

Europe farewell

We bid ciao to the Porto Hotel and promised to return (which we're now scheduled to do April 02/24), and crammed eight or nine people, including a couple of extra-large specimens, and an inordinate amount of luggage into the hotel shuttle and headed for the ship, where we went through the intricate identification and boarding protocols of a new ship line. After boarding we found our Castaways gang, and after perusing the options settled on a corner of the 'Explorer' lounge as our pau hana meeting place.



Shuttle to our new home (no, not that beautiful ketch), the monster ship in the background.

Leaving Civitavecchia, we were bound for Barcelona, SP and were looking forward to the stop to see Gaudi's Sagrada Familia cathedral, finally finished. But once again sea conditions precluded our landing. We think the captain (or the lawyers) are too timid concerning port arrivals. It wouldn't be so bad if we could stay in a following port for the missed port, but it just always adds as another sea Day. For whatever reason we slow sailed on to Malaga, SP. A revisit to this place for us. We had stayed in Malaga some years ago and are very familiar with the city and immediate environs. We offered our excursion ideas to the Castaways, but we just wandered around the shore, harbor, and old downtown area.



Renewing our Malaga experience from years past, and view the Spanish interpretation of Advent

Our first goal was a post office, but it turns out that they are closed on both Saturday and Sunday so no luck there. It being Christmas season, the well cared for buildings were decorated with garlands, ornaments, and baskets of poinsettias. We found an incredible Christmas Coresh, about the size of a four-car garage, and depicting the Holy Family and Bethlehem with the inn and stable, depicted as an entire Middle Ages Spanish village.

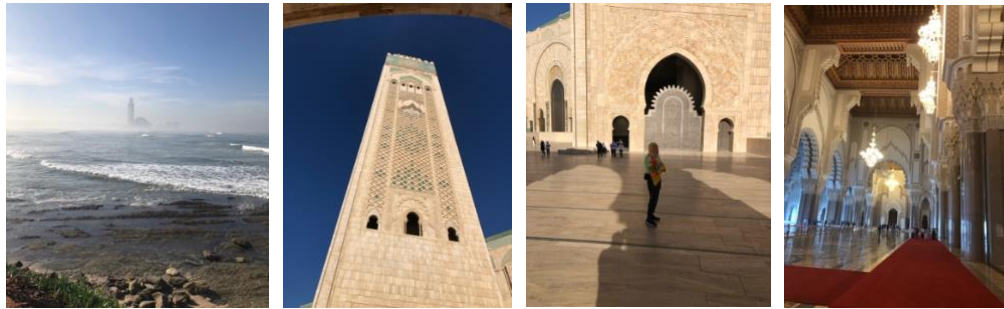


Watching the marathon running through town and 'Berta communicating with Picasso ... her muse?

Wandering into the shopping pedestrian streets, we became entangled with a marathon being run through town. The organizers had erected barriers along the route with coordinators guiding us through the crossings, so we found a corner street café and sipped wine as we cheered the runners on. We went back to the Plaza de La Merced, so 'Berta could spend some therapy time with Picasso on a park bench. He's always there. It's always good advice.

A return to Morocco

With no more scheduled Mediterranean ports we slipped through the Strait of Gibraltar (unfortunately at night) and landed next at Casablanca, where we had spent several days on our 2018 Morocco trip with Justine and Steven. Since we knew what we wanted to see (and not see) again, we declined any ship excursions and hired a taxi for the half day. The driver promised to be our "body guard" and would safely guide us through the 'best' marketplaces, not recommended for unaccompanied tourists ... hmmm.



Hassan II mosque emerging from morning fog, grand minaret, Entry, to the splendid interior

He was actually very helpful and spoke good-enough English. We revisited the Hassan II Mosque, truly a remarkable structure. Then we went for a drive along the coast to check out the surf and "Waikiki-style" beach front. Driver dropped us off for a stroll – to meet up again approx. 1 mile down the road by the McDonalds. Good Grief. It was obviously not the ideal time for surfers, summer strollers and hotel pool swimmers as the pools were all filled with birds. Trapesing along through the local bazaars with our guy aware, we were kept very busy. He wanted us to buy things from the vendors who are likely all his friends and family and couldn't seem to grasp the notion that we weren't interested in collecting souvenirs. He was a very fast walker and from the number of hands he "shook" in the Moroccan style he had a very large family. We did get some very delicious dates though. We tried to find a hammam on the return trek to the ship but alas time was running short and the prices were very high. We are now "pro's" on the art of hammam. Will explore again when we get to Agadir, Morocco (but that's a tale for the future).

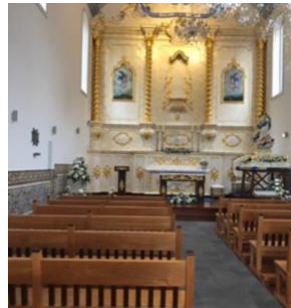
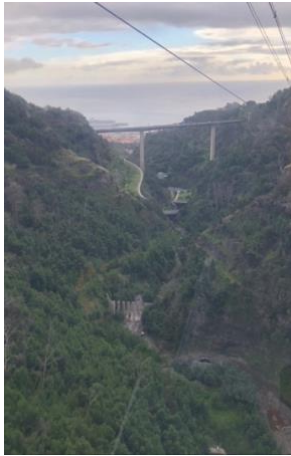
Have some Madeira my Dear

A couple of days at sea, now in the Atlantic Ocean, found us arriving at Madeira, where our stated goal was to "Have some Madeira, my Dear". The island turned out to be a very pleasant surprise, a steeply mountained volcanic island somewhat redolent of Hawaii in days gone by, with a serious Portagee twist.



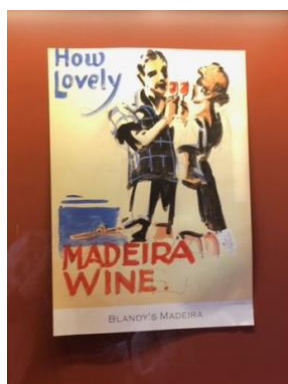
Lots of celebratory art, friendly people, and open markets loaded with fresh produce, and objet' de art

Such a delightful place. Clean, artsy, friendly, picturesque. It's an easy walk from the cruise ship berth to the heart of the main city, Funchal-Se'. It has a wide park along the shoreline with walking and bike paths the length of town and leading into the heart of the retail district, with modern stores, cafes, bars, and treed, park-like pedestrian avenues.



Valleys reminiscent of Hawaii, a simple chapel, formal gardens, and a wild ride for miles down steep lanes

Highlights: after a ride up a cable from town up the steep mountainside, there's a small church where the parishioners were decorating for the advent season, the Portuguese take Christmas VERY seriously! A path led down a kilometer or so along the cliff face, ending at another gondola system, which led to a botanical garden with exotic and native plants, formal gardens, ponds, more cats, and picnic facilities tucked along the steep mountainside, with views of the sea, the port, and the city at every opportunity. In the past, access was by donkey trail, then one-lane roads twisting up the mountainside, through tightly clustered little residential neighborhoods. Becoming tired of the trek back down, they devised 'sleds' with wicker baskets mounted on hard-wood runners. Each basket can accommodate two or three people, and they are steered down the road by two healthy, strong men who ride the runners dragging and pushing wearing durable boots (with cork soles) and steer with ropes that turn the front in the direction needed. It feels like an amusement park ride, but without seatbelts, cushions, or protective barriers. Cars share the road, but heaven forbid should one try to pass or challenge the right-of-way! There are marketplace stalls with fresh fruit, lots of tourist tchotchkes, and locally made cork products.



This mus' be da place ... yup, wine flights and relaxed smiles from Castaways Wendy & Donna

Four of us went to a winery to sample flights of the eponymous wine and allow the adrenalin to fade after the sled descent down the mountain. 'Berta bought a cork purse, which promptly started falling apart, and a delicious Madeira-soaked coffee cake to be gifted at Christmas. The island is an almost perfect expat long-term affordable living place, with only one major drawback ... yas gotta learn Portuguese, which is like Spanish with a mouth full of marbles. Wendy, one of the Castaways on the full Round-the-World 2024 cruise plans to jump ship and revisit Madeira and expatriate for a time (she along with us are also planning to investigate Agradir, Morocco for a several months stay in the future).

Mid-Atlantic in winter turned out to be surprisingly calm and temperate, in fact, calmer than some days in the eastern Med.

Back in the USA – Ft. Lauderdale, Florida

We landed in Ft Lauderdale, FL and we were picked up by long time friend from Hawaii, Jon Bennett. Borrowed his fiancé's truck and drove to the warehouse and picked up our stored luggage which had been managed by Miray contract. All was in place and promptly brought out and loaded into the pickup, not like some of the horror stories of missing luggage from other Castaways.. Next day we repacked and went 'sightseeing' ... not much to see, but we stopped at the Hard Rock Cafe hotel/casino for an overpriced brunch. We walked around in the giant guitar shaped building (with no neck, as it would have protruded into the airport approach corridors), got lost in the casino, and looked at the extensive collection of Rock & Roll memorabilia, a massive collection of guitars, clothing, (regular duds and show costumes), albums, cars, and more, displayed in built-in glass cases throughout the hotel. The interior was festooned with living plant 'green walls' waterfalls, and a never-ending circular array of every type of gambling device you can possibly imagine and, of course, cashiers ready to run your credit card for gambling credits or cash. The huge gambling room wound around the entire wing of the casino, and except for emergency exits with alarms, exits were disguised so that they turned you back into a different gambling area, not out of the building.

Next morning, we dragged our excess luggage, paid exorbitant overweight and extra bag fees, and boarded an Alaska flight to Oakland, CA. Our daughter, Justine, collected our exhausted bodies at the airport, armed with the largest baggage trolley available, and squeezed us and baggage into her car and took us home. She promptly provided us with wine, their giant bed, heated blankets, poofy pillows, and tucked us in early. We woke to a special Christmas Eve morning with Soli – the ballerina, Darwin – amazing ice-hockey center, Rane, our oldest down from Portland, OR, and husband Steven, vegan chef par excellence. We all took turns cooking (well, except for the teens) and turned out some passables.

A wonderful family holiday season interlude, respite from travel time (see the next episode for details).



Mid-January we flew down to L.A. to reboard the Island Princess again, bound for Dubai, via the South Pacific islands, New Zealand, Australia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Bali, and India. Much of the time was spent attempting to finalize entry visas via the internet.

We thought we were finished until clearing exit passport control. It was discovered that our Australia applications had not been issued ... with four hours until board authorization was closed ... YIKES! The agent directed us to a cluster of chairs and tables, and two volunteers helping dozens of passengers in the same fix through the intricacies of on-line visa applications with the Australian app. After an hour we both managed to complete the application, photo-scan, and data dump from our US passports, take and enter face photos, and pay via credit card.

It was with great relief that we were passed, issued our new ID medallions (digital bangles that open doors, track our movements aboard ship [to the foot], and buy drinks and extra services), and located our stateroom with our luggage waiting by the door and our inviting 'upscaled' balcony.