

THE GREAT EXPLORING ADVENTURE GOES ON ...where did we go from there?

To cram a lot of days into a short explanation – we landed in Ft Lauderdale, FL and we picked up by long time friend from Hawaii, Jon Bennett. Borrowed his fiancé's truck and drove to the warehouse and picked our stored luggage. Next day we repacked and went 'sightseeing' ... not much to see, but we stopped at the Hard Rock Cafe hotel/casino for an overpriced breakfast, and look at the extensive collection of Rock & Roll memorabilia, then boarded an Alaska flight to San Francisco, CA. We had a wonderful holiday visit with Justine, Steven, Rane, Soli, and Darwin in Oakland, CA. There were multiple excursions in Oakland and San Francisco for dance, walkabouts, quirky and delicious cafe' meals, hockey games, and many trips to the local Trader Joe's market. We even got Hawaii phone numbers after 15 years of out-of-state area codes. We broke down our multiple suitcases and repacked downsizing into new rollies for travels to wherever we might wander in the future.



Christmas cookies, the Nutcracker in San Francisco, where Soli danced the pas d'deux in the ballet, Jack London Sq.

We headed down to LAX and San Pedro to catch the Island Princess again and rejoin our Istanbul friends on board – 13 or so, depending where on the cruise each is. We were scheduled to sail to the south Pacific, Pango Pango American Samoa, Aotororea (aka New Zealand), Australia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Bali, terminating in Dubai, with unknown continuation from there.



Our last mainland meal shared with the Queen Mary across the Long Beach harbor.

A visit home.

San Pedro to Honolulu, five days at sea in calm waters, and increasingly warmer climes. We arrived early and watched the dawn over Diamond Head before entering Honolulu Harbor for our day on Oahu. Having finished with Oahu touring decades ago, we hung around the harbor at the foot of the Aloha tower and waited for lifetime friends to arrive and share talk story and lunch that lasted most of the afternoon.



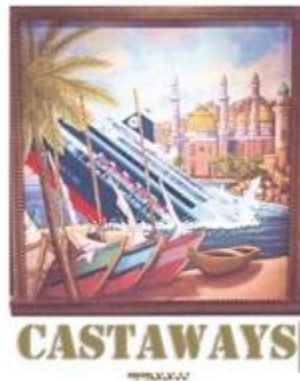
The famed Aloha Tower at pier 9. 'Da Girlz, from hanabudda days. Suzzane, Mitch, & Liz, from fo'avah!

The Istanbul Castaways scattered around Oahu taking in the sites, sipping maitais on Waikiki beach, taking care of business, until returning to the ship for an overnight to Kailua-Kona – home and the chance to share a bit of our life with our shipmates. We were met by hula friends who draped ti leis on everyone and welcomed all with Hawaiian songs and hula on the pier. After a stroll through the King Kamehameha Hotel Herb Kane painting gallery, we all piled into their cars and headed down Alii Dr toward Keauhou with a stop at AlaKaLa to show off our home (and pick up collected important mail). With much confusion we had finally chartered a Kona coast snorkel tour with Sea Quest, Liam and Manu Powers' primo ocean adventure company. Alas, it was not to be. Tragectly, there was a death on the first tour out, and the operation was closed down by the Coast Guard and Hawaii county coronor for investigation. Manu handed us a carrier of snorkels and masks and we headed back to Kahalu'u sealife refuge park for a morning snorkel. Teri, Greg and we stayed while the rest of the gang headed for Huggo's Onthe Rocks to have lunch. Like so much of this trip 'changes' ... closed. So Magics at Laaloa for lunch. Marlene from our hula group showed up at Kahalu'u with huluhuli chicken, so, with that and with fresh oranges from Cathy & Peter we had a great repast by the sea. Unfortunately, our ship regulation of one day per port was up, and we headed back to the ship and sailed south for Polynesia.

Istanbul



Some of castaways hanging at the Explorers bar our 17:00 hrs libations before dinner together.



Our 'Istanbul Castaways' logo (note decorative panel on left, the basis for our signature logo)



Our scheduled stops in Fiji, New Zealand and Austrailia had been modified for reasons unknown. Our first inkling that things were not as planned came with a port change from Pango Pango to Suva, Fiji. We hit the major ports beyond, Auckland, Sydney, Melbourne, and Perth, but alas only one day each, not enough time to even get a reasonable taste of each city. Suva city isn't much to brag on, kinda like a giant Hilo succumbing to tropical ennui, so we opted for an excursion to a national wildlife park, not much wildlife, but lush jungle and challanging trails.



Boat day at Suva marketplace



Wilderness park pond



Trail waterfalls



Rough. Trail indeed!

Political upheavels in the middle east, and general geoploitical unease determined otherwise! After Fiji things got even weirder -- a notice that we may not go to Dubai. From there our ship was scheduled to proceed to the Red Sea, through the Suez Canal and into the eastern Mediterranean (without us). With continuing threat from Houthi

pirates, Iranian client terrorist groups and the continuing Gaza confrontation, that route is deemed not safe passage, so now what?

Rumours aboard ship abound.

Based on the scuttlebut we went to the booking office and changed our destination from Dubai to Rome, booking that leg to Rome as a revised continuation of our cruise. The next day the ship informed us all that we would divert direct from Perth, AU to Capetown, SA, and that all Dubai PAX would disembark and be given airline vouchers to go home, or wherever. Ah, but we were no longer Dubai disembarking, so we will now add on 22 days to be sent around the horn, up the west coast of Africa and back into the Med via the Straits of Gibraltar. Our New Zealand and Australia ports are being rearranged, and we'll know soon where we're going ashore before venturing direct across the Indian ocean to Mauritius. So, a whole set of new ports to visit en route and on the continent of Africa, off-shore islands, and Mediterranean ports until our new destination, Rome ... where we started!

So far our plans don't go beyond mid-April, when we'll learn if Miray Cruise lines can reconstitute the Life at Sea voyage. At that juncture we'll decide if we want to spend anymore time afloat, or find some foreign sanctuary to wait out the clown show that the US 2024 election show promises. Certainly, we'll take up Miray's Greek isles offering, and then attempt an overland crossing of central and northern Europe to visit the Josocks in far northern Norway. Then, once more, 'who knows'.

Life aboard ship.

The great disappointment in the 'cruising life' (that so many of our fellow shipmates enthusiastically embrace) is port stays. We dock at 09:00 in some interesting country/city/port and are characteristically informed to be back on board no later than 16:30 for a 17:00 sailing. Four and one-half hours and then back at sea ... really? One doesn't know whether to feel glad for our tantalizing peek, or angry that we had our calm on-board routine interrupted for such a miserly excursion. And don't get us started on ship sponsored excursions, typically \$160.00 – \$280.00 for a four hour ride in a sixty person coach being regaled by a barely understandable narrator pointing out the requisite points of interest flashing by at 60 kph. *"And now, lady and gentlemen we arrive at our wonderful (insert destination here) famous for (insert again), please to observe steps leaving the bus, so no fallings downs. You may enjoy (insert) for 30 minutes, and please to visit our gift shop before reboarding."*

The ship substitutes for a moving hotel, and indeed, the hosting and cruise business is a combination of travel agency and hotel management. The ships crew, management, support staff (and there are hundreds of stewards, housekeepers, cooks, waiters, busboys, deck furniture handlers, maintenance, and planners) are all subservient to a vaguely invisible corporate headquarters in some far away unknown land. The ship is well furnished, decorated with fine materials (a preponderance of fitted marble, polished wood, brass, glass, and upholstered furnishings to match), all the venues, bars, restaurants branded and decorated as if one were in an exclusive theme park ... which I suppose we are, it just can't seem to sit still. Strolling (we do...a LOT of strolling) the decks one passes: a restaurant/bar, a photo studio overflowing into the wide carpeted corridor, a casino buttressed by a bar, a jewellery store, a clothing store, a piano bar, a combination liquor-convenience store, another restaurant, this one full service with no visible bar, a branded clothing store, the 'Guest Services Desk' facing a three story atrium with stage, band well, a couple of white grand pianos, connecting curving marble stairways, and glass elevators. That is typical of three decks of public spaces, with a small library/game room, and the 'Churchill Room', haven for cigar and cigarette smokers tucked into a small room with serious exhaust fans isolating the on-goings. The overarching feeling is that one is living in a well appointed mall, but with well-dressed or uniformed young retailers hawking their wares to passersby like polite carnival barkers.

Service announcements (to supplement the in-cabin TV and corridor loudspeakers) add to the banter in addition to myriad & frequent live bands. A second pool anchors another two deck lounging area, glazed over like a huge greenhouse, with more hot tubs, a full-service health/beauty spa at one end and an ice cream parlour at the other. Somewhere there's also a pizza maker, but the offerings are marginal, and I keep passing it by. In addition to the five or six sit-down restaurants and (fixed directly above the bow), is the glassed-in main dining area called the buffet (aka the trough), which, judging to overheard diner's comments, is mediocre in scope and extravagance.



Shopping, shopping, shopping ...



Lido deck, pool, sun, Tai Chi, Zumba ... yet more shopping!



Atrium, the 'heart' of the ship.



The casino, 24/7 'get rich'



Lotus deck, the weatherproof pool

That said, the food is varied, well prepared and flavorful, if somewhat bland, The menu shuns spices and heats, in deference to the wide range of regional and international PAX on board I suppose. There is wide range of fruit, beverages, salad fixin's, breads, and copious desserts (they keep the peanut butter cookies under lock and key, and will only dispense same after querying one about peanut allergy).



Occassional food art contests



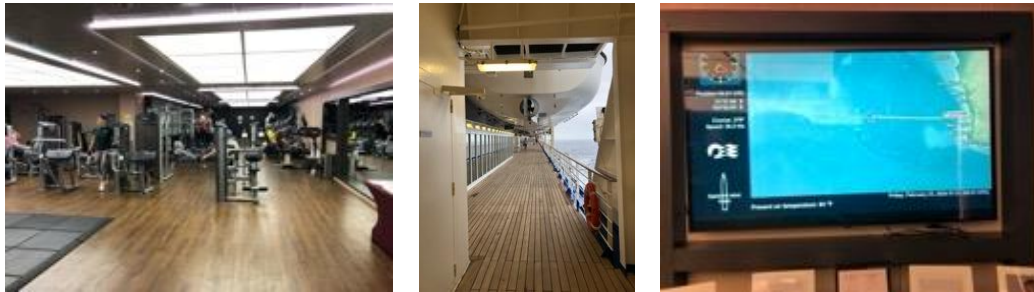
Buffet, aka 'the trough'



La Provance, our usual group dinning

Buried deep in the aft hull is a small but functional gym that offers a complimentary selection of the usual array of mechanical torture devices, and a full spectrum of exercise classes, at \$30.00 a pop. In addition there are almost constant and varied dance classes, tai chi, Zumba, pickleball, table tennis and deck games. Contests, trivia, and crew/passenger contests occur on a regular daily basis around the various venues. Exercise options include dance and Zumba classes, pools, gym, walking loops on several decks, yoga, spinning, all designed to help defeat the battle of the bulge gained from all the varied breakfast, lunch, dinners, snacks, etc.

Finally (and I mean literally) located on the furthest aft deck, is 'The Sanctuary', a quiet haven appointed like a beach resort, where one can escape the frenetic activity and crowds while relaxing in the sun, or sheltered under a cabana, or even a private tented hideaway and contemplate the fading wake like a fading exclamation point scribed on the sea. The 'Elite' passengers may avail themselves at will, the rest of us ... \$40.00 per person, per visit, 10:00 to 16:00 only please.



Smit's am workout, then Zumba Promenade (3.2 circuits = 1 mi.). Nav/position screens scattered about ship

*The main entertainment venue is the 'Princess Theater', a 1,000+ theater nestled at the bow, and capable of off-broadway level productions, with sets, lighting, sound and fury. VERY talented guest entertainers and show quality house band, dance, and thespians perform on a nightly basis, with 'enrichment' speakers, lecturers, film, and musical presentations during the day and early evenings. Boarding in Suva, Fiji a Maori troupe welcomed us to Aotorea with Haka, dance, chants, and even classes. If you can extracate yourself from the comfortable seating, top the evening off with 'Asian Soul' a very good rock and roll cover band/singers. If you're bored it's your own fault.



Princess theater, 1,000 seats. Off-broadway performances nightly. Cultural events, Aotoraean Haka

Some of the crew rotation and passenger disembarkment takes place at Auckland, our next port. From there we will learn of our amended itinerary for the remainder of the voyage ..., unless it's changed again, that is!



*Keeping track in our stateroom, lest we get lost amongst all the itinerary changes.
Ti leaf lei to keep the bad juju at bay!*

Topped off me supply of Vegemite in Suva, so we're too right to visit the Australs, so g'day mates and see ya in the lands down under.