them. At \$35 a package, this pair of tourists weren’t suckered. When we had gone into the darkened room to view the kiwis we were told that no photography of any kind was allowed because they wanted to be absolutely sure that nobody’s camera flash went off and disturbed the birds. I wonder, being the professional cynic that I am, whether that was true, or whether real reason was good, old fashioned greed. I think that they just wanted to sell us kiwi pictures. All right, maybe they wanted to protect the birds from the flashes. We’ll never know.

After the Rainbow Springs adventure, our bus drove us to Waimangu Volcanic Valley. This was a different kettle of fish. Although it was managed and run by a commercial company, and had a gift shop, Waimangu Valley is a Regional park.

After exiting the bus we had to assemble in a small open area for a traditional Maori welcome. It was quite impressive and unusual, to say the least. There were two men and two women in traditional, very strange Maori garb. They were covered with tattoos (later we found out that some of the face tattoos were paint, not real, because only the chiefs were entitled to wear the elaborate face tattoos, but some, even on the women, were real). The men were brandishing wooden spears. There was a fifteen minute ceremony which was partly a very threatening aggressive dance or martial arts demonstration (it was hard to tell which) by the most frightening looking of the men. He made scary faces, stuck out his tongue, brandished his spear, yelled a lot in Maori and generally was acting in a very unfriendly manner. Later his demeanor softened and he placed his spear on the ground. Then he addressed us in English, with a typical New Zealand accent! He welcomed us, and explained that as part of the Maori tradition they had to greet each of us with a nose bump, so the two men and the two women went from guest to guest bumping our noses, twice each. At one point the lead Maori introduced himself with his name which was about thirty syllables. I didn't memorize it. Later, our guide told us his real name was Clive – much easier to remember. Donnie and I suspect that his other profession is as a used car salesman. Nobody would have the courage to turn him down.

After a buffet lunch, we were taken through a guided tour of the Waimangu geothermal area. It was a long walk, sometimes on very steep paths, but it was very worthwhile. There were a large number of fumaroles, geysers, steam vents, bubbling mud pools and other phenomena caused by the area being volcanic. The last big eruption in the area was in the late 1800s, but it wasn't impossible that things could suddenly get very unpleasant. After the fascinating walk, we then were taken on a boat trip around Lake Rotomahana, which, in addition to being a volcanic caldera, had more steam vents and geysers, and a group of black swans. It was relaxing after the long, sometimes strenuous walk.

During our time in New Zealand so far, we discovered that many, many place names and business names in New Zealand are Maori names, not English or European ones, even street names.

When we got back to our stateroom we witnessed another beautiful sunset, which included sailboats and Mount Maunganui. Is it possible to have seen too much beauty?

Thursday, October 25 – At Sea – Cruise 2 – Day 3

Today was a sea day – our first on this cruise. We tried breakfast in the buffet again. It was better than our previous experience. Maybe we're beginning to figure it out. Afterward we went to a port lecture on Akaroa and Christchurch. Akaroa is the small town that the ship docks at.

Christchurch is the city about an hour and a half away. When I say that Akaroa is a small town, I mean small. The population, when a cruise ship isn't in town, is about 600. Our 3800 cruisers should increase that a bit, temporarily.

For lunch we tried the sit-down pizza restaurant, Alfredo's (come on guys, can't you think of more interesting names?). There were a lot of servers for a small place, but we still had a long wait for our meal. We ordered one personal pizza and a pasta dish, and we shared them. The pizza was OK – just OK. Not as bad as some of the pizzas we have had on cruise ships, but not as good as the pizza made on the pool deck on the Golden Princess.

In the afternoon we went to the Dunedin port lecture. We found out that Dunedin is Gaelic for Edinburgh. Another momentous fact that we learned at that lecture was the unofficial name of this cruise: "Across the Ditch". We had heard before that the Aussie's and the Kiwi's refer to the Tasman Sea which separates the two countries as "The Ditch", so the nickname for the cruise makes perfect sense. The lecturer likened it to the Americans and the British talking about "Crossing the Pond" when going across the Atlantic.

We also learned about two major events that occur in Dunedin. One is the Nude Rugby game! It is played by the university students. There are two, one for the boys and one for the girls. I guess a mixed one would be just a little too risqué. We were even shown (suitably censored) pictures. Unfortunately, we won't be there at the right time. Maybe that is not so unfortunate.

The other event, which I am even more sorry that we are missing, is the Jaffa Race. This will take some explanation. First, there is a street in Dunedin, which is listed in the Guinness Book of Records as the steepest street in the world, called Baldwin Street. I have already explained about Jaffa's, which are little round, hard shell covered orange flavored chocolate candies (the kiwi lecturer called them "lollies", which I think is the generic term for candies). For the race, you buy a special Jaffa which has a number on it. You then give it back and receive a receipt with the number on it. They gather together all the numbered Jaffa's and put them in dump truck and at the top of Baldwin Street they dump them out. The person whose numbered Jaffa makes it to the finish line first wins the prize. We didn't find out what the prize was. I suspect it's a bag of Jaffa's. We were told that the kids eat all of the Jaffa's that have rolled down the hill – not exactly hygienic. We saw a picture of the event. There were a lot of people lining the street and a lot of people at the finish line, and a whole lot of Jaffa's.

During the talk we also heard about the various things to do in and around Dunedin and one of the recommended excursions was to take the Taieri Gorge Railway journey. We had booked that excursion a long time ago, but had received notice that it was canceled and were given a refund. After the lecture we went to the excursions desk to inquire and found out that the one we had booked included the train and a bus ride and it was indeed canceled because the ship was arriving at the port a little later than originally scheduled and there wasn't enough time for the train and bus excursion, but, there was a train only excursion available, and since we had read and heard that this was a very special and not-to-be-missed train, we booked it.

We had been given a “Special Invitation” to an event for returning Princess guests in the theater later that afternoon. It started with the Cruise Band playing some musical numbers and then there was a movie screen showing some Princess marketing videos, and then the Entertainment Director talked about the benefits accrued by repeated bookings, even the most important and well-loved benefit: *Free Laundry*. Then the Princess Singers did a couple of songs. After some staff introductions and a speech by the Captain, they did a drawing for a special prize: Elite status for the rest of the cruise, including *Free Laundry*. We didn’t win. The whole thing was essentially a marketing exercise, but they made it worth our time – they gave out vouchers for a free drink in any bar – not a bad deal. The vouchers are good for any drink up to a cost of \$11.95. We’ll make use of them.

In the early evening we hung out in the Hollywood Conservatory, which I described earlier. Although we had been told that it fills up early in the day, this evening it was almost empty. Everybody must have been at dinner or being photographed, since it was formal night. We had our complimentary drinks. Donnie had a Caipirinha, and I tried a Bahama Mama. I didn’t like it. It was way too sweet. During our relaxing time there we heard lots of bird song. It was pre-recorded – cute. By the time we left, the conservatory was completely deserted.

Since it was formal night and we had elected not to bring dress-up clothing we had dinner in the buffet which, surprisingly, was also almost empty. This ship has 3500 (sometimes we heard 3800) passengers. Where were they all? After dinner we went to see a comedian in one of the lounges. He was very good at doing various voices and accents and based his humor on that. It was different and pretty funny.

Friday, October 26 – Wellington, New Zealand – Cruise 2 “Across the Ditch” – Day 4

Today we were in Wellington, the capital of New Zealand. The weather started off mostly cloudy and chilly and it looked like rain. Wellington is nicknamed “Windy Wellington”, which we thought was appropriate.

We took a free shuttle bus to the National Te Papa museum. It was a fascinating modern building with many types of exhibits from contemporary art to Maori art. Photos were allowed in most of the museum except, sadly, the Maori art, which was the most interesting and extensive part of the museum.

After visiting the exhibits for a while we took a break to use the museum’s free WiFi. Donnie, unusually, limited her emailing to the known universe. After a very quick twenty-minute phone call to her brother, we left the museum and walked down Cuba Street, a pedestrian street recommended by the ship’s port expert and by the shuttle bus driver. We were looking for a lunch place. They were harder to find than we expected, after all the recommendations we had heard. We ended up at an Irish Pub where we had good meat pies.

The weather improved in the afternoon, but we were tired, so earlier than we had planned we took the shuttle bus back to the ship, where for the first time on any cruise Donnie had bubble tea. She really likes bubble tea. I can't stand the stuff. It's tea, usually with a lot of milk and sometimes other flavorings, but it has "bubbles", which are gooey, soft, rubbery globes of tapioca that you suck up through a very wide straw and chew on – ugh.

Since the Majestic Princess had spent much of its time serving the Chinese market it has many venues and features designed for Chinese guests. Some had been removed when it was changed to serve the Australian and New Zealand cruisers, but the bubble tea bar was left. The staff member who served the bubble tea, a young man from India, told Donnie that when they were on the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese cruises, they served 600 glasses of bubble tea a day. I don't know how many they sold on the Australia/New Zealand cruises, but it had to be much, much less. You rarely saw anybody at the place. Bubble tea is a Taiwanese invention, but I don't think it is well known outside the Chinese community, so I don't think the Aussie's or the Kiwi's know much about it. Our granddaughters love it and introduced it to Donnie.

Something else of note: As I wrote this we were starting our sail-away from Wellington. On other cruises, when the ship was about to pull away from the dock, the Captain usually sounded the ship's horn, sometimes more than once. Our Captain just did this, but with a twist – the ship's horn, or at least the one they use for the sail-away, plays the theme song from "The Love Boat". I'm not making this up.

It was pretty cold today, and I suspect it will be getting colder as we sail south. That probably sounds weird to you Northern Hemisphere denizens. It sounds weird to me.

Saturday, October 27 – Akaroa, New Zealand – Cruise 2 "Across the Ditch" – Day 5

Today we were Akaroa, New Zealand, on the South Island. It was a pretty day out but it started out chilly. Akaroa is a teeming metropolis with 600 residents (or 700, depending on which description you read). We got a deliberate late start because we thought that there wouldn't be much to see or do in such a small place. We were very wrong.

After our usual morning body refurbishment, we had a quick breakfast and went to the Symphony Dining Room to get tender tickets. I have described tenders and why you need them earlier, but I may not have mentioned that you have to get numbered tender tickets and then wait for them to call your number before you can mosey on down to the tender. We had about a half hour wait for our number to be called, and when we got down to the tender we did something we had never been able to do before – we sat on top. The Majestic Princess tenders, unlike any others we had seen, had an outdoor seating area on the very top of the boat, so of course Donnie *had* to sit up there. I said to Donnie that I wondered if, during a horrible storm, when the ship is about to sink and they have called "Abandon Ship", do they make some of the passengers sit out

in the open on the top of the tenders (which are also the lifeboats) – maybe the peons in the cheap staterooms.

Luckily, we had beautiful weather so we didn't freeze our you-know-whats off. Also luckily, Akaroa was a very, very beautiful place. It has a large beautiful harbor, surrounded by rolling green hills. In the town itself, there were a wealth of little shops and restaurants, too many to be supported by the cruise ship passengers, but we figured out that Akaroa is a summer vacation destination for Kiwi's from nearby Christchurch and farther away. There were quite a few summer homes and apartments, and even hotels and motels. Nonetheless, Akaroa was another paradise. We seem to keep running into them on this trip. I'm not complaining.

Akaroa was originally settled by the French, so it still has a slight French atmosphere. Many of the street names were French, like "Rue Jolie" (Pretty Street), and instead of a butcher shop it has a Boucherie. Some places were even flying French Flags. I didn't hear anybody speaking French though, or even with a French accent.

We walked around for a long time, basking in the perfect weather and the perfect scenery. The temperature was now about 64 degrees, with no wind, so a long-sleeved shirt was all we needed, even though we had brought several layers because in the morning it had looked overcast and threatening, and yesterday evening in Wellington it had gotten cold.

At one point we came across a small craft fair where Donnie bought some natural wool colored Merino scarves (no possum fur in these, though). Later we had mini meat pies for lunch at a place called "L'Escargot Rouge" (The Red Snail). Donnie then had some Feijoa & Pear sorbet. She asked the girl behind the counter what feijoa was but the resulting explanation wasn't very informative. It's probably some kind of fruit. Oh, and I mustn't forget to mention that we bought another Whittaker's Peanut Slab, a small one.

Later in the afternoon, we suddenly realized that we had too much New Zealand cash and very little opportunity left to spend it, so we scoured a few shops for things to spend it on and could only find a couple of New Zealand T-shirts. We can handle that – just more T-shirts to somehow stuff in our already-overstuffed suitcases. We relaxed on park benches and walked around some more and took a few million more pictures of the gorgeous harbor, hills and town and finally we took a tender back to the ship in the late afternoon. I almost wished that we could make the permanent population of Akaroa go up to 602! Later we watched a beautiful sail-away.

I lost count of the number of "beautiful's" and "gorgeous's" I used back there but I don't think I'll apologize.

That evening we had dinner in the dining room at a shared table with some very nice Canadian and New Zealand people and had engaging discussions. I had Shrimp Cocktail and an Asian Noodle Bowl with shrimp (in both cases called prawns), which brings me to a digression about shrimp tails.

What the heck is going on with shrimp tails? Years ago, when I was a wee lad of thirty or so, when you got a shrimp dish, chances were very good that the entire shrimp was peeled and ready to eat. Now, in the last few years, some weird fad or some other phenomenon has taken over and everywhere you get shrimp the tails still have the shell on them. Even when the shrimp is in soup, or in some Asian noodle dish or casserole, or even covered in some kind of sauce. How are you supposed to eat that? My Asian Noodle Bowl was chiefly a soup, full of noodles and julienned vegetables and shrimp, with shell on the tails. I could eat everything in the bowl with a spoon, except the shrimp. Those I had to pick up with my fingers and bite off the part that wasn't in a shell – not very refined. I have had Chinese dishes containing shrimp which you can eat with chopsticks, except the shrimp. Have you ever tried to pick up a shrimp with a pair of chopsticks and then bite off everything but the tail? It's impossible.

Sometimes this is carried to an extreme. A couple of years ago we went to New Orleans, and Donnie had something called Barbecue Shrimp, which were very large shrimp swimming in a goodly amount of a thick, gooey, messy sauce (which wasn't actually what most people think of as barbecue sauce). Donnie loved it, but because the shrimp were completely un-peeled, she had to pick up the shrimp with her fingers and peel them. By the third shrimp she looked like a grease-monkey who had just disassembled an engine crankcase. By the end of the meal, she needed to be hosed down. What is the purpose of this? Is this supposed to be cool? I don't understand.

Sunday, October 28 – Dunedin, New Zealand – Cruise 2 “Across the Ditch” – Day 6

Today we docked in Dunedin (pronounced like Done Eatin'), or in reality, the port nearby called Port Chalmers, but we didn't actually go to either. We took a train ride on the Taieri Gorge Railway, which unsurprisingly took us to the Taieri Gorge. The train even conveniently picked us up directly at the ship dock, so we only had to walk a few feet from the ship to the train.

Sadly, it was a very overcast day, but I won't complain (that sounds strange coming from me) because we have been very lucky with the weather so far on this adventure. It was a very nice train ride but there were no real photo opportunities because the windows of the train, while large, reflected the lights and the other windows too much, and the grey diffuse light from the overcast sky made the scenery very un-photogenic.

Still, it was a very comfortable and relaxing ride. Tea or coffee and locomotive-shaped cookies were served in the morning. Wine or beer or soft drinks were available all day at no extra charge and a box lunch was served. The seats were quite comfortable even though the train cars were from the 1940s. The only inconvenience was that the cars were hard to climb into or out of because of the very steep, very narrow steps. You actually had to climb down facing backwards.

We saw hills, rocks, plants, grass, and some sheep. Sounds boring doesn't it? It was, a little. We have probably been spoiled by the American west – places like southern Utah and Arizona, so this gorge was a bit tame. At the end of the line where we stopped and got off while they moved the engine to the other end of the train there was a little, somewhat sad craft fair and a lady who was a really bad folk singer. It was still very overcast but we took a few bad pictures of the train.

During the trip back it rained. We still had an enjoyable time because we were sitting at a table opposite a nice couple from Iowa who were fun to talk to. The train made a stop at the old, famous Dunedin station, and we got out and tried to take some pictures in the rain. We also tried to take some pictures inside, but it was crowded full of people doing the same thing.

In the late afternoon we were back on the ship and Donnie suggested we go down to the Piazza (the corny and totally inappropriate name for the area at the lowest deck of the atrium) for tea and violins. The violins were supplied by a couple called the Talisman Duo who played popular tunes and show/movie themes. I didn't like their playing because they relied too much on electronic background instruments, amplification, echo and other electronics so that it hardly sounded like violins. I even wondered if the violin sounds were real.

Monday, October 29 – Fjordland National Park – Cruise 2 “Across the Ditch” – Day 7

Today we visited Fjordland National Park. We visited three fjords or sounds today. The first one was Dusky Fjord, then Doubtful Fjord, and finally Milford Fjord. I had been assured that we were not visiting Gerald Fjord, Betty Fjord, or Model-T Fjord. As I wrote this, it was overcast, drizzly, foggy and yet the views in Dusky Fjord were dramatic. Outside, the decks were wet and the handrails were wet. Still, there were lots of people out snapping pictures. It stopped raining so I walked around the decks taking some pictures. Donnie preferred to relax in our room and watch out our balcony window.

I then figured I'd have a nice breakfast. That didn't happen. The breakfast buffet was a zoo – one where all the animals had escaped. Basically, there was chaos. So I went down to the cafe for two coffees instead, which I brought back to our room.

We entered Doubtful Fjord with the sun out. After we were tired of taking a quazillion or so pictures, we had Chicken Chow Mein and Wonton Soup from the Noodle Bar on the pool deck, while sailing through a beautiful fjord in New Zealand! Sounds perfectly normal, right?

After lunch, while the ship was sailing the Tasman Sea along the coast toward the entrance to Milford Fjord, we attended a lecture by a park ranger about Fjordland. Then we investigated strategic places to watch and photograph the passage through Milford Fjord. We thought we would try to find a place to sit in the Hollywood Conservatory, which is a very relaxing, nice, indoors, adults-only area at the top, front (oops, I mean topside, forward) of the ship. As we had been told, it was full, with not a single seat available, but after much waiting, searching,

jockeying and putting on threatening expressions, we secured two deck chairs right by a big window in a little semi-private niche in the conservatory. We camped here for the duration or until hunger became too powerful to resist. We were ready to defend it to the death.

As we sailed along the coast of New Zealand, the sky above us was blue and cloudless, but the land we were sailing past was completely covered with low puffy clouds but as we turned and entered Milford Fjord we were surprised to find that the sun was out. Not wanting to lose our hard-won encampment, we took turns going outside to take pictures. It was hard to find a place by the railing to get decent pictures. Next time we have to pack a cattle prod.

While relaxing in the deck chairs in our sort-of private little cabana we stared out at snow covered mountains, waterfalls, puffy clouds, and green water all a few feet from our window. We took turns going outside to take another kajillion pictures. During his lecture, the park ranger described the many birds, seals, whales, and other wildlife that inhabit the area. Naturally we didn't see a single one. Several times during our passage through the fjord, we were closer to the steep rock walls than we were to the other side of the ship. That was scary.

As we exited the fjord, the ocean swells got bigger and there were whitecaps on the water. When we finally left the conservatory, the wind outside was especially fierce and they were removing everything not permanently attached to the deck like chairs, tables, topiary plants, etc. They also closed all the pools and outside decks and were tying things down. Strangely, the ship wasn't rocking all that much. We had been told by several Aussie's and Kiwi's that the Tasman Sea could be very rough. We would be spending the next two days on it. I wasn't worried, or was I?

We really enjoyed visiting Fiordland National Park – yet another staggeringly beautiful place. The New Zealander's really take care of it. Aside from one road leading in to the town of Milford, which is only there for tourists who want to hike the trails or take boats into Milford Sound, and which has no privately owned land or buildings, there are *no* man-made objects in the park. There are no other buildings, no roads, no electric wires, no restaurants, no souvenir shops – quite a difference from American National Parks. There are some trails for hikers, but they have to carry out everything they bring in, and there are no signs. In addition, the park rangers spend much of their time controlling the pest population, trapping rats and stoats (a type of weasel) that are not native to New Zealand and are a threat to the indigenous birds.

After dinner we listened to a pair of young English women folk/pop singers, called Char and Philly, one of whom played the acoustic guitar. They were very good. They used no electronics at all except the PA amplifier. That's nice.

Now we were on the Tasman Sea, heading west to Tasmania, an island south of Australia and part of that country. Both the sea and the island were named after an early Dutch explorer whose name was Abel Tasman. We said "Bye, Bye" to New Zealand. We already missed it. If it was closer to home, I have no doubt that we'd go back often.

As we were getting ready for bed, we shared a small bar of Whittaker's Dark Chocolate with Peppermint that we bought way back in Akaroa. It was way, way too good – rats! I really like Whittaker's chocolate, and when I get home it will be unavailable – double rats! I don't even know if it's available in Australia. We'll soon find out. If it is, I plan on loading up on it during our stay in Sydney, just before we get on the M. S. Amsterdam for our cruise home. Stay tuned. (Note: I still have one, small, "Super Peanut Slab".)

Thursday, November 1 – Hobart, Tasmania, Australia – Cruise 2 “Across the Ditch” – Day 10

Here we were in Hobart, Tasmania, Australia! Donnie finally made it to Australia! Mission Accomplished. For those geographically challenged (like me), Tasmania is an island off the southeast coast of mainland Australia, but it *is* part of Australia.

We received a notice a few days ago that Australian passport control was mandatory and that everybody had to get off the ship between the time it docked and 11:00 AM and that nobody would be allowed back onboard until everyone was inspected by passport control.

We got off around 8:00 AM and the terminal building was crowded with a few hundred people snaking their way through the zig-zag roped-off lines to have their passports inspected. Surprisingly, it only took us 15 minutes to wind our way through the line. This was probably because they had 14 inspectors. Donnie was annoyed again, however, because they didn't stamp our passports. Hardly anyone does anymore. New Zealand didn't, so when we docked in Akaroa, New Zealand and Donnie noticed a small booth where they offered to stamp your passport for \$2, she had to have it done. Amusingly, they stamped it “Kingdom of Akaroa”. The woman who did the stamping pointed to a guy standing nearby and said “That's my husband. He's the King”.

We walked around the town. Hobart was another attractive place. There were many old preserved and re-purposed buildings. Since we were on the harbor, many of the ones we saw first were old warehouses, customs houses, chandleries, etc. Since we had skipped breakfast, after walking for a while we went into a nice bakery/cafe for giant coffees and huge croissants. We determined that at least some of the restaurants in Australia are like those in New Zealand. You don't wait for a check from the waiter. You just go up to the cashier when you are ready to pay, and somehow they know what you ordered – it's remarkable, very sensible and much more efficient than how it's done back home. You don't have to catch a waiter and ask for the check and wait for them to bring it and then wait for them to come back and pick up your credit card and then wait for them to return with the credit card and the receipt for you to sign.

Afterward we once again *had* to make our customary and mandatory visit to the post office for postcards and stamps. Luckily for me, this visit accomplished another task of extreme importance. Inside the post office I determined that they do sell Whittaker's Chocolate in

Australia. I'm very relieved. They even had a bag of bite-sized Whittaker's Peanut Slabs. I should probably explain that the post office, in addition to postal matters, sells souvenirs, gifts, toys, and some edibles, like Whittaker's Chocolates. I didn't buy the bag because I didn't want to carry it around town. There will be many other opportunities. We will be in Australia for almost another month.

We then wondered what to do next and after glancing at a map of downtown I suggested we visit the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, for two reasons – one: it was very close by, and two: it was free to visit. Who could resist?

The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery was another really nice museum. The exhibits were very eclectic. There was art – paintings and drawings, even a little contemporary art, natural history – stuffed animals birds and sea creatures from Tasmania, historical artifacts, a whole exhibit on Antarctica including a lot about expeditions there since it's very close, and also some historical exhibits. We wandered around the museum for a while and then when we tired, we sat at the museum cafe and had some juice while Donnie filled her postcards with a few million words. I still don't know how she gets them all on those tiny pieces of cardboard.

A word about the weather – in the morning it was 48 degrees and quite chilly. Clouds and rain were predicted for the early afternoon. At 3:00 there was bright sun and it was 77 degrees – so much for predictions. I had brought several layers of clothing and I had to keep removing layers until there were no more I could remove without breaking some law and I was still very warm.

About 3:00 we went back to the ship and I had a late light lunch while Donnie went out to the terminal building. Need I explain why? There was free WiFi, of course. Emails needed to be read and answered.

Hobart was another very nice place. It had a pretty harbor, nice old buildings, and was very clean. It is the capital of Tasmania so it had a number of modern government buildings too. It isn't really a tourist town so there weren't too many touristy places, which was good.

In the early evening we went for tea and a violinist in the piazza. The young male violinist wore a sequin covered T-shirt, and played a sequin covered violin. His first piece was Vivaldi's Four Seasons to a rock beat. The audience was clapping to the beat – poor Vivaldi. It was billed as “Pizzazz in The Piazza: Up Close and Personal With Chris Watkins”. We were not up close and I didn't want to get personal. He strutted back and forth and all over the area while playing. His violin was somehow connected wirelessly to the amplification system – very modern. I prefer David Oistrakh. You probably have no idea who he was. It would take too long to explain. If you care, Google him.

Friday, November 2 – At Sea – Cruise 2 “Across the Ditch” – Day 11

This morning there was a grey, overcast sky. We're were at sea so it didn't matter. Some islands off the north coast of Tasmania were visible in the mist. That last sentence couldn't possibly have been written by me, could it?

Today was full of the following exciting events: breakfast, morning trivia, writing this epic on the computer, lunch, afternoon nap, listening to audiobook on my iPhone, dinner. Or, perhaps I could claim that something unusual occurred, like a giant pterodactyl swooped out of the sky and grabbed some unwary passenger off the pool deck and flew off with him. No, I'm afraid not – it was an afternoon nap then. Cruising can be so tiring.

I nearly forgot, one other thing we did this morning was look over Donnie's research on things to do in Melbourne tomorrow. We're still not sure what we will do, but I firmly vetoed visiting the Banking Museum.

Saturday, November 3 – Melbourne, Australia – Cruise 2 “Across the Ditch” – Day 12

We awoke to a cloudy day in Melbourne. It was predicted be overcast and cool all day. We took the advice of a couple we met that had lived in Melbourne and we didn't rush off the ship and get caught in the huge crowd waiting for transportation into the city. When we did get off about 9:30 we bought the Melbourne Transit MYKI cards for \$15 (Australian) each for day passes. As we stepped onto the pier, I told Donnie that she now officially made it to mainland Australia. That makes five continents we have visited so far. Only two to go, Africa and Antarctica. For some strange reason, I have noticed her window shopping for heavy fur parkas recently. I am worried.

We took a nice, new, very crowded tram to the downtown area, which seemed very quiet for a Saturday morning. We had made no plans, and weren't sure exactly where we were or how to navigate the tram system, so we stopped for coffee and read maps and decided to walk around a little. Downtown Melbourne was full of modern glass and steel buildings and yet had trees in the streets. We walked about seven or eight blocks to the Queen Victoria Market, which had only been mentioned as an afterthought in most travel guides and our port lecture.

It was astonishing. The Queen Victoria Market consisted mainly of several giant covered sheds, with open sides. The sheds each held at least a hundred vendor's stalls, maybe two hundred, and there were about twelve or fifteen of these sheds, plus some enclosed buildings. The word huge doesn't go far enough to describe it.

The vendors sold everything from cheap T-shirts to hardware to pet supplies to luggage, fresh produce, clothing, souvenirs, shoes and a lot more. You could buy anything here. Forget about Walmart. The market was seemingly endless. Then in one of the enclosed permanent buildings I stumbled upon the biggest meat market I have ever seen. There were at least thirty permanent butcher stalls in one incredibly crowded building, and a dozen or so fish stalls. Also, we discovered why it seemed so quiet downtown. Everybody who lived in Melbourne was in the

Meat Building. I could barely squeeze my way through. Intelligently, Donnie stayed outside and bought postcards. I wondered how the shoppers chose *which* of the thirty meat vendors to buy tonight's steak from.

First we had been completely astonished by the immense sheds, then I was thunderstruck by the Meat Building, then we discovered the Deli Building. Inside there were dozens of permanent establishments that sold cold cuts, sausages, breads, cheeses, spices, cakes, chocolates, meat pies, and more. We wandered around the deli building taking pictures and salivating. Finally, we couldn't resist the temptation so we went to the stand of "Ferguson Plarre Bakehouses" which state on their packaging "Celebrating 115 Years" and "How long have we been baking? Put it this way, our first delivery trucks were powered by hay."

Donnie got a Lamb and Rosemary pie and I got a Steak and Onion pie and we shared a Mini Party Pie and a "Mini Oggie". We found out that an Oggie had beef and vegetables in it. The Party Pie had some kind of meat and gravy, we don't know what kinds, exactly. We found a seat at some plastic tables outside the Deli building and enjoyed our mini-feast.

Then, after our mini-feast, inside the Deli building again, I saw some really gorgeous looking sausages which I couldn't resist. I had a big, red, mustard and sauerkraut covered sausage on a crusty French roll. It was fantastic. Then we shared a bottle of "Pub Squash" which Donnie had seen others drinking and wanted to try. It was lemon soda and not too sweet. We both thought it was quite good. I could have tried about a thousand things in the Deli Building. If it weren't for our full suitcases and the possible American airport Beagles sniffing for forbidden foodstuffs I would have bought breads and cheeses and ham and honey and chocolates and...

After lunch, Donnie wanted to do some gift shopping in the market. I reminded her that we had very overstuffed suitcases and that we were going to be limited in our carry-on luggage capabilities during our tour, so she only bought some fancy socks as gifts. We could have gotten T-shirts, sweatshirts, Merino Wool sweaters, boomerangs, didgeridoos, UGG boots, plush kangaroos and koalas, leather jackets, ...

We could easily have spent an entire day wandering around the market. It was the biggest, most impressive market we have seen anywhere. Even the meat market was the most impressive, and the deli market, and the fruit market...

We eventually took a tram from the market to another stop where we switched to an antique city circling tram. We found out from the tram driver's commentary that Melbourne has the largest tram network in the world. Also, in the whole downtown area, the trams are free – what a smart city. We rode around the downtown area for a while, but then decided to get off the tram because it was getting close to "all aboard" time for the ship. We walked a little more exploring a different, more crowded downtown area. Finally, we took another tram back to the pier.

It turned out to be pretty nice weather today – the Sun was in and out all day. When it came out, it got warm. The weather wasn't nearly as bad as had been predicted. Once again we had overdressed based on the weather forecast and had to keep removing layers of clothing, which increased the amount of stuff we had to carry. Our weather luck continues.

When we got back to the ship and dropped off our encumbrances, I announced that I had a plan for the late afternoon/early evening. I said I was going to wash my hands, grab my laptop, and head down to one of the more comfortable bar lounges and...

1: Order a Gin and Tonic, and...

2: Write up today's words of wisdom (the junk you are now reading) and possibly...

3: Repeat 1.

If I really do item 3 and continue doing item 2, the text may get a little more incoherent than normal – sorry. Update: I just did item 3. Ahh.....

We were very pleasantly surprised by Melbourne. We hadn't really known what to expect, but we had vague notions of your typical large, noisy, busy, somewhat gritty modern city. Melbourne was a big city and modern – an abundance of glass and steel buildings, but it had a lot of pretty places and a pleasant atmosphere, and like every place we have seen so far in New Zealand and Australia, was very clean.

Sunday, November 4 – At Sea – Cruise 2 “Across the Ditch” – Day 13

Today was our last full day of this cruise. We felt a little sad, which is strange because we were only about halfway through our little adventure. We started late this morning, partially because Donnie didn't sleep too well last night, and I slept too well, which I swear had nothing to do with the two G&T's that I had yesterday evening. Lest you think I'm a boozer, I just checked our stateroom bill and we only had bar drinks three times on this cruise and wine with dinner once.

Which brings me to an interesting thing I noticed. Yesterday, just as we got back to the ship around four in the afternoon, as we were in the elevator going up to our room, a man got on board the elevator holding a well-filled brandy snifter. I thought that four in the afternoon was a bit early for a big snifter of brandy. Then, this morning, at about 11:30, a woman got on our elevator, also with a well-filled snifter of brandy. It wasn't even noon. To each his own, I guess. Maybe they purchased the cruise beverage package which, according to my calculations, means that you have to drink six alcoholic drinks per person per day in order to break even. If I did that Donnie would have to pay extra for a burial at sea.

Today there was little on the event schedule that we were interested in doing. Donnie's main concern today was the dreaded packing. Usually, before a trip, Donnie's idea of packing is a lengthy operation which involves days, or weeks even of selecting and discarding potential items to be packed, and then in the last few days before departure, carefully packing the chosen items

into her luggage, and then re-thinking her choices and unpacking and re-packing – sometimes more than once.

None of this applied today, except that we did make a few purchases and there was no room for them in our suitcases, and we will be restricted to one suitcase and one carry-on each during our whirlwind six day tour of Australia's airports (a.k.a. our land tour). So packing will be interesting. I must add that Donnie is a very neat, very efficient packer, and I am not. So, she very kindly has agreed to pack my suitcases also, probably out of pity. I do plan to help. This means standing around and making useless and unwelcome suggestions. I'm good at that.

Tomorrow is debarkation. This is a fancy cruise-line word that means "get off the ship" (or to be more accurate "get the hell off the ship"). We have done this on each of our five previous cruises of course. In each case they want you to put your suitcases outside the night before so they can collect them and put them off the ship, and they want *you* out of your stateroom before 8:00 AM so they can get your room ready for the next set of cruisers who are embarking almost while you are disembarking. This is a big pain. You have to get up pretty early to be out before 8. Tomorrow will be even worse.

Here's the very busy scenario for tomorrow: We have to meet up for transfer to the airport for our 10:30 tour flight to Uluru (formerly called Ayer's Rock), so our meeting time is 6:15 AM. We will probably set our alarm for 5:00. Then we get off, find our suitcases in the terminal building, probably go through passport control, and board a bus to the airport. Then we fly several hours to the Uluru airport, and then probably board a bus to our hotel. Then the tour has scheduled a sunset visit to the Uluru National Park, by which time we will have been awake for way too many hours and will be totally zonked. I think we are also scheduled to get up very early the next morning so we will really be zonked by then.

All of this is speculation. I will report the actual events after they happen. That is usually the best plan. Reporting events before they happen requires paranormal capabilities or a whole lot of chutzpah (or a time machine which I am working on but have not completed yet – or I have but I haven't come back and told myself. Never mind. I have read too many science fiction stories.)

Although we haven't yet received all of the gory details, it is our impression that the entire tour will be equally intense. Donnie is looking forward to the two weeks we have on our own in Sydney after the tour so she can chill, but I know her too well. After the first few hours, she will become bored and want to go out exploring.

Chapter Four – Touring Australia

Monday, November 5 – Uluru, Australia – Australia Tour – Day 1

We awoke very early, about 4:30 AM. Fortunately, this meant that we were up and dressed in time to see and photograph the sail into Sydney harbor, right past the opera house. We got to our assigned meeting place at 6:15, per instructions. We were called to disembark at 6:35, which, based on previous experience, wasn't a long wait. We were on the bus at 6:55 – again not bad. Since we had to walk from the terminal building to the bus, we did actually set foot in Sydney, very briefly.

It was only a half hour ride to the airport so we had way too much time to wait in the airport before our 10:30 flight. We met our tour guide, Juliet, who handed out name badges, some questionnaires and gave us some information about what was happening next.

When we were boarding our plane, the airline used a very strange, confused boarding process. They announced that the people in the front fifteen rows were supposed to use the usual jetway but the people in the back rows had to walk down a flight of steps and then out to the tarmac and then up the old fashioned portable stairway to a rear door on the plane. You can probably guess which group we were in. Some people didn't hear or follow the directions and thus you had people trying to go in both directions in the very narrow aisle of the plane. The result was chaos.

As some kind of compensation of our having to use the stairs, the gods smiled upon us and we had one of the very few empty seats between us. It was a rather spartan flight experience. They charged for the usually free sodas or coffee/tea. The seat backs reclined maybe an inch. We later found out that we had been on one of the discount Australian airlines. It was also one of the bumpiest flights I've been on in a long time.

After landing at Ayer's Rock Resort Airport, baggage pickup was also a little chaotic because they were constructing new carousels and so they just placed all the bags on a concrete area outside the terminal building with some guards there to watch them while we searched for ours. Then we boarded our bus for a quick ride to the hotel. Suddenly, a lot of water started pouring out of the one of the overhead storage shelves on the bus. Several of us had to change seats to avoid being drenched. Then, at the hotel we found out that our rooms wouldn't be ready for another hour and a half. Also, just for completeness, it was overcast. This was not an auspicious start to our tour.

While waiting for our room, we had a light lunch in the restaurant in the hotel. It was much lighter than we had anticipated. We each ordered a "Beef Taco" which turned out to be three small crackers topped with a half teaspoon of shredded beef. It was very "nouvelle cuisine" which is French for "a lot of emptiness on the plate". We eventually got the keys to our room

about fifteen minutes earlier than scheduled but it took us ten of those minutes to walk to our room, which was a long walk to the other end of the large hotel complex.

The Ayer's Rock Resort is a commercial resort complex of several hotels, campsites, and support establishments in the desert, just outside the non-commercial Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. Uluru is the now-official Aboriginal name for what was previously called Ayer's Rock.

The Rock is 1141 feet high and 6 miles in circumference. In other words, it's big. Our next itinerary item was a visit to the park and a walk to the rock itself. As we drove from the hotel to the rock, our bus driver/guide told us a lot of fascinating facts which I won't bore you with, except that there are 800,000 wild camels in Australia. I'll bet you didn't know that. I'll also bet that you don't care. Aren't you glad that I won't bore you with any more of those facts, like why and when the camels were brought to Australia and why their descendants are wild.

It wasn't as hot as we had been told it would be, but, strangely, in the middle of the desert it was quite humid. The visit to the rock was astounding, awe inspiring, life-changing, (add your own superlatives here). There was one downside however, there were Little Black Flies, everywhere – mostly in your face and unavoidable. They were really everywhere – in the bus, in the hotel, in our room, everywhere we walked.

During our walk we were so close to the rock we were allowed to touch it. Donnie was thrilled. We took another very very large number of pictures. After the walk we went to an Aboriginal Cultural Center where we were given an Aboriginal culture demonstration which was fascinating. We were asked not to take pictures of the Aboriginal people, except for the one demonstrating. They do not like to be photographed. I don't blame them. Neither do I.

Later we went to see Uluru at sunset. Again, you can add your own long list of superlatives here. Another large number of pictures were taken, not just by us but also by the very, very large number of visitors. Poor Kodak would have made a fortune if all those people were still using film. While we were waiting for the sun to set, Donnie bought some aboriginal art from one of the actual artists who were showing their artwork laid out on cloths on the ground nearby.

Here I will impart one other tremendously fascinating piece of information – Uluru is 10,643 miles from New York. You can't get much further away without a spaceship.

Tuesday, November 6 – Uluru, Alice Springs, Darwin – Australia Tour – Day 2

We were so exhausted last night we had no dinner and almost no sleep last night. Then we had to get up and out to the bus by 5:00 AM to see Uluru at sunrise. Since we had gotten up around 4:30 yesterday and had almost no sleep last night, this was not fun. I was so fuzzy, I think I may have brushed my teeth with my shoehorn.

The view at sunrise was, once again, wonderful, but not quite as spectacular as we had hoped. Then we were driven back to the hotel for a nice buffet breakfast but it was rushed because of the crowded timetable for today. First, we had a quick bus ride to the Ayers Rock Resort Airport, a tiny airport that is just there for the resort. There was no problem finding our gate – there was only one. Also, on the airport video screen, the list of departing flights was easy to read – there was only one flight.

After the usual airport chaotic rigamarole, even in this tiny airport, we took a very short flight to Alice Springs, a small town in almost the very center of Australia, in the “outback”, where we boarded a tour bus. According to the bus driver, Alice springs is the closest point to *every* beach in Australia. Also, he said, it isn’t in “The Middle Of Nowhere”. It’s “In The Center Of Everything”

We visited the “Alice Springs School of the Air”, an education center where they have a studio for remote teaching of students who live in the remotest inaccessible parts of Australia and who cannot get to schools. It once used radio but now uses the Internet, and good, old-fashioned mail. I was surprised to hear that there were still people, ranchers and others, with their families, who live and work way out in the “outback” very, very far from what we would call civilization.

Then we visited the Alice Springs Reptile Center, where we were given the wonderful opportunity to touch and stroke Isabelle the Bearded Dragon lizard, a Blue Tongued Skink (another lizard) and Lexie the Python. Donnie was again thrilled. Then we had a visit to the historical first Telegraph Station in Alice Springs where unhappily it was hot as hell. Finally we went on another very hot visit to the ANZAC war memorial. ANZAC stands for Australia New Zealand Army Corps. I am sorry to say that visiting War Memorials in the heat is not my cup of tea. It was very hot tea.

After our varied visits in Alice Springs we headed back to the airport and boarded yet another flight, this time to Darwin, Australia. Every single Australian person we had met so far, upon hearing that we were visiting Darwin, immediately responded with something like “It’s very, very hot and humid in Darwin, Mate.” Well, OK, they didn’t always add the “Mate”.

We walked out of the nice, air-conditioned Darwin airport and were hit in the face with sauna-like weather. It was supremely hot and devilishly humid and our bus was late and we had to wait a while in the heat and humidity. After we finally got to our hotel and dropped off our stuff in our room, we went down to the lobby about 7:30 for some complimentary glasses of wine, and, contrary to our original plans, stayed talking to some nice fellow tourists until 10:00. Since the hotel restaurant was now closed, and we didn’t want to wander the streets of Darwin, we had a room-service dinner.

Talk about an exhausting day. Up at five after no sleep for two nights, two flights, three airports, visits to five sights in the heat of Alice springs and then hot, humid Darwin. Still, most of it was fun and fascinating, just don’t ask me to do it again.

Wednesday, November 7 – Darwin – Australia Tour – Day 3

Today we got to see flying crocodiles and jumping doctors, or was it the other way around? Our first itinerary item was a trip to see Jumping Crocodiles. Oh Joy! As I explained to one of our fellow tourists, who noticed that I was somewhat un-enthusiastic about the Jumping Crocodile cruise, I am not a nature lover, and it was very hot and humid, and I have been on other “crocodile viewing” river cruises where all we saw was something in the distance that might have been a log.

Our bus drove a while through the countryside, which was full of farms and Mango orchards. On the road we passed Road-Trains. What is a Road-Train you may ask? (I’m going to tell you even if you don’t ask) Imagine a normal 18-wheeler tractor trailer, you know, a big truck. Now attach another trailer to the back, now do that again, and again. We passed Road Trains that had four trailers, but the trailers didn’t have the usual two axles in the rear, but three. They are big, and heavy. Our driver said you want to give them a wide berth. Especially the tankers carrying fuel. Eventually we arrived in the area known as Humpty Doo at the Jumping Crocodile Cruise, where after being given some mango ice-pops to cool off, we boarded the river boat to see the crocodiles.

My un-enthusiasm was misplaced. The entire thing was professional, well managed and surprisingly engaging. I expected a silly tourist-trap. The young female boat driver explained that the crocs are not captives, they are wild. They are not trained to jump just for tourists, they do it naturally to get birds in low branches. They are not overfed or mistreated, and we definitely didn’t need binoculars to see them. We were told to keep all limbs inside the railing of the boat, and in this case with good reason. They were very close, like a few inches from the boat.

We got up close and definitely too personal with three crocodiles: Stumpy, Pearl, and Casanova. Stumpy got his name because he only has one and a half of his normal four feet left. Crocs can attack and eat each other. Pearl was unique because she was white in color. She was not albino but had some other genetic disorder. They call her Pearl because of her color, but they don’t really know if she is a she or a he. I don’t think anybody wants to check. Casanova’s naming story was too long to impart here and unimportant. The fact of most significance was that he was huge.

They drove the boat on the river for a while to spots where they knew the crocs hang out and then they slowed down and sure enough the crocs detected the vibrations of the boat and came over for a treat. The crew then held out some buffalo meat on a long pole, but strangely the crocs didn’t immediately grab it. They swam right up to the boat, and had a look around and even had to be coaxed, but when they did go for the treat, they jumped several feet out of the water to grab it. There were two young woman crew members on our boat, one driving and one feeding the crocs. Even though it was quite hot and humid out, the one feeding them was wearing a heavy-

duty jacket. I really didn't want to know why. On her feet were some sneakers. I wondered why she wasn't wearing Crocs (footwear pun).

Later, back in Darwin, after a nice lunch of Barramundi, an Australian fish, and a cooking lesson on how it should be prepared, we visited a museum that featured the bombing of Darwin at the start of World War II and also the Royal Flying Doctor service, which is an important medical service for the outback where nobody is close to anything, especially medical facilities.

Thursday, November 8 – Darwin to Cairns – Australia Tour – Day 4

Today was a pure travel day. At least it wasn't an early awakening. We had to have our bags outside our doors before ten AM and we had to be on the bus by eleven. Then at one PM our plane departed for Brisbane. Why Brisbane? We don't know. Brisbane wasn't on our tour. We are heading for Cairns.

There was a direct, two and a half hour flight from Darwin to Cairns but for some unknown reason we instead were booked on a four hour flight from Darwin to Brisbane, which is way south, followed by a two hour layover, and then another two and a half hour flight back up north to Cairns, arriving at ten at night. This is like flying from Chicago to New York with a stop in Miami. None of us were particularly thrilled with this itinerary.

After four hours in the air, we arrived at the Brisbane airport. Donnie wanted to add Brisbane to our list of places we have visited, but my rule is "airports don't count". She doesn't really care about my rules.

We chatted with a couple in our tour group while waiting to check in for the second flight. The unusual thing we learned was that the man had a PhD in Geography. I didn't even think you could *get* a PhD in Geography. I thought they finished teaching it by high-school. He used to be some kind of bigwig in the USGS. (United States Geological Survey, a government agency).

Perhaps more interestingly, I think one of the black flies has followed me from Uluru to Alice Springs and then to Darwin. If he turns up in Cairns, I may have a new pet, or maybe *he* does.

We had a two hour layover in the Brisbane airport and then, already very tired, got on our two and one half hour flight to Cairns. At least we had two seats alone, in an exit row with lots of legroom. After two bus rides, two flights and three airports we got to the hotel at eleven PM. What a day.

Friday, November 9 – Cairns – Australia Tour – Day 5

Today we visited the Great Barrier Reef! We never dreamed... yada yada yada... you've heard that stuff before. We took a big multi-level catamaran tour boat to a Great Barrier Reef Pontoon. These pontoons are like floating islands. I googled them and saw a picture of a floating resort, with three floors, glass walls, a bar, a restaurant and a canopy roof over it all. It turned out that ours wasn't that big or fancy. After a ninety minute boat ride, we tied up at a platform with a big canvas quonset-hut style roof. Inside were some aluminum tables and chairs, and some metal boxes, and not much else.

They were offering snorkeling, scuba diving, guided snorkeling tours, scuba lessons and undersea walking where you walk on the sea bottom in a big clear plastic helmet, breathing normally. Many of our fellow tour members did do snorkeling, but we are not fish but fowl – chicken. We chose high and dry. Actually, we did take two rides in a glass bottom boat and got to see the reef. We saw many different kinds of corals, starfish, and even giant clams. From a very young age, when I first read about them, I thought giant clams were fictional. They aren't. We saw some. The ones we saw were about the size of a large SUV tire.

We spent about four hours out at the reef, and then another ninety minutes on the boat back. There were a large number of tour boats at the Cairns wharf, advertising all kinds of excursions to the reef, including some that said you could sleep overnight at the reef. I imagine these go to the kind of large, fancy platform that I found with Google. The reef is big business for Cairns.

That evening we were bussed to a Tjapukai Gala Dinner. The Tjapukai are the Aborigines from the Cairns area. The event was held at a combination cultural center, theater, art gallery and restaurant, all operated (and presumably owned) by Aboriginal people. It was a large, modern structure, almost like a resort. First we were given wine and canapés in the art gallery. One of the canapés had a small amount of Emu meat in it. It was tasty. In case I haven't mentioned it before, an Emu is a large, flightless bird, sort of like an Ostrich.

Then we were treated to a Didgeridoo concert and lesson, and then we went outside to a Fire ceremony hosted by an Aboriginal stand-up comedian. He was an Aborigine. He wore native costume. He had simulated Aboriginal Tattoos, probably painted on. He told silly jokes. He and three others, two men and a woman, also with painted faces and bodies and native costume, danced and performed ceremonies. It was a bit silly.

They painted our faces. They taught us some words and some chants and some songs and made us chant and sing along, usually coaxed by the comedian, who, strangely, had almost no Australian accent. The climax came when, after two "volunteers" from the audience were unsuccessful at making fire by rubbing sticks together, the performers made fire and launched it through the air on the tip of a spear, which somehow magically caused a hidden propane torch on the other side of a nearby pond to propel a large flame up several feet high. I wonder how they did that. Perhaps they had some help from the Aboriginal gentleman nearby who was manning the electronics during the show, who they referred to as their "tech guy" – extraordinary.

We then went inside for a buffet dinner which included some crocodile and kangaroo. The crocodile was in some kind of barbecue sauce and was a little chewy. The sauce was tasty but it made it impossible to taste the crocodile – maybe that was deliberate. The kangaroo looked like venison but had a strange taste that I didn't like. Strangely, the dinner item I liked the best was the potato salad.

After dinner the performers came out and did some Aboriginal dances, but again the comedian had to funny it up by bringing “volunteers” up to the stage to participate. As we took the bus back to the hotel, our tour guide explained that this Aboriginal tribe is very different from the one back at Uluru, whose members are very shy, don't want their pictures taken, and speak very softly, if at all.

Saturday, November 10 – Cairns to Sydney – Australia Tour – Day 6

We had a five thirty wake up again. We really hate these early mornings. This one was less fun than the others because it was raining heavily. We sleepily boarded our bus and drove out of Cairns to the countryside. It *was* a pretty area. There were sugar cane fields and mountains. The bus then went up a very twisty mountain road to the top of a rainforest mountain and dropped us off at the little rustic tourist town of Kuranda. When I say “tourist town”, in this case, that's all it is. Nobody actually lives there. There are just shops, cafes and restaurants to serve the tourists who come for the main tourist attraction, the Skyrail Gondola.

By the time we got there, the rain had stopped. We walked through the town, which had some little interesting shops, which were all closed because of the early hour. We then took the Skyrail gondola down over the rainforest. This rainforest is a UNESCO world heritage site, and so the gondola system had to be built and run without any damage to the rainforest, bringing everything up by helicopter and not cutting any trees. It was very impressive, but short. After visiting the rainforest, we were bussed to the Cairns airport for our flight to Sydney.

There was the now-familiar airport group-check-in chaos only this time it was worse than usual. The flight was delayed by a half-hour or so, but that wasn't the big problem. The boarding passes were all messed up, mine had a gate number on it and said we would be boarding at 12:10. Donnie's had no gate number and said we would be boarding at 11:30. This was very strange since we got them at the same time. Also, getting them took an unusually long time and was also chaotic, as they were being handed out in dribs and drabs. The airport video displays showed no gate number. Also the assignment of seats was haphazard and strange. Then onboard, the flight attendants handing out drinks and picking up trash skipped our row, twice. Is it any wonder that I hate flying more and more.

After landing, getting baggage, and a short bus ride, we finally got to our very luxurious hotel in Sydney and checked in. After dropping our ever-heavier stuff in our room, we walked around the nearby very famous Circular Quay area in Sydney. While walking around at night, Donnie didn't

easily find gelato, so she had to settle for Royal Copenhagen Ice Cream. How sad. We, being totally exhausted from several days of little sleep, went to bed early.

Sunday, November 11 – Sydney – Australia Tour – Day 7

We started the day with an extraordinary buffet breakfast, with a huge selection, but we were rushed so we didn't even get to check out all of the possible breakfast treats – maybe tomorrow. We had to be out by the bus at 9:00AM for our Sydney tour today. Before we got on the bus we looked briefly at a small map of Sydney which we were given. We found one place we absolutely have to visit. We don't know what's there, but we have to be able to say we have been there. It's an area in Sydney called Woolloomooloo. I *have* to have visited Woolloomooloo. I don't care what's there.

We drove over the very famous Sydney Harbor Bridge and then to various suburbs. All of which were very attractive and had fantastic views of the Sydney harbor and skyline. We even went to the famous Bondi Beach which was very pretty and very crazy. I'm sure that our tour guide and bus driver avoided any poor or ugly parts of the city, but all of the areas we did see were very nice, with fantastic views and immaculate. Sydney and it's surroundings are gorgeous. It's yet another place I wouldn't mind calling home.

After the tour we had the afternoon to ourselves, so we walked around a nearby Sunday Market where we had Meat Pies for lunch. We walked through the market, which featured handicraft items. Donnie searched for some gifts for our granddaughters but didn't buy anything. Afterward we walked a block to the Circular Quay where we sat and had soft drinks and enjoyed the view.

One of the famous landmarks very close to Circular Quay is the Sydney Harbour Bridge. In pictures, it looks like many similar shaped bridges elsewhere, but the difference is its size. It's immense. The Aussie's call it the "Coat Hanger" because of its shape. There are several ways to cross it. You can take a motor vehicle such as a car or bus. You can take a train. You can actually walk across on a pedestrian walkway, but getting to that is difficult. Then there is the other way – you can climb it.

There is a company that you can book with and climb over the top of the bridge. There are a few things you would need to know, should you contemplate this excursion. You have to pass a test to prove you are physically capable of the climb. You have to don special suits. You cannot bring anything, including mobile phones or cameras. You cannot change your mind mid-climb. Most importantly, you have to pay over \$300. It sounds strenuous, difficult, scary, and expensive, and yet every day during our visit to Sydney we saw dozens of groups of people doing it. I was shocked at the numbers. Most times when we were looking at the bridge we could see tiny dots on the top part of the bridge which were in groups of about ten or more and there was always at least one group and often two or three. They were there even on the windiest of days. There were

there in the late evening when the sun was about to set. I'm not sure if they were there after dark, but I wouldn't bet against it.

Two other things of note occurred during our Sydney city tour that morning. First, Juliet, our tour guide gave out some Tim Tams. These are very popular Australian cookies that every Australian seems to love. They were just square chocolate cookies covered in milk chocolate, which was partially melted and gooey. I thought they were a little too sweet. I think this is another childhood memories thing. Like American kids love Hostess Twinkies, and a lot of American adults remember them fondly and still claim that they love them. If you try them without any such fond memories, they aren't very good.

The other important event today was that I have definitely confirmed that the black fly followed me all the way from Uluru. I think I will call him Sir Gawain. I have no reason.

In the afternoon when we were left to ourselves, I set the wheels in motion for two must-do things to do in Sydney. I will use this as an opportunity to discuss the Sydney Opera House for Tourists. There are several of what I will call "levels" of visiting the Sydney Opera from the tourist point of view. I will elucidate.

Level One: Taking photos of the Sydney Opera House from elsewhere in Sydney. This is easy, and ubiquitous. The Opera House is visible from everywhere in Sydney. You almost can't avoid seeing it. Even from some of the far away suburbs we visited on our tour this morning, there were many places where the view included the harbor and the Opera House. It must be the most photographed building in the world.

Level Two: Going to the Opera House. You can walk up to it, walk around it, have a drink or a meal at one of the cafes, bars, or restaurants in it, take oodles of selfies right on the steps, etc.

Level Three: Take the Tour. There are one-hour tours of the Opera House that run every half hour or so, from 9 AM to 5 PM, 363 days a year. I don't yet know what you see on these tours. We might find out.

Level Four: Take the Backstage Tour. Once a day, very early in the morning, they take up to twelve people on an extensive one and a half hour tour of many backstage places. You are required to wear closed toe, rubber-soled shoes, be fit enough to do 300 steps and climb ladders, be over ten years of age, be able to pay the expensive fee, and show up at 6:45 AM. It also includes breakfast in the Green Room, potentially with staff and performers.

Level Five: Attend a Performance. There are many performances, some of which are not Operas, such as Orchestra Concerts, Dancing, Comedy performers, Plays, etc.

Level Six: Attend an Opera. It *is* called the Opera House.

Level Seven: Buy the Opera House and use it to house your collection of very rare vintage Ferraris, Lamborghinis, Shelby Cobras, Bentleys, Rolls Royce's, Bugatti's, and Porsches. This level is not for everyone.

So, what did I set in motion this morning? I sold my luxury vintage car collection to be able to afford this trip, so forget Level Seven. I booked the Backstage Tour, and I got tickets for a performance. Not only that, but the music gods are smiling down on me. The performance we have tickets for is a special performance by the Australian Chamber Orchestra of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and Beethoven's Violin Concerto, my two *favorite* pieces of music!

Now might be a good time to discuss coins. It might also be a good time to discuss Zebras, but I have chosen coins. A good number of intelligently run countries, like Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and several European countries have come to the conclusion that one and two dollar (or equivalent) bills are best eliminated in favor of coins. I think the rationale is that the coins last longer and thus cost less for the country to mint.

This is fine. However, the Aussies have done something I consider weird. The one-dollar coin, like many elsewhere, is gold colored, or (to paraphrase one of my favorite authors, Terry Pratchett) is goldish and is thicker and heavier than most of the lower denominations. It's something close to an inch in diameter. The weird thing, however, is that the two-dollar coin, also goldish, also thick, is half the diameter. It's about the size of a very thick US nickel. Huh? The two-dollar coin is smaller, much smaller, than the one-dollar coin, both of which are smaller than the 20-cent coin, which is huge and heavy. Somebody explain that please. Every time I have to pay someone an amount that would ordinarily use a two-dollar coin, I end up using two one-dollar coins because my feeble brain forgets that the tiny little coins are worth two dollars.

Chapter Five – Sydney and Environs

Monday, November 12 – Sydney – On Our Own – Day 1

Today we achieved Freedom – no more tour guides telling us we have to be on the bus at 6:00 AM – no more airports (until we go home from LA) – no more bus rides (except for our two excursions in Hawaii near the end of our adventures) – no more setting the alarm to get up early (except for our 6:45 AM backstage tour of the Opera House) – hmmm – that’s a lot of exceptions. Still, we felt more relaxed. Most of the next two weeks are completely do-what-we-want-when-we-want. Today we were inclined to do very little.

We walked further around the Circular Quay towards the Opera House. You know the one. The Circular Quay is the name for the most famous part of Sydney Harbour. It has the Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge nearby. The name Circular Quay is a little misleading because it isn’t circular. It’s almost a square.

On one side of the square harbor area is a peninsula, at the very end of which is the very famous, much photographed, familiar to everybody Opera House. Further in on this peninsula are luxury apartment buildings and restaurants and a very wide promenade right at the water’s edge, with many benches and places to sit. Even the Opera House has many open areas, seats, and a long open balcony-like area under it that has a big bar and a restaurant, also at the water’s edge. This area of the Opera House is open to the public and is often full of people.

The end of the square away from the open harbor has the ferry wharves. There are six covered wharves with ferries able to dock on both sides of each wharf, so there are a very large number of ferries almost continuously going and coming all day. There is also a major elevated train station and a bus terminal and a bunch of restaurants and shops. Behind the wharves and the train station is the Sydney central business district, or CBD as they like to call it. It is awash with glass-and-steel skyscrapers and office buildings as well as stores, some very upscale, and the usual things you would find in the downtown area of a major city.

The third side of the square, the side opposite the Opera House, has another wide promenade, some park space, the Contemporary Art Museum, and at the end directly opposite the opera, the Overseas Passenger Terminal, where all the big cruise ships dock. The whole area is busy, with ferries, boats, tourists, commuters, street performers, and yet whenever we were there it seemed to have a tranquil, relaxing atmosphere. Maybe it was because of the wide promenades and open spaces or maybe because of the proximity of the water. We often spent time sitting and people watching, or boat watching, or Opera House watching, or Sydney Harbour Bridge watching. We really liked the Circular Quay and wished there was a place like it in New York. There isn’t.

The area adjacent to the Circular Quay, on the side near the Overseas Passenger Terminal and the Contemporary Art Museum, is called “The Rocks”. It used to be an area where lower class dock workers lived and also had warehouses and chandleries, etc. Luckily, many of the old buildings have survived and have now been renovated, or are soon to be renovated, and re-purposed, so the area is full of appealing old buildings housing shops, boutiques, cafes, galleries, cafes, restaurants, etc. It’s a really nice area to explore or just hang out in and our hotel is only a few steps away.

On the way to the Opera House we passed people getting ready to ride the Thunder Jet Boat. They were all putting on what looked like long purple monk’s habits with hoods. I think they were actually a group of Jedi who have turned to the purple side. Later in the afternoon we saw another group of Jedi who had turned to the red side. I suspect that they were going to get wet.

One reason we walked to the Opera House was to pick up the tickets for our tour and concert later in the week, which we accomplished. We found out that the backstage tour starts at the Stage Door – cool. We searched and found where it was. Under the massive stairs up to the Opera House, it was a glass door to a glassed-in hallway, with a lighted sign that read “Stage Door”, which seemed quite appropriate. Just think, the very famous Australian Opera star Dame Joan Sutherland walked through the very door that we will be walking through. No, wait... she probably had her own very private, very special entrance with a red carpet, automatic Champagne and Caviar dispensers and a rose petal dropping system. Heck, the Opera hall is called the Joan Sutherland Theatre.

We had lunch in the outdoor water-side restaurant under the Sydney Opera House – very cool. There was one feature of the restaurant that we had never seen anywhere else. When you got your food, you were also given domed metal mesh covers to keep the seagulls from stealing the food off your plate. I am not making that up. The restaurant is only feet from the water’s edge and there were a very large number of very aggressive seagulls who were extremely unafraid of people. They walked and flew everywhere in the restaurant, and would steal the food off your plate unless you covered it with the mesh dome. During our lunch, there were several seagulls conspicuously hanging out a few feet from our table, eyeing us, or our plates of food, hungrily. Oh, and with lunch we had another Aussie treat that I hadn’t mentioned before – Lemon Squash, it’s another carbonated lemonade. It’s very good and very refreshing.

We have confirmed again that in Australia and New Zealand restaurants you hardly ever pay the waiter. Last night we were in a slightly fancier Italian restaurant where the waiter actually brought you your bill after you finished eating, but you were still supposed to take the bill up to a cashier to pay. Today, at the restaurant in the Opera House, when you gave your order to your waitress, she told you the amount you had to pay and you paid her right there. She even carried the ubiquitous small credit card machines that they have everywhere here and in Europe that are connected wirelessly and even print out the receipts.

We walked all around the Opera House, up and down the many staircases, taking a humongous number of pictures from every angle. We will probably end up taking a very huge, or even ginormous number of pictures since we will be there several times and we will be seeing it from every possible angle and location.

We were tired, so we slowly walked back to our hotel room, only stopping two or three times for Donnie to buy another two or three pounds of postcards. When we got back to our hotel room we found out that we're important bigwigs. In our room there was complimentary wine, cheese and fruit and a hand written note from the head of housekeeping thanking us for our stay and offering his services should we need them. You get treated well when you blow huge wads of cash.

The cheese, crackers, fruit and wine were very nice and we enjoyed them, but the most incredible thing they gave us were three candies in the shape of fruits, each about an inch in diameter, all sitting on this big, heavy slate slab about the size of a sheet of letter paper.

One was a light yellow and was in the shape of a pear, with a plastic green stem sticking out of it. Another was red and shaped like a strawberry, with another plastic stem with plastic strawberry leaves, and the third was round and green and probably was supposed to be a kiwi fruit. They were all sugar covered and looked translucent, like gumdrops, only a little bigger. There was a card with them that described them in glowing terms and said that they were called "Pate de fruits", which is French for "fruit paste". Donnie was skeptical since she doesn't like gumdrops. She tried a taste of the pear-shaped one. She was in heaven. I tried it. Wow! Pure essence of pear. We both love pear. This was ultimate pear. The strawberry one was good, and the kiwi one was good, but the pear one was fantastic. These were not gumdrops. I guess the hotel *really* likes the fact that we are spending fifteen days here (the word *spending* being very appropriate).

Even though we said we were inclined to do very little today, we walked about three miles and climbed six flights of stairs, and even though that isn't much compared to some days in the earlier parts of this adventure, we felt very drained this evening. Maybe tomorrow we will really take it easy and only walk 2.9 miles and climb only 4.3 flights of steps.

Oh, and Sir Gawain was waiting for us in the hotel elevator – really. He started way out in the outback, in Uluru, and now he has traveled all the way to the big city and now even to a five-star hotel – lucky fly.

Final note for today – the weather: about 70 degrees, clear blue sky, light breeze – once again Perfect – scary.

Tuesday, November 13 – Sydney – On Our Own – Day 2

Today, we were told by several sources, would not be such great weather, probably overcast and cold. They were wrong. We woke up to sun, blue sky and a few puffy clouds. This is getting

monotonous. We figured that it would be a good day to finally see a kangaroo, even if it is in a zoo. After the usual morning rigamarole, such as brushing the occasional tooth, off we went.

We had been given some official OPAL cards, which are the high-tech payment cards used to get on and off all of the transit vehicles in Sydney. They were donated to the tour group by a couple of women who had purchased them for the one afternoon they had free at the end of the tour and then had to leave. They even had about seven dollars of credit still on them. Since we were the ones most likely to use them, Juliet, our tour guide, gave them to us. So we went to the machines by the ferry wharves and added some credit, bought two tickets for the zoo, which they sell right at the ferry wharf, tapped our cards at the turnstiles, (you are told to “tap on” and “tap off”) and got on the ten minute long ferry ride to Taronga Zoo.

At the end of the ride you are left off on a small jetty way down below the zoo, but, happily, there is a Sky Safari cable car right there and it whisked us up a steep incline to the top of the bluff and then over the entire zoo to the main entrance at the other end – fun.

Once inside the zoo, we headed for the section that had Australian animals. We didn’t come here to see elephants. We have seen elephants. At home, we can see elephants any time we want at the Bronx Zoo. So, without going into the nitty gritty details, we finally got to see Koalas, Platypus (we were told that the plural of Platypus is Platypus), several kinds of small rodent-like nocturnal creatures including, finally, a Tasmanian Devil, some weird-looking creatures called Echidnas, a large number of native birds, one of whom bombed poor Donnie, and yes, the biggies... Kangaroos, Wallabies and Emus. Most wonderfully, many of them were in enclosures with us so there was nothing between us and them. We got very close to some of them. We did go up to an enclosure that claimed to have Wombats, but we saw nary a Wombat. We have been Wombat-deprived. No Worries, Mate. Finally, after a small snack lunch, we went to see a Komodo Dragon, which is *not* native to Australia. He, of course, like many of the animals, was sleeping.

After walking around for a few hours, we took the ferry back to the Circular Quay, where we had ice cream from the Royal Copenhagen Ice Cream stand, and after ruminating on what to do next, unanimously made up our minds to go back to our hotel room and collapse.

Interestingly (for me anyway, I can’t speak for you), almost every open space in Sydney, at least where we have been, is heavily populated with these extraordinarily exotic looking birds which we found out are Australian White Ibises. They are quite large and are white with black heads and black, long, down-curving bills. They wander around the parks and between tables in outdoor cafes and act just like pigeons at home. Just like the pigeons at home, people ignore them. It’s very weird.

I just read that they have substantially abandoned their natural territory in the marshes and have become city-dwellers and are something of a pest. People refer to them as “bin chickens” because they rummage in garbage bins. Even weirder, while we were having a small lunch at the zoo, a very large black bird which looked something like a wild turkey was wandering around

the tables and even jumped up on one right by a man who was eating his lunch. We asked a staff member and she said it was a “bush turkey”.

An item of note: I’m sorry to burst your bubble, but despite the fact that there are very cute plush stuffed Kangaroos for sale everywhere in Australia, the truth is that Kangaroos, at least the adult ones, are not cute – sorry. Wallabies are cute. Koalas are cute. Kangaroos are not cute.

At the risk of bursting another bubble, I’m going to impart some information we were told about Koalas. First, they are Koalas, not Koala Bears. There are no Koala Bears. Second, everybody wants to hold one but in most of Australia this is now illegal. In one state, Queensland, if I remember correctly, you can still do it but there are some gotchas. The Koalas don’t like it and they can bite, and scratch, and perhaps more importantly, poop. They do – often while you are holding them. Also they smell. If you must, hold a plush toy one. They don’t poop.

Wednesday, November 14 – Sydney – On Our Own – Day 3

We got a very late start today. It was so late, it was almost tomorrow. We walked down George street, which is one of the main shopping and business streets in Sydney and runs right through the Central Business District. We needed to go that way to run a few errands.

One of the most important errands, as far as Donnie was concerned, was getting our laundry done. She is fanatical about it. That’s all I will say. We could have had it done at our five star hotel, however I have a little quirk that prevents me from paying more to have a garment cleaned than it costs to buy a new one. So Donnie had done considerable research and found a drop off/pick up laundry only a few blocks from our hotel.

We placed all our dirty clothes in two large plastic bags we had gotten on the cruise ships (by buying T-shirts), which unfortunately were see-through and thus we, very embarrassingly, carried them through the very posh lobby of our five star hotel. After dropping them off, and getting a confusing explanation of when they might be ready, we came to the conclusion that we may never see our clothes again, which would have the positive effect of giving us plenty of room in our suitcases for gifts, souvenirs and the all-important T-shirts, as long as we want to wear the clothes on our backs for the next five weeks.

After running the errands, since it was only a few blocks further and on our to-do list, we went to the Queen Victoria Building. It’s a beautiful old Victorian building which used to be a market, and still is, sort of. It’s a high-end shopping mall, but still has a lot of the Victorian charm. It also contained some remarkable stores. In addition to the usual Global Mega-chains, there was a Dr. Seuss art gallery, a Leica store (Leica, for you non-camera buffs, is a maker of very expensive, highly regarded camera and lenses), a toy soldier store and something very rare nowadays, a real hobby shop. I avoided going into the hobby shop because I didn’t want to re-activate my old

serious addiction. I was a *very serious* model train nut. I still am but the obsession is dormant, I hope.

We had lunch sitting in an open space between an Aboriginal Art gallery and the Leica store – very cool. The mall even had a live pianist. There was also a Formal Tea Room with floral decorations, comfortable chairs and chandeliers of Baccarat Crystal – very posh. The mall didn't have a Women's Toilet, they had a "Ladies Powder Room".

At one point I saw a very formally dressed gentleman wearing a bowler hat and carrying his "brolly" (British for umbrella). Then we saw Santa walking around the mall talking to kiddies. I wondered how they explain to the Aussie kiddies why Santa is wearing his heavy red clothes with the fur collar and cuffs in the summer. At least in Florida he wears shorts.

After spending considerable time window shopping, we walked to Darling Harbour – yet another very attractive harbor in Sydney with wide promenades on the water. There were more shops, restaurants, bars, places to hang out, museums, another small zoo, a convention center, and another shopping mall, all also surrounded by giant glass-and-steel office towers and apartment buildings. There were also several ferry stops around the harbor.

Here I need to mention one of the notable places we saw in the shopping mall as well as several other places in Australia. One of our bus drivers called it the American Embassy. He said that it even had a big M for 'Merican. Can you guess what the big M is for? Yes, McDonald's. Sadly, this is the world's image of America. There are also a number of fast food joints around called Hungry Jacks. The logo looks familiar, and they have signs that say "Home of The Whopper". A Burger King by any other name still smells of charred burgers.

We had coffee and did some more window shopping, and then instead of a long walk back to our hotel I got a brilliant inspiration. Or, more accurately, my lone brain cell remembered that there was a ferry from Darling Harbour back to Circular Quay. With a little help from some nice local people we found the ferry terminal and using our very convenient OPAL cards took a longish ferry ride. It stopped at several places to pick and drop off commuters. Happily, one of the places was called Barangaroo Wharf – yet another cool name. I won't be totally happy though until I'm sure I have been to Woolloomooloo.

Interestingly, while in Sydney we have noticed a very large percentage of the people around are from Asia – both tourists and people working here. Almost all the store clerks, waitresses and other similar positions seem to be Asian people. I'm sure it is because Asia is so close by. Or maybe the Chinese are trying to invade, surreptitiously.

As we entered the lobby of the hotel in the evening we realized that we might be in big trouble – the hotel is full of police. In fact, the hotel is the venue for something called the National Investigation Symposium. We had no idea what that meant until we ran into a gentleman in the

elevator who had a convention badge and he explained that it was essentially a police convention. Still, we'll be careful.

Thursday, November 15 – Sydney – On Our Own – Day 4

Our damn iPhone alarms went off at 5:00 AM. Sadly, it's because we set them that way. We had to. Our Sydney Opera House Backstage Tour was today and we were required to be at the Stage Door at 6:45 AM. After doing our usual morning washing, dressing and remembering how to breathe, all while still half asleep, we walked to the Opera House, arriving a little after sunrise. Fortunately, we had given ourselves a little extra time, so we had time to take a few more millions of pictures of the Opera House at sunrise.

Then we got to the stage door. As I already mentioned, it's an automatic glass door with a lighted sign over it reading "Stage Door" (What else?). We waited a little while inside in a sort of foyer until the two tour guides arrived and gave us some instructions, stored the bags that people brought that they had been instructed not to, and gave us each a plastic tag-like badge with our names on it and a lanyard to wear it on. Finally, in two separate groups we were escorted inside, after the tour guide told the guard at the desk to "push the magic button", which opened the inside doors.

Inside it was very industrial looking with painted yellow stripes on the floor and equipment and packing cases all over the place. Our guide explained that they used to drive big eighteen-wheel trucks containing stage sets, etc. through this area but there wasn't enough room for more than one truck at a time so they dug a bigger loading dock underneath.

Then our tour guide gave us each safety day-glow green vests to wear that said "Sydney Opera House Backstage Tour" on the back. He said it was a requirement that we wear them. The tour guides had similar vests, but theirs were day-glow orange. My guess is that if, say, a fork-lift goes out of control the driver is instructed to try and avoid the orange and head for the green.

We went first under, and later on the stage of the Joan Sutherland Theater (where the Operas are staged) – the same stage where Joan Sutherland and Luciano Pavarotti sang, among others. It was named for her shortly after she passed away. We had to remove our shoes to go onstage because the stage was covered in a special material for the ballet dancers who were currently using the theater. I suppose they had to use this material because ballet dancers move their feet a lot and opera singers don't.

At one point we were in the Orchestra pit and we each took turns standing on the podium where many famous conductors conducted. Most of the people in the group *had* to have someone take their picture while they pretended to conduct. I will admit it – I raised one hand like I was conducting while Donnie took my picture. She raised both hands when I took hers. I think I looked cooler.

We went into a dressing room used by many famous people including Leonard Bernstein. I sat on one of the couches in the room. It could have been the very couch that Lenny sat on, except I suspect that it's a newer couch. There was very nice Steinway grand piano in the dressing room. One of the tour visitors played a little and the sound from the piano was magnificent. I'll bet they tune it often. Lenny's ghost may want to use it.

We went into the second, bigger venue, called the Concert Hall (couldn't they find a more interesting name?) which is where the orchestras play. More pictures were taken of tour group people conducting from the podium.

Then we were taken up into the fly tower above one of the smaller dramatic theaters. The fly tower is a big open space above the stage, full of ropes, wires, lights, and equipment of all kinds, with electrical cables running everywhere you walked. The sets and lights are "flown" from the ropes and wires in the tower. The guide showed us a big mechanical "wind machine" that they installed to create the sound of the wind in case a play needed it. They never used it. No play ever needed it, and now if one does, it's easier to create the wind sound electronically – poor, lonely, unwanted wind machine.

At one point the guide stopped us in a small unimportant looking short hallway. He then explained that for some reason, now unknown, performers had started the tradition of kissing the walls in this room, presumably for good luck, and if you looked closely you could see some faint lip marks. I suspect they were left after the lipstick was removed. We were *not* invited to kiss the wall.

We then were all escorted to the "Green Room" (which had nothing green in it) which is where performers and staff relax and have something to eat. Every decent-sized theater in the world has a "Green Room", and our guide told us the several theories as to how it got its name. I will refrain from repeating them since he said that nobody knows which is correct. The Green Room here was very large, with a large number of tables and chairs and a nice window view out to Sydney Harbour, a counter where the staff and performers could order food, and perhaps most importantly, a snooker table (Pool table for you Yankees out there). As part of our tour we were treated to a nice breakfast in the Green Room.

We were then escorted out to the foyer, after giving back our Safety Green vests, but we were allowed to keep our badges and lanyards. Happily, none of us was hit by an out-of-control fork lift.

The tour was a fantastic experience, well worth getting up early for. We were quite surprised, however, that the Opera theater was so small. It only held a little more than 1500 people. The Metropolitan Opera in New York holds 3800.

The tour was over, and we were outside the Opera House and it was only 9:30 in the morning. We went back to our hotel to drop off some things and pick up others, since we had obeyed the instructions not to bring bags to the tour. We both didn't have enough sleep and it was tempting to go back to bed, but instead we took a ferry to Manly Beach. It was very strange to be walking around in a warm summery beach area which was putting up Christmas decorations in the middle of November.

Once there, we watched the surfers for a while until the clouds moved in and the wind picked up and a drizzle started. So we walked back to the ferry terminal, stopping once or twice to shop for cheap T-shirts, which we didn't buy because they were too cheap and crummy, and we took the ferry back.

We stopped for meat pies at a nearby bakery and took them back to our room, only to discover that our room was in the process of being made up, at 2:30! We waited in the lobby for a while and then went back to our room and gobbled down the Steak and Mushroom pies.

Major alert... we have big news! We found a convenience store that not only carries Jaffa's but also Whittaker's Chocolates! Not only that, but they have Whittaker's Peanut Slabs in bite size pieces. Not only that, but they have Whittaker's in many flavors and sizes. Not only that but the store is across the street from the rear entrance to our hotel! We have no more needs, except for a source for more Pineapple Lumps.

Friday, November 16 – Sydney – On Our Own – Day 5

This morning we accomplished another of our important tasks: we got our laundry back. I had been worried that we wouldn't get it back, but if that happened, at least it would leave room in the luggage for souvenirs. No such luck. We got a lot of laundry back, possibly too much. The bag was very heavy. I think they may have given us some extra unclaimed laundry. We dragged the heavy bag back to the hotel and snuck it up to our room because it was very embarrassing to be carrying a transparent, conspicuous bag of laundry through the lobby of a five-star hotel. We did not feel like spending the time to unwrap, sort, and re-pack our laundry so we left the big bag in the room closet and went out. Maybe we should just ship it home for a cost of a zillion dollars and fill the luggage with T-shirts.

We walked around a different part of the city on our way to the Art Gallery of New South Wales. It was overcast, but a pleasant day temperature-wise. Donnie had used her formidable map skills and planned our route, which took us through the Royal Botanic Garden. We were going to visit it on a nicer day, but we were here so we wandered through the garden. There were a lot of very exotic looking plants and many tropical ones, also many gigantic impressive trees.

We wanted to have lunch, and since we were in the garden we headed for the Cafe and Restaurant in the garden. We came to a building built on a hill so that the entrance on one side

was on one level and the one on other side was on a lower level. A sign said that the restaurant was on the upper level, so we went around to that side. It turned out that the lower level was the Cafe which had sandwiches, etc., which would have been fine with us. The restaurant on the upper level was a fancy, cloth tablecloth, wine list, expensive menu restaurant, but Donnie said let's eat here, so we did. It was good, but pricey.

After lunch we wandered a little more but were generally headed in the direction of the Art Gallery when we accidentally wandered into Palm Grove, a section of the garden with a whole panoply of various species of palm trees. Donnie *loves* palm trees, so I suggested we spend a little time in the Palm Grove. I'm a nice guy.

Later, a stupendous event happened – we exited the garden at the Woolloomooloo Gate! It's official. We have been to Woolloomooloo! I wonder if I can get a Woolloomooloo T-shirt. On second thought, it probably wouldn't look very good because they would have to hyphenate it to fit. How do you hyphenate Woolloomooloo anyway? (The spelling is correct. Two L's in Woolloo and one L in mooloo).

After quietly yelling “Woolloomooloo!” a few times, we walked to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which I think is a slightly misleading name, since it's the major art museum of Sydney. We love art museums, so we spent a few hours wandering through. One very nice touch was that admission was free.

Remember back earlier I talked about the Australian White Ibises which have left their habitat and now live in the cities? We had no idea how many there were. They infest every outdoor restaurant and cafe, and I do mean infest. While we were having lunch we could see down to the Cafe below. The ibises were walking everywhere and anywhere and then jumping on the tables, even the ones people were eating at. The same occurred later when we had afternoon coffee at the gallery. In fact, at one point, four of them jumped on the same table and were fighting each other over the scraps of food just abandoned by some diners. You need to understand that these are big birds. I would say they are at least two feet tall – much, much bigger than pigeons. They could probably *eat* a pigeon.

I forgot – another significant event occurred the other night. We actually visited a place that we had never expected to even be near on this trip. We were walking along George Street in the The Rocks, only a few feet from our hotel, when we saw a sign pointing to the place. I was amazed. We walked along it, thrilled to be there. “What place are you going on about?” you are probably asking. Why, the *Suez Canal*, of course. “What?”, I hear you exclaim.

It's a tiny, very narrow alley which widens out a little at the other end. A sign explains that when it rained there used to be a torrent of water flowing through it, so the locals gave it its name. Do I get to check it off my bucket list? Oh, and there are also signs for The Brooklyn Bridge and a few hours from here is Palm Beach. Isn't it wonderful how you can visit the entire world, just in Sydney.

Sydney is a great place for Donnie, since, as I mentioned before, she loves palm trees. I was surprised to find out that they are everywhere in Sydney. In Los Angeles, they were deliberately planted in certain places, but in Sydney they are all over the place. I never knew that Sydney had so many palm trees.

Saturday, November 17 – Sydney – On Our Own – Day 6

Today started out overcast but bright, but our ever-accurate (Hah!) iPhones predicted rain for most of today, so we declined to do anything that involved a long walk, and since we also needed something of a “down day”, and since it was a Saturday, we walked around The Rocks market again, taking some market pictures, which we like to do.

Later we had an outdoor Asian noodle lunch at a little stand called “Wok On Inn” (note the bad pun), carefully avoiding the hungry stares of the nearby pigeons, seagulls, and the large, imposing ibises. One of the ibises hanging around the noodle place was totally unafraid of people. If you walked up slowly, you could get within a foot of him and he was completely uninterested in you, unless you had food. However, when some people left their tables with some leftover food on it, the birds went crazy. At one point there were about four pigeons, two seagulls, and eventually an ibis all attempting to steal leftovers from the same plate, until one of the waiters from the noodle place came and chased them away so he could clean up.

After lunch we found a very nice aboriginal art store which had been recommended to us by our tour guide as a place that had a particularly nice display of didgeridoos. She was right. There was a large number of beautiful didgeridoos, many elaborately decorated. There were a large number just standing up on their own and another large group on racks on a wall. They even had special didgeridoo carrying bags. They are very imposing, being about five feet long and several inches in diameter and very heavy. The store owner who was demonstrating them played very well.

At one point two German guys were talking to the owner about them and one of them played. He was pretty good. He must have done it before. He and the owner played a short duet.

We also discovered that didgeridoos came in different musical keys. Some were marked C and some D and the owner said that keys higher and lower than that were harder to play. They varied in price from around a couple of hundred dollars to several thousand, depending on how they were decorated and what kind of wood they were made from. I wasn't tempted. Well, maybe a little. They definitely would not have fit in the airplane overhead compartment. I did overhear the owner say that they could ship anywhere in the world within five days. This store is very close to our hotel and we will be here for ten more days. Hmmm.

I just realized that some of you readers may not have a clue as to what a didgeridoo is. It's an aboriginal musical instrument, which is, in essence, a hollowed out tree trunk or large limb. It's

played somewhat like a trumpet by making a buzzing sound with the lips. The resulting sound is a very low, very haunting sound. They are not easy to play.

There were a lot of beautiful aboriginal art pieces in the store, including some decorated boomerangs. Even though I had resolved earlier not to do it, I couldn't resist, so I bought two boomerangs, an elaborately decorated one of a beautiful dark wood, and a plain throwing one so I can demonstrate my complete lack of skill. I might give it to one of my Granddaughters so I don't kill myself with it.

We went back to our hotel room to rest a bit, and even though our magnificent iPhones still were showing a high probability of rain all day, there was still no rain by 5:00. I am still not complaining.

Sunday, November 18 – Sydney – On Our Own – Day 7

I awoke this morning in a Beethoven frame of mind – grumpy, frowning, and hard of hearing – maybe just the first two. No, no, in reality, I awoke my usual happy-go-lucky, jovial self. I *was* in a good mood. I had a lot to look forward to today

We went out and, to our surprise, noticed this huge cruise ship at the cruise terminal in Circular Quay, just a few steps from our hotel, and to our amazement, it was the good old Majestic Princess. We waved hello and then walked around Circular Quay to our destination, the Opera House, of course. Today is the big day. We have tickets for a concert, and not any old concert. As I mentioned before, we are going to hear my two *favorite* pieces of music by good, old, Ludwig Von Beethoven.

Once at the Opera House we went to a pre-concert lecture in a place called the North Foyer which had very interesting architecture and a gorgeous view of the harbor. Of course we took a lot more pictures.

The lecturer, Francis Merson, the former editor of an Australian classical music magazine, gave a wonderful lecture about Beethoven. He talked a little about Beethoven's life and the history of the two pieces we are going to hear today and some insight into the music itself. It was a really fascinating lecture. Then it was time to go to the concert.

The first thing we noticed was that the inside of the Concert Hall was more impressive than we thought. When we had seen it on the Backstage Tour it didn't look like much, but from our seats it looked much better. Then the music started...

————— Seriousness Alert – There will be no humor until further notice —————

Here are some impressions that went through my mind while I was enveloped by the most beautiful music...

The Sydney Opera House Concert Hall is like a theater in the round. The stage is almost in the middle of the space, surrounded by listeners on all sides. In most concert halls, the orchestra is at one end and the audience is at the other, and it's like there is this invisible wall between them. Here it felt very intimate, since the orchestra isn't separated from the audience. I liked that.

The Australian Chamber Orchestra is a small orchestra. There were only about forty or so players – about twelve violinists, four cellists, two bassists, and eight violists, plus a small number of woodwinds and brasses. I thought that the majestic Fifth Symphony would sound thin or strange with such a small orchestra. It didn't. It was magnificent. Then I remembered that in Beethoven's time it was probably played by a similarly sized group.

The violin soloist Richard Tognetti was also the conductor. When he wasn't playing the violin, he conducted the orchestra with his bow. When he was playing, and if the other violinists weren't, the concert master (senior first violinist) conducted with her bow. It was unusual, and engaging. It seemed to make the performance more special, somehow. When the second piece, the Fifth Symphony was being played, Maestro Tognetti joined the violin section and was in the concert master position playing as one of the first violinists, however when he wasn't playing, he conducted with his bow. However a few times during the piece, during the most climactic parts, he left the violin section and conducted from the center of the orchestra. It made it feel like the orchestra was a close-knit group, rather than a bunch of separate people under the control of a master.

Most unusually, the entire orchestra, except for the cellists, was *standing* during the entire performance. I have never seen, or even heard of any performance like this before. I can't explain why, but it added something special to the performance. One thing that it did was make it easier to see the performer's body motion. Many of them were moving to the music. It made the performance even more emotional,

Here I digress a little bit, but it's important. I can remember from when I was young, maybe six or eight, that my Dad used to play a record on our stereo system from time to time. It was a recording of the Beethoven Violin Concerto, played by a very famous Russian violinist, David Oistrakh. As I was growing up, I probably heard him play it hundreds of times. When I was a little older, maybe ten or so, he gave me a record of the Beethoven Fifth Symphony. It was a strange record. It had a red label on one side and a blue label on the other. One side was the Symphony. The other side was a commentary by a musicologist trying to explain Beethoven's thoughts or ideas or just explain something about the music. I must have played that record hundreds of times.

Somehow classical music didn't become a big deal to me until much later, but when it did, those two pieces became my very, very favorite pieces of music, as they still are. I still have a

cherished copy of the very same Oistrakh performance. Inadvertently perhaps, my Dad gave me the gift of classical music, and Beethoven. Because today's performance reminded me of that, I had tears in my eyes during the performance. I am not usually a very emotional guy. It was hard for me to write this paragraph.

Today was one of the most memorable days in my life. I can only say thank you Ludwig Von Beethoven. Thank you Richard Tognetti. Thank you lovely wife Donnie for dragging me here to experience this, and thank you Dad.

————— End of Seriousness Alert – There may be humor after this —————

After the standing ovations died down, we left the magnificent Sydney Opera House and walked slowly back around Circular Quay. It was much more crowded than we had experienced before. We had a nice Italian dinner near the quay and then watched the Majestic Princess sail off into the sunset. (It really sailed off *away* from the sunset, but that's just nitpicking).

Monday, November 19 – Sydney – On Our Own – Day 8

I walked around the Rocks while Donnie stayed in the hotel room catching up on her award-winning writing. Later we took a relaxing, ninety-minute Parramatta River ferry to the town of Parramatta (where else?). All along the river were luxury apartments, marinas and homes – no industrial areas until near the end of the trip where it first became marshes and trees and then some industrial buildings. We ended up in the city of Parramatta, a suburb of Sydney which was full of glass-and-steel tall office buildings and modern everything. It was very unexpected. Instead of taking the slow ferry back, we took a slow train back.

In the evening, Donnie finally had a kangaroo burger for dinner. I had a salad. This is total role reversal. Anyone who knows us would be shocked.

Tuesday, November 20 – Sydney – On Our Own – Day 9

Today we had to get an early start because we were taking a two-hour train to the Blue Mountains. It was a very slow train and there were a lot of stops. We got off at the little town of Katoomba, which we walked through a little. Katoomba had seen better days. The town looked run-down, even though it is the gateway town for two of the biggest tourist attractions in the area, the Blue Mountain National Park and an attraction called Scenic World. We had read that it was recommended to take the hop-on hop-off bus to Scenic World so we bought combined bus tickets and Scenic World tickets.

Scenic World is a major tourist attraction that has four major parts which they call: The Scenic Railway, The Scenic Skyway, The Scenic Cableway, and The Scenic Walkway. It sounds to me

like they need a slightly more imaginative marketing department. First we looked out at the views of the Blue Mountains and the big valley, including a rock formation they call “The Three Sisters”. Then we took the Scenic Cableway, which was a steep cable car down to the valley in the National Park, where we walked along the Scenic Walkway, a rainforest walk. We enjoyed the walk through the rainforest, which also provided glimpses of the Blue Mountains and rock formations and other fantastic views.

Then we took the Scenic Railway, which was a very steep inclined railway back up to the top. The inclined railway had very modern, high-tech cars which were very unusual. There were no normal doors. The entire side of the car opened up as one big piece that hinged at the top, first one side lifted to allow people to leave and then the other side lifted to allow people to enter. When you got in there were bench seats that held up to three people each, but there were instructions on signs outside the train that explained that you could select three positions for the seats via a switch. One position was called Laid Back, one was Original, and one was Cliffhanger. When we got in we realized that we were leaning backwards at an uncomfortable angle. I played with the switch and when I switched it to Laid Back, the angle got worse. So I put it back.

Then when the train started, going backwards because we were at the bottom, we quickly discovered a problem, I had left the switch at Cliffhanger because when we were in the station we were leaning back the least, but after leaving the station, the track went up at a very, very, very steep angle, and now we were leaning forward so hard that we had to grab handles on what had been the roof, which was now practically in front of us. Also, we had to quickly grab our belongings which nearly went flying forward. The roof also had windows in it, which were now necessary because it was in front of us. The ride was over too quickly. It was a lot of fun and the short views of the valley and the mountains were exceptional. This train was described as the steepest inclined railway in the world. If we had time, we would like to have taken it again, going down this time.

Lastly we took the Scenic Skyway, a very big glass bottomed cable car over the valley. The views were spectacular, especially looking straight down through the glass floor. Sadly, the clouds had moved in so the light wasn't so good. We took the same cable car back to the main building, and then we had to leave because the hop-on hop-off busses stopped running soon. We took the next-to-last bus back, except not to Katoomba, but to the nearby town of Leura. We got cold drinks and Donnie got ice cream in Leura, and then we caught an express train back to Sydney Central. For some unknown reason, the express train still took two hours.

By the way, just as we got to Katoomba this morning, my old buddy Sir Gawain, the little black fly from Uluru, along with his huge group of relatives showed up to say hello and stayed with us all day. At one point, one of the hop-on hop-off bus drivers made an announcement saying that if you brought any flies onto the bus with you, you should remember which ones and make sure to take them off the bus when you get off. I didn't have to. Sir Gawain and his millions of cousins

stuck with us all day until we got back on the train to Sydney. I think he and his buddies will show up again though.

When we got back to the Circular Quay, we went to a nearby Indian restaurant that we were unable to get into a couple of days earlier, where we had a mouthwatering Indian dinner. Donnie had room afterward for gelato.

It was a long, busy, but fun and fascinating day. Everything we had read about Sydney, and everyone from there that we spoke to had recommended visiting the Blue Mountains. The recommendations were good ones.

Wednesday, November 21 – Sydney – On Our Own – Day 10

This time we got a very late start, but that's becoming normal. We walked down George Street to the Apple store because Donnie needed a replacement cable for her iPhone charger. Then we went across the street to the Strand Arcade, another very cool Victorian Arcade with fascinating shops. They included a made to measure shirt maker who made custom shirts right there in the store, similarly, a custom shoe maker, a custom dress designer, a bridal gown store, many boutiques, and almost no global chain stores which was unusual and somehow refreshing.

Then we took a train and a walk of several blocks to a place called Paddy's market. Paddy's was supposed to be a big indoor market. It was a large, somewhat dingy, enclosed market with concrete walls, floor and roof, on the ground floor of a big building and which also had a modern, glitzy shopping mall on the upper floors.

We wandered around Paddy's for a while looking at the stalls offering cheap souvenirs and cheap T-shirts. Donnie bought a silly hat for her brother, Bob – one of those supposed Australian hats with the corks hanging down from strings to chase away flies. She blew an entire five dollars on this thing. I thought it was way too expensive.

The market mainly is directed at tourists. It had cheap Australian souvenirs, cheap T-shirts, supposed Aboriginal art objects, and cheap luggage. I'm sure everything in the place was made in China. Almost all of the stalls had Chinese (or Asian) attendants or owners. The market was also about a quarter the size or less of the Queen Victoria market in Melbourne, which was much larger, more varied, and had some better stuff.

We got hungry and were directed to a Chinese food court on the more glitzy mall level of the building. We found a stand that made good freshly made Chinese food. There were a bunch of cooks manning woks in the back and I watched one make my lunch. Both of our lunches however had impossible to eat noodles. They had a big pile of thin, long, wiggly all tangled up noodles, sort of like Ramen noodles but much longer. When you attempted to pick some up, either by chopsticks or by a fork, they all stuck together in a big tangle and you ended up with a

huge mass of noodles on your utensils. Trying to slurp them up, Ramen-style, was fruitless also because you were slurping forever. Fortunately, our lunches included enough other good things to eat besides the noodles.

After lunch, we went down again to the Paddy's market level and after some searching around for the best and cheapest, bought some cheap T-shirts. They were eight dollars each. The ones in the stores near the Circular Quay ranged from fifteen to thirty dollars each, but they were probably made in a nicer part of China. I don't know or remember when we became T-shirt addicts. That wasn't the case for most of our lives. Now we seem to want T-shirts from every place we visit, which, given our travel habits, would be impossible. We would need a closet the size of, uh, Manhattan, or maybe Montana.

Donnie bought another hat, a baseball cap, for her brother. This had an embroidered kangaroo and the word "Australia" on it. The seller's stand had two groups of baseball caps. On the left side were the expensive ones that had embroidery, and on the right side were the cheap ones that were just printed, not embroidered. Donnie sprung for the expensive one. It was four dollars, or three for ten. The cheap ones were two dollars, or three for five – and that's Australian dollars, about 75 US cents to the dollar. I told her she shouldn't be so extravagant.

Donnie, ever resourceful, discovered that right outside the market was a light rail system that could take us back to the Central Station without the long walk we had done to get to the market – excellent. At the Central Station, Donnie found a Gong Cha bubble tea shop, which was the same company that had a bubble tea bar on the Majestic Princess. She *had* to have one. I had one too, but I got mine without bubbles. I hate the silly bubbles.

We took a train back to the good, old Circular Quay and walked wearily the short walk back to our hotel, and staggered into the elevator and crawled to our room only to discover a little tag on the door. They were doing the housekeeping turn down service, at 5:30! We went down to the lobby and sat there, slowly collapsing into the rug, for half an hour so housekeeping had enough time to complete their work.

It's been a while, so it's time for a little rant.

— Rant Mode On —

We stayed in a very fancy, (i.e. expensive) five-star hotel. I am not going to make any attempt to justify why we chose it or why we blew our children's inheritance on it. In most ways, it justified its five-star rating. However, the housekeeping service was weird.

In the morning, if you were in your room with the "Do Not Disturb" sign on your door and housekeeping came around to make up the room, they slipped a little card under the door and it said that they tried to make up the room but they honored your "Do Not Disturb" request and you would have to call to get the room made up. This was weird. In almost every hotel we have ever

been in, from cheap dumps to other five-star places, the housekeeping staff would keep checking to see when you left the room and then make it up. Another weirdness was that we found the housekeeping staff here making up our room as late as 2:30 in the afternoon.

Then there's the turn-down service. For those of you readers who have not had the good fortune to stay in fancy hotels, in the evening they usually do a turn-down service where they remove bed covers and turn down the sheets, close the curtains, put some ice in the ice bucket, change the lighting and generally prepare the room for bedtime. Some even put little chocolates on the pillow – cute. Even the poor, very overworked room stewards on the cruise ships do this. All of them usually keep track of when the room is empty in the evening and do it while you are out to dinner. Not here. They did it at crazy times. Who is out to dinner at 5:30? Most people are returning to their rooms to change for dinner. If you were in your room and had the “Do Not Disturb” sign out when housekeeping came, you got the little card under the door – tough luck – we're not going to try again later – no turn-down for you – and they *never* gave chocolates.

I know, this is a problem most people would be happy to experience. I just hadn't had a good rant in a while. I'm better now. Thank you for your patience.

— Rant Mode Off —

It's about seven in the evening as I am writing this, and it *finally rained in Sydney* – heavily – for about five minutes. Still, no complaints from me about the weather.

Thursday, November 22 – Sydney – On Our Own – Day 11

After brunch we went to the nearby Museum of Temporary Art, well, actually it's the Museum of *Contemporary* Art. Its “artistic” sign makes the “Con” part hard to see. I personally think that *Temporary* is more correct. The artist Rembrandt, for example, is known, loved, and respected four hundred years after his death. In my opinion, the artists represented in this museum will be lucky if anybody knows who they are six years from now. Maybe six months. Six days?

I was happy though about one thing. In every contemporary art museum I have ever been to, there is one “art” work consisting of a square canvas painted a single, even, unadorned color. The first one I ever saw was in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, a very prestigious museum. The piece was called “Blue Square Number Five” – a good description, though I always wondered what happened to numbers one through four – wrong shade of blue, perhaps? Anyway I have seen Black Squares, White Squares, Red Squares, etc. Is that considered plagiarism? They are all copies, aren't they? In this museum, there was no square. That made me happy. There *was* a Blue Rectangle. How bold. How imaginative.

Another “work of art” was five hemispherical blobs about an inch and a half in diameter that looked like somebody took mud and stuck it on the museum wall. For years I have been telling

Donnie that this stuff isn't art. Today I realized I was wrong. The works on display aren't the art. The art is in convincing the museum curator to buy this stuff.

In the lobby was a permanent sign indicating that we were in the Mordant Wing. Donnie thought that Mordant was the name of a big donor. I remembered it was a word, but I couldn't remember what it meant, so I looked it up. Here's the definition:

mordant

adjective

(especially of humor) having or showing a sharp or critical quality; biting: a mordant sense of humor.

I knew it was all a joke.

After the Temporary Art Museum we went nearby to The Rocks Discovery Museum, which was not for Geologists but was all about the history of the area called "The Rocks". Regrettably, it was almost all just written descriptions on signs, with a few artifacts like old bottles. I don't have the patience to read the many lengthy description on signs in a museum. If I was that interested, I would rather read a book about it.

Then we went for coffee. In New Zealand and here in Australia we have been ordering something that seems popular, called a Flat White. I don't, however, understand the difference between a flat white vs a cappuccino vs a latte vs a macchiato. They all have espresso-machine coffee and milk in them. I'm not sure I really care. All I know is that they all cost more than a *coffee*.

We also had another one of the items on our Australian goodies list, an ANZAC biscuit. ANZAC stands for Australia New Zealand Army Corps, and dates from World War I. Why they named a biscuit for it, I don't know. Oh, and for you Americans reading this, a biscuit isn't a thick white bread-like thing that you have with butter or gravy on it. In England and Australia and New Zealand, a biscuit is what we Americans call a cookie. An ANZAC biscuit turned out to be sort of an oatmeal cookie with a bit of coconut flavor. It was good, but not addicting like Jaffa's and Pineapple Lumps.

Another food note: Sydney is very cosmopolitan, food-wise. In the last ten or so days, within a few blocks of our hotel, we have had: Italian, French, Thai, Chinese, Burgers, Australian Meat Pies, Indian, Belgian, Pizza, Dim Sum, Kangaroo Burger, and Sea Food. We still have a few days to go – perhaps Mexican next.

Friday, November 23 – Sydney – On Our Own – Day 12

This morning we got coffee, croissants, and baguette sandwiches for a later picnic lunch at a French patisserie, near our hotel. There was supposed to be a Friday Rocks food market today, but there were signs saying it was closed because of the “unpleasant weather”. The signs were a little misleading. It was a sunny, cloudless day with a temperature in the low 70’s. The only slight “unpleasantness” was that it was quite windy. I guess that might disrupt a market.

So we took a ferry to Darling Harbour, which we had visited earlier. We planned this time to go to the Australian Maritime Museum, but first we sat at a table in a food court in a mall and had our sandwiches. Donnie talked to a young Chinese couple sitting at a table next to us and they told her about a Chinese Tea Exhibition in the Conference Center which was close. So we went. It was different and fascinating. It was also free. There were a bunch of Chinese companies with booths, mostly with young Chinese women in traditional costume serving tastes of the companies’ tea. Donnie spent about an hour and a half just chatting with some people who worked there. I walked around and took some pictures. We did try a little tea, which was good enough that I was almost tempted to buy some, but I think they were only selling it in quantities of tons.

Finally, in the late afternoon we got to the Australia Maritime Museum, a very large, very modern, imposing structure. This was yet another marvelous museum that had no entry fee. At one point we were looking at an exhibit about the first woman to sail solo around the world. Her actual sailboat was on display. I sat down a few feet away and I saw Donnie and a couple of other people talking near the boat. The next thing I saw was Donnie and the others going through some door, with a red sign that probably read “Do Not Enter”, to a little walkway that led onto the boat and then she was on the boat. Soon she was in the cabin. I wondered who she bribed. Later she told me that a volunteer invited her and another couple to tour the boat. No bribe was involved

The volunteer who gave her the tour of the boat then took us into the special James Cameron exhibit. It was about the movie director, James Cameron, who created the movies Titanic and Avatar and an earlier movie called The Abyss. After filming the earlier ones, during which he helped develop a number of undersea technologies, he became fascinated by undersea exploration and was the one who discovered the wreck of the Titanic and also did several other explorations of the deep ocean.

We could have spent more time, but the museum was closing so we left and walked across the harbor on the pedestrian-only Pyrmont Bridge and along the harbor in the setting sun. We walked past huge crowds of young people in and around the very noisy harbor-side bars, and got to Barangaroo Wharf where we took the ferry back to Circular Quay. As the ferry got near the Quay it passed by the huge Royal Caribbean “Ovation of the Seas” cruise ship, leaving Sydney. There have been cruise ships docked in the Overseas Passenger Terminal in the Circular Quay, a few steps from our hotel, almost every day we have been here.

Saturday, November 24 – Sydney – On Our Own – Day 13

We want good coffee. So far, the coffee we have had in Sydney has been very weak. I like strong, European-style coffee. Donnie likes *very* strong coffee. I think she would like coffee that you could stand your spoon up in. We researched online for the best coffee nearby and found a place, called Danieli which was inside a small shopping mall a few blocks away from the hotel.

When we got there, the place was empty and the glass folding wall that separated it from the mall was almost closed. Then, the owner, a bald man in his late thirties, with a slight Italian accent, yelled to us, “What would you like?” We answered “Coffee”. He opened the floor-to-ceiling glass wall and invited us in. He told us while he was making two large Latte’s that he usually closed at 11:30 but he was closing early today. It was about 11:00. His name was Ron Danieli and he was a real character. From time to time, as we were waiting for, and then drinking our coffee, people would peer in and Ron would invite them in. He told funny stories, made jokes, kidded around with people, talked about the area, and Australia, and politics and whatever. He was fun. As we were leaving, about 11:30, he invited somebody else in – no early closing today.

The Majestic Princess was back in port again today. We had a very lazy day. Basically, all we did today was walk around the Rocks Market for the third time. We bought some gifts this time. I bought Donnie a birthday gift, but it was impossible to surprise her with it, so I let her pick it out. Then I took it away from her. She won’t see it again until it’s her birthday.

Talking about lemon sodas, (I know, I wasn’t talking about lemon sodas. I have run out of clever ways of starting a new topic.) we have found that there a lot of different brands of lemon sodas in Australia. I think we have had at least six or seven. They are all essentially what Americans call lemonade, but fizzy. Almost all of them are way, way less sweet than the American equivalents, like Sprite. They do have Sprite here, and you sometimes get it if you ask for lemonade. It’s too sweet. I prefer the lemon sodas. One is called Lift and says “Hard Hitting LEMON. Made with BITE” on the bottle. It’s very tart.

Sunday, November 25 – Sydney – On Our Own – Day 14

Today Donnie suggested a walking tour. I said I wasn’t in the mood to follow a tour guide around at his or her pace, usually too fast. She said no, that she meant a self-guided walking tour. That was OK. First we took a train to Hyde Park and then walked around a new part of the Central Business District to Chinatown.

We passed a store that we *had* to go into. It was called “Uncle Tetsu’s Japanese Cheesecake”. Who could pass that up? We bought what we thought was an Uncle Tetsu’s Japanese Cheesecake, which they were making by the dozens as we watched, but we found out later that

we had bought an Uncle Tetsu's Japanese Cheese *Tart*, a completely different thing. We didn't like it. Since we will be leaving Sydney the day after tomorrow, I don't know if we will get the chance to try an Uncle Tetsu's Japanese Cheesecake.

After walking around, trying to figure out which Chinese restaurant to go to, we picked one at random and had a Yum Cha lunch at a place called Emperors Garden, not that any of you readers would care what the place was called. Yum Cha is what they call Dim Sum here. A Dim Sum meal, for any of you who don't know, is one where they bring little appetizer-sized dishes around in heated carts and you point to what you want. You have to point because you don't speak Chinese, and the women wheeling the carts around don't speak anything else. If you foolishly ask what one is, you will get a detailed answer, either "shrimp", or "meat".

Usually they have different kinds of dumplings, or meatballs, or small spare ribs, or, the scariest ones for the non-Chinese, chicken feet. When we were first seated, we were asked if we wanted tea. We said yes. We never got any tea, or Soy Sauce, or forks, and only one tiny paper napkin apiece. The food wasn't great either. You win some, you lose some.

After leaving, Donnie suggested some bubble tea again. Once again, I opted for no bubbles in mine. Then she suggested, just for something new to see, that we take the light rail to the end of the line which was some place called Dulwich Hill which turned out to be much farther away than we had anticipated. Once there, it looked from the light rail platform like a suburban residential area with nothing of interest to us, so we just got back on the light rail and took it back to Darling Harbour where we took a ferry back to Circular Quay.

Today we took a train, light rail twice, and a ferry. It cost each of us a total of \$2.70. Why? Because the wonderful Sydney transport system allows you to travel as much as you want, as often as you want, as far as you want on Sundays, for a maximum of \$2.70. That includes Buses, Ferries, Trains, and Trams. We could have ridden two hours out to the Blue Mountains again, and back, for \$2.70, and still have traveled more in the city, for no more money. How nice!

Now, let's talk about Uggs. "Why?", you readers are probably wondering. How about because they are an Australia/New Zealand invention. For any of you who has no inkling, they are these ugly looking suede boots that seem to be very popular with girls and young women in the US. They must be a hundred times as popular here, because there are thousands of places to buy them. I am not exaggerating. We have passed *dozens* of Ugg stores. Every clothing store advertises them. They are sold in souvenir shops. They are sold in convenience stores. They are sold in stands in the markets. They are sold in gas stations. (OK, I lied about that last one.) In Australia and New Zealand, the word Ugg is considered a generic term for a type of boot, and is not protected by trademark, so there are a large number of companies making them. In the high-end stores they are over \$200. In the market stalls they are \$40. I have calculated that in order for all these sellers to make money, every man, woman, child, and dog in Australia must have at least three pairs of Uggs. All I can say is, ugh.

Monday, November 26 – Sydney – On Our Own – Day 15

Today we got a very, very late start. It didn't matter. We weren't in the mood to do very much today. I had researched and found a very well reviewed, high-end Chinese restaurant not too far from our hotel, so we went there for lunch. It was in a hard-to-find, nondescript alley with almost nothing indicating its presence except some very small painted lettering above the door. It was called Mr. Wong's and the inside was large, modern, classy, and very inviting and not at all like a Chinese restaurant. It was also apparent that it was popular with business people and the young, attractive crowd. It also had an unusual menu, and it was pricey, but we had very good Dim Sum and enjoyed the experience. It made up for the not very good Dim Sum we had the previous day.

Later we went into a nearby supermarket and bought some more Whittaker's chocolates. We now have a small stash of them for when we are back home in poor, Whittaker's-deprived America. We went back to the hotel and had a very lazy afternoon and did some dreaded packing.

After dinner we walked around yet another area of The Rocks near the water and saw more wonderful nighttime views of the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge and Luna Park, the amusement park, which was brightly lit. At one point we saw some big bats flying around the lit up trees. It was a beautiful night with beautiful views. This is probably due to the fact that I had not brought my camera. Donnie ended the evening by having her last gelato in Sydney. It will most definitely *not* be her last ice cream on the trip. No – definitely not.

Chapter Six – Heading North

Tuesday, November 27 – Sydney – Cruise 3 – Day 1

Today was our last day in Sydney – except it wasn't. The MS Amsterdam, which we boarded today, didn't actually leave until the next evening. We checked out of the hotel, and after they resuscitated me once I saw the hotel bill, we took a taxi to something called the White Bay Cruise Terminal. Unhappily for the cruisers on the MS Amsterdam, the Overseas Passenger Terminal, which is right in the Circular Quay area and has iconic views of the Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge and easy access to everything, was occupied with a larger ship, so the MS Amsterdam had to dock in the White Bay Cruise Terminal, which is close to nothing.

We went through a very quick and easy embarkation process because only seventy people are boarding during the two days that the ship is in Sydney. We were on board after only fifteen minutes. Our cruise from Sydney to Los Angeles is only the final segment of a much longer cruise that essentially circled the Pacific Ocean, starting in LA and ending there. The whole cruise was 83 days! So only people like us who were joining the cruise for the final 24 day segment got on board in Sydney.

The MS Amsterdam is very nicely decorated ship, and though similar to, and the sister ship to the MS Rotterdam, which we have been on, is smaller. We had a nice lunch in the buffet, and then (insert another fanfare here) Donnie had her first ice cream of the cruise. Again, similarly to the Rotterdam, they have very good ice cream on this ship. This is not necessarily a good thing. Donnie is an ice cream addict. I'm not addicted to anything, except maybe chocolate, and pizza, and bagels with lox, and pasta, and...

Even worse, she found out that the crew member who serves the ice cream, an Indonesian fellow, says that his name is Jeff. She said he is now her favorite Jeff. I am almost devastated.

We had been invited to a Mariner's Society Welcome Aboard Reception but I hadn't read the invitation and forgot about it, but we went to explore the ship and ended up stumbling into the reception by chance. There we had some wine and hors d'oeuvres and chatted with a very nice Australian couple who spend a lot of time in New York. Later that afternoon, Donnie ecstatically enjoyed one of her favorite pastimes – doing laundry.

Wednesday, November 28 – Sydney – Cruise 3 – Day 2

Today was a very rainy day. The first real lengthy rain we have had on this entire adventure. We dressed in rain gear and, wielding a very large Holland America umbrella, took the ship's shuttle bus to the Darling Harbour drop off point and walked almost a mile in the rain to Paddy's

Market. “Why?”, you are probably pondering, since we had been there before and it wasn’t all that impressive.

Maybe we have been a little extravagant in the area of purchases – too many gifts – too many T-shirts – too many chocolate goodies. We thought we could squeeze it all into some tight little gaps in the suitcases, but while packing we determined that we had way too much stuff. The excess filled a large tote bag that Donnie had brought, and since we already had too many things to carry, we figured out that we needed a small suitcase that we could wheel around in the LA airport and check on our flight home, and we had seen very cheap (and probably very cheaply made) suitcases for sale in Paddy’s Market.

While there, of course, we bought some more gifts but luckily nobody was selling chocolate. We almost got a glaring purple suitcase but we finally picked blue. Donnie tried to haggle. They weren’t interested in haggling. They told us that we were paying for quality goods. Since it was still raining, we got extravagant and took a taxi back.

Once back on the MS Amsterdam, we did a little more exploring. On the MS Rotterdam, we had discovered a secret door to an outdoor area below the bridge and above the bow. We suspected that the Amsterdam had the same outdoor area on our deck, so we looked for it and voila, there it was. On our *Voyage of the Vikings* cruise on the Rotterdam this area was the perfect place for some wonderful views and some really good picture taking. I’m not sure if it will be useful on this cruise because there is no “scenic cruising” which means that the only thing to see out the forward part of the ship will be the Sea. I suspect that the view of the Sea from our balcony will be quite similar to the view out of the hidden outdoor deck.

We then had to attend a quick muster drill but it was outside in the wind and almost in the rain. Then we explored the entire ship, and it seemed to go very quickly. The ship is definitely smaller than the Rotterdam. Someone told us that there are only 805 people on board after some people left in Sydney. The ship supposedly holds over 1200.

We went up to the very nice Crows Nest Lounge, which had comfortable chairs and a panoramic view, for the sail away from Sydney. It was Happy Hour, but that meant that the second drink, which had to be of the same kind as the first, was only two dollars, so since we couldn’t come up with a drink we both liked, I somehow ended up with two G&T’s and Donnie had one Margarita. They also served complimentary hors d’oeuvres including some Emu. It was a good thing that all the drinks were so weak that they didn’t affect us. They probably water them down during happy hour.

Sadly it was still overcast and rainy so no there was no beautiful sunset on the Opera House and the Sydney skyline. As we left the dock the Asian band played *Waltzing Matilda*, to a country beat – very appropriate. Even though it was rainy, windy, and cold we still saw groups of people climbing the Sydney Harbour Bridge. We bid a mental farewell to Australia. I liked Australia, but to be honest, I preferred New Zealand. For one thing, the chocolate was better.

Once outside the harbor, the seas got very rough. The pilot boat was going up and down in the big waves. When it plowed through a wave, it appeared to be completely submerged. On the deck of the pilot boat there was a crewman in waterproof coveralls, a life jacket, and a helmet, firmly attached by cables to some railings. He was there to grab the pilot when he jumped from the Amsterdam to the tiny pilot boat. The pilot boat was going up and down like crazy and nobody envied the poor pilot. It took three lengthy attempts to get the pilot boat close enough to the ship for the pilot to get from one to the other. Finally he made it and he and the crewman rushed to get inside. The people watching in the Crows Nest Lounge applauded. Then the pilot boat took off at high speed to get back to the peaceful, quiet Sydney harbor.

Up in the Crow's Nest Lounge it was pretty rocky. By the time we got to the buffet for a light dinner it was very rocky. It was rocking so much that it was starting to affect us. I couldn't eat much of dinner, but we saw that they had another one of the Australian treats on our list of things to try – a cake called a Lamington. It was a cube-shaped cake-like dessert that had chocolate on the outside, covered with coconut and a creamy filling with a layer of raspberry jam. It was very good. We both could only manage a small taste.

As we went back to our stateroom It was very hard to walk. That night both of us were seasick – not enough for any serious consequences, you know what I'm talking about, but we felt terrible and were hard-pressed to fall asleep. This was the first time in my life that I had been seasick like that. I finally had to take a seasickness pill that Donnie had brought. I'm not sure if it helped. I think we finally fell asleep in the early morning, after the seas had calmed down a little bit. The next day we heard that a lot of people had a hard time of it, including the crew.

Thursday, November 29 – At Sea – Cruise 3 – Day 3

The ship was still rocking somewhat this morning, and we both were tired and still feeling a little weird. After a very, very light breakfast we went to a lecture entitled “European Explorers of the Pacific” given by Professor David Horner. It was a fascinating lecture. One nice feature of the two Holland America cruises that we have been on is that they have these guest lecturers.

After the lecture the seas started getting rougher again, but we were actually a little hungry. We resolved to only eat a little bit, in case we experienced seasickness again. Imagine our surprise when we found that they now had a raw oyster bar in the buffet and there were some people scarfing down oysters.

After lunch another we attended lecture “Peopling the Pacific” by Joseph F Kess, BSc, MA, PhD, FRSC, ORS. I am sure that Professor Kess would be happy to know that I retained all the letters after his name. This lecture was fascinating, but his presentation style wasn't the greatest. I nearly fell asleep.

Shortly after the lecture, there was a performance by Raymond Crowe, who billed himself as an *Unusualist*. His performance was canceled last night because of the rough seas. He was very entertaining. He performed some skillfully done magic, some cute ventriloquism using audience volunteers as his dummies as he asked them questions while performing a trick and he made as if they were answering with funny voices, and some unusual shadow puppetry, all done very well and with style. His patter and body movements and almost-mime were elegant. I enjoyed his act. It was *unusual*.

Since we had fun doing trivia with our team on the Golden Princess, we thought we would try the Evening Trivia. It was not fun. The trivia teams on the Amsterdam have been together for over sixty days and are cutthroat. We walked into the Piano Bar where the trivia was held. There were only a few seats available and when we asked if they were taken we were told, in no uncertain terms, that they were. The assistant cruise director who was running the trivia contest suggested that we join a group of four over in one corner. We asked them if we could join them and were told, coldly, that they were waiting for their other partners who hadn't arrived yet. One of them then said that the partners might not show up so we could wait and see. Then a minute or so later she told us that we might as well sit down with them.

They made no attempt to introduce themselves and asked us no questions about ourselves. When the trivia started they didn't even whisper potential answers to each other but scribbled them on little slips of paper to show to their partners for approval. It was all very tense. The questions were tough and we couldn't answer most of them. I contributed two answers, which they chose not to use, and which later turned out to be correct. The team scored 7 and the winning score was 16 – not a good showing. As the group broke up, only one or two of them said goodbye to us – what fun.

Later we went to yet another Welcome Aboard Reception that we had an invitation for, this one hosted by the Captain, the Hotel Director and the Cruise Director. We sat with the Australian couple that we had met and talked with at the previous reception. We chatted for about an hour.

The ship's newsletter said that tonight in the dining room was "Las Vegas Night". Sure enough, when we went there it was gaudily decorated in a playing card and dice theme, with red and black everywhere and the waiters were wearing vests with dollar bills printed on them. I'm not sure how "Las Vegas Night" fits into a cruise that is circling the Pacific Rim, unless the San Andreas fault has finally let go and Las Vegas is now a coastal city. I haven't been keeping up with the news.

It seems that Holland America goes the extra mile on the cruises they call "Grand Voyages". This one is the "Grand Asia and Pacific Voyage". Everyone is super polite and some assistant cruise director or other higher level employee is always asking if there is anything they can do for us. We have been invited by printed invitation, with our names on them, to *two* Welcome Aboard receptions, with complimentary wine and hors d'oeuvres and we've only been on the ship three days.

Also, on our bed one afternoon were two very sturdily built messenger bags with the Holland America Grand Voyages logo on them and containing Moleskine notebooks and cruise card holders, as a gift. And, we received an email before we left home asking us if we wanted personalized stationery with the Grand Voyages logo, and Donnie replied yes. We think it was express shipped to our house after we left. There was another such offering in our stateroom when we came aboard – all very impressive.

Many of the passengers on this ship have booked for the complete cruise – 83 days, and there are many more suites on this ship than others we have been on, which says to me that many people are spending a great deal of money on this cruise, which explains why Holland America wants to keep them happy – or maybe they're just a very nice company – nah. I'm a cynic, remember.

Friday, November 30 – At Sea – Cruise 3 – Day 4

Today we did the usual “at sea” stuff... breakfast, lecture, port talk, lunch, lecture... you know. The most important event today was that we left the Tasman Sea and entered the Coral Sea. This body of water was much, much quieter. Thank goodness!

There was nothing else significantly different today to report, so instead let's discuss art – specifically hotel room art – more specifically ship's stateroom art. On all our many previous cruises (six, amazingly), the art on the walls in our staterooms has been beach scenes or tranquil landscapes, or some other quiet scenes designed to be relaxing. As I wrote this laying in bed in our room, directly in front of me, on the wall opposite our bed were two large framed art prints consisting of reproductions of eighteenth century colored drawings of some of the most ugly and disturbing looking fish possible. These fish are hideous. These prints are not tranquil or relaxing, they are nightmare inducing, and, being directly in our line of view as we lay in bed reading or writing these fabulous words of brilliance, cannot be ignored. What sadist at Holland America chose these things? And, just to be even more sadistic, they installed special reflectors on the ceiling lights that direct the light right at the prints so they are highlighted and very visible – good going guys.

Saturday, December 1 – Noumea, New Caledonia – Cruise 3 – Day 5

We made it to the modern small city of Noumea, on the Island of Grand Terre (which is French for Big Land) in the archipelago country of New Caledonia. Looking out from the ship we saw high rise apartments, office buildings, stores, cars, all the hallmarks of modern civilization – ugh.

The first thing we did after leaving the ship was to pay some bills using the free WiFi at the terminal building – what fun. Then we walked to the morning market. As you may have guessed by now, we love markets – not even necessarily to buy anything. All the signs were in French

and almost all of the people were speaking French. New Caledonia was once a French Colony, now it is almost an independent country, but not quite. It's still some kind of French territory but with its own government. A few days ago they held a referendum and they voted to stay with France for a while, but by a small margin.

At the market we started out at the Fish building. We didn't buy any fresh, raw fish to bring onboard. The Holland America staff would *not* have approved. Then we wandered around looking at the strange fruits and vegetables and the usual souvenirs and clothing items. We were looking for more gifts but didn't find anything nice enough or cheap enough. Going through the other buildings we saw a lot of typical Pacific island items, such as baguettes, crêpes, and croissants.

After we explored the whole market we walked through the downtown area where we stopped for cold drinks. The young woman who sold us the drinks told us she would accept payment in French Pacific Francs, or Euros, or Australian dollars, or US dollars. Donnie used this opportunity to use up some of the Euros she had brought along just because we were going to some French islands. Donnie loves everything French. Spending some Euros on a French island probably gave her goose-bumps.

Then we went to a local landmark, according to all the travel brochures, called *Place des Coconuts*. It was not impressive, just a small park with some palm trees and a fountain. The walk through the downtown was a little depressing since the area was a little run-down. It wasn't excessively dirty but in need of repairs and tender-loving-care. There are supposed to be some areas where the wealthy people live, and there were marinas with a large number of yachts and sailboats, but the downtown area within walking distance of the ship wasn't very prosperous.

Since it was very humid, although not very hot, we were sweaty and tired so, we slowly dripped our way back to the ship, had a small lunch, and relaxed until the mandatory muster drill in the late afternoon.

“Wait”, some of you are thinking, “Didn't you just have a muster drill four days ago?” You *are* astute savvy readers. Yes, we had a muster drill when we got on board, which I gather is a legal requirement. I also gather, based on an announcement this morning, that there is another legal requirement that they have a muster drill once a month on a cruise, which turns out to be today, and we had to attend, even though we had just been to one. The written announcement says that if you refuse to attend, they put you off the boat. We attended. Noumea is OK, but if they are going to put me off the boat I would prefer Moorea, or Akaroa, or Auckland, or even Sydney.

Based on the muster drills I have attended, I have figured out that the purpose of a muster drill is this – if the ship is sinking or on fire and things are going very badly very quickly, and you are about to panic, you will know *where* to panic. We have to panic at station 5 on deck 3.

During the early afternoon, while we were in the Ocean Bar, writing these masterpieces of English prose, with only a very small number of others in the bar, the assistant cruise director came in and started setting up for a Trivia Contest. We hadn't expected this, since it was supposed to be much later in the afternoon, but she explained that because of the muster drill it had been rescheduled. We chose to stay and participate and since it was still relatively early, many of the die-hard trivia aficionados were still in Noumea, so there were very few people participating, and therefore.... (Sound of Fanfare here) we won!

Well,... sort of. It was really a tie between us and one other team, and only because we cheated a little. One of the answers Donnie came up with, but then she changed her mind and wrote down a different answer but the first one was the correct one, so, technically the answer on the paper was wrong. Unlike on the other cruises, here they let you mark your own papers, so she cheated a little and gave us the point. It didn't matter much because the winner's prize was... nothing. However, modest as I am, (really!) I must describe a brilliant answer I came up with. The question was "What is the title of the leading person in the PEZ candy corporation?" I guessed the correct answer... The PEZIDENT! No applause please.

After the Big Trivia Contest Win we had to go to the muster drill. The only thing worth reporting was that at least the weather outside on the Lower Promenade deck was nice.

Then it was time to head up to the Crow's Nest for the sail away party, Happy Hour and hors d'oeuvres. It was a nice sail away. We shared two Pina Colada's because the bartenders didn't have any idea how to make Painkillers (a caribbean cocktail). When the ship started moving the Asian band played "Anchors Aweigh" – OK, fine.

In the evening we went to a show which was a female singer/impressionist/comedienne who did singing impressions of famous singers some of which were strikingly realistic. She did a very good impression of Stevie Nicks and also Louis Armstrong! Her other impressions included Barbara Streisand, a particularly good Julie Andrews, Tina Turner, Tammy Wynette, Cher, and several others. We had a fun time, which surprised me. I'm not normally a big fan of impressionists, or singers, or comediennes, or shows on ships.

Sunday, December 2 – Easo, Lifou, New Caledonia – Cruise 3 – Day 6

We were awakened at 7:45 AM by the cruise director on the PA system announcing the procedure for obtaining tender tickets. The tender tickets have different colors and numbers. You *must* get a tender ticket to get on a tender. They have told us that many, many times – in numerous announcements and in writing on our daily newsletter ingeniously named "Where and When". You might think that since many people have been on this cruise for over sixty days that they might know this already. Still, they announced the tender ticket rules several times today.

On our previous Holland America cruise, we discovered that the biggies, i.e., the four and five star mariners (people who have sailed 200 or 500 days on Holland America), were given priority on the tenders. They got different colored tender tickets than us despicable low-star mariners (we have a measly three stars). Today they started out by calling “Grey 1&2”. I assumed that the Grey was really Silver and was for the royalty – the five star mariners, and eventually we would receive “Worn, Torn, Dog-eared, Dirty-brown 97”. It’s fair. You get what you pay for. We haven’t paid enough yet.

I also suspected that the three-star-and-below-low-life would probably finally get on a tender only around a half hour before the ship sailed away so if you were a three star mariner that meant you got five minutes on shore. Fewer stars meant you were allowed to look out the tender window for one minute at the shore before the tender went back to the ship.

The Official Holland America list of things to see in the town of Easo on the island of Lifou had the following items: 1 – The little chapel. 2 – The beach. Incredibly, without ever leaving our stateroom, by going out onto our balcony and looking way to my right, I was able to see and even photograph 1 – The Little Chapel. It was little and looked sort of like a chapel.

There were other towns on the map besides Easo but there was no mention of buses or excursions or any other way to get to them. My suspicion is they “don’t want no damn tourists, thank you very much”.

When we did get on the tender, without tickets since we left late and they had gone to “open tendering”, and we saw the island and the beach close up, we were astonished by how beautiful it was. This was another Tropical Paradise, totally unlike Noumea. The island is low, only a few feet high, covered in lush vegetation. There were palm trees everywhere, delightful white sand, and the clearest turquoise colored water you could imagine. You could see the rocks on the bottom and little fish swimming. There were no black flies or mosquitos, just little black-and-white butterflies. People were wading, swimming and snorkeling. Even some of the local kids. Others were just relaxing on the beach in the shade of the palm trees.

We took a mere trillion pictures while still on the tender dock. On the tender dock there was a six foot square section of carpeting that had the Holland America Grand Voyages logo and had words woven in that read “Holland America Grand Asia & Pacific Voyage 2018”. They had this carpeting made *just for this cruise* – classy. Leaving the dock, we walked a few feet to a little market that the locals had set up.

It was unlike any market we had seen before. They had a few little ramshackle shacks made of driftwood and woven palm leaves and a couple of small “buildings” with corrugated iron roofs held up by poles made of tree limbs – nothing else. Inside, some local women were selling clothing and some jewelry and other souvenirs, but it was all very informal and not too touristy. Some of the people in the small shacks had hand-written cardboard signs selling fresh coconut water, or hair braiding. We bought a couple of gifts and, almost needless to say, I succumbed and

bought a Lifou, New Caledonia T-shirt. I'm not ashamed anymore. I'm an addict and I'm going to flaunt it.

Then something occurred today that my friends and family will find impossible to believe... I waded knee deep into the Pacific Ocean and the Coral Sea, simultaneously. The Pacific Ocean/ Coral Sea part they will find hard to believe. The wading in the ocean part they will find impossible to believe. As I said before, I'm not a nature boy. They know it. "Swimming, wading... Jeff... No way."

We stood in the water on one of the most beautiful beaches you could imagine, in the warm, crystal clear, turquoise water until the sun became too much and so we reluctantly took the tender back to the ship. Sigh... maybe I *am* becoming a nature boy.

Instead of immediately washing off the sweat – sorry – perspiration, sand and sea water by taking the seven or eight showers apiece as we had planned, we headed to the buffet and got some sandwiches and brought them back to our stateroom to eat on our balcony. I even was so extravagant as to take a coke from our room minibar. This adventure has destroyed all my inhibitions – five dollar cokes, thirty dollar T-shirts, ocean wading, my god – what will I do next – nude skydiving? Don't worry. I promise not to go that far.

Big News Item! This afternoon we went to the Ocean Bar to sit and work on these masterpieces and after a few minutes they started another Trivia Contest there. Can you guess the Big News Item? Yes! We Won! Of course, the contest was sparsely populated as many people are still ashore, but there *were* six teams. We found the secret – only participate in Trivia Contests when everybody else is off the ship.

We now had to extend our Trivia winning streak, so we abandoned the Ocean Bar – the dance band and ballroom dancers had arrived anyway so it was time to leave – and headed for the Piano Bar, the venue for Evening Trivia. Here's a very quick summary: Us:9 Winners:16. So, it's a winning streak of two (well, one really). We'll take that.

We then checked out the classical music duo called Adagio who were playing in The Explorer's Lounge. On every other cruise we have been on the classical musicians have been young, blonde, Russian or Eastern European women. (Not strictly true. On one ship it was an older Polish couple). Not this time. It was a man and a woman and they weren't blonde. They played the piano and violin and played very well. Sadly, there was almost nobody listening. In addition to us, there were maybe three or four other people in the large lounge and the others were ignoring the music. It must be very frustrating to play an instrument for forty five minutes and have almost nobody listen or care. They do this four times a day, almost every day.

Later we went out to the open area in the aft of the ship to watch the South Pacific sunset. It was particularly relaxing, pleasant, and romantic. I recommend it.

After dinner, we checked out the show in the main theater, even though we had missed the first two thirds of it. It was a couple of “classically trained” singers. We listened to two songs and left, very happy in the knowledge that we had missed the first two thirds of it.

Today was a beautiful day – beautiful weather – a beautiful island – a beautiful beach – beautiful clear water – beautiful palm trees. Once again I asked Donnie “Tell me again why we live in “very hot in the summer/very cold in the winter” New York?” She really didn’t have a good answer.

Monday, December 3 – Mystery Island, Vanuatu – Cruise 3 – Day 7

Some of you readers are no doubt wondering “Where the hell is Vanuatu?” Vanuatu is another archipelago country, which used to be called New Hebrides. As for where it is, it’s in the South Pacific, north of New Caledonia and south of Fiji, you geography dummies. All right, I’ll admit it. I didn’t know where it was either, especially since I had never heard of it.

Once again, the Holland America Port Information Booklet list of places to see on Mystery Island has several items, namely: 1 – The cannibal cook pot. This is a touristy joke photo op where you (for a fee) can get into a big black cooking pot with the words “Mystery Island Cannibal Soup” painted on it and have your picture taken, and 2 – the airstrip, which is a grassy airstrip occasionally used by small planes for touch-and-go landing practice, built on the remains of a World War II airstrip. That’s the list.

There’s one quite significant fact not in the Port Information Booklet... Mystery Island is uninhabited. There were natives there when we arrived, but they only come over from the inhabited island three minutes away, when a cruise ship shows up. This morning as we looked out our balcony there was a fleet of tiny boats heading to Mystery Island, no doubt loaded down with cheap Chinese trinkets and T-shirts, and of course, beer.

That’s right, Mystery island is a three minute small boat ride from the inhabited island Aneityum, sometimes spelled Anatom. The mystery is why would anyone want to go to Mystery Island. You could probably walk from one end of the island to the other in about fifteen minutes. You can walk from one *side* to the other in about two minutes. We should know – we did it. From where we were anchored you could tell that it was essentially a sand bar with trees on it.

I finally figured out why the cruise ships take their guests there. The Vanuatu residents probably want the money that cruise ship passengers bring, but they don’t want them messing up their nice island, so they cut a deal with the cruise ship companies. They can bring tourists to Vanuatu, but they have to go to Mystery Island. Nobody from the ship is allowed on their real island, Aneityum.

At least six times this morning, before we left the ship, after the usual tender ticket announcement, they made a lengthy announcement about Vanuatu customs regulations and all the things that were prohibited, like trading duty-free items for taxi rides or “donating” items to the natives without registering them first with both the ship’s crew and the Vanuatu customs officials. Or, heaven forbid, donating or selling duty-free items to the natives. There are severe penalties for violators. They even said that the Customer Relations staff would help in filling out the forms. I somehow don’t think too many people want to fill out forms so they can “donate” a duty-free item in exchange for a taxi ride, especially on an island that has no roads or taxis.

Let’s hope they didn’t continue repeating the annoying announcement every few minutes all day while we were gone. That would have driven everybody off the ship. Or maybe that was some dastardly plan all along. Maybe some very clever Vanuatu bureaucrat came up with this scheme to sell more souvenirs on the island. “Let’s annoy all the passengers and force them to go ashore and buy trinkets.”

Enough of the sarcastic, cynical, curmudgeon humor. What was “Mystery Island” really like? I won’t bore you with all the details of what happened today, just the highlights. It was YATP (Yet Another Tropical Paradise). It had: a profusion of palm trees, super clear turquoise water, white sandy beaches, cool refreshing breezes, and a cute native market populated by the locals relaxing in the shade, along with their little kids running around having fun and gawking at the strange foreigners.

It sounds just like yesterday on Lifou, except... this time we were prepared. We wore swimsuits. We bought towels and flip-flops. We slathered on sun screen. We left expensive cameras back on the ship. I didn’t even bring a watch or my ever-present iPhone. The result is – we went swimming. That’s right, nerdy non-nature-boy Jeff went swimming – in the Ocean – fully submerged – not touching the bottom – for about an hour – and I *loved* it. So did Donnie. Since she was swimming also, she wasn’t able to use her iPhone to take my picture, so we have no proof. You’ll just have to believe me.

We also wandered through the market where I spent my last Australian ten dollar bill on cheap Chinese trinkets. One was a little turtle on a string you could wear around your neck. It looks like it’s carved from ivory. It is, in fact, injection molded from plastic. I choose to believe that it’s a native Mystery Island Craft Product, injection molded right on the island in the plastic factory hidden among the palm trees.

We got back to the ship late, so we had a late lunch in the afternoon. This meant that we weren’t hungry at the normal dining hours. At one point, lovely Donnie said “I’m not even hungry enough for salad. Of course, there *is* ice cream.” That’s my Donnie.

It was a perfect day. To make it even more perfect, in the afternoon, Donnie did laundry.

Tonight's show was very unusual, made even more unusual because we had seen it before on the Majestic Princess. For some reason I forgot to write about it then. It was billed as "The Sandman – Marcus Winter". His show is, as far as I can tell, unique. It's so unique that I'm going to describe it in some detail.

He tells stories and creates pictures with sand. He has a little table with an open flat box on it containing a white surface and some sand, over it all is a little video camera, so his work is visible on the big screen in the theater. With just his fingers he moves the sand and creates elegant works of art, sometimes metamorphosing them, almost as moving pictures.

As one example, he spread a little sand across the white surface, not as much as you would expect and then with one sweep of his hand there was a curving beach. A few finger movements and there were palm trees. He went on to create a full tropical island scene in a minute or two. These pictures were not cartoony or just line drawings. By erasing a little sand he could create highlights. By adding a little he created shadows.

Since he is a Maori from New Zealand, he did one piece where he told an old Maori folk tale about how the world was created. He also did an around-the-world piece, creating pictures of famous places. With a few finger strokes, there was the Statue of Liberty, another few strokes and there was the Great Wall of China, Big Ben in London, and Mount Fuji.

Because he used to be a street artist, he did two works of art using paper, brushes and paint, completing complex landscape paintings in under five minutes. Later somebody referred to him as the Maori "Bob Ross". Maybe you know who that is. Maybe you don't.

His big finish was a piece about love, which he likes to do because he just got married. First, with one downward, twisting stroke of the side of his hand there is the profile of a pretty young woman. A few trickles of sand through his almost closed fist and she has pretty eyes, lips and with one stroke of his five fingers, long sweeping hair. Then there is the profile of a young man kissing her. A movement of his finger and her eye is closed. Then erasing it all with his hand, he starts over but this time they are slightly older, with a few wrinkles and wearing glasses, then, without erasing them, he moves a little bit of sand, and the man is bald, and the woman is older, but they are holding each others faces in their hands. The audience loved it. So did we.

Tuesday, December 4 – At Sea – Cruise 3 – Day 8

We're at Sea, so you know the drill... brush toothies and other brushable parts, breakfast, port talk, lecture, lunch, trivia, lecture, more trivia, etc.

One unusual thing did happen today. On all our other many cruises (only six) whenever we went from one time zone to another, they put a notice in our stateroom that the clocks would be

changing at 2:00 AM that night, so we would change our watch, iPhone and camera clocks just before we went to bed.

Here, on the MS Amsterdam, we discovered through one line in the daily *When and Where* that the ship's clock was being set forward one hour at 2:00 *in the afternoon*. I thought this was a misprint, until we got a little card in the card-key slot in our stateroom door stating that the clocks would be set forward in the afternoon (exact time unspecified). We later had this confirmed by our room steward. What a strange way to handle it. I think it must wreak havoc with crew schedules, not to mention the less savvy passengers. If it's 1:59 PM, one minute later you will discover that the 3:00 lecture is starting.

Later on the Captain made an announcement that sort of explained it. He said that the clocks would go forward one hour at two in the afternoon and again another hour at two in the morning, to match up with Fiji Summer time. I read this to mean that Fiji is on daylight savings time and Vanuatu isn't, so the time difference is two hours instead of one and they didn't want to change everybody's time by two hours at once. Except... why didn't they change the clocks one hour forward last night at two AM and again tonight at two AM? That's what they did on the Princess Cruises – strange.

In the afternoon, Donnie performed her usual magic and did some packing. I almost hear you readers querying “Why is she packing now? You have more than two weeks left in the cruise.” Good point. What she was packing was the little suitcase we bought in Sydney to hold all the gifts, T-shirts, and chocolates we bought. We wanted to see how much room we had for more purchases. The answer, unhappily, is almost none. As Donnie said, “We should have bought a bigger suitcase.” I will now have to attempt T-shirt withdrawal. Hmmm... is a Hawaiian shirt classified as a T-shirt?

Dinner tonight was the first Gala Dinner we experienced on this cruise. On the Princess cruises they had “Formal Nights” which meant that you had to dress up for dinner in the dining room, and their interpretation of that was that men must wear a jacket and dress pants and a collared shirt. Since I didn't want to pack a jacket, we had little enough room in our luggage, we ate in the buffet on the Princess Formal Nights.

Holland America's interpretation of their Gala Nights is such that a man is accepted in the dining room in just a collared shirt and slacks – jackets were not required, so we went. It was very nice. The theme tonight was “The Secret Garden”, which is also the name of an Orchid garden in Fiji. They had the dining room decorated in Green and Gold, and they had a potted fern on every table, but the most fun was that they played recorded bird song during dinner, except when the Adagio couple played classical music in the dining room. It was elegant, and fun.

Wednesday, December 5 – Port Denarau, Fiji – Cruise 3 – Day 9

We anchored off the town of Port Denarau on the island of Viti Levu in the country of Fiji. Because of the double time change yesterday we lost two hours of sleep when we were awoken by the (insert curse word of your choice here) tender announcement.

Washing, brushing, dressing – you know, the usual morning stuff. Afterward we took the long twenty minute tender ride to Port Denarau. We had been told that the Fijian's will greet everybody with their greeting, Bula. As soon as we got off the tender, we heard the word continuously from then on. Either they really, really like to greet people with the word, or they are spoofing all the tourists with a word that means something they wouldn't like. In addition, everything was called Bula. There were Bula shirts, Bula tours, Bula sandwiches, on and on. I'm beginning to suspect that somebody is full of Bula.

Port Denarau was a tiny port comprised entirely of shopping, resorts, luxury condos, boat tours, and a Hard Rock Cafe. There was nothing I would call real. The buildings around the dock made up a small outdoor shopping mall.

We went into a place called Jack's of Fiji where we bought more T-shirts and postcards. For an air-conditioned, modern, shopping mall type place, the prices seemed very cheap. The T-shirts were \$9.95 and that's Fijian Dollars, or \$5 US. I couldn't resist. Forgive me. We also went into a little convenience store so Donnie could buy guess what? If you answered "stamps", you got it in one. I noticed on one of the shelves that they had a kind of chocolate bar filled with coconut and cherry that I had tried in Sydney and liked, but I reasoned that it was a bad idea to buy chocolate in a country where the average temperature is in the eighties, so I passed on it. One wonders how many times that chocolate bar has melted.

The rest of the island looked pretty from what we could see in the distance but there was no convenient way to tour the island, so we just shopped and had lunch. While we were eating I saw two guys fishing with big nets on a sandbar a hundred yards or so from where we were having lunch. I don't think they caught anything.

It was so hot and humid that after lunch we took the tender back to the ship and rested, drank a gallon or two of water, and took a few showers. Afterward we almost felt human. We will be docking in the city of Suva, also on Viti Levu in Fiji so maybe we'll get to see more of Fiji than we did today.

Thursday, December 6 – Suva, Fiji – Cruise 3 – Day 10

We docked this morning in Suva, Fiji, a commercial, bustling, crowded city. It was not very modern or very clean, and it was chock full of Fijian people. It was totally different from Port Denarau. The temperature was about 80 fahrenheit, but it was 93 percent humidity. After walking outside for a few seconds you were covered in sweat. We walked a block or two from the ship to the Suva Municipal Market.

Under a big shed, and a large bunch of makeshift, tarpaulin-canopied tables outside the shed, there were hundreds of small vendors selling all kinds of unusual fruits and vegetables, just fruits and vegetables, no souvenirs, no clothing. There must have been fifty pineapple sellers. Some stuff was just spread out on cloths on the ground. There were at least a dozen kinds of bananas, mangos, taro roots, green beans, and many other things we couldn't recognize. It was so large that for each type of fruit or vegetable there were probably thirty or more vendors selling it.

The market was right next to a bus terminal and there were dozens of buses going and coming. We originally thought that they were bringing workers into the big city to their jobs. That may be partially true, but after seeing how much stuff was being sold in the market, and the fact that the market vendors looked like very poor people from the outlying villages, we realized that the buses were also bringing people who wanted to sell and buy in the market.

Upstairs in the second floor of the market, there were vendors selling spices and kava root. There were a whole lot of vendors selling kava root, which just looked like bundles of twigs. The dictionary says kava is a sedative, narcotic drink made from kava root. Maybe that explains "Fiji Time". Our port expert explained that the natives live on Fiji time. If a tour operator is supposed to pick you up at 4, it might be 4:30, it might be 5:00, it might be never. Being punctual is not in the Fiji culture.

After taking a lot of pictures in the stifling, humid market, we walked a couple of blocks in the bustling city, past more village people selling fruits from cloths spread out on the sidewalk. It started to rain heavily so we ducked into an air conditioned, modern, multi-story department store – a very different world. We relaxed a little in the food court and had some soft drinks. After that we went out and walked around the downtown area a little more and, soggy with rain and perspiration, went back to the ship.

The Fiji people do seem to be genuinely friendly. Many people, even just people you passed by, greeted you, either with Bula or hello and asked you how you are and sometimes asked whether you liked Fiji. Nobody objected to having their picture taken. One woman, after I took a picture of her inside her food stand, smiled and gave me a thumbs up.

Friday, December 7 – At Sea – Cruise 3 – Day 11

Need I reiterate the same old list of Sea Day activities? No, I think not. The only things different from the norm were 1: we lost another hour again, at 2:00 in the afternoon again. This time there was nothing to explain why they did it at that unusual time, and 2: the evening show was a very funny comedian.

Saturday, December 8 – Apia, Samoa – Cruise 3 – Day 12

We were supposed to visit Apia, Samoa today. We almost did. The ship docked at about 8:00 and we awoke about the same time. I looked out our balcony door and saw that we were right up against the dock. Then I went and did my usual bathroom stuff. While doing the usual, I was surprised to notice that the ship seemed to be still rocking considerably. After finishing in the bathroom, I again looked out of the balcony and the ship *was* rolling side to side, quite a bit.

I went out on the balcony while Donnie was in the bathroom and I saw that the ship was rolling quite a bit and the gangplank was sliding back and forth about two feet at a time. There were some ship's crew out there setting up the usual port stuff, canopies and tables for the water and lemonade, barriers to keep the passengers going in the correct direction, the Holland America Pacific Grand Voyage carpeting, etc. Other crew members seemed to be trying to keep the gangway steady.

I went back into the stateroom for a little while and then went back out. This time there were more officers outside and eventually they lifted the big gangway and put it back on the ship and put a small one out, and started dismantling all the port equipment and were bringing it back onboard. A small bus pulled up and a group of passengers got off and headed toward the gangway, but they weren't taken on board. I guessed what was coming next.

Sure enough, a few minutes later the Captain came on the PA system and announced that due to large swells he was aborting our call to Apia. He said that some passengers were on shore and that he was going to pull away from the dock and await their return to the pier and then try to get them on board via a tender.

They pulled in the small gangway, even though several crew members were still on the pier. One or two passengers were walking toward the ship. It started to rain lightly, and a funny thing happened. Some crew member starting throwing big Holland America umbrellas out of the ship and onto the pier, presumably for the remaining crew and passengers. For a few seconds there was a pile of white umbrellas on the pier. I wondered what the reaction must be of the passengers who were out visiting Apia when they noticed the ship pulling away. I imagine it was not a pleasant one.

So, we went and had a leisurely breakfast and then we had to plan for another Sea Day. We will have to scratch the country of Samoa from our list of countries we have visited, at least I will. Donnie and I have a slight disagreement about what constitutes visiting a country. I consider it visited only after I have spent some time on its soil, say at least half an hour. Inside an airport while changing planes doesn't count. Donnie, on the other hand, considers a place visited if she saw a glimpse of it.

Saturday, December 8 – Pago Pago, Tutuila, American Samoa – Cruise 3 – Day 13

Once again, some of you more astute and perceptive readers are thinking that the author has made another unforgivable error. Not this time. Yes, yesterday *was* Saturday, December 8th. So was today. There's this thing called the International Date Line. We went through it going east to west on our first cruise of this journey. At that time we lost a day. We had no October 12th, 2018. We just went through it going west to east, so now we have two December 8th's. You lose some, you win some. We got certificates for crossing the line again. Holland America spared no expense and printed our names on them. On our previous crossing, Princess left our names blank and we will have to write them in ourselves – the cheapskates.

We also had to set our clocks back an hour last night. This was really confusing because we had set them forward the day before yesterday. It must be something to do with daylight savings time in one place and not another but even having a mathematics background doesn't help me figure this stuff out. I read that we have to set them forward again soon. What with the International Date Line, that was a 25 hour time change. And just to add to the confusion, the day before last we set them forward in the afternoon. Last night we were supposed to set them back at 2:00 in the morning. My brain hurts!

During breakfast this morning we found that the buffet was gaudily decorated with all kinds of red, white, and blue decorations. Technically speaking, we are now in the USA and will remain so for the rest of this cruise. American Samoa, which we visited on the first cruise of this trip, is an American Territory, and I hope that I don't have to explain that Hawaii is part of America proper.

Since we had been here before, and since it was extremely humid outside and threatening rain, and since we weren't feeling up to par, all we did is go to a market right on the pier and buy another shirt. This time, however, it wasn't a T-shirt. It was a Hawaiian shirt. See, I'm almost cured. I have been told that chartering our own cargo plane to take home the T-shirts, gifts, and chocolates isn't *too* expensive.

In the late afternoon the wind picked up and it started to rain very heavily. The rain was almost sideways, but, like all rain in the tropics, it only lasted a short while. Some of the Samoan guards on the pier walked around in the heavy rain as if it wasn't there. I'm sure that they are used to it. Immediately after it stopped, we saw hundreds of bats flying around in one of the hills. I'm guessing that the rain brought out the insects.

Tonight they had a special "American Cookin' Dinner" in the buffet. In addition to the red, white and blue decorations, they had American flag bunting, red, white, and blue lights, red, white, and blue wine (yes, blue wine – probably white wine with food coloring), red, white, and blue cloth napkins, and the servers were wearing American Flag shirts. They had hotdogs, hamburgers, meat loaf, mac & cheese, fried shrimp, baked potatoes, baked beans, and ... chicken empanadas?

OK, I guess I can accept that chicken empanadas are American Cookin', but why didn't they have pizza?

This was our second visit to Pago Pago. On our first visit we sort of felt that the town was not very attractive and we didn't investigate the rest of the island. This time, after being more experienced with South Pacific islands, some of which were very beautiful and some of which were not, we kind of felt like we were too harsh in our opinion of Pago Pago. We viewed more of the island during the sail away and it looked very pretty. There were hills and mountains covered in vegetation, almost all the way to the sea shore. We are sad that we didn't go out and explore more. In cases like this Donnie always says "We can always go back." Yeah – that would be easy.

Sunday, December 9 – Thursday December 13 – At Sea – Cruise 3 – Days 14 – 18

We were at sea for five consecutive days. I won't repeat all of the usual "at sea" stuff. I will only describe the unusual occurrences, or maybe sometimes I will become philosophical. I know that some of you are hoping I don't do the latter.

On our first sea day of this group we attended the Captain's talk and Q&A session. We had thought, solely based on his very dry, very boring daily announcements of ship's position, heading, sea depth and other minutiae, that the Captain was an uninteresting, characterless fellow. Not so. His talk was very informative and he described the operation of the Bridge in great detail, but he also was a decent speaker and had a passable sense of humor. It was the best Captain's talk we had attended. I was going to impart to you all of the amazing facts that he conveyed to us, but, luckily for you, I didn't write them down. I will only mention that in addition to the mere 800 or so passengers on this segment of the cruise, there are 600 crew members. That's quite a ratio.

One effect of the mere 800 passengers on a ship designed to handle over 1200 is that many times this ship appears to be empty. There have been several occasions when we have walked through Deck 5, which is the deck that contains most of the public spaces, like several bars, the library, several lounges, the shops, the casino, etc., and we have seen almost nobody. Often all the bars are completely empty, without even bartenders. We have rarely seen anybody in the pools or hot tubs. On our other cruises they almost always had somebody in them, except in bad weather. Sometimes the ship is so empty we wonder where everybody is. We expect it to be fairly empty when there is a show going on in the theater, or during the early dinner seating for those who have fixed dining times, but we have seen it empty in the afternoon when there is no show in the theater, no lectures, and no meals in the dining room. It's strange and even a little eerie.

On Tuesday, December 11, We crossed the Equator, going north this time. Once again they had the King Neptune ceremony which was very silly. Holland America spent more time, effort, and money than Princess, with more people in costumes, more decorations, a band dressed in Pirate

costumes, and many, many more crew pollywogs who had to kiss the fish, get slimed, and dunked in the pool. There were probably twenty or thirty of them, poor slobs. While this celebration of crossing the Equator was going on, we were, in fact, still three degrees south of the Equator, but which is more important, the ship's crowded schedule, or reality?

We continued to try the Trivia contests. I think I can hear some of you loyal readers muttering "Gluttons for punishment". That's not quite fair. The Cruise Director and the Assistant Cruise Director who run the Trivia contest always admonished us that the purpose is "To Have Fun" and "To Learn Something". We did learn things. I learned that the little dot above the lower-case "i" and "j" is called a "tittle". Isn't that a momentous and useful thing to know? All of you are copying that down for future use, aren't you?

On one of these sea days there was a small crowd in the sports bar watching a football game. Most of the time that place is totally empty. Since these sea days tend to be somewhat uneventful, I thought I might take this opportunity to discourse a little on an related topic, sports.

Those of you readers who know me are shouting "Sports? Jeff? Sports? He doesn't do Sports. He doesn't know Sports. He can't even spell Sports." See how wrong you are. I just spelled sports eight times. The other comments are accurate. My, admittedly nerdy, philosophical (I warned you) take on sports is this – billions, no – more probably trillions of dollars are spent every year so a large number of people can watch a smaller number of people move a round, or roundish, object from one place to another. It sounds pretty silly when I put it that way, doesn't it. I'm going to tell a little story about my youth that might explain my feelings on the matter.

My Dad was a golfer. He loved golf. He wasn't fanatical about it. He didn't spend large amounts of money on it. He couldn't really since he didn't have a lot of money. He didn't go to tournaments. He didn't read golf magazines – maybe once in a while. He played almost every week except in the winter. He also watched golf tournaments on television. Now way back in the dim past when I was a lad, there was only one television in the house. Hard to believe, but true. It was in the living room, and Dad, Mom and I had to watch the same thing if we wanted to watch television.

On a number of Saturday afternoons Dad would watch golf tournaments. Sometimes, for lack of something else to do, I would watch with him. Here I have to describe a little of what went on in a golf tournament. A tournament player would go up to the tee, put down his ball, do one or two practice swings and then hit the ball. It would travel several hundred yards. Then the next player would do the same, and so on until all the players at that hole had hit their tee shot. Then everybody, the players, the caddies, the journalists and the fortunate spectators who were there had to walk to the places where the balls had landed.

In summary, there was about five or six seconds of something happening, and then five or ten minutes of nothing happening. Even when the ball was in flight, the primitive TV technology of

the time could barely follow it in the sky. Sometimes, using a very long telephoto lens on a TV camera they could show a shaky picture of the ball bouncing where it landed.

This all meant that most of the time you were just listening to the commentators talking, and they had a hard job. They had to come up with something to say while nothing was happening. If I remember right, it went something like this...

“Well Dan, that was a really great shot that Sam made back there on the eighth, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, Fred, I agree, that was a great shot. It might even have been a better shot than the one he made on the seventh hole in the third round of the Sahara Desert Open in 1965.”

“I think you might be right about that Dan. Now we’re coming up on the ninth hole. It’s a four hundred yard par four with a slight dogleg to the left with bunkers on the front right, the back left and the left side. Looks tricky, doesn’t it Dan.”

“I agree Fred, this one looks like a really tricky hole, especially with the bunker on the front right. Many a ball has ended up there. I remember back in sixty two when Gary hit a high two iron shot on this very hole and it landed right in that front right bunker. He dropped from second place all the way to fifth on that round.”

... and so on, for several hours. My Dad was engrossed. Somehow, I wasn’t.

It’s double coincidence time. A few days ago we had joined two couples in an ad-hoc team for Evening Trivia and this time we got along very well with our team members. We got decent scores but didn’t win. The other night, after the trivia was over, we got to talking with one of the couples, Ferd, short for Ferdinand, and Claire, and during the discussion we were surprised to find out that Ferd’s birthday was in a few days. Would you believe that we both have the same birthday? We were also talking about cars, and lo and behold, we both bought red Mazda Miata’s in 1989, within a month of each other. Tonight I’ll have to ask Ferd if he likes pizza. You never know.

We had been noticing, we thought, that during this third cruise aboard the MS Amsterdam that the ship seemed to move with the waves more than any of the previous ships we have been on. Then, in the last three days, things got worse and worse. It got harder to walk a straight line. There was a great deal of creaks and other strange noises in our stateroom. Yesterday it got pretty bad. Standing up was a challenge. Yesterday evening, it was quite bad. The ship was rocking, rolling, lurching, twitching, jumping, banging and creaking. There were very loud banging sounds coming from the elevator shafts. I think it might be the cables or the counterweights. Fortunately, for some unknown reason, it didn’t make us sick, but it was still very unpleasant and made it very difficult to sleep. Then this morning we noticed that the emergency floor lights were on in the hallways. We’re not worried – yet. The captain made his usual, fairly boring, daily announcement. He casually mentioned that there are 6 to 12 foot swells and that the weather today, tonight, and tomorrow will be the same as today – swell.

Tonight's show was described as a musical extravaganza. I avoid anything called an extravaganza. Aha, they just made an announcement – the extravaganza has been postponed because of the movement of the ship. There's a silver lining in every cloud.

The rough seas lasted all five days from Pago Pago to Honolulu. This was not fun. We didn't get seasick, but it was treacherous just walking around. Taking a shower was almost suicidal. Maybe I should re-evaluate my feelings about long airplane rides. We had speculated that the smaller ships such as this one are less stable in bad weather. One of the servers in the buffet confirmed that the larger ships handle rough seas better. I may not give up cruising altogether, but cruising on small ships on long open sea voyages is no longer in my repertoire. Those 5000 passenger ships with the rock climbing walls and water slides and onboard go-kart tracks and 2000 kids running around screaming their heads off can't be too bad, can they?

One of these sea days was my birthday. I'm not revealing which one in case one of my readers wants to steal my identity. I can't imagine why anyone would want to do that, since I have a quite uninteresting identity, but since I am paranoid, I won't reveal this highly sensitive piece of information. Any of you readers who wants to use my birthdate to steal my membership in our local library will have to try five times to guess which date it is.

Anyone with the poor sense to have a birthday while on this ship was subjected to a very embarrassing event at dinner. I will describe it soon. I had seen others undergoing the agony and I wished to avoid it, if possible. If this were a normal, on land restaurant situation, one could avoid any embarrassing singing of "Happy Birthday" by the bored wait staff by merely not telling anyone it was your birthday – simple. On a cruise however, when you signed up you had to give them all kinds of information for various government immigration and customs officials, which included your date of birth. The cruise staff are no slouches and they have that information in their computer systems, and, unfortunately, they use it. So they *knew* when my birthday was. I couldn't hide the fact from them.

I had come up with a plan. They only seek to cause total embarrassment and dismay at dinner, so I told Donnie that on the fatal day I was going to have dinner of a candy bar in our bathroom, with the door barred. She vetoed that. Darn, foiled again. So, I resigned myself to a painful, embarrassing dinner experience.

That night when we went to the dining room, I noticed the maitre d' handing a piece of paper to the waiter who took us to our seats – damn. I ate dinner, steeling myself for the ordeal. I ate slowly, delaying the inevitable, but then it was time for dessert. For some reason known only to Holland America, the wait staff, in fact almost the entire staff that interacts with passengers, are from Indonesia, so instead of "Happy Birthday", which would have been bad enough, I had to sit through five or six waiters singing some Indonesian song while the other diners in the room watched in pity. Probably the words to the song meant "Ha Ha. The silly American thinks this is a birthday song." Somehow, I got through it. At least the birthday cake was good. Donnie was

grinning and videoing the whole thing. Later she sent the video to everyone in the known universe. I'll get revenge somehow, or at least I'll enjoy planning the revenge.

Friday, December 14 – Honolulu, Oahu, Hawaii, USA – Cruise 3 – Day 19

We had set our alarms and thus got up very early because they had given us a notice that they were going to open up the bow area at 6:30 AM so that people could watch the sail in to Honolulu. Still half asleep we went out to the bow at the designated time to watch the sail in but the ship had already docked. The Captain had sailed in early. All we saw was the big terminal building and some cargo containers – lovely. Diamond Head, the famous big volcanic cone at the end of Waikiki beach, was mostly blocked by the terminal building. One thing we did notice was the “2018 Grand Asia and Pacific Voyage” title and logo painted directly on the front of the ship's superstructure above the bow area. – very impressive. They seem to spare no expense on these “Grand Voyages”. So instead of watching and photographing the sail in past Diamond Head and Waikiki beach, we had a quick breakfast instead.

We had also been given a notice about the complex immigration procedures we would have to go through, since we were officially entering the good, old USA. Yes, Hawaii is part of the USA. I have heard that the Hawaiians really *hate* the tourists asking them if they take US dollars, or have they ever been to the US, or do they still have a king. To paraphrase somebody, it's impossible to overestimate the stupidity of people, but I digress.

We were given group numbers and we had to report to the theater when our group number was called, to have a “face to passport” inspection by the USCBP (US Customs and Border Patrol) inspectors, and then receive a “Clearance Card” in order to get off the ship. Since we had an excursion booked for 8:30 AM, we were concerned that the typical long wait in line for the inspection might cause us to be late for our excursion. When we had gone to the bow area for sail in, we saw the staff setting up the typical roped-off lines and tables in the theater.

Strangely, even though we were in group 5, we were the first group called for immigration check. The whole process from when we got to the theater to when we left the theater took 30 seconds. We didn't believe it when they sent us on our way. We were off the ship by 7:45.

We waited in the very large, almost empty terminal building until our tour bus arrived at 8:20. We met our driver/guide, Keith, who was a big guy with long hair and sunglasses and looked like a 1960s beach bum. He had a TV announcer's voice, though. Later he told us he was 58 years old. He didn't look it. He also told us about his heritage. Even though he had no trace of an Asian background, he said his last name was Takahashi, or something similar. I didn't write it down.

Keith drove a while to a Japanese style Buddhist temple called Byodo-in. It was a very attractive, elaborately decorated Japanese temple, very similar to some we had seen in Japan, with beautiful grounds. He told us that we should ring the very large, sacred bronze temple bell which he said

will “cleansed our minds” so we rang the bell. I’m not sure if it cleansed my mind. I’m not sure if my mind was dirty. I’m not really sure if I *have* a mind. The sound of the bell was pleasing.

The next stop was a place where Keith told us we would be given free coffee and macadamia nut tastes. It was the usual excursion tourist trap. It was a shop where they were selling bags of coffee and macadamia nuts. What a surprise. The coffee, dispensed from those pump-style carafes, tasted like rich, dark, hot water. It was labeled “Macadamia Nut/Kona Coffee”. I think it was 99.5% Macadamia Nut juice and the rest was coffee. Unbelievably some people in our tour group were raving about the coffee as we drove away. Two people next to us, however, did whisper to each other about how weak the coffee was. We were relieved to hear the latter as it confirmed our opinions. For some strange reason, we like coffee that *tastes* like coffee. The shady area behind the coffee/nut store was chock full of wild chickens of all shapes, sizes and colors. The tourists ignored the chickens. The chickens ignored the tourists.

We then stopped at a beachside park called Kualoa park, where it rained briefly, after which we had a short stop at a very pretty beach called Sunset Beach to watch some surfers. The beaches on the North shore of Oahu are spectacular. Maybe that’s why people go to Hawaii, especially the surfers.

Then it was time to go to lunch. Part of the excursion description said we were going to experience the famous North Oahu Shrimp Trucks. We drove a while to a place called Tsue’s Farm in Haleiwa, Hawaii. Instead of a Shrimp Truck it was a Shrimp stand, which also had other attractions like kayaking and paddle boarding on the local river. We were given a choice of pulled pork, teriyaki chicken or three kinds of shrimp: coconut, spicy, and the one we had read about, butter garlic. We, and almost everybody in the group chose the last. We were also told that after our main course we should go to the little stand nearby and have some shave ice, a Hawaiian delicacy.

The butter garlic shrimp came one of those big styrofoam take-out boxes, with rice, a piece of pineapple, and a small salad. We also chose pineapple/orange soda in a can. The shrimp were unpeeled (see my shrimp diatribe earlier in this tome). They were covered in a very, very gooey, messy, slippery, hot butter garlic mixture, and the only way to eat them was to peel them with your hands. They did give us small plastic forks. I’m not sure what they were for, certainly not for eating the shrimp. After the first shrimp, it was acutely inadvisable to touch anything else. We had each taken a small paper napkin. It was useless after the first shrimp, reduced to a gooey, soggy, falling apart scrap of paper.

There were at least eight or ten large, scrumptious shrimp which we devoured, slowly. You couldn’t eat them quickly because it took a long time to peel one, especially since they tended to slip out of your gooey fingers. It was very, very messy and very, very good. One of the very helpful staff brought us several paper towels, which were still completely inadequate to clean up with, but at least they allowed us to pick up the fork to eat the rice, mixed with the rest of the

butter garlic sauce, and the really good Hawaiian pineapple. Even better, the staff member pointed out the washing sink outside the shave ice stand. We made good use of it. We had to.

Then it was time for shave ice. Note – it is *shave ice*, not shaved ice. Shave ice is absolutely not a Snow Cone. It has a completely different texture. They sell it everywhere in Hawaii. They had a machine that shaved a big block of ice and made a very soft, slush-like icy base, which they then soaked in your choice of flavored syrups. They had about a dozen flavors and you could ask for several at once and they would put different flavors on different parts of the huge ball of shave ice, bigger than a softball. I chose coconut, pineapple and lime. Donnie chose coconut, pineapple and root beer. She likes root beer. I didn't think it was authentically Hawaiian, but it was her choice. They gave you a spoon *and* a straw. We really liked the shave ice. It wasn't like anything we had before. My tongue kept freezing. The whole meal was unforgettable. If I lived on the North Shore of Oahu I would be a regular. If I lived on the North Shore of Oahu I would be a lot of things, including happier and poorer.

Then Keith drove us to our next stop which was a completely different kettle of shrimp. It was called the Dole Pineapple Plantation which was a misnomer because the Dole company pulled up stakes and moved all of their pineapple plantations to Thailand a while ago. It was really just a very big, overpriced gift shop. Keith had actually warned us that everything inside was overpriced. I was surprised that he did that. I surmised that the tour company had a deal with the place and was required to bring passengers there, but that Keith didn't really approve. Donnie did have some pineapple ice cream – no surprise there. We didn't buy any of the pineapple-themed tourist junk, although I was tempted to buy a very small bag of pineapple flavored bubble-gum balls, for six bucks. I resisted.

In the afternoon, Keith drove us back to the ship and we got back onboard so Donnie could make some long awaited phone calls to the family, since we had normal, non-roaming AT&T cell phone service. It was quick, only two hours of phone calls. That was for just two calls.

In the evening we felt it would be a big waste to stay onboard the ship since it wasn't leaving until 10:30 PM, so we went back out and took a taxi to Waikiki beach, just as the sun set. We walked along the beach and out one of the small concrete piers, taking some Hawaiian sunset pictures, which will, once again, probably be unused. We wanted to have dinner in Honolulu so Donnie queried the taxi driver about where to go. He was Chinese or Vietnamese or something similar and didn't speak English well, but he enthusiastically told us about a place called Tiki's. I would never have asked and would usually strongly avoid any restaurant recommended by a taxi driver in one of the most touristy places in the world, but after checking out some places nearby, we decided "what the hell" and risked it. It was even on the second floor of a hotel, just off the swimming pool – very encouraging.

It was a modern day 1960s Tiki bar. It had all the trimmings, including carved Tiki statues everywhere, drinks that came with souvenir glasses and souvenir glasses with orchids in them on the table. At least the menus didn't have pictures on them, except of the souvenir glasses. I

prepared myself for an expensive, mediocre, but possibly crazy experience. We ordered drinks. Donnie had her usual Mojito, but I boldly ordered something called a “Wipeout”. On Waikiki beach, how could I not? They both came with paper umbrellas, even the Mojito. My “Wipeout” was blue colored (what else?) and tasted sort of like a Pina Colada. It was good. It had a maraschino cherry on the shaft of the paper umbrella. How could it be bad?

Then the waiter came out with the bread and said “Taro rolls with banana butter” – what? We tried them. The rolls were purple. The banana butter was just that, butter flavored with banana. It was interesting, but sweet, and I might have liked it better for breakfast, say with pancakes. For our main courses I had garlic shrimp again, on linguini in puttanesca sauce and Donnie had some grilled fish. The banana butter did *not* go well with them. Her fish also came with something that was like an egg roll, but it was filled with what the waiter said was Molokai sweet potato. It, too, was purple. She liked it. The food turned out to be very good, much better than we had anticipated. Tiki’s was a hoot. Our day on Oahu was yet another great day, including our evening jaunt to Waikiki. We will absolutely be coming back.

Saturday, December 15 – Lahaina, Maui, Hawaii, USA – Cruise 3 – Day 20

We tendered out to Lahaina, a small touristy town on the island of Maui. The tender rolled and pitched and even getting off on the dock was scary. We had another excursion today and we soon found our tour guide and he took us to a van. There were eleven in our tour group and we all just fit in the van. Our driver/guide was a guy about our age, looking like any typical American, but he introduced himself as Keioki. (rhymes with Okey Dokey, he told us) The first thing he did after the introduction was he required us to read, initial in many places, and sign long legal consent forms which had a large number of paragraphs explaining all the possible dangers and absolving him and his company from any blame and relinquishing our right to sue. Donnie asked if this trip was dangerous. We later found out that the tour company mainly specialized in taking hikers on difficult hikes, so they spent money for very good lawyers.

Keioki drove us around Maui, mostly inland. First we stopped in the tiny cowboy town of Makawao which was only two blocks long, old, and quaint. You read that right, it was a *cowboy* town. There were, and still are, cattle ranches in Hawaii. Our first visit was to the Makawao History Museum. It was small. Four people filled it. Five was a big crowd. It had cowboy memorabilia on the walls and a couple of Hawaiian saddles, made of wood. The guide told us that in the late 1800s a Hawaiian cowboy with a flower Lei on his Ten Gallon hat went to Wyoming to participate in a big Rodeo. The guide claimed that he won. It’s possible. I don’t feel the need to check.

Next we went to a glassblower a few doors away. We watched a couple blowing glass and we saw some very nice art glass pieces for sale, but it would have been impossible to get them home. We were supposed to visit an art gallery next door, but it was closed.

When we were in the town of Lahaina before we got on the van, it had been uncomfortably humid and there was no wind. Once we got away from there it was windy everywhere else and very pleasantly dry and cool. Keioki said it was unusually windy that day.

Our next stop was for lunch. Unlike yesterday's magnificent lunch, this time we were "treated" to a skimpy picnic lunch. It consisted of a thin turkey sandwich on a soft roll, a small bag of chips, a small piece of pineapple, a cookie and a small bottle of water. Everything came in tupperware containers. It looked like somebody had assembled it in their home kitchen. It was, however, set in a pretty location, the former mansion of the richest family on the island, now a museum and art center, with magnificent grounds. It rained very briefly as we walked to the picnic tables, and it was quite windy while we ate.

We drove for a while more and stopped at Ho'okipa Park, a beachside park, for fantastic views of the surf and even some sea turtles who were sunning themselves on the beach.

Keioki told lots of stories and explained some history while he drove. He claimed to be another person of native Hawaiian descent, and seemed to be pretty knowledgeable. One story he told us was that his birth name was George, but at some point his aunt, evidently a very highly respected Hawaiian Elder, told him she would give him his Hawaiian name, which he said made him thrilled. She thought for a long time and came up with the name Keioki. He was disappointed. In Hawaiian, he told us, Keioki means "George".

The last stop was to another tourist trap store, which seemed to be some kind of norm for these excursions. I don't think any of us bought anything. Some people did avail themselves of the facilities. The tour was OK, but we weren't totally happy with it because there was too much time spent driving and too little seeing things, and lunch was a joke.

After we got back we walked around Lahaina which was another touristy little town full of shops and restaurants. We did stop for some shave ice again. Yesterday's was a little better but we liked this one anyway. Even though the ship was staying until 10:30 PM again, this time we elected to go back in the early evening. It was still a rocky ride on the tender back to the ship, and disembarking the tender onto the tender platform was very scary since it was going up and down by several feet. We made it. Many of you probably figured that out.

That evening we had dinner in the buffet because it was Hawaiian Night. They had decorated the buffet and given all the wait staff Hawaiian shirts, but one waitress told us that they had to give them back. They had a real suckling pig, head and all, and also skewers of Spam and pineapple. No Poi though. There were torches on every table, electric ones of course, and there were several lawn-style flame torches in the buffet, but they didn't light the latter ones. I tried the suckling pig. It was pretty good. I also tried the Spam and pineapple. It wasn't.

Sunday, December 16 – Thursday, December 20 – At Sea – Cruise 3 – Days 21 – 25

We were at sea again. The ship was rocking again. The elevators were banging again. The passengers and crew were weaving side-to-side again. Things were back to normal.

Since it was almost Christmas, one evening they held a “Tree Lighting Ceremony”. It was held in the ship’s atrium. All the cruise ships seem to have atriums. These are areas in the middle of the ship that are open to several decks, just like in a shopping mall. This one is very small. It goes up three decks and the middle is dominated by this huge complicated three deck high thing called the Amsterdam Astrolabe, which is a giant structure with lots of gears and dials and a tiny planet Earth that orbits around it and other gewgaws and thingumabobs. I suspect that it’s some artist’s idea of scientific stuff. For the holiday season they surrounded it on the bottom deck with tables on which they put a panoply of gingerbread houses and a toy train track. Under the Astrolabe they put a couple of small holiday trees and to one side a slightly larger one, not a very big one mind you.

The atrium was small enough that the passengers who attended had to watch from the railings on all three floors and also while standing on the circular staircase surrounding the Astrolabe and most couldn’t actually see the tree. We couldn’t even get close. There were some Indonesian Elves, and a few Santa’s helpers who gave out rum punch, or cider, or hot chocolate, and cookies. After they threw the “Tree Lighting” switch, they sang a few carols. When they got to “Let It Snow”, by magic it started snowing. It was snowing thousands and thousands of half-inch squares of paper. I immediately thought of the two hard-working groups involved. First, the poor overworked staff who had to cut out the thousands and thousands of little half-inch squares of paper and stuff it in the bins or wherever it was before the magic happened, and then I thought of the even harder working group that had to vacuum it all up, especially on the insides of all the gears and thingumabobs in the Astrolabe. It was all very festive.

The following is brought to you by the Professional Curmudgeon Association. Our Motto is “When You Need A Curmudgeon, call a Professional”.

Why is it suddenly all the rage to have “Tree Lighting Ceremonies”? Way back when, in the dim past when I was a young apprentice curmudgeon, people just lit the tree. There was no “ceremony”, or if there was it consisted of somebody yelling “plug the stupid thing in, Dad”. I think that after they started broadcasting the “Tree Lighting Ceremony” from Rockefeller Center in New York, suddenly everybody had to have a “Tree Lighting Ceremony”. How come they don’t have a “Shutting off the Tree Ceremony”? I would.

The preceding was a complimentary sample from the Professional Curmudgeon Association. Remember, if you need a curmudgeon in a hurry, just grumble.

One morning, several days before the end of the cruise, Donnie started *packing*. The first part of the process involved “thinking about packing”. Then there was “thinking about what to pack”, and “talking about packing”. Then she reached the stage called “taking some clothes out of the closet, putting them on the bed and then getting distracted reading some tour guides for a while”. I’m pretty sure she really didn't want to pack. I didn't either. Throwing everything into the ocean from our balcony would have been frowned upon, though.

One evening we were invited to yet another Mariner’s Society Cocktail Reception with the Captain, the Hotel Director and the Cruise Director. Since all it takes to be in the Mariner’s Society is to have been on one other Holland America cruise, almost everybody on the ship was invited to this reception. In fact, they had to have two receptions, one at 4:45 and one at 6:45, and they were held in a very intimate place, the theater. We later heard that the earlier one had 500 people attending and the later one had 300. That’s almost exactly the entire passenger contingent.

We waited outside the theater until it was time to go in. Almost everybody but us was dressed to the hilt, possibly because it was another Gala Night, but it might also have been because of this event. We hadn't wanted to bring fancy clothes, so I wore just a nice shirt and tie, no jacket. We sort of stood out. There might have been one or two other guys not wearing jackets, but not many.

Another disconcerting thing we noticed was that the majority of the people waiting were wearing huge metal medallions on ribbons around their necks. The medallions were at least four inches in diameter, and they were different colors, bronze, silver, some gold. When it came time to enter the theater we were directed to one side and allowed to find seats while the Adagio duo played classical music. Then we were offered a choice of drinks and then hors d’oeuvres.. After everyone was seated, the event started.

The whole *raison d’être* for the thing was to give awards to people who had been on Holland America cruises for a certain number of days. The higher award category recipients were individually called up by name and were photographed with the Captain and the Hotel Director. I could enumerate the various classifications, but I will spare you readers. The only one I’ll mention was a guy who was now in something called the “President’s Club” because he had over 1400 days on Holland America Cruise Lines. A quick calculation (using a calculator, I’m lazy) reveals that this is 3.8 *years* of cruising – yikes.

We drank our cocktails and munched on mixed nuts and chatted with the couple next to us while the ceremony went through the President’s Club, the Platinum, the Gold, the Silver, and the Bronze. Then we left before the crowd did and went to dinner.

Here’s my cynical, curmudgeonly take on the thing. The Holland America marketing department is really, really good at understanding the psychology of their customers. They *award* people for spending money. You get these medal-like things, have your name read aloud, get photographed

with a bigwig and get applauded, just as if you had done some heroic act, and all you did was spend a lot of money with Holland America – brilliant.

When we got back to our room, on the bed were two boxes, side by side they were about the size and shape of a medium pizza box. They contained our final “Pillow Gifts”. We had recently found out that on every Gala Night on these Grand Voyages everyone received a “Pillow Gift” on their bed in the evening. As I had mentioned before, we had found very nice messenger bags one night, and on another night we had gotten luggage tags and luggage straps. We hadn’t connected this with the Gala Nights until later. We heard that the passengers who were on the whole 83 day cruise received things like smart phone external battery packs and even a suitcase. I wish we had gotten the suitcase. We needed it to carry home the other “Pillow Gifts”. I think that may be the reason they gave it out.

Our gifts this time were oval china plates about a foot long and eight inches wide with a antique-looking map of the Pacific on them, with the route of the voyage marked, the “2018 Grand Asia and Pacific Voyage” title, and the Holland America logo, of course. They were very nice, and we got two of them, and we had no way of getting them home! Donnie suggested we give them to some of our new onboard friends. One person told us that she knew someone who collected them. That made sense. A few tens of thousands for this cruise, a few tens of thousands for that cruise and you soon have a nice plate collection.

It’s very evident that Holland America spends an extraordinary amount of money on extra touches on these Grand Voyages. They must make their money back somehow. I was really glad that I didn’t remember how much this cruise cost us, compared to the first ones on this trip. If I had, I would probably would have attempted to sell my “Pillow Gifts” to other passengers.

In our mail slot one evening was an envelope containing our “Disembarkation Package”. This was a normal cruising event. It’s was a description of the disembarkation process, with information on what groups meet when and some special luggage tags to put on your luggage so the crew knew how to deal with them. The one thing different from our other cruises was that we got *ten* luggage tags. Previously we got four. That indicated something about the people on this cruise. We only had three suitcases when we got on board, one large one each and the little one we bought in Sydney. I felt humbled.

We went to another morning trivia contest, which are the harder ones, and this time we made it into a three way tie for first place. We didn’t get the tiebreaker question right, though. We’ll survive.

We had attended three Mariner’s Society Receptions and we weren’t done. We were invited to a Mariner’s Society Lunch. There we had complimentary wine and a three course meal, and we received our Holland America Tiles. We got two of these on our previous Holland America cruise. They are square ceramic tiles with a Holland America related scene in blue on white and a

cork backing so they can be used as coasters. I guess we were now building our collection. Maybe all these frequent Holland America cruisers are just in it for the swag.

Dinner one night was a special Dutch-themed event. Everyone was asked to wear something orange. Orange is a special color for the Dutch, I think because one of their historical heroes was William of Orange. The menu contained Dutch specialities. We had pickled herring for appetizers, which is a very popular Dutch delicacy, which we enjoyed. For the main course we both had a very typical Dutch dish, Indonesian Rijsttafel. That's right, Indonesian. Centuries ago, the Dutch colonized what used to be called the Dutch East Indies, which is now Indonesia, and they learned to like Indonesian food. We had had Rijsttafel in Amsterdam before. It's usually served as a group of several tiny dishes, each containing something different, served with rice, hence the name which means "Rice Table" in Dutch.

They also gave us hats. Donnie, and all the ladies received antique-style women's Dutch hats, which were these gauzy white conical things with "wings" or flaps around the face. You've probably seen them in old Dutch paintings. They looked very silly. The men were given what looked like baseball caps with flat tops. If you have seen illustrations of "The boy who put his finger in the dyke" you know what they looked like. They weren't quite as silly looking as the women's hats. I was lucky – mine was black. Some men got bright orange ones.

It seems that Holland America is constantly giving us stuff, which would be nice if we had any way of getting it home. I am really worried that on the last day of the cruise they might give us a pair of Official 2018 Grand Asia and Pacific Voyage Bowling Balls.

During the five sea days we had to change our clocks a couple of times. Once we had to do it in the afternoon and once at two in the morning. I still don't know why. I'm beginning to wonder if the Captain just gets a kick out of confusing people.

Friday, December 21 – Los Angeles, USA – Heading home

I could fill several more pages with my usual tales of woe about airports, airlines, etc. I will only touch on the good parts. The disembarkation process from the MS Amsterdam was very pleasant, and it was well handled and efficient. I was very impressed by the staff of the Amsterdam. After the shuttle bus dropped us off at LAX, things went downhill from there. All I can say is we did make it home, over two hours later than scheduled, about 2:00 in the morning, NY time. The house was just as we left it. The next morning my car started right up without any need of assistance. What more could we ask for.

In summary, we were away almost exactly three months. We visited seven countries (one, Samoa, we couldn't get to). We saw many wonderful things and had many great experiences. Was it worth it? Of course it was. Would I do it again? I don't know. It was very lengthy and demanding and *expensive*, but it was a lot of fun. I think maybe we'll stick with shorter trips

from now on. Maybe not, Donnie's been talking about the MS Amsterdam 128 day World Cruise in 2020. Yikes!

Kia Ora!

G'day Mate!

Bula!

Aloha!