



Sunday: Start of our Great Adventure

At Gatwick we dropped off our 2 cars with Maple Manor Meet-and-Greet-Parking at the North Terminal. The procedure has now changed and instead of a driver meeting us at the drop-off point close to the Terminal entrance to take the cars away while we check in, it is now done at the North Terminal Short Stay Car Park 6, level 1.

We soon found the Thomson desk inside the terminal and yes - there was the sign for Premium Club ticket holders! Good! No queues at all to endure and within a few minutes we had dropped our bags and shown our boarding passes to collect our boarding cards. My hand luggage - being slightly over my max of 7kg was not weighed at the desk - much to my relief!

We were then given cards with our cabin numbers on, but our own cabin number issued was 208 and not 205 as had been previously booked. I was not happy as I had checked this 3 times over recent months and once at the Travel Agents a few weeks ago to confirm all was well with our choice of cabin.

We moved quickly through a priority security queue (where my phone was taken from me and tested for explosives!!!) over to the airside of the Terminal.

In the restaurant, I called Thomson. I had spoken to the girls in Liverpool previously several times on a Sunday and as it was now later than 10am I thought they would be at their desks to help me sort out the problem.

After several calls where I heard an automated message tell me to call an alternative phone number, I almost gave up there and then as the message stuttered just at the point that the new number was being read to me.

Eventually a successful call provided me with the number, so I made a sixth call and got thru to the automated routing system, pressed the correct option which I was told to, I was immediately cut off! I did this 3 more times and got cut off then gave up. It would have to wait until Barbados, but I was not hopeful.

The flight was called and we made our way to the gate passing across Gatwick's north terminal footbridge. Our Dreamliner G-TUIF was docked below at the gate's air-bridge.



The flight left bang on time and we were very pleased with our Premium seats at the front of the aircraft. The seats were very comfortable, bottles of water provided with blankets, cushions, a good set of 'cans' (headphones), and a blanket each. A glass of cold Prosecco was served before take off.

As it was to be a holiday with 3 major celebrations - 2 Birthdays; one being Gillie my wife's 60th, Gill's 64th and Gill and Martin's 40th Wedding Anniversary) I had ordered a bottle of Champagne. I had kept this little secret from the others - my life-long friends and fellow musicians - Keith my Drummer and Martin my Vocalist and his wife Gill (yes a Gillie *and* a Gill on this trip!) until now, but the moment had arrived to 'come clean' as one of the Stewardesses sought me out to ask when we would like her to serve it.

We settled back for our flight and once in the air explored the video system taking our screens out of the side of our seats and positioning them on their stalks. There were some good films to watch but switching over to the music player delivered a message saying there were no music tracks to listen to! (Had Thomson paid their PRS returns for music licences I asked myself? It seemed quite likely they had not!) A little later I found the leg calf support (I called it the 'Parker Knoll flap') and when deployed it made me feel extremely comfortable in preparation for the long flight ahead.

For most of the flight, Gillie my wife and I were concerned by the mix up of cabin numbers which partly spoiled the journey.

The time passed quite quickly and snacks, meals and drinks arrived (even an ice-cream), - plenty of everything and wine/beer/spirits offered 5 times on the flight (not that I partook of the max).

From time to time there was a little turbulence during the flight, but not much more resally than if you were in a car travelling down a 'B' road. Arrival at Bridgetown was on time too with our airliner passing right over the Celebration down in Bridgetown Harbour - quite a sight!



A fleet of small busses transferred us to the dockside cruise terminal and we queued to be received. This was extremely fast and efficient although it looked as though Cabin 208 was undoubtedly going to be our home for the next 2 weeks whether we liked it or not.

Our hand luggage was carried to our cabin for us and our cases we were told would arrive later on and be left outside our cabin door.

On viewing our cabin we were not impressed by a huge bed settee placed diagonally across the floor taking up much of the cabin space. One end of the settee was up against the edge of the bed which meant I had to climb over it to get into bed. The other end of the settee was pushed up against the wardrobe doors - inside the wardrobe, once I had shifted the heavy settee out of the way, I found our life jackets!!!! Nice!



My wife wanted the settee moved straight away and made a beeline for the Reception desk on Deck 4, but I knew that it was a task too bothersome for the crew to move it elsewhere and it would never happen. I was right - it didn't!

We were told we couldn't move into our original room 205 as it was occupied but we 'might' be able to move in there in a week's time when it was vacated. We were disappointed and cross that such a stupid mistake had been made over the cabin numbers and it wasn't the best start to the holiday.

Lifeboat drill was at 19:30 hrs and we promptly turned up for our induction. I must admit that it was confusing to hear we should be at another lifeboat station and not the one numbered on our lifejackets. We found out that there were different stations for lifeBOATS and lifeRAFTS both with the same numbers. We were assigned to a lifeRAFT.

We listened to the Captain's address and he told us that it would not be possible to visit Grenada the following day as the ship still had engine problems from the previous week. Speed was restricted so it would take longer to get to our second port of Kralendijk in Bonaire, so Grenada was struck off from our itinerary.

This didn't bother us too much though as we visited Grenada on our first cruise and found that we were inundated by people begging. Also our schedule planned to be there for just 4 hours which probably meant less than 3 hours ashore.

Then off to Horizons for a drink and the Lido for some food before promising ourselves an 'early' night - we had been up nearly 21 hours! We unfortunately missed the sail off from Bridgetown at 8pm as we were eating but we caught some of the Lido Deck Party with resident band The Peakles.

Monday: Day at Sea

After all the previous days travelling and hassles, I walked out on the Promenade deck at 06:30 the following morning to a blaze of early morning sunshine, a warm breeze, the smell of fresh air and looking into the sea, a cloud of flying fish gliding through the air fleeing the bow-wave of the ship. It was at that exact moment I relaxed and said to myself "I'm on holiday!"

We had discovered the judder of the ship the previous night when we went to bed and I was a little concerned that it would be constant throughout our 2 weeks (which it was) but as the days went on it troubled us less. Something to do with the imbalance of one of the electrical generators. I spoke to a member of the crew about it that morning and he said it had always been a problem and nothing could be done to the old ship to fix it.

After a slightly over-indulgent breakfast in the Lido we all made our plans for the day. We would find sun beds, meet up for a drink in Hemmingways (which we crassly re-christened 'Haemorrhoids' amid hoots of laughter) and I would do the Wine Tasting activity in the afternoon as I cannot lay out in too much sun.

Sunbeds were placed on the rear decks and on the new top (Eagle) sun-deck and also around the sides of the ship on the Promenade deck.

It took a while but we did find some sun beds giving us the shade we were looking for. There were notices in our cabin documents asking us not to hog the sun beds and we could not reserve them or leave them unattended for more than 45 minutes which I thought was fair, but I still noticed people ignoring this request. I think sun beds were in great demand and people were reluctant to give them up especially if they had found one in a favoured spot for the day. We found a note on one of hours reminding us of the rules after we left it unattended for not much more than the allowable three quarters of an hour. Someone was pretty hot on their job!



While on your sun bed, every so often a waiter would appear with drinks on a trolley. Although the trolley couldn't hold more than the ingredients of just a small number of cocktails, it was still a welcomed service.

The ship as you probably know is a completely cashless environment and everything is charged to your cabin-card to which your debit or credit card is registered. So if you buy a drink, a shirt, a necklace or whatever, it is purchased by using your cabin-card.

We had gone for the 'All Inclusive' (AI) drinks package - which wasn't 'exactly' all-inclusive, but what we drank was extremely good and we never felt the need to upgrade to the Ultimate drinks package for £99 per person per week. This would have allowed us access to popular branded spirits. There was also an upgrade to branded soft drinks as well for £49 per week per person, giving you cans of real Pepsi and Sprite. Not necessary!!! For cruisers changing their minds and wanting to go AI, they could do so for an extra charge of £360 each per week(!). The offer closed at 6pm on Mondays - the day after you joined the ship.

I think the only extras we paid for on drinks was in the Coffee Port which sold really-**really** good mugs of coffee to AI passengers for £1.20 - else 3:60 for non-AI passengers.

There were only about 8 - 10 cocktails which were not included on AI but you could buy these for £1.20 instead of the normal £4.60 charged. We paid £199 each for AI on our 2 weeks cruise and found it very good value for money. We don't drink excessively but we were on holiday so it was cocktails every day and wine with our meals.

I went to Wine Tasting in the Meridian Restaurant during the afternoon. I don't know too much about wine - only enough to know that I quite like Spanish Rioja and Crianza. After signing for this activity which cost £7, I entered Meridian to see 6 sparklingly clean glasses lined up at every set place on several tables with a plate of crackers and a dish

of cubed assorted cheeses. The Head Wine Waiter (Head Sommelier) Benjamin greeted us and gave us a chat before introducing his two Sommeliers Wally and Mario. These two chaps had years of experience and certainly knew their stuff! They told us about the wines, their environments, their characteristics and the Sommeliers told us what to look for when examining a wine, how to smell it and how to taste it. Everything done in a very entertaining way. A delightful afternoon with 3 reds and 3 whites - but I only sipped and actually only drank about 1 glass in total. (fool *me* I suppose!)

I had a chat to Wally afterwards and discovered what an incredibly nice guy he is. It was inevitable that I bought a bottle of 'the good stuff' we had been trying, but there was a bit of pressure to buy an upgrade to a wine package - 6 bottles of fine wine for £79



Wally was full of surprises as we would find out a little later on in the holiday!

Monday was Captains Gala night where you could meet the Captain at his Reception party. We did this back in 2011 on our first cruise and had taken along suits and ties and long dresses. Mart, Gill, Keith, Gillie and I had spoken at length about this particular function and we had decided this time 'we would give it a miss' and not bother with all the formal paraphernalia of dressing up and use the extra suitcase weight for something else. I actually would have liked to have been part of it but I went with the majority decision. So off to the Lido again for dinner! Lots to choose from both hot and cold choices with almost a hidden choice contained in heated cloches on the centre cabinets. I don't think many people found these - they contained curries or risottos or stews.

Tuesday: Kralendijk, Bonaire

Up at 06:30 to watch us dock at Kralendijk. Being a film maker among other things, I made sure that plenty of footage was always taken ready to make the obligatory holiday film which, in a few months time would, be the excuse for a get together chez-nous for a Caribbean Dinner Party and a 'Film Premier' with Martin, Gill and Keith - all to relive the experience of our 2015 Caribbean holiday. Also by taking high quality video, I think the best still images can be obtained as you can roll the footage back and forth on the computer to find that best shot which you certainly may have missed with a stills camera!

After Breakfast we went ashore and was approached by an older man - Victor, who was one of the hopeful taxi drivers. He offered us a tour in his mini-bus for \$20 each and he would show us the sights of the island. These tours of course are pretty typical on every island, its a question of choosing the right one at the right price. Usually you pay right at the end of the trip.

Clambering aboard his bus we set off with Victor summarising life on the island. He took us to the 'Thousand Steps' which when first mentioned conjured up an exertive and sweaty stop-off. When we got there victor laughed because there were less than 40 steps, the rest were actually in the sea and used by the divers! The joke was on us!!!

We watched from the rocks while beautiful turquoise Parrot Fish swam beneath us in the shallows feeding off the weed on the rocks. There were loads of them!





Then down the steps passing a family of sleepy Iguanas camouflaged on the rocks in the shade. Victor offered some vegetation to a squabbling pair until a much bigger lizard appeared and drove them off to steal the bounty! Victor explained that the Islanders made soup out of these creatures!! I was horrified!!!!



Moving on Victor took us to a lake where we saw wild pink Flamingoes wading on their stick-like legs and feeding on shrimp in the shallow edges of the water. He pointed out Mockingbirds which were the most musically sounding birds I had ever heard. Their song has to be heard to be believed!



His tour concluded with a stop off at a local bar in a village in the centre of the island where we all bought and sipped cooling beers. Victor said that he had really enjoyed our company as we had made his job extre-easy. We had asked lots of questions, joked with him, and talked about the local politics as there was to be a General Election the following day.

We bought him drinks, and he said we had treated him like a long lost friend - there were many that just rode silently in the back of his bus making the atmosphere awkward for him, but we certainly had not!

He probably said that to everyone he took on a tour(!), but I like to think that yes, we did get on exceptionally well with him.



We went to see the Entertainment Team perform one of their shows in the Broadway Show Lounge. I must say as a person who has been in the music business for over 40 years, that I was very very impressed! The singing, the dancing, the costumes and the overall professionalism was top notch - as good as a West End London show.

Worthy of note were Ben and Matt who were singer-dancers and Billy-Ray and Simon who were the primary dancers but also sang. Also Kate who had the most wonderful voice.

The Show Team would perform the same show twice per evening, probably after doing their own solo gig in one of the bars or lounges first, then they may do a late night show out on deck or in the Liberties disco. They would perform also during the day and were appointed to other duties too like being Lifeboat Marshalls, or Passenger Hosts on the arriving busses or as 'crowd-getter-uppers' around the ships. They were on hand for a chat to anyone who wanted to stop in the corridors and talk to them, and every afternoon would perform their own hi-energy keep fit routine on stage in the Show Lounge for people to watch (and maybe wish they were as fit!) The ship worked them extremely hard but you could tell they absolutely adored being in the Show Team.



When you consider the hundreds of hours of rehearsals to achieve such a high standard, the time required to further develop their shows, learning their the lyrics to probably over 100 songs, the time they had to spend in make-up and in preparation,

looking after their wardrobe and props and all, it was probably an 18 hour day for them. Yet all the time they were smiling! When music and theatre is naturally in your blood, it is not an occupation, but a natural way of life! Well done and Congratulations to all of them!

Wednesday: Willemstad, Curacao

Again up on deck bright and early to witness our arrival at Willemstad, Curacao. I think it was John Ison or Paul Baglin on Facebook that told me that I must not miss this morning's docking!

Sure enough, The Thomson Celebration pulled into the port leading to the lagoon which split the city into two halves.



I had been told about the Floating Bridge - being a walkway on several pontoons which swing back from guarding the entrance of the harbour to allow the big tankers and smaller cruise ships to dock on one of the sides. Unfortunately this was out of action due to the previous week's bad weather, so the bridge was already open when we got there but we did get a good close look at it.

The Celebration moved through the dock into the lagoon where it passed under the 400 feet high Princess Julianna Bridge to do a 180 degree spin round before returning back under the high bridge to moor up. It was always interesting to watch the engineers throw the landlines and secure the ship.



Free water taxi's took us to the eastern side where we were told most of the tourists go.



The girls made a bee-line for the jewellers. Gillie my wife would be 60 the following day and she wanted to choose her own Birthday present from me while she was in the Caribbean Islands. Gill, Martin's wife also was on the lookout for something for her own 64th Birthday the following week, when we would be visiting Antigua.

Us chaps found the Floating Market and talked to some of the stall sellers about the fish and vegetables they were selling. Fascinating! Most of them had come across the water from Venezuela.



The girls took their time in the Jewellers (of course!) but eventually we rounded them up and we found a nice bar with al-fresco seating. I remarked that we could be anywhere in Europe - France; Spain; Netherlands; - well Curacao I believe used to be under the auspices of the Dutch? There was a definite European feel to the town.



After coffee and the most delicious Apple Cake we strode down town to find a beautiful set of bells on the wall striking midday. Just like how I imagined certain decorative street clocks in Amsterdam, as the bells rang out, little plaster characters suddenly appeared and moved across the clock face.



With a view to wandering back down to the port again, the girls suddenly disappeared into another jewellers! We guys found ourselves yet another bar at the waters edge and while sipping our beers surveyed a much bigger cruise ship than ours that had docked at the other cruise ship terminal on the edge of the sea.

The girls appeared again after 20 minutes with a girl who they had found offering a good island tour. It sounded okay so we signed up and waited for our transport.

When it arrived it was literally a wooden shed on the back of a lorry with knocked-up wooden benches to sit on! We looked at each other with that 'Oh Dear' expression! But funnily enough the seating wasn't quite as uncomfortable as we thought it might be!



A chubby but very friendly woman climbed aboard to be our guide. I thought she looked to be of a Jewish origin and she confirmed this a moment later when we asked her about her accent.

We were then on our way to what was probably the best tour of all of our holiday! As we sped past people in the streets they waived and shouted to her and she shouted back at them in a garbled tongue which I presumed had the (double) Dutch influence. We suddenly came to a halt by the Floating Market as one of the sellers had shouted to her. Next thing I knew, a bag of fresh Oranges were handed over for everyone in the bus to enjoy on our trip!!!! How very kind!!!

As our lady guide talked about life on Curacao we stopped off at the Curacao distillery where we had a short conducted tour and were able to taste 6 of the Curacao liquors including Blue Curacao. I bought a bottle! This factory made the original Curacao liquor made from fermented orange peel. There were now many different varieties including coffee and chocolate, but I thought the original was best.



Next we went onwards to 'The Million Dollar View' and this was a view from a shop's balcony on a hillside overlooking a beautiful blue lagoon with several inlets that had expensive yachts and expensive boats moored by even more expensive waterside villas. A truly beautiful sight on a hot sunny afternoon, but with a curious barnacle... there was a huge ugly sea-going machine the size of an oil rig moored in the bay as well. We were told it was a machine which laid seabed cables. This monstrosity had been parked there for nearly 18 months - much to the annoyance of the locals.



It was hot and everyone was thirsty so our guide promised us all a stop off for a drink. She said we would stop by a beach which had a £3.50 admission charge, but as we were on her tour, we would not have to pay. We would stay for around 45 minutes.

Wow! What a treat that turned out to be. Mambo Beach was idyllic and we found a shady table to enjoy ice cold rum punch bristling with fresh fruit. If I ever return to the Caribbean I would like to spend a week on Curacao and particularly at Mambo Beach!



We returned to the ship via the Princess Julianna Bridge showing views over the port - pity we were not travelling the opposite direction - the view would have been grand!



The Captains address over the PA in the evening confirmed that the ship had now been fully repaired and we were able to make top speed again. I had been a little worried about our long 500 mile trip to St Lucia and hoped the visit would not be scuttled as did Grenada. But now I was relieved and confident we would make it there on schedule.

The Celebration left dock at 20:00 which ended an unusually long day docked at shore. As the ship left Willemstad at we stood on deck watching the bright lights of the quayside bars and buildings as we slipped away into the night.



Thursday: Oranjestad, Aruba

Today my beautiful wife Gillie of 38 wonderful years reached her 60th Birthday.

As this is **my review(!)** I make no apology saying she certainly doesn't look 60 and to me she is as lovely as the first day we met! Together we have always made a phenomenal team in everything we've done together and we've achieved more beyond our wildest dreams! I love her very much indeed!



Okay, so I digress!

Up at sunrise and out on deck with my HandyCam taking in the sights of Docking at Aruba.



The Royal Caribbean Adventure of the Seas followed us into port and moored just behind us giving one very dramatic backdrop with its looming massive bulk while we at breakfast in the Lido.



Breakfast was always very comprehensive with the usual eggs, bacon, sausages, mushrooms, beans and tomatoes etc, and also luscious fruit like fresh pineapples, melons, grapes, and blood oranges. There were also cheeses, familiar cereals, porridge, French toast and croissants and also pancakes. Far too much choice and far too tempting not to take advantage.

There was also a breakfast service running in the Meridian restaurant but although there were things like Eggs Benedict, kippers and kedgeree and smoked haddock with poached eggs on the morning menu we never tried breakfast down there - which was a shame. But usually the order of the day, and certainly today, was get ashore as quickly as possible.

Returning to our cabins to slap on the sun screen, our Phillipino Cabin Steward *Lanang* (Gill called him 'Langham' which sounded amusingly 'butler-ish' to me!) had heard it was Gillie's 60th birthday. And as we walked past him saying good morning, he beamed a smile and said he'd left a surprise for us in our cabin.

On opening the door we saw that he had laid out all of Gillie's birthday cards on the bed in a presentation with two swans made out of towels as the centre-piece. What a lovely thought!



We alighted from the ship, showing our cabin-cards to the officer at the gangway who bar-coded each of us individually ashore (beep!) and made our way to the throng of taxi drivers hungry for our business.

Today was to be our first proper Beach Day. We had been recommended Eagle Beach with its Fofoti trees (although we never actually saw one!) and we arrived by minibus at long white sands stretching for miles in both directions.



The beach was so long that it was hard to decide where to set up camp. Eventually one of us took the decision to approach some guys at a nearby beach shack who seemed to be renting sun beds and beach umbrellas.

It took an age for some reason (I think they were busy repairing some of the umbrellas) but eventually 5 sun beds were brought to our allotted spot with 2 huge sunshades. The guys dug a deep hole in the sand, wrapped a cord around a heavy stone and buried it into the sand, tying the other end of the cord to a sun shade umbrella. This was to stop the wind (which was a bit gusty at times) blowing the umbrellas away.

We set down our bags, laid out our towels and also one of us went for rum punch! The sun was burning and the temperature was about 35 degrees. Hot hot hot!!!

At one point there was a hell of a crack behind me as the wind ripped a wooden arm off my umbrella! It was repaired very quickly.

We surveyed the scene in front of us - there were several jet-skis which for hire and we enjoyed watching various contenders cock their legs over a jet-ski and dart off with a whoosh of spray. Quite entertaining but I wondered what would be said back in England about unregulated jet-skis operating so close to swimmers and bathers in the shallow surf. I remember hearing of a fatal accident some years ago.

The colours of the sea, sand and sky were stunning and Gillie and I walked hand in hand for a mile or so up and down the beach cooling our feet in the rushing surf.

We went for lunch across the road in a bar and all had something barbequed. We also tried a bottle of the local beer and really liked it. After lunch we returned to the beach for a swim and another paddle.

Around 4pm we wondered how we would be getting back to the ship. The taxi driver who dropped us off said that there would be plenty of taxis around but we saw none. So the guy in the sun bed beach shack called for transport for us on his mobile phone. The transport which arrived turned out to be a multi-coloured American school bus! The bus driver charged us \$4 for the ride back - half the cost of the morning taxi-bus we used.

As was becoming the norm, we met up in 'Haemorrhoids' Bar - (actually calling it that is quite 'disrespectful' as it was very tastefully decorated and furnished at one end with Ernest Hemmingway photos and ornaments, but - we were on our holiday so didn't give it much of a second thought!) - Cocktails at 7pm in 'Haemorrhoids' it was!!!!

Tonight was to be a special dinner for us in Mistral's - the Cordon Bleu restaurant serving fresh fish, lobster and steaks. There is a £19.99 per person cover charge for eating there, but we had found an on-board deal for a meal at Mistral's plus a meal in the newly opened Thai restaurant Kora La plus a meal in the Lido called Steak on a Stone - all three 'gourmet' dinners for £50 which was a saving of nearly £10 per person. Very good value!



The waiters were almost nervously over-attentive, but they soon relaxed as we talked and joked with them. We bought a couple of bottles of lovely Spanish Crianza and enjoyed a sumptuous 5 course including an appetiser and sorbet mid-course. For the first time in my life, I tried Escargots (Snails) for my starter, warily tasting the first and deciding there taste was very palatable with its cheesy garlic sauce. They were very much like mushrooms both taste and texture - not anywhere near as I had imagined them. I ate 6 out of the 12 provided.

Main course was Surf and Turf for me which included a Lobster tail. There was fresh Sole, Rack of Lamb, Medallions of Pork and Chicken on the menu too as well as a vegetarian Risotto. Later on Joven the Executive Chef came out to meet us and asked us if we enjoyed our dishes. We certainly had!

I noted from day one on our cruise that as well as vegetarian choices on all the menus, there were also clearly marked Gluten-free and Sugar-free choices which pleased me as I am very aware that some people have food intolerances. My daughter Nicola is a Coeliac and she requires a wheat free diet.

Nicola and I are always commenting that in England restaurants do not cater well for Coeliacs and the evidence is that English restaurant staff are quite ignorant of the special care and attentions required to provide a gluten free meal. Often when Nic eats out at a restaurant and she asks for Gluten Free food, she ends up with wheat contaminated food that upsets her stomach for days on end. All UK restaurants seem to offer a vegetarian choice, but as Nic points out - being a vegetarian is usually by choice, but being a Coeliac is not a choice but an unwelcome condition.

Dessert came but Gillie was already full. I chose the trio of desserts as it looked quite light, and I was amazed to see its presentation with my name written in chocolate when it arrived. A fantastic work of art and imagination!



Because Gillie was full and had not ordered a dessert, an empty plate with Happy Birthday written in chocolate and raspberry sauce was presented to her. We took pictures!



Then a guitarist appeared by our table and serenaded Gillie with a love song which finally turning into a rendition of Happy Birthday!



A lovely evening we will never forget!

Friday: Day at Sea



A second day at sea on our way to St Lucia was spent on sun beds on the Promenade deck again. Lunch was down on the Lido where the resident band The Peakles were playing a lunchtime set on the outside deck-stage.

The Peakles recently had a bad press on Facebook and I wasn't sure what they would be like. We saw them on our first night playing outside on the deck party before we went to bed, and within a few minutes I had assessed them as very competent musicians and entertainers. They appeared to all be Phillipino although I couldn't be absolutely sure of this and they consisted of 5 young guys and a young girl all in their early twenties. They had great voices and were armed with the most extensive repertoire of songs to suit all tastes.

As a lead guitarist myself I was very impressed by their lead guitarist Richard who played a red Fender Strat fitted with a Roland synthesizer pickup (just like my own Fender Strat) and for all you fellow Nerds out there, this allows keyboard, brass and string sounds to be played from the guitar. I knew Richard was a highly talented guitarist when he competently played the acoustic version of The Eagles 'Hotel California'. He played all the guitar parts which the Eagle's 3 guitarists play on that track, and Richard played them all very accurately indeed, proving that many hours of hard practice had gone into learning and remembering the notes and chords.



Internet access via ships Wi-Fi is sporadic and quite expensive. Even so a Nerd like me cannot be without that essential service to keep me updated and informed when I want to be. Most of the time Internet Access through Wi-Fi **when it was working** was okay and I had much more success using my iPhone 6 than the others did on their iPads.

The cost ranged from £4 for 10 minutes to £18 for 3 hours. I actually spent nearly £70 on Wi-Fi. It is so expensive because the ship has to connect to the Internet via Satellite, and we might all imagine that using a satellite to connect to the Internet will inevitably be expensive.

We noticed that the amount of time we were paying for was somehow being curtailed too early by the system and we were not getting our monies worth. Martin and I went down to reception to point this out and we were told they would look into it by the end of the day.

The best place we noticed to use ship's WiFi was in the Coffee Port. I guess as the ship's Internet Lounge was next door, that one of the ship's WiFi routers was pretty close.

It was good to use free WiFi access when in port but this did tend to slow you down from your planned activities.

In some ports like Antigua and St Maartens, ship Wi-Fi did not work at all. Nor did the satellite TV for Sky News or BBC World Service.

There were quite a few TV channels which could be accessed from our cabin flat screens - 3 film channels for example. In particular, channel 34 showed the view from a webcam situated at the front of the ship. This proved very handy if you switched to it in the early hours to let you know how close you were to port. By turning it on at first light I could see land ahead, so I would drag myself out of bed to get on deck and into the fresh air at the front of the ship to film with my Sony HandyCam!

It had been Gillie's 60th Birthday yesterday, and as the ship's photography department seemed to have 'sussed' this, we had a card for a special birthday offer photo session pushed under our cabin door. Gillie thought it would be a nice idea to take up the offer and have some proper shots done as her 60th Birthday keep-sake, so we went to see the ship's photographer, Milos. He set us up with 'sittings' around the ship.

My God, he took 266 shots! He arranged for us to see them on Monday and I wondered how much all this would cost if we wanted some prints. We knew we would get one free as that was the temptation on the offer. Later on I found out that every cabin on the ship had the same photographic offer (birthday or not) because another identical advert was slipped under our door, this time not addressed to us personally, but to everyone generally!

Before our evening meal Martin visited Reception to find out the 'score' about our Wi-Fi access and received an apology that there had been a technical error which used up our allotted Wi-Fi time prematurely. Our Wi-Fi access was reset, and we both got a further 3 hours of internet access with no further charge. My advice if you are going to use the ship's Wi-Fi would be to keep an eye on this!!

Tonight, dinner in the Meridian featured the Parade of the Baked Alaska for dessert.



Wally was by now our regular wine waiter and I had a feeling that because of our repartee with him over the last few days, he was pouring us finer wine that was certainly not your average table wine! (But of course that may have been the drink talking!)

Wally would automatically bring us each a glass of Port at the end of our Meridian Meals which was included in our AI of course. But **ALL** waiters in the Meridian restaurant (as well as in the Lido) were absolutely wonderful to us. I suppose they have to be as its part of their jobs, but even so they made us feel very special. If any of these wonderful guys ever read this review I would like to say a big thank you and 'well done' to each of them.

The service was far superior to the service you could expect from any restaurant in England. The moment your glass of water went down by just one inch, they were there to refill it for you. Plates were whisked away the moment everyone was finished, tablecloths brushed clean of crumbs, knife and fork reconfigurations seemed to happen by magic - you never noticed that suddenly a fish knife was substituted or a soup spoon was added. They were always prepared for a conversation or joke with you.



And of course they excelled when the Baked Alaska Parade came on with flaming dishes of (probably fake!) meringue followed by waiters banging cloches like cymbals, spinning napkins (which was so contagious all the cruise diners did too!) Waiters were playing guitars, Conga-ing round the tables, clapping and laughing and generally acting the fool - one waiter pretending to be drunk with a bottle of wine - it was hilarious as several waiters walking round with napkins in their ears so they did not have to endure the sound of their colleague's singing. Great fun! Great atmosphere which brought people together.

These guys work 10-14 hours a day, 7 days per week for 8-10 months of the year. I certainly could not work as hard as that! I would like to have given a tip to every single one of them!

After a lovely 4 course dinner we headed off to The Broadway Showlounge to watch Maurice Grumbleweed (this week's guest comedian) perform his show. I went to bed with my sides aching from pulled muscles of uncontrollable laughter!

Saturday: Castries, St Lucia

A few miles out from the port of Castries I could see a white cruise ship already docked. It was cloudy and also 10 minutes of warm rain fell too. But by the time we docked on the south side of the harbour, the sun was shining.



I was looking forward to our day in St Lucia as this had been one of our best days on our previous trip in 2011. Last time we went down to Soufriere and Les Pitons by speedboat, we hoped today to see a lot more of the island.



We selected a taxi tour - they always seemed to be around \$20 per person which-ever island you visited, and the driver showed us a big picture-card of where we would be visiting. There was a bit of sales pressure from the speedboat company we went with last time as we passed by them and I noted their price per person had gone up from \$65 to \$75. As we walked away and into our waiting mini-bus, \$65 was offered as a last resort to try and change our minds! That's worth noting!

The first visit on the list for St Lucia was the Cathedral, but all we did was slow up and get a micro-second's look at the inside through the open door!!! Huh! Then suddenly we sped out of Castries and up a very steep hill in a very noisy and overworked gear.

We stopped at a lookout point which gave a spectacular view over the harbour and The Celebration was in full view. This place was very much a tourist trap with islanders determinedly eager that we should buy something from them. We did, but even so they were relentlessly after our money despite trying to be very friendly and welcoming us to the island, asking our names and saying "we love the British!" I guess these islanders believe that cruise ship tourists are all very rich - which you know is far from the truth! But the islanders of course have little other than the tourists to try to make ends meet and to a certain extent as you are in their country, I guess this is something we should respect.



Continuing our journey we went up to the Arthur Lewis Community college where a very friendly and informative guide showed us round the grounds and told us some history and facts about St Lucia as he walked us up to a view-point. The guy (probably a student) was extremely good so we gave him a tip.



A bit further on and we stopped by a shack at the side of the road selling other stuff. We were all given a free banana! But despite this being yet another tourist trap there were some interesting things to look at in the shack-shop. Various Caribbean sauces and rums were freely offered for tasting and there was plenty of it! I bought a bottle of yellow home-made extra hot pepper sauce which I will try out one Saturday night when I am not out gigging with the band!

Our next stop was an art studio where they specialised in wood carvings. We looked around the shop full of clever and sometimes grotesque carvings and bought a cool beer while we mused around the figureines. We were also given a short demo of the techniques and an explanation of the carvings of wood which were mostly made with beautifully rich dark mahogany.

To conclude our tour, the driver took us to another vantage point overlooking a pretty fishing village, then back to Castries and the ship.



After a nice lunch in the Lido with Caribbean Jerk Chicken, Rice and Peas, the afternoon was spent on sun beds on the Promenade deck. Sun beds are much easier to find when the ship is in port as many cruisers of course are ashore!

As usual we gathered with our cocktails to watch us leave port at around the time of sunset. We had seen some of the most spectacular sunsets on this trip and tonight was no disappointment either! The other big cruise ship in port, The P&O Adonia had left a few minutes before we did after turning 108 degrees on a sixpence to point her bow to the open sea. We followed her out of Castries as she headed out toward the sunset. I wondered where she might be in the morning.



During the evening we went to The Broadway Show Lounge for another brilliant show by the Show Team. Cruise director Richard was always the compere and he also had many other jobs on the ship. He always seemed to be working. We warmed very quickly to Richard who had worked on-board a few years back as assistant cruise director. He was comical, had a great attitude to everyone on the ship and a very likeable personality. You *listened* to him! The last Cruise Director we had on The Thomson Destiny was a bit of a berk!



Sunday: Bridgetown, Barbados

I was later up this morning but would probably have missed our arrival into port anyway as happened in the early hours. The sun was shining and 2 other huge cruise ships had already docked behind us.



I had done some homework (as always on these adventures) and found out that a Concorde which flew from London to Barbados throughout the 1980s and 1990s was preserved in a museum (The Concorde Experience) back at Grantley Adams Airport. I have always wanted to sit in a Concorde passenger seat and try to imagine what it was like flying first-class at more than twice the speed of sound.

The others were not so keen to go so Gillie and I set off from the ship to try and get to see the supersonic aircraft. I had no idea how we would get there, obviously some taxi or bus would take us, but as we passed through the Bridgetown Cruise Terminal with all of its shops, I noticed the Tourist Information office and patiently stood and waited my turn. Asking about the best way to get to the museum, I was told it was shut on Sundays! Well.... that was that!

We rendezvoused back with the other guys and set back off with them to find an island tour. We had first thought of going to a beach but Martin had already had too much sun and was peeling badly. So the suggestion was to visit the local caves and also the Flower Forest - both of which sounded like cooling visits in the hot sun that was beating down at more than 32 degrees.

At the taxi rank the Taxi Marshall called over a driver who introduced himself as Anthony. We realised we had really struck gold with this guy the moment we set off. He was very knowledgeable and he had a great personality. We chatted at length with him, and Keith noticed that there was bible discretely placed between the front seats - not

that Anthony seemed overly religious but I think that may have indicated he was a caring sort of guy

We were to first visit Gun Hill but he told us that the fort had been damaged by fire recently. He drove us straight to Harrison's Caves.



Just as we parked up and Anthony was telling us all about what we would be seeing, 2 large coaches containing Germans (from hearing their accents) from the other ships pulled up as well! Oh dear!

We bought our tickets which were quite expensive at BD\$50 which is over \$25 US just at the point where the Germans were ushered through the gate in front of us. Obviously being an official ship tour, their admission charges had been pre-dealt with.

We looked at each other, it was going to be a long wait! At that point Anthony grabbed our arms and escorted us right to the front of the queue of the other amassing visitors. We were first to use the elevator down to the lower level. Anthony pushed the Germans out of the way as though we were VIPs! I must admit I did detect a certain smugness come over our little group!



We took the lift down and looked round the exhibition first. Then we boarded an electric tram and were driven into the cave complex with a lady guide telling us what to look out for. The cave was wet in places and there were little showers of water here and there that sprinkled and dripped on us. The caves were very impressive and were lit for dramatic effect.



The driver was a bit of a joker and had at first made an announcement telling us what to do in case of an earthquake causing some to be quite alarmed at the underground tour, but a second later he was laughing that unmistakable Bajan laugh and we realised he was breaking the ice and putting our minds at rest about the visit. At one point all the lights were turned off in the part of the cave where we had stopped, and the lady guide was telling us all about the lack of light which the first explorers endured when discovering the cave chambers.

It was a total blackout. I flinched as a loud and sudden "Boo!" came from within 12" from my ear, followed by the lights coming back on and that Bajan laugh once more as the driver had played yet another practical joke on us. He couldn't stop laughing at my startlement!



The trip in the caves lasted nearly an hour with plenty of time to take pictures. Anthony was waiting for us with a cool air-conditioned bus and he drove us on to the Flower Forest snaking his way along the back-roads in the middle of the island.



We walked through a bar-restaurant to obtain our tickets. We greeted by the lady owner and she exclaimed that at that moment we were the only visitors there! We walked out onto the side of a hill with all sorts of flora and fauna covering the slopes beneath us.

Little paths guided us round and there was the sound of a waterfall trickling someway off. Many of the plants were labelled and we took our time ambling round the pathways and gradually moving down the hillside listening to the sounds of the forest. We came to a clearing which was also a lookout point and we surveyed views of the middle of Barbados - much of it rainforest.



For a little while we took a restful pew and enjoyed the solitude. It was lovely not to be rushed or have others following or in front of us. It felt like the place was there just for us!



We reached the bottom of the hillside and I braced myself ready for the long slog back up the hill, but for some inexplicable reason, the pathway back up to the restaurant was nothing like the steep incline I was expecting. It only took about 3 minutes and we were hardly sweating at all when we reached the top! Strange - but very welcome!

Leaving the wonder of the Flower Forest, we asked Anthony to take us to a place where we could have lunch and if it was near a beach then that would be perfect! He did not disappoint! He took us to a restaurant called Zaccios located on one of the loveliest beaches on Barbados' west coast at Holetown in the province of St James.

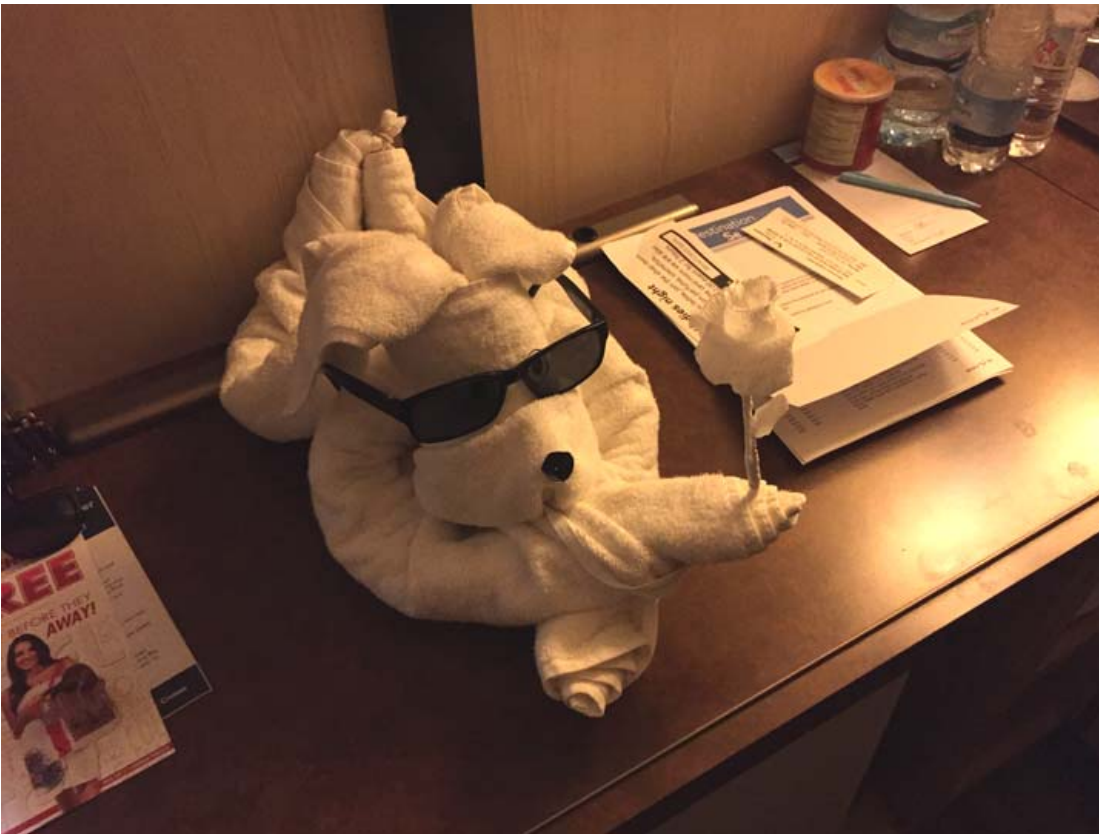


It was an absolute delight! Immediately a table on decking inches from the surf was readied and a delicious menu to choose from was offered. I chose a Caesar Salad with charred Flying Fish! Wow!

We had rum punch and a little walk on the beach afterwards. I thought to myself that on our last day in Barbados next week, we might be lucky enough to find Anthony again and ask him to bring us back here for another superb lunch! It would be a great way to finish off our holiday.

Back at the ship, we noticed that a new intake of cruisers had arrived and the holiday loop had started once again with cases being delivered to cabins and yet another lifeboat drill for the 'newbies'.

Gillie had said she did not want to change cabins today and so we had let Reception know earlier in the week that we wanted to stay in 208(!) Reception credited our account with the £42 we had paid to reserve cabin 205 which had not been available when we arrived due to *that* 'administration error'. The gross settee was still in our cabin but somehow we managed to ignore its overbearing presence. To soften our hearts a little, Lanang our Cabin Steward had made a dog out of towels to surprise us. It was wearing *my* sunglasses and offering the white rose that Wally had made the previous night from paper tissue and given to Gillie. The dog looked hilarious!



Today was Gill and Martins 40th wedding anniversary (he had not bought her a card!) and we had planned our second special meal of our Gourmet package in Kora La - the ships Thai/Asian restaurant.

The Bill of Fayre was awesome! We love hot spicy food and you could order a custom curry to your liking with which ever meat or fish that took your fancy and also how hot you wanted it to be. We again bought a couple of bottles of the Crianza we had so enjoyed in Mistrals last week.

A guitarist was again despatched to sing at our table and he crooned a Barry Manilow(!) song to us, after which Martin said to the guitarist, give that guitar to this man (pointing at me!) Okay so being in a band as myself Martin and Keith are, we have our own repertoire which is always on hand at a moments notice and also a couple of 'party pieces'!

So taking the guitar I launched into what I thought was a very appropriate song for a 40th wedding anniversary - 'If You Don't Know Me By Now'(!) The three of us sing this in 3 part harmony. When we started the jaws of the waiters dropped and they gathered round to listen to us. On a cruise ship sailing in the Caribbean Sea, in the lush surroundings of the Kora La restaurant, with excellent wine in our glasses and after a lovely meal, we had found an audience! Life doesn't get any better!!!

Monday: Day at Sea

The ship on our 3rd day at sea was heading north for the island of St Kitts. We had been there before and enjoyed the sugar-train ride around the island on the Thomson Excursion. It had been a very expensive excursion too at £65 each and so we had no plans to do it again.



A day at sea can be restful or it can be boring. I spent a little while on a sun bed watching the islands of Guadeloupe and Dominica pass slowly by and watched the various types of gulls dive vertically into the sea after fish. Flying fish would jump out of the way not knowing they were exposing themselves in even more danger as easy prey for the lightning-quick sea birds. I was astounded to see the sea-birds as we were hundreds of miles from land, but here they were flying around the ship gliding in its slipstream.



I had spoken to Martin and Keith about coming to join me at the repeated Wine Tasting session which I had enjoyed the previous Monday. Keith had been just one exam away from becoming a Master of Wine many years ago, so he already knew his stuff about wines. Martin was a bit of a connoisseur as well, favouring expensive fine wines!

Wally and Mario were there again to guide us through the various glasses and we chatted to him extensively at the end. I bought a bottle of the wine we had all said we enjoyed most out of the samples offered, and Wally said he would make sure it had been open an hour before our dinner tonight and would decant it for us at the table for our maximum enjoyment.

True to his word the wine was decanted and served to us at dinner. It was really good so we bought another bottle for £23 (£2 discount for AI card holders) It would seem that everything Wally had told us about how to improve the taste of wine and techniques of how to enjoy it more was correct. I felt that I had learned a lot from Wally and I was very grateful.

As usual, those having birthdays on board were sung to by a group of waiters at their tables. There was a birthday close to our table tonight and inevitably the guitar found itself being passed over to me! Another rendition of If You Dont Know Me By Now - this time to the whole of the Meridian restaurant with waiters joining in and some mockingly taking-the-micky for the entertainment of on-lookers. We received a huge round of applause. Even Wally joined in!

Wally was a bit of a dark horse actually, as during the crew show last week he surprised us all by coming on stage and singing New York New York! He had a great voice and great stage presence. The whole ship seemed to know about Wally and loved him to bits!

The ships judder was still apparent but as the days and nights had passed it was less intrusive to our comfort. It could still be felt all over the ship though especially in the middle of the Broadway Show Lounge and particularly up in the Horizons Bar high up at the front of the ship

Tuesday: Basseterre, St Kitts

Another beach day had been planned tomorrow for our favourite island - Tortola - so today needed to be something other than on the beach on our visit to St Kitts. A tour!



After my usual filming of us coming into port and also the usual hearty breakfast, we walked off the ship and found a taxi driver offering a tour round the island. The first visit was to be a trip to the Caribelle Batik factory where garments and table cloths were made by hand, painted first with masking wax then each colour dyed before the wax is removed.



The 'factory' was actually some old small buildings in the grounds of a lush shady garden with sprawling lawns and spurting fountains. Bright fabrics and colours lifted hearts and minds and it was a fantastic place where I could easily have spent a lot of money! We had cold drinks outside in the beautiful sunlit gardens and although our taxi driver had given us 25 minutes there it was a good three quarters of an hour before we got back into the bus!



Our next stop was at Brimstone Hill Fortress high up on the hills of St Kitts overlooking the azure sea below. It was a very hot day - caps on then! The bus drove up and up and up the side of the hill and we arrived at the reception area having first to juggle our route around other mini buses and cars coming down from the fort on the single track road.



The main part of the fort itself was further up a long pathway of steps and it took a little while to reach the top. When we did - oh my what a view! The place was steeped in history as it had been occupied by British Soldiers guarding the island for King and Country in long-bygone years when the world was a very different place. There were waxwork figures and many historical artefacts, mostly in separately themed rooms and chambers which you could enter. Each room told part of the historical story of the occupation.

There was plenty of excitement walking around the ramparts and I lost count of the number of authentic canons in the castellations that had guarded the fort high up on the mountain.



In the distance we could see the islands of Nevis, Saba and St Eustatius - Nevis having its usual table cloth of cloud covering its peak and Saba - an almost perfect cone.



Our last visit inevitably took us to another tourist trap, but here we could get another cold beer and look round the shanty shops and shacks for things like home-made fridge magnets and charms and bracelets.

A guy approached me with a monkey and before I could object it clambered onto my shoulder to disapproving looks from my wife. But my heart softened as the monkey was quite adorable, warm and cuddly. We had seen wild monkeys like this one in the trees around Caribelle Batiks and we were told they had a reputation of stealing anything they could lay their hands on! I stroked and petted him and the owner offered to video with my camera, so I let him. After a few minutes the monkey clambered on to a protesting Gillie briefly, then back onto me. I gave the monkey back and offered the guy \$2 for his trouble for taking the video.



He said "That's not enough!!! It is \$10 for doing your video"!!!!!! Hmm - he had his 'rates' then! Okay okay.... \$10 it was! (More disapproving looks form my wife - oh well!)

Mr Taxi driver took us back to Basseterre port (where the Celebration had been stuck for 2 days with engine trouble 2 weeks before) and we had a late lunch back on the ship.



My video-ing of each evening's sunset was becoming the norm as we all gathered on the Promenade deck with our cocktails to watch us leave port and then get ready for pre-dinner drinks in 'Haemorrhoids' bar.



Tonight one of the Show Team - Ben, was doing his solo gig of Motown classics which were fabulous. Unfortunately his gallant efforts were ignored by most people in the bar despite him being so good. We tried to make up for this as we appreciated the time and energy that goes into learning a set of songs and performing them well. So we made sure after each song we gave maximum applause (to strange looks of some of the others in the bar!) We also noticed that in the Broadway Show Lounge, some people would carry on loud conversations while the show was in progress. Very bad manners! I gave one lady a very cold, hard stare until she noticed me looking at her. She then shut up!

We finished off the night watching Fogwell Flax (the new guest comedian) in the Broadway Show Lounge (he was very good!), then off to the The Lido for late-night hot drinks. As we were enjoying those we noticed heavy rain pounding the rear decks of the ship and hoped the morning would see the sunshine return for our visit to Cane Garden Bay - our favourite beach in the Caribbean on the British Virgin Island of Tortola.

Wednesday - Road Town, Tortola

We were fast approaching the end of our fantastic 2 week cruise with a little downheartedness, but I knew that the next 3 days were going to probably be three of the best!

Today I got up extra early to watch us sail into a cluster of small islands at sunrise. The sky looked ready to provide a great morning light show with the promising orangey glow on the eastern horizon where the sun would peep above the sea. In the west the sky was pink! With blue clouds! Slowly the sun rose over the horizon lighting up the tops of the higher islands in sheer magnificance! It was well worth getting up at 05:30 to witness this.



As the sun's disk became fully visible and lit the rest of the islands with morning sunshine, I panned around trying to see if I could spot the island hosting the webcam which I would log onto everyday back home, showing a splendid view over Tortola. I couldn't be certain which island it was, and I had looked previously many times at the screens in my studio to see if I could see any cruise ships in view of the camera, but I never did. Perhaps I was just looking in the wrong place or at the wrong island.

But there were some tall ships in the harbours we were passing - it was quite like a pirate scene!



Keith would normally join me very early on deck with his binoculars but this morning he was very conspicuous by his absence. I was sure he would want to see this.

There were two other cruise ships in front of us today. Last time we visited we were the only visiting cruise ship. I had heard that due to extensive renovations to the cruise terminal at Road Town's port, it would not be possible to dock. All cruise ships would need to anchor in the bay then the ship's boats would 'tender' everyone ashore.



We had heard that we had to get tickets from reception for our turn of tendering and then wait to be called to our boat. When Keith did appear on deck and had his usual look-see

at today's new island, he quickly raced down to reception to grab our tickets. We had planned to spend the whole day at Cane Garden Bay on the other side of the island today and we did not want to hang around!

We were lucky to be on the very first tender boat. It quickly got us ashore, passing dramatically close to the other two huge cruise ships tendering their own passengers and we moored up along side a new dock which was in a state of major construction.



It looked very much like the new cruise terminal was going to be enormous - maybe able to accommodate up to four cruise ships at once.

A bus was going straight to Can Garden Bay and we climbed in to sit like compacted sardines in a can. Very uncomfortable but we knew it would only be a fifteen minute ride.



Up and down extremely steep hills we went and noticed that the seemingly unfinished roads we saw back in 2011 with tarmac that just suddenly stopped, had finally been finished.

All at once we arrived at the Beach at Cane Garden Bay. It was exactly 4 years to the day, when we were there last! We wasted no time in getting our sun beds and brollies organised, set up our camp on a mainly deserted beach as other cruisers had not yet arrived, bagged our rum punches from the beach bar for just \$3, stripped off and waded into the sea with our drinks in our hands. We had arrived!!!!



The native pelicans were still diving into the shallows close to the bathers and the yachts and catamarans were still moored in the bay, the sea was turquoise right up to the next islands, the already-hot sands were pure and white, the surf was frothy, the shady bendy palm trees on the beach were dark green and yellow - some with clusters of ready-to-fall coconuts - all this on a backdrop of forest green vegetation blanketing the hillsides and punctuated by the odd expensive villa or hotel poking through the trees.



And the hot sun was shining! We had dreamed of revisiting this place for 4 years and now we were looking at it again with our own eyes. Fantastic! We made the most of the day in this paradise and we didn't want the day to end!



'End' it had to though and reluctantly we packed up our things and headed back to the bus for our journey back to Road Town and then a tender back to the ship. Thomson had chartered a large motor catamaran to get more people back to the ship quickly and I got some good footage as we bounced around on the waves.



Disappointingly it was a bit too cloudy tonight for a sunset, but tomorrow held the promise of another fantastic day in the Caribbean.

Thursday - Philipsburg, St Maarten

I had a plan for this day which I had spoken to the others about at our pre-holiday Caribbean night where I had cooked a Caribbean themed dinner with Jerk Chicken, Rice and Peas. I particularly wanted to go to Sunset Bar at Maho beach to watch the airliners coming incredibly low over the beach in Princess Julliana Airport. I had seen videos on YouTube of how low these planes actually are - they seem to be less than 100 feet above the sand. People flock there as it is the prime attraction on the island. When planes take off, 'idiots' cling onto the perimeter fence and the planes are so close the jet engine blast then with sand and lifts them off the ground - sometimes hurling them 100 yards across the beach into the sea. Very dangerous but from a spectators point of view, very compulsive viewing!



On deck this morning I filmed ourselves and 4 other huge ships docking at the cruise terminal in Philipsburg. They were enormous parked up alongside and in front of us and made The Celebration look like one of their lifeboats! (sic!)



Each of these massive cruise ships could accommodate anything between 3,500 and 5,000 passengers as compared to 1,250 on our own ship. If these ships were filled to capacity and most people made for Maho beach, it could get very crowded there indeed. I hoped it wouldn't!



Discussing our prospective trip today at breakfast, Gill had heard it was going to cost £20 each to get there and \$20 beach back again - a taxi bill of \$80 per couple. I had an aching feeling that this was going to be too much for everyone to take. Gill suggested we get a bus into Marigot like we did before when we visited in 2011, but all we did that day was walk around with no real purpose, yes the cheap bus ride was only \$2 per person each way, but I was disappointed we didn't go to Maho beach that day. So...

After a bit of closer research and encouragement at Destination Services on deck 5, I was told that a fee of \$20 each way per person was not the case and we could get a ride there and back for just \$16. That was more like it! But I got the feeling that not everyone i.e. Gill and Martin really wanted to go.

The best time to see the planes land was early to late afternoon, so as it was only 10am we all went ashore and walked into town. The girls were making their usual bee-line for the jewellers. 4 years ago Gillie had bought a rather lovely bracelet from a jewellers on the way into town but she had only worn it once and it had broken. She came back to the Caribbean armed with the exact-same broken bracelet and was on a mission to get something done about it(!)

While us guys had coffee in a cafe with free Wi-Fi, the girls disappeared into the very same shop visited 4 years ago where the bracelet had been purchased. I guess they were in there nearly an hour and when they emerged Gillie had got the satisfaction of a replacement bracelet! (Good on ya!!!) No receipt provided either! Result!



We walked further into town and the girls were still buzzing round every jewellers we passed. I had a look in an electronics and music shop and I saw the Video Camera I had my eye on - a Go-Pro Hero 4 - on display and I asked the price. (If only I hadn't left my credit card on board ship - actually I am glad I did because I would have bought it as it was such a good tax-free price.

Walking out the shop I spied a familiar looking bunch walking this way. Turning on the video camera I caught them all unawares as I shouted out "Ladies and Gentlemen - its the Peakles!!!!" They spun around startled, grinned and then waived to my camera!



We realised that we would have to walk 20 minutes back to the port to pick up transport for Maho beach and just as we got there Mart said they would give it a miss. I think his knee was playing up. OK the three of us still wanted to go but after asking at the Tourist Information office, I was told if I wanted to go *by bus* to Maho Beach we would have to walk 20 minutes *back into town* to catch one. Oh no, more delay!

It was very hot so I suggested to the girl on the desk we might travel back to town by water taxi. She said, you may as well get straight onto a mini bus taxi here for \$8 each as the water taxi would be \$7 each then the bus fare would be another \$5 on top!

So elated that my plan was finally coming together with a good solution, we found a minibus going to Maho Beach. It took bit lot longer than I had expected, at least 20 minutes. It didn't look that far looking along the coast while sailing into port this morning, but the road twisted round and went up and down hills elongating the journey.

Suddenly we had arrived! Yes the beach was pretty crowded and there was an airliner just about to take off! I directed the others to Sunset Bar, which was quite full, while I filmed the take off and onlookers being blown into the sea.



Shortly after I joined the others and they had acquired a table. I had been a little worried for the girls that shade on this beach would be at a premium and maybe nowhere to sit in the bar, but today we were lucky! We ordered a drink and noticed another table closer to the waters edge had become vacant so we shifted tables. Our drinks came and we ordered lunch. Just as the waiter took our order, yet another table became available with a 'ring-side' seat of the aircraft coming into land, so we jumped onto that one and pointed out to the waiter that we had moved again. He was very friendly and said that he was used to everyone doing it!

Aircraft were landing all the time, some big and some just 2 or 4 seaters. All very exciting.



During lunch two guitarists struck up some Caribbean style flamenco, they were very good. They changed genre quite a lot and then played that acoustic version of Hotel California as The Peakles had played last week. I put \$5 in their gratuity box. These guys were really excellent.



Lunch - a burger of barbequed pulled-pork with a salad, was delicious and not overly expensive either.



We spent the rest of the afternoon watching the planes and listening to the band. A really good time was had and I was sure Martin and Gill would have enjoyed it. I think Gill had definitely been worried she would not be able to find shade.

I had heard on Facebook that getting back into Philipsburg might not be easy due to heavy traffic. Today there was a good amount of traffic but we easily reached the cruise terminal with an hour and a half to spare before we sailed. The journey to the ship was 35 minutes and we had left around 3:50pm



Gillie went off to look at more jewellers in the port (she hardly ever actually buys anything and usually takes back what she does!) Keith and I headed over to the bar for a cold drink and I ordered 2 rum punches! They came in 18" high glasses and I swear it was nearly a pint of rum punch in there. As we walked round, people looked at us curiously and asked us what it was we were drinking and how much it was (\$7.50)

The sunset upon leaving Philipsburg this evening was the best yet and I found my way onto Eagle deck high on top of Horizons bar right at the front of the ship, maybe 50 feet above my usual perch under the bridge on the Promenade deck.



While the UK had its best view of a partial Solar Eclipse for many years (I was sorry to miss it) coming out of St Maarten in the sunset, a brand new moon smiled down on us and made up for it!

We went to see Fogwell Flaxes second show of the week during the evening and finally ended up at The Lido for hot late night drinks. Tomorrow was Gill's 64th Birthday and we had a special day planned!

Friday: St Johns, Antigua

I walked out on deck around 06:30 and was nearly blown off the deck! Last night we had noticed more of a swell as we quietly slipped past the island of Barbuda. The front part of the ship had been roped off and rain was in the air. Oh dear, not a good day for a helicopter trip around Antigua, that is if it is even going to fly today in this wind.

I had mooted the idea of flying round a Caribbean island by helicopter to the others sometime last year and thought we could do the same trip round Barbados as Martin had done on his very first cruise in 2000. Unfortunately no helicopters were operating in Barbados at the time of our cruise and so I had to look further a-field.

I found a company in Antigua and told the others. Everyone was up for it and it was to cost £122 each for a 20 minute trip. I was about to call the company to book when I suddenly had cold feet and called Thomson instead to check that we were actually in Antigua on the day that had been itemised on our itinerary.

Speaking to the girl in Liverpool, she told me that our itinerary had changed and that our visit to Antigua was to be 2 days later than the original date! Good job I checked as that might have cost me nearly £750 if I had booked it and we couldn't go!

She also said that it could be booked through Thomson with the same helicopter company for £4 more each which would include transfers to and from the Heliport, Seemed like a good idea as a taxi was bound to cost anything from \$7 to \$15 each. Thankfully I booked through Thomson. It was on the ship, I noticed that this excursion had now been added to the official Thomson Excursions list, and that all helicopter trips this morning had been booked up. Checking with destination services they informed me that the trip was still on and we were to meet our chaperone on the dockside at 09:20.

Sure enough, after perhaps too big a breakfast for a helicopter flight in high winds, we left the ship and found our lady waiting for us.

She directed us to a waiting minibus and we climbed aboard. It was with a little trepidation that I went on the trip as the documentation had said there was a weight limit of 16st 7lbs, and after a weigh-in mid week I found that I was half a stone too heavy to comply. Probably all the good food on the ship being responsible. So I could imagine getting to the heliport and either being disappointed due to exclusion, or having to pay another £126 for a second ticket due my excessive weight and the disapproving look from my wife while having the 'mick' taken out of me by the others. I was at the mercy of the helicopter company.

We walked in and straight away we were weighed again. Weight was important because it translated into the amount of fuel the helicopter would require. Luckily as there were only 5 of us (the maximum the helicopter could take was 6) nothing was mentioned about my weight and we were guided to the next phase which was the safety induction.

We were fitted with life jackets and knew what to do to ingress and egress from the chopper and were directed to wait for our aircraft on the back porch. Soon the sound of approaching jet turbo-shafts were audible and 2 Bell Jet Ranger helicopters came out of the sky to gently land in front of us.



One at a time we walked out and boarded the machine, lowering our heads away from spinning rotor blades which could never have touched us anyway. We had been given number badges which corresponded to where each of us would be sitting in the cabin. Gill - the Birthday Girl - was in the front seat on her own and knowing that Gill is not too keen on flying, I wondered how well she would cope - the wind was still very blustery even though the sun was now shining.

There were two rear facing seats and two forward facing seats in the rear cabin. Martin and I, the two heaviest sat in the back seats facing forwards while Gillie and Keith sat in the other seats facing backwards. Headphones were donned so we could hear a commentary and by pressing a button, we could speak to each other. This also dulled the noise of the helicopter's engine a great deal.

In no time we had lifted off, the nose of the helicopter dipping in its usual fashion while it accelerated then climbed in to the air.



I never realised the island was so beautiful! From the air we passed over inlets and mini harbours, over mountains with a coverage of trees, and over the sea too flying at a maximum height of 700 feet and at 130 mph.



The wind gusted now and again and the helicopter rocked, sank and twisted as it battled the winds. The pilot warned us when turbulence was likely so we were prepared, and this made a great deal of difference to our comfort and confidence.



We travelled right round the island and it was fantastic. For almost twice the price we could have crossed the sea to visit the island of Montserrat which was close by and peer into its live volcanic crater, but with the cost a line had to be drawn and we were extremely satisfied that we had our monies-worth.



We flew over the harbour at St Johns and looked down on our ship 600 feet below. Considering the ship is only just over 1,000 feet long you can imagine how low we were!



We headed back to the peninsular where we took off from and leaned into the turn as the helicopter banked and we sank back down to the ground with the machine jumping a little more as the ground-effect-turbulence came into play before gently settling on the helipad.



One by one and again in strict discipline, each of us climbed out and headed for the helicopter building. The next passengers anticipating their own flight with no doubt with a little anxiety. We told them it was a great flight and a wonderful experience - which it certainly was. Gill had coped extremely well on her own in the front seat and had enjoyed her birthday treat very much indeed.

We climbed back into the bus and headed back to the ship. We decided to spend the afternoon on a beach as it would probably be our last chance. Turners Beach was suggested as we had been there in 2011, but Dickenson's Beach was far closer.

Our morning taxi driver had been very friendly and so we decided to seek him out and give him a bit more business. He was very pleased to see us and escorted us onto the beach when we arrived.

The beach looked awesome, white sands, turquoise waters, palm trees rising out of the sands. Unfortunately most of the long beach had sun beds and brollies which belonged to the hotels with beach frontage, so we could not rent or use these as they were for residential guests. It meant a bit of a walk up the beach to where cruise ship people were settled on sun beds and brollies that could be rented. It took a little while but the goal was achieved and we settled down for a lovely afternoon's beach time. The water was lovely and there was a lot to watch while we sipped rum punches on our sun beds.



The taxi driver we had used could not pick us up, but he sent his mate over to collect us and called us to make sure we were okay. That was really nice of him! The taxi driver that did pick us up was a character. He started humming Bob Marley songs and all of a sudden (with us guys being musicians) full renditions of his songs were performed while he drove us back. He loved it and joined in! He said he would have to buy Emmanuel our first taxi driver of the day a drink for passing us on to him as he had really enjoyed himself!



Back on the ship we showered ready for pre-dinner drinks and another special dinner - this time it was to be Steak-on -a-Stone in a special area on the Lido aft deck.

Steak on a Stone was a four course meal included in our Gourmet dinner package. We turned up and were shown our table. Flat breads and dips were brought to the table as an appetiser followed by the preparation of a Caesar salad made at the table by the Head Waiter. Then we were issued and fitted with paper bibs and a sizzling slice of prime sirloin was served on a red hot stone in front of us with accompanying vegetables. There was a choice - it didn't have to be steak, it could have been Lamb or Chicken or Fish! But Steak-on-a-Stone was what we had envisaged so Steak-on-a-Stone was what we ordered! It was wonderful. You removed your steak frying itself from your stone, cut off a slice and then placed it back on the stone to cook it to your liking. You could also sear your vegetables too if you wanted. It was a novel experience!

Gillie and I went to the Broadway Show Lounge to watch the final crew show while the others retired to their cabins as they were absolutely 'zonked'! Once again Wally was the star in the show and everyone cheered him!

On the way back I called into the Photographers shop to ask where our photographs had got to? Milos looked rather embarrassed and promised them the next day! We had chose 4 altogether, one was free anyway and the others were £40 each, but he did us a deal of the three we had to pay for - for £100. They were very good!



Saturday: Rosseau, Dominica

Again the night crossing from Antigua had much more of a swell than of late. I was up on deck filming our entrance into port at Roseau, Dominica. The sea was as calm as a mill pond with hardly any waves at all. I was pleased to see this especially after last night's bumps and sways.

There was a cruise ship already docked at the cruise ship terminal and I was a little confused that we were steering a course that headed away from it. It soon became apparent we were going to dock elsewhere - it looked like the Container port.



Sure enough we docked beside Roseau's containers and cranes. On our last cruise we were not very enthralled with Dominica as it seemed a lifeless place to visit. But as we had docked at Portsmouth at the other end of the island back in 2011 we tried to keep an open mind about Roseau.



After breakfast we jumped ship and walked towards the town centre. The pavements were in a bad state of repair and storm water was running in vent like drains down the

middle of them. Buildings were shacks and the whole scene resembled something you saw on TV in the poorest part of a country like India



We stopped at a bar which offered free Wi-Fi and the best 'Juice-drink-ever'. We went in and ordered a juice but it was horrible and watery. The Wi-Fi didn't work even after the barman brought over the pass code scribbled on a shoe-box (why a shoe-box?). On visiting the loo, Gillie was told to go into the Gents to find toilet paper but there was none.

After that we shunned everything else about Dominica and walked back to the ship. Maybe we should have booked a tour into the rain forest, but the others were wary of getting bitten by mosquitoes. We never had a plan for Dominica - maybe we would have enjoyed the island more if we had.



We spent the rest of the day on sun beds on-board ship and I filmed our departure as usual, noting that there was a rainbow over the mountains.



The sea was still very calm when we left, but as soon as we reached the end of the island a gale blew up and we were rocking and rolling across the sea like we had never seen since we boarded. We listened to the Captains address and he told us to expect a much bigger swell tonight.

He was not joking. Come 11pm you could hardly stand up let alone walk in a straight line. As we came back from watching the Show Teams final show for us, we passed lots of others on their way back to their cabins joking that they'd drunk too much! It was quite a long night and for a bit of extra confidence Gillie and I took a sea-sickness tablet each, just to be sure! The whole day had been the worse day of the cruise and was a bit of an anti-climax, especially as we had to pack tonight and leave our cases outside for collection ready for transfer back to the airport for our flight home.

Sunday: Adventure over, now back home to reality!

Once again I missed our arrival in Barbados but with the lack of sleep during the gale last night it was hardly surprising.

We had breakfast then went back to the cabin to pack the last things into our hand luggage, say thank you to our Steward Lanang and give him a tip for keeping our cabin pristine and vacate it. We had booked an alternative cabin for a late checkout which cost

an extra £35 but for the 5 of us it was well worth it as we could leave our hand luggage in safety and also clean up before we moved onto the airport.

We still had until 3:15 pm to do as we pleased and most people stayed on board for drinks and food. I suggested my idea of calling Anthony and asking him to take us back to Zaccios for lunch. He was delighted that we called him and he was waiting for us eagerly at the taxi-rank.

He took us straight to Zaccios at Hometown where we had drinks and a lovely lunch. We went for a short walk up the beach and said 'bye-bye' to Barbados properly. It was a fine end to our 14 night cruise.



But now it was time to get back to the ship and be transported to Grantley Adams Airport for our Dreamliner flight home.

We arrived at the airport after a 40 minute drive at 3:50 pm and our aircraft (which had just arrived from Gatwick) would be taking off at 6:30pm



We kept ourselves amused with the shops and the free Wi-Fi and then our flight was called.

We made our way down the end of the terminal and got on a bus. Although Premium Club passengers had been called first, it seemed like everyone made a mad rush to the gate.

We walked up the air-stairs and found our seats, this time right at the front of the aircraft - row 1. These are the best seats on the plane because there is bags of legroom and nobody in front of you pushing their seat back into your face.

It was to be an overnight flight of 7 and a half hours which came as a nice surprise as the journey out was a lot longer.

I noted that the aircraft was not the one we had flown to Barbados on two weeks earlier and was slightly older and had a lesser interior. We took off and headed east.



Food on the plane was good (albeit served quite late) and there was a full English breakfast served before we landed. We flew into the UK along the Severn estuary and I kept track of most of our flight using the on-board dynamic map which showed your position and other flight details at every point of the flight.



Back at Gatwick we soon picked up our luggage and made our way to Car Park 6 level 1 where cars were waiting. Now just the 90 minute drive back home to Thatcham where a proper bed would be waiting.

It was a great holiday which we all enjoyed very much. Okay there were one or two things not quite to our liking and a couple of things went wrong.

But what a ***fantastic time*** we had!

I have 4 and a half hours of footage to look through to make my second Caribbean Holiday film which I am looking forward to doing.

I would like to think that one day we will make a third visit back to the Caribbean but for now we have Portugal to look forward to in a 5-star villa for two weeks in September and then a real treat - our first visit to New York for New Year's Eve with our kids!!!

in 2017 Gillie and I will Celebrate our own 40th Wedding Anniversary. I am looking at forward to another cruise already!

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