

Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> April . . . still at sea . . .

And it was distinctly cool on deck until eleven, by which time those who were anxious to maintain a healthy tan were in their cossies again and wondering whether it might be their last opportunity to do so. We actually managed a night without an hour's sleep and I had breakfast before line dancing and managed almost an hour. Furthermore, there was no issue with boat movement as we are sailing in beautifully calm waters. We are missing the extra interest that lectures add to the day but Fred is doing his best .... Last evening our cruise director, the rather camp and rotund Ashley, he of the announcements which are often a tad stumbly with the occasional grammatical gaff, gave an amazing 45-minute performance with the Black Watch Orchestra. By the time he had settled into the performance, like after 10 minutes or so, he was great. He sang 'Hear My Prayer' from Les Mis', beautifully, and Sinatra songs, finishing, oh so appropriately, with 'I am what I am.' I am told by regular cruisers that the ability to entertain is one of the necessary qualifications for Cruise Directors.



Then, today we had the Black Watch Annual Country Fair (bit odd, out on the Atlantic Ocean!) but staff and volunteer guests pulled out all the stops for an afternoon of fun and spending for two orphanages that Fred supports, one in Thailand and the other in the Philippines; this is entirely appropriate as the crew are primarily Philippino and Thai. The spare change that guests have accumulated from their travels is trailing up both sides of the double staircase mid-ships for the charity and we are yet to hear how much has been collected.

We continue to meet up with engaging people. Some meetings are brief, such as today, when we chatted at tea with an *All Rounder*, a French lady who lives on the Cote d'Azur and has already booked the world cruise on the *Balmoral* for next year, and we have passing interaction with a delightful group of Norwegians. Then Raia, a bubbly Finn, who seems to get involved with every activity aboard, dashing enthusiastically from one to the other, has bludgeoned our sing-along Group into attempting a couple of Finnish folksongs.



But our regular companions are Derek and Betty with whom we dine, and Jill who joins us for the post dinner quiz and often for tea and on deck. Strangely they all hail from *our* part of the world ...

Basingstoke and Devizes way. Then, in the past week we have enjoyed a few hours in the company of John and Gill from Bournemouth, who are able to entertain in their suite on Deck 9 (those who *pay to sway* when the seas get rough!) Most of the folk we meet are inveterate travellers, so much so that I sometimes feel parochial. After hearing so many travellers' tales I have just three places topping my wish list – 1) Petra (I've *always* wanted to go there 2) Africa (possibly Botswana) to see animals in the wild and 3) back to Peru.



April 23<sup>rd</sup> . . . homeward bound . . .



Last night I sat more or less alone, in a sheltered spot on Deck 8, watching Ponta Delgada and then the very beautiful southern coast of the Azores pass me by until it was past eight o'clock and I really *had* to go and get ready for dinner. It was still quite balmy and I felt quite emotional, out here on the ocean, missing Elanor's birthday. This is not just our cruise nearing an end, but the grand finale to an amazing world journey. Nick was in the gym; he claims he is fitter than he has been for a while, and plotting how he can maintain the level. Today, we are really back in temperate climes and you need layers when on deck. The seas are not too rough, though tomorrow, pm, things threaten to be choppier as we skirt round the Bay of Biscay.



Yesterday, the Sunday afternoon stop in Ponta Delgada was a huge success for everybody. Those who went on trips all had a great time, returning with stories of villages in volcanoes, bathing in hot springs, and most of all, singing the praises of the beauty of the island and its flowers. I understand we were lucky with the weather; it is apparently best to visit in the Spring or Autumn. We just walked the streets of this beautiful town with its black and white patterned streets and historic houses and its many churches.

Here, only some of the trees are in leaf; in one park the red chestnut

flowers and leaves were *just* out, but the white, hardly; the freesias in the gardens smelt wonderful. Though we heard complaints that the town was dead, I liked the fact that at least *somewhere* still enjoys a holy day and day of rest. Nick found an internet cafe in the port area and even managed a word or two with George in Delhi.





Then, our final sail away party; unlike the interaction with the fellow cruisers as we left the previous port, the solemn folk in the Azores beheld our partying and maybe considered us an ungodly crew!

Today has been pretty full on; line-dancing (me), practice for ukulele 'performance' – I am part of the 'fronting' (as opposed to 'backing') group – we are singing; lecture in absorbing story form of Tay Bridge disaster; gym (him), Zumba (foolishly me – 'oo me knees!); *and* I have to stop shortly to ready myself for a special Chinese meal, ticketed due to numbers restriction.

### **Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> April . . . edging towards Bay of Biscay**

Last evening there was quite a swell and today was the last morning of line dancing and it was certainly the most challenging due to the rolling of the boat – we tried one... then a second and kept going for over a half hour. As people joined they realised that they had to use different muscles to stay upright and avoid collisions on the dance floor. And Captain Ingar Neerland is forecasting a Force 9 later today ... so how many folk will be upright and fit for the Captain's Farewell Cocktail Party is questionable. Nick seems to sleep thro' the creaks and groans of the cabin/boat, but it takes me ages to get to sleep!

### **Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> .... homeward-bound – final lap**

Whatever the weather, we weathered the weather, whether we liked it or not! Yesterday the waves grew and grew and the horizon closed in; as our cabin window is not so very far above the water, it all seemed pretty formidable. The good thing was that we were travelling with the wind – it would have been worse if it was coming on to the side. We did the registration for the talent show where yours truly has been volunteered to sing with the backing/ group. This involved the technical folk sorting the mikes. The good news is we're first on and we can then relax. So . . . we managed a couple of glasses of bubbly and a canapé at the farewell party and the atmosphere at the final formal dinner was consequently particularly amicable. The crew show was especially warmly received – as effusive as that for any of the professionals, comprising of folk dances from Thailand and the Philippines, including a lovely dance with fans and a fresh, number with naval/military marching to the song *YMCA*. There is something about

the joy and pleasure shown by the girls who labour, below deck, when under the warm lights. The final number when the entire cast were involved with a singing of “We are the World” was 100% cheesy, but delightful. What I wasn’t so impressed with was the ornate buffet: ice sculptures, ornamental breads and dressed (to extremis) salmon, cold meats arranged as exotic creatures and sculpted veg. Some folk went back an hour or so later to tuck in to the n’t<sup>h</sup> feast of the day, but for some reason I can’t admire food art, though I do understand why food on a plate should be presented nicely. I was particularly upset when someone said most of it would be thrown! Surely not! That’s indecently decadent.

So – the penultimate breakfast was memorable as we met up with a delightful *round the world* lady, hailing originally from the East End. Having shared with us the parlous state of family fortunes in love and war, (she and her husband of 30 years share five children whom she loves dearly but sometimes finds difficult to like!) she then went into a blow by blow account of how her husband had come to have his arm in a substantial sling. Apparently, the morning alarm went off and, as he found himself wickered and wound up inside the duvet, decided to hurl himself towards the alarm to shut it off and inevitably landed on the floor. After a time of berating him, she finally realised he really *was* in a lot of pain. He is now suffering from the multi-coloured bruises, not so much from the fall, as from the nurse who had her foot in his armpit attempting (for 20 minutes!) to put his dislocated shoulder back in place! Apparently, the doctor finally called a halt to the efforts, and he went to the hospital in the Azores where they discovered it was already relocated and he just had a broken collarbone!

### **Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> : Southampton**

. So . . . the final day on board was decidedly choppy, and for a while the weather was hitting us sideways and we were rolling *and* tilting. We enjoyed one of the ship’s excellent curry meals at lunchtime and survived the talent show, and were like all the other contestants, received warmly. Nick made his final visit to the gym and we enjoyed some of the Celtic Tenors before slipping up to Deck 9 to say farewell to John and Jill. Final meal, meant farewell to Derek and Betty Rose, and then to Jill, our regular companions on this leg. It was all feeling rather sad, though an hour with the newly arrived comedian cheered us awhile. At 4.00am yesterday the ship stopped bucking around, and an hour later we were passing the Isle of Wight so when I went up into the grey overcast morning at 6.30 we were moving gently up the Solent, passing the island catamarans, which hadn’t sailed the previous day because of the weather. By this time all the main luggage which had been left outside our cabin door was ready to be taken ashore and a somewhat bleary-eyed and disconsolate lot of post-breakfast passengers, sat with hand luggage, saying final farewells and preparing to disembark. We were off, almost exactly on time where the lovely Mag, Nick’s sister, had been waiting awhile and, once out of the port, the industrial hinterland and suburbs England looked delightfully green and blossomy.

Two hours later, back in our normal environment, it was as if we’d never been away.