

Life at Sea – the adventure saga. 2023 ... and on?



February - the germ of a notion

Near the end of the month, surfing around the International Living (expat articles, etc.) website, Smit stumbled across a short mention of a three-year round-the-world cruise 'Life at Sea'. Well, the concept has been a matter of discussion for years amongst friends, so THAT sounds interesting. We discussed it and decided to investigate further. <https://www.lifeatseacruises.com/>. After looking at the website for the cruise, we decided to drop the \$500.00 refundable deposit to learn more, mostly through webinars. The more we read and listened, the greater our interest, until early March when we placed our reservation funds and started the long-range planning to shed the common cloth of Hawaii, and venture into the great world. Our itinerary; all seven continents, 40 countries, 350+ ports-of-call over 1095 days!

June – a storm on the horizon

Late May, we headed down to the Cook Islands for a two-week island trip accompanied by Sharon, a long-time Montana friend. Why waste an already booked tropical excursion, eh? While there, we got wind of a schism in the marketing/planning of the trip. The marketing team had come into conflict with the ship provider, Miray Cruises in Istanbul, Turkiye, over bookings and billing, and they were leaving or being fired (we never did find out). Accusations flew in both directions, of improper fees, the seaworthiness of the designated ship, MV Gemini, owned by Miray, and the general workability of the entire concept. In the end, we decided to go with the team that actually had a ship (More about that later), rather than just a well-thought-out dream which we shared – a community at sea, experiencing the world together.

Heigh-ho, it's off to sea we go – or maybe not?

Over July, August, and into September we jumped through international hoops acquiring visas from multiple countries, the most difficult being China. We started sorting out our lives for the greatest change in our married life ... off and away on the sea, leaving everything behind. Hours, days, and weeks turned into months as we sifted through the acquisitions of forty years of travels, moves, and home-making. Suitcases were left open on the floors as we created five major classification piles, pack, store, give away, dumpster. Some items moved through the entire options before finding a permanent place, usually the last category. Car and e-bikes were cleaned up for sale, trips to our favorite thrift store became an almost daily event, and our luggage was shipped off to a warehouse in Ft Lauderdale, FL, to be picked up when the ship arrives from Europe on its way around the world.



Weeks of sorting, getting rid of, storing, and packing, ready for adventure

During this time we were constantly hearing from the cruise line, and other passengers of the saga, of buying a new larger ship, MV Lara, that was to be totally refitted as a floating community, with every amenity and system required to sustain a small town of 700+ residents.

Everybody meet in Istanbul for a November 01 departure!

D-Day for us finally arrived as we hugged our condo caretakers and said our 'a hui hous' and alohas and headed out to Kona airport and a marathon of Alaska Airline flights. Our en-route trips took us to Seattle for several days in Puget Sound (Kalani's family & old friends), a side trip to Whitefish, Montana for a 'wake' with our many friends there, and we even were invited to stay in our home that we built two decades ago.



Sunny day outing on Olympic Peninsula.



Smit's 'found materials art' @Basta's in Whitefish

Next leg took us Glacier>Seattle> Oakland, CA for a stay with Justine and family (which found us both looking UP at our grandchildren). Thence our next leg was Oakland to Santa Ana, CA to visit niece & hubby and three great-grands. We stayed with Becky Cobb in Huntington Beach where we wandered the strand and had a luncheon with another set of niece-family. Back up to Seattle for one final night with Sheri and 'Da Boyz', Kody and Tyler. We gathered our luggage for the next three weeks until the ship arrived in Ft. Lauderdale, Fl to pick up our three years worth of luggage, currently in warehouse storage there. Finally, we boarded a Turkish Airlines plane for the l-o-n-g direct flight to Istanbul, prepared to board our new ship in two days, and set off on the adventure of a lifetime.

Is it Istanbul or Constantinopol?

Arriving in Istanbul we went through the typical customs and visa process and were directed to the entire opposite end of the terminal to baggage claim. Wading through the mob of passengers from multiple flights, we collected our checked bags, and were directed to the ground transportation exit ... at the opposite end of the terminal, directly under customs! The curb area was a madhouse, and we not only didn't understand the language, we couldn't even read the writing, in Arabic script. We called our contact number and Anastasia showed up to claim us. We met our first fellow voyagers as we waited for our bus to the hotel, booked by Miray ,for what we anticipated to be two nights before boarding our ship.

After a long ride we arrived at the Midpoint Hotel (So named because it claims to be located at the exact nexus of Europe/Asia/Africa), located in the old town maze of streets, alleyways, lanes and mosques

After settling in for our proposed two days, we waited for boarding instructions, only to find out that ...



... the Life at Sea voyage had sunk

The ship 'MV Gemini' still moored to the pier in Istanbul after being declared unsuitable by the cruise line!

Gemini, the original ship proposed for the 3-year 'Life at Sea' cruise remains berthed in Istanbul. She was judged to be outdated and too small and was meant to be replaced by a larger ship, MV Lara. The whole deal collapsed due to the cruise line's failure to acquire a larger replacement ship they didn't really own but were actually trying to buy. It's complicated, but the entire voyage was cancelled, and refunds are still pending ... we hope! The cruise line is organizing a schedule for '24 and will honor our original pricing and offer us first options on bookings ... we shall see.

Miray cruises booked almost the entire Istanbul Mid-Point Hotel in the Old City part of Istanbul, meant to house us until the ship replacement purchase was consummated. There were +/- 35 booked passengers waiting for news. We had the better part of a month being 'ghosted' by Miray management while we all took varying daily excursions and wandered the back streets of old Istanbul, marveling at the industrious densely populated city. The experience was a microcosm of what we expected on board, a small community of strangers that (mostly) became bonded into friendships by our common situation.



Dinnertime at the hotel



Kitchen help

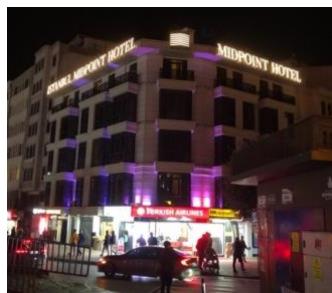


Planning in the hotel lobby

Midpoint is a small hotel catering to business and local travelers, and our mob of foreigners booked in by Miray was a new experience for the staff. They were helpful and gracious to a fault, and we all struggled with language with a lot of pantomime and good humor. Our room (third floor facing busy street) had a beautiful flower arrangement waiting, and was comfortable, if a little noisy with traffic and frequent calls from the mosques for prayer time.

Three meals a day were prepared in the penthouse kitchen, and we got used to local cuisine as they learned to modify offerings to suit unfamiliar western tastes. Adjustments were made on both sides of the kitchen door. We all grew friends with each other as the staff warmed to our 35 surprise guests, and prepared special meals, celebratory cakes and deserts, and even looked the other way when we gentiles snuck in forbidden bottles of wine at dinner. For our 40th wedding anniversary a huge cake adorned with flowers and sparklers was brought out and added to the 40 long-stem roses Smit arranged to be delivered by breakfast that day.

We walked, and walked, by ourselves, and with fellow Castaways, exploring the parks, mosques, lanes, and alleyways of the old city. rode the metro and busses, and visited lots of mosques, shops, streetside restaurants and street vendors. The city was even busier than normal, with the one hundred year celebration of the Turkiye Republic. There were marathons, parades, demonstrations, and flags everywhere!



The 'Istanbul Castaways' on the roof patio of the hotel. There were 35 of us in Istanbul, and the social dynamic was already forming a community, as we had hoped for Life at Sea.

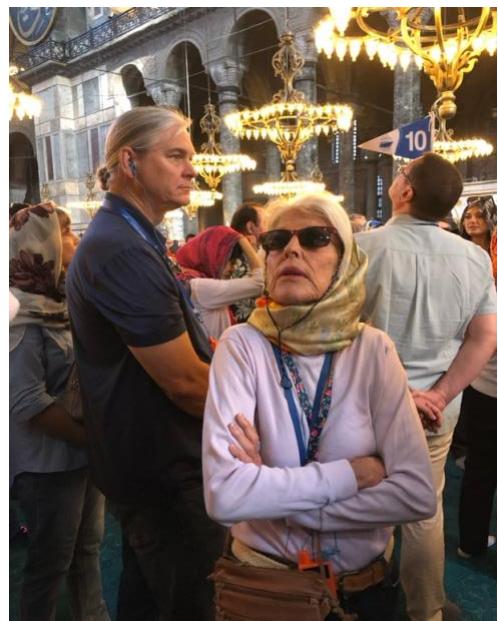
We visited shops, for incidentals, liquor stores to buy wine to 'sneak' into dinner, picked up cough medicine at the 'chemist', and knockoff clothing at street stalls (the Turks are masters at knockoffs of every label on the planet). Street carts sold us delicious pomigranet juice and some of the best vanilla ice cream we've ever tasted. We mixed with a veritable crush of humans, everywhere we went, especially on the metro trams and dodging cars

(crosswalks, stop signs, lane markings, and traffic signals are merely suggestions), motorbikes, scooters, street hawkers, human mules pulling carts loaded with huge bundles, beggars, and cats! The denizens of Istanbul run from hipsters in pipestem jeans and Italian shoes, to old men sitting in doorways smoking (apparently the national retirement protocol), young girls in head scarves and short-tight-skirts, and traditional Islamic married women in full burka, black from head to toe, even gloves and sunglasses hiding the eyes peeking through the slit in the head covering (the latter were often in groups of three, as that's the allowable limit of multiple wives in the fundamentalist Islamic world) ... and cats!



Typical Istanbul everywhere cats

Cats are revered and cared for in many Muslim countries, but nowhere as much as Istanbul. The government has a program of capture/spay/ feed/ and provide veterinary care. There are cat food dispensers in the parks where for a few lira a handful of food comes out. Sitting on a park bench is an open invitation for a kitty to climb into your lap and purr itself to sleep.



Days and kilometers of walking the streets and lanes were spent seeking out the most significant sites in Istanbul, such as the famed 'Blue Mosque.'

We had a couple of tourist sailings on the Bosphorus on ferries and Miray party boats, with one memorable dinner/entertainment cruise, but still not a word about the Life at Sea voyage. Finally, on 11/21, we learned that the whole deal had collapsed due to the cruise line's failure to acquire a larger replacement ship that they didn't really own but were actually trying to buy.



Daytripping for weeks, street food, Bosphorus cruise, deep in a Roman cistern, and hang around in a necropolis

It's complicated, but the entire voyage was cancelled, and refunds are still pending ... we hope! The cruise line is organizing a schedule for '24 and will honor our original pricing and offer us first options on bookings with an automatic cabin upgrade, as well as a next-season complimentary 10-day Greek Islands cruise at our convenience ... we shall see. In the meantime, our month in Istanbul, paid for by the line, was over on 11/28, so we're outta there, catching the last ocean liner out of Dodge on 11/22.

Escape from Istanbul

Along with about a dozen other refugees we boarded Norwegian Lines MV Gem, on an eastern Med tour. We departed Istanbul on the 22nd, and set off sailing to various ports (Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Egypt & Italy until 12/04, landing in Rome. During gatherings the 'Istanbul Castaways' on board all were lamenting the lost opportunity of the Life at Sea experience and adjusting our future plans. While on board MV Gem there was no communication (\$40/day/device for WiFi, not on our budget!) So, we hit shore-based free Wi-Fi in port, but some days the seas were too rough to dock, so we stayed out to sea. When there is a glitch, like the port weather or heavy seas standoffs, there is a general passenger "Oh, what shall we do?" meltdown, and the Karens come out to prey on the unfortunate crew members. Cruising on these big liners isn't our thing, too much hype, additional charges for everything in sight, too short port stays (usually just eight or nine hours), and crowds.



Norwegian Cruise lines MV 'Gem', our oversized transport & the escape to Rome route.



Rough seas for part of the Istanbul > Rome trip.

Our view from our MV Gem stateroom

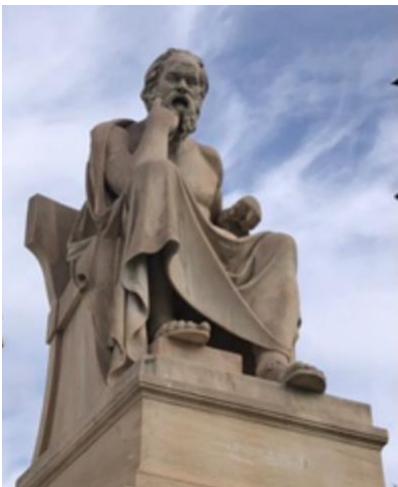
But we're enjoying the occasional on-board event, people watching, doing nothing but contemplating the horizon and sharing time with the Castaways as we use this huge ship for basic transportation. A constant subject of discussion is 'what next'. Ideas about continuing cruises, long-term expat residency somewhere, connecting transportation, and wondering out-loud if we'll every see our initial payments to Miray Cruises again! We decided to book a repositioning cruise back to the US along with the castaways on the Island Princess.



Taking advantage of 'rough seas' on board

Highlights of the Istanbul > Rome leg of our escape from Istanbul

We all joined a chartered scenic bus excursion from Piraeus to Athens. Along the way sites: Hadrian's Arc, Temple of Olympian Zeus, Constitution Square, Acropolis Museum, and Parthenon catacombs.,



Hmmmm, are we in Athens yet?



Parthenon on the Acropolis



Unknown soldier honor guard



Troy ... nice horsey



The palace at Knossos



Searching for the minotaur

Knossos holds the ruins of courts, residences, and catacombs of the legendary King Minos, half bull, half man. Excavations here have lasted 135 years. Landscapes seen from the bus were hilly, barren land that looked like it had been scoured by giant rakes. Modern 4-lane highways at the entrance to the cities, then well paved 2-lane roads elsewhere. Large tunnels of what looked like very large pvc pipe with air ducts along the ceilings. There were acres and acres of what looked like large land plots, tilled, patchwork, and growing something?? Grain, cabbage, broccoli. From our view from the back seat (4 abreast, slightly elevated) good views with a lot of bouncing and air was had. Weather was sunny, 74-75 deg. F. Gas per liter: \$4.90 (that works out to about \$17.00 usd/gal).

We didn't see much of the city of Alexandria, Egypt. On the first day in port the Cairo excursion busses left immediately after we disembarked from the ship. The route to the pyramids was fairly direct, but the trip for lunch led us many miles beyond, rather than back along our path - gotta support the vendors that are giving kickbacks to the bus company after all. Our time en route was compounded by a flat tire on the bus (rear dual wheel) which the driver ignored for a couple of stops, until the Egyptian police noticed and forced us to stop and wait for a replacement bus. By the time we got back to the port all we could do was reboard. But yes, we did have several hours amid one of the grandest tourist attractions of the entire world!



And finally, needs no explanation!

Day two in Alexandria we did the usual walkabout, the 'new' Library of Alexandria museum, including a plunge into the depth of the catacombs, before heading back to the ship.



Calm port waters, delving deep into the catacombs, walk like an Egyptian, Greek and Egyptian goddesses

We headed across the Med, a two day at sea run bound for Sicily, Italy. But alas, once again sea conditions led the ship to bypass the port and we went direct to Napoli. We grabbed a tour bus to Pompei where we were even more amazed at the size of the city. In the ensuing six decades the excavations and recovery was far greater than we both experienced in the '60s. Also, back then one just walked into the ruins, now it is so regulated and commercialized that it seems more like an amusement park entrance than an archaeological site. We ordered a pomegranate juice ... \$0.75 usd in Istanbul, \$9.60 here and half the size, and made from dried-out fruit!



Vesuvius, the culpre, lanes leading to homes, shops, temples, mausoleums, courtyards ... and our Napoli bar refuge.

After returning to the city, we wandered around near the port, and after rejecting several bars and restaurants we ducked into a door, which led us down into a basement bistro, that was absolutely PACKED with locals. The bartender let us grab a couple of stools and sit at the server station as every bar stool and table was full. I wish we could have grabbed a meal, because everything looked and smelled marvelous.

Civitavecchia, Rome

The ship docked to the arrival of the usual gaggle of busses and taxies awaiting their excursion pax. This situation did not include paxs permanently getting off (us). We had to get ourselves off the landing area and immediate harbor area before hailing a taxi. Well, forget that. Smitty was able to convince some bus driver to take mercy on us and give us a lift to the large metal surrounding gate so we could proceed. A tuk-tuk was spotted and we were pleased with the very airy ride to the few blocks down the road to our hotel.

We spent several days in this wonderful recently renovated hotel. Civitavecchia is the port for Rome, which is about 40 kilometers east of the coast. It's a quirky mixed industrial port and bedroom community for Rome (with a bit of tourism and street art sprinkled about) filled with multitudinous historical sites and fantastic restaurants.

They do not start eating dinner until approx 9:00 pm. Hmmmm. We are 6 O'clockers so often had the whole restaurant to ourselves with the chef and waiters setting up to recommend wines, entrees, and history of the village.



The Kiss, a monument to the liberation of Italy by US troops, our neighborhood, at station waiting for train to Rome

The open market was just around the corner, and we picked up a couple of clothing items we thought we needed, and directly facing was a cinema where we watched 'Napoleone' in Italian. We walked everywhere. Except for the train that passed through the town and took us to Rome proper where we went to see the Vatican.



Waiting for the 'tren' to Roma, the Vatican, 'Refugee' Vatican art, Palatine hill, Tiber, bridge and river.

On this particular day, it was off-and-on drizzley and chilly, but we proceeded with enough sightseeing and picture taking 'til we decided a lunch with pasta and wine was necessary. Perhaps a hop-on-hop-off bus could polish off the afternoon. Rain stopped, bought tickets for the bus, sightseeing around for an hour or so til we were frozen sitting in the upper level. A fast walk back to the train station to catch our transport home—all with GPS tracking us through the small narrow streets watching the little blue dot on the screen. Not a minute to spare—didn't want to miss that train. While we waited for our secheduled departure on 'Island Princess' we wandered around Civitavecchia until we found a hair dresser that could fit us in, where 'Berta got an excellent trim for 1/3 of what it would cost in the US, and done by a handsom Italian, no less (Smit kept his eye on HIM).



The 'Silver Fox' showing off her newly styled crown of glory

The great adventure exploration goes on ...

Stay tuned for the next episode - 'Braving the Atlantic Ocean in Winter'

The Island Princess - Rome > US mainland leg of 14 days is actually cheaper than air fare, and a number of the Istanbul Castaways are on board. The ships give us an opportunity to wind down and readjust from weeks of uncertainty ...



... the buffet also gives us the opportunity to experience 'boat bloat'!

On 12/07/23 we boarded Island Princess repositioning cruise from Rome to ... wait for it ... Ft Lauderdale, FL.