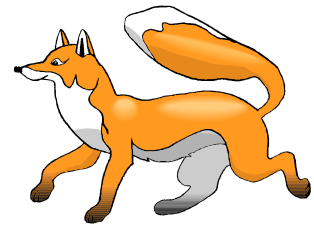


Cruise Report



Ship:	Costa Allegra
Dates:	6 April 2007
Itinerary:	Hong Kong – DaNang [Vietnam] – Halong Bay [Vietnam] – Hong Kong
Duration:	6 Days
Add-ons:	Pre & Post cruise stays overnight at Intercontinental Grand Stanford, Hong Kong

Introduction ..

I booked this little trip in early January 2007. The dates fitted in perfectly with an Easter getaway, and limited time had to be taken off work, bearing in mind that we have a 5 week holiday booked for November 2007.

So the cruise was booked, the flights confirmed, the hotel was chosen and the limos were scheduled to collect us – we were off on a *quickie* cruise. One that was going to be quite different from anything we'd ever experienced before.

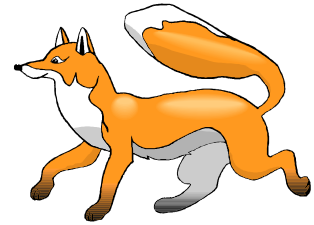
Getting to Hong Kong ..

The new airline rules commenced in Australia on 1 April [everything in less than 100ml containers and in one zip lock baggie] which meant this was the first time we'd had to pack under this regime and because our standard plan was to carry all toiletries and cosmetics in our hand luggage, we had to seriously rethink this strategy. I'm guessing that the rules aren't going to revert any time soon – shame that, because I liked my old system.

It was Robyn's birthday and after several choruses of "HBTY HBTY HBDR HBTY" the car collected us and we left for the International Airport.

Flew Qantas - check in no problem – emergency row seats, extra space – excellent duty free shopping for fragrances – r&r in the Qantas Club – board the flight to Singapore – all in all very pleasant.

At Singapore terminal we enjoyed a brief walk around before boarding Cathay Pacific flight to Hong Kong – my head rest broken – Robyn's table broken – sellotape holding ceiling panels in place – engine problems delay take off with eventual announcement saying another hour on ground waiting in [hot] plane – drink service starts – repairs fixed early – drinks service and take off happening together – fluster and panic - not a good look for an airline that is generally more expensive because of it's reputation for quality service and their younger fleet. We got over it. Doesn't pay to sweat the small stuff.



Hong Kong [the first time] ..

For anyone that hasn't visited the new terminal 'enormous' barely begins to describe it. We got off the plane and walked for 5 or 10 minutes before catching a train and then walking for another 5 minutes or so.

We approached customs and immigration and noticed cameras trained on the approaching crowds, with the pictures shown on monitors as heat sources. They were checking the body temperature of incoming people [SARS and Bird Flu] and if you looked a bit hot or flustered they pulled you aside for an anal probe – just joking, it was an ear probe, but the rest is true.

Now [as I already mentioned] the terminal is really **big** and due to the number of limousines that pick up customers they have a lounge especially for limousine customers to wait whilst their car is called to the collection point from the limousine car park. A pretty neat system and within minutes we were on our way to the Intercontinental Hotel Grand Stanford.

I'm not a huge fan of 'the buffet' but breakfast was excellent the next morning, after which we set off for a brief look around Hong Kong before boarding at 4pm.

It was Good Friday but that didn't seem to make any difference as all shops eventually opened – bear in mind that nothing opens early, shops open mid morning and stay open late into the night.

Our meanderings eventually took us to the Star Ferry / Ocean Terminal where we saw the gambling ship Star Pisces arrive and the Costa Allegra already at berth.

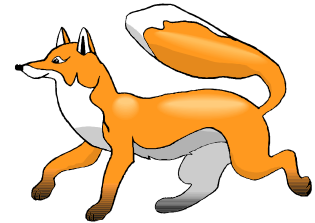
Note on Gambling Ships: There are 7 gambling ships based in Hong Kong and they sail each evening, returning the following morning. The Pisces is the only one that berths at the Ocean Terminal. We were told that there are plans to build a cruise centre on the harbour land where the old airport used to be. This would be good for the gamblers but not so good for the cruisers as the Ocean Terminal is a great location [albeit not necessarily a great shipping terminal].

Note on Ocean Terminal: as well as being a shipping berth this is an up market, 2 level shopping centre with a car park on top. The ships berth either side and the luggage is handled at the very end of the terminal – under a tent.

Checking out of the hotel we returned to the Ocean Terminal and checked in our luggage. It's a bit of a convoluted system where the taxi takes you along the wharf, you drop off the bags and then walk back inside the terminal.

Embarkation was at 4pm and unlike any other cruise we've been on before, it didn't start earlier. We arrived as they opened the doors and passed through the formalities. Without realising, Robyn was the first guest on board and they made quite a fan fare of the whole deal.

That was a first, being first.



Costa Allegra ..

The Costa Allegra [at 28,000 tonnes] is an older ship, 3 star, but she had a recent fit out and was in pretty reasonable shape. Décor wise she is very European minimalist and quite attractive and comfortable. This link provides ship stats.

<http://www.costacruisesasia.com/B2C/PAO/Shopping/Ships/AL/default.htm>

In keeping with my rule of thumb ‘book the majority outside cabin’ i.e. whatever there are most of, is the one I book. Accordingly, we had an outside cabin, with 2 very nice portholes.



She is an ‘odd looking’ ship, compared to more modern vessels, particularly from the stern.

The 3 levels of glass are, from top to bottom, the Casino, the Dining Room [VIP area, partitioned off from the general populace] and the crew bar. That’s right – prime real estate dedicated to the hired help – something you would never see on a newer ship. *Plus* they have an outside deck area with seating to enjoy, fantastic.

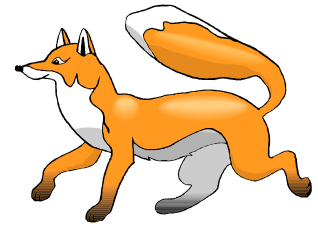
Costa Crociere entered the Asian market with a view to selling short cruises to the Chinese. Chinese don’t apparently like long holidays because they don’t have a lot to start with and are reluctant to waste them. The first cruise was a sell-out, capacity about 980 passengers. Thereafter they were routinely sailing with 200-400 on board, with the exception of Christmas and Easter.

Initially they had shaped their product delivery to suit the Chinese – food, entertainment etc. and had a large number of Chinese staff who had never sailed before. As the experiment failed to deliver the numbers they hoped for they expanded the marketing throughout Asia and reduced some of the Chinese staff numbers, bringing back the traditional Philippine staff. This, in turn, increased the number of nationalities on board, Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, Philippine etc. There were 5 languages at the boat drill, which was casually conducted the day after we sailed, as per Italian time no doubt.

On our cruise there were a couple of Frenchies and a couple of Krauts, an ancient Italian diva and her consort plus a quartet of young Italianos, four folks from the USofA, a couple of younger girls Julie [Costa staff] and Lidya [a teacher], 7 Hong Kong expats with 4 children home from school in the UK, 2 travel agents from Perth, Robyn & I, and about 900 Asians.

On the negative side: it was like inviting 900 people to go on a cruise without telling them the ‘cruise rules’. They were noisy, they never stopped talking whilst announcements were being made or during shows, they had no concept of queuing, they kept their kids up until they went to bed, some wore the same clothes every day, and they waved their hand in the air for service – continually raising it higher until they got attention.

Itinerary	
6-Apr-07	Hong Kong
7-Apr-07	At Sea
8-Apr-07	DaNang
9-Apr-07	HaLong Bay
10-Apr-07	At Sea
11-Apr-07	Hong Kong



On the positive side: It took all of 24hrs before the staff all knew Mr Allan and Mrs Allan. We received very attentive service. We were invited to the Captains cocktail party [the small and private one] by Patricia, the Cruise Director. We met a number of the senior officers and the Restaurant Manager made a point of dropping by to say hello. Apparently he smelt gorgeous [Bulgari Aqua], according to Robyn, and he was Italian.

In general, the Asian crowd participated in every event that was free and avoided anything that cost money. Dance classes were a version of Chinese line dancing, arts and crafts produced all manner of paper flowers and painted 'things', ping pong tournaments were huge, the pool was full – except for at meal times when the outer deck was evacuated like a scene from Jaws. BUT there was no deck drinks service and the shop only sold perfume, watches, booze and jewellery. There was no Costa clothing or Costa gear at all, no books, no confectionary, no pens, no stationary, no odds and sods that are normally sold, presumably because they couldn't sell it.

Of course this did mean that you could always get a booking at the spa, pre-dinner drinks included one on one entertainment, and there was no crowd checking out the photographs or browsing the shops.

That pretty much covers our cruising companions and I wouldn't want you to get the wrong impression, it was different, that doesn't make it bad, just that you need a good travel agent when you book these things to warn you of the pit falls.

In talking with the travel agents they don't sell these short cruises to Australians usually, they sell the 10-15 day cruises where there is a much smaller Asian complement and usually those from Hong Kong who are considered to be more cosmopolitan than the mainland Chinese. Comments from the Staff and the Cruise Director support this in as much as the on board offerings are changed to European standards when they cruise the longer itineraries.

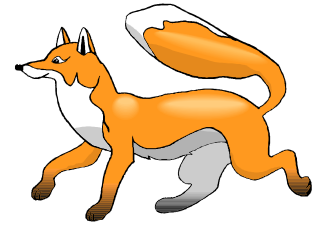
The Ports .. DaNang ..

We berthed in DaNang but we had made arrangements to be taken to Hoi An and were collected at 8am, arriving there by about 8.40am, passing the famous China Beach on the way [if you're not too young to remember the war].

Why were we going to Hoi An ? – simple really, this is the town famous for it's tailors and made to measure clothes and after searching the boards and a few emails, we'd arranged to visit Yaly Couture Tailors [number 1 store, not number 2 store].

The drive across was an eye opener. You know those emails where they have the family of 4 all riding on the motor bike, or the 27 crates of beer balanced on the handle bars, you can see everyone one of these pictures in about 15 minutes of travel.

The bikes travel on any side of the road, in any direction, so it's not uncommon to have a swarm of bikes heading towards you, only to part like the proverbial wave as they are about to collide head on.



Hoi An is a river town, with narrow streets, shops that sell everything you could imagine, a market that is overwhelming in humanity and aroma, and street hawkers everywhere you turn.

Our guide took us directly to Yaly and within about 30 minutes I had picked a nice cashmere, had the inside leg measurement taken and was ready to go and savour a Vietnamese coffee. Robyn had ordered 2 jackets [from a sample she brought with her] 2 silk tops, and a pair of silk pants. Before we left they took body shape photographs of both of us and we arranged to return for fittings at 1pm and went to explore.



Breakfast was in a riverside café. Banana pancakes [fried] with chocolate sauce and coffee made by individual dripolator, very thick and strong. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger, is what they say, it was actually very nice.

We shopped, and the choice was excellent, and the bargains were everywhere, and Robyn showed great control.

We went for a ride on the river in a junk built for 2. The pollution was everywhere but on reflection if a country has trouble feeding itself I don't suppose they worry too much about a bit of litter in the river.

For lunch we went to the Pho Hoi Hotel and had a selection of specials, one of which was incredibly hot and one which was rubbery, but the rest were interesting and appetizing and I wasn't too concerned about asking what it was.

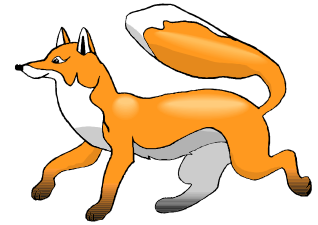


FYI I just looked up the hotel on the net and it costs \$37 per night for a double. For one of the better hotels in town.

At 1pm we returned for the fittings. Everything seemed to be going according to plan and we hung around for the next hour or so for subsequent fittings. It was fascinating watching the other customers come and go as they tried on their clothes and had their fittings. It transpires that because I had been in touch with the owner we were guaranteed to get out clothes within 6 hours whereas the customer off the street was being asked to return the next day.

Yaly employs 350 tailors and 150 sales staff, who were all 5 foot tall and looked stunning in white silk pants and black silk top [the Vietnamese version of a Cheong Sam]. As we sat there staff were walking out with garments and returning 10 minutes later, bolts of material were being delivered, and people were in perpetual motion. Apparently the sales staff received 2 days off per month and worked from open to close every other day, 8.30am to 10pm typically. In any event this was a very different society to that in which we lived.

By 3pm we were heading back to the Costa Allegra and we sailed at 5pm.



The Ports .. Halong Bay ..

Is famous for the 2000 Islands that you have to pass through as you enter the harbour.

I have never passed anything so close, so often, as we did as we sailed in. To make it all the more dramatic the weather was grey, the water was grey and the mist hung heavy in the air. It was almost eerie because it was silent as the islands loomed alongside and then disappeared again.

But according to 'Tour Guy' the weather in Halong Bay is always like this, and the other problem is that the harbour is shallow which means that the ship had to anchor quite a way out.

We opted for a junk cruise to visit an island that had received world heritage listing because of it's limestone caves. It had been found about 10 years ago by a local fisherman and had become the main tourist attraction for the area.

There were junks everywhere as we arrived – the disembarkation process is for the junk to sail straight into a set of steps and for the passengers to skip lightly off the bow onto the steps. A good plan except the congestion was incredible and this was [by all accounts] a quiet day.

It could almost have been made in Hollywood and towed into place. A hollow island with massive limestone stalactites and stalagmites of various hues and forms. Climb the 100 outside steps and enter the cave. Follow the pathway and out the other side and down the next 100 steps. Find the junk and away you go.

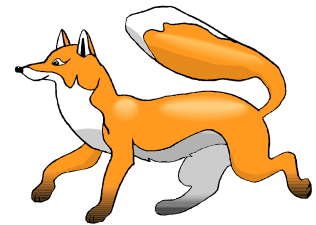
After sailing around the more interesting [?] islands we returned to Halong and to look at the local markets. It is apparent that this has been created to feed the tourist needs for gifts and treasures and there is a lot of work going on to make the wharf area more attractive but Robyn had had enough for the day and after letting the tour guide know we left the tour and boarded a tender.

Going, Going, Gone ..

Vietnamese junks do not make great tenders. The deck around the cabin is very narrow, the step from deck to gunwale is high, and the whole thing is moving up and down erratically.

It was as Robyn was transferring from junk to ship that she fell backwards. The crew assisting her grabbed frantically, I caught her from behind and whilst she didn't fall overboard she did hurt her ankle.

At first we just iced it down. 24 hours later the Doctori produced pain killers and yards of bandage to strap the problem. After returning to Australia we saw our own Doc and had x'rays and whilst there is no serious damage the leg is literally black and blue.



Hong Kong [the second time] ..

I like Intercontinental Hotels because you can arrive at 9am and get your room, can check out at 2pm with no questions asked, and can book a 6pm departure without the receptionist getting excited. They also have the best duvet that I've ever had on their beds, in comparison it felt as though the one we have at home was single ply. I want one!

We decided to play tourist, we had all of today and until 6pm tomorrow. Here are some of the high lites.

- Stanley Market: an institution in Hong Kong. A rabbit warren of markets and shops selling predominantly clothing.
- Drunken Pelican, Outback Steakhouse, Ned Kelly Bar: all excellent places to stop for a pint and a meal.
- Nathan Road: shopping, shopping, shopping – mile after mile.
- Hong Kong Harbour Symphony of Light and Sound: a 15 minute laser light show that takes place every night and the best place to see it from is on the harbour. Spectacular.



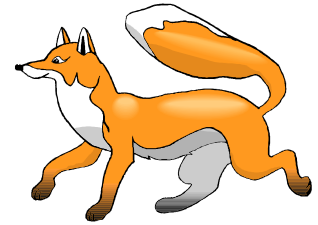
- Afternoon tea at the Peninsula Hotel: whilst the string quartet played bohemian rhapsody. A treat to be enjoyed by young and all. <http://www.hongkong.peninsula.com/>

Going Home ..

The limousine was booked through the hotel and he was on time and delivered us to the airport, at the correct location for the Qantas check in.

Emergency exit seats secured we head off to the Qantas Club where we grazed in a leisurely fashion until boarding time.

The flight was quick. Get onboard, dinner, fall asleep, breakfast, get off, meet the man from Hughes Limo's and by 9am we were home.



The Wrap Up ..

I'm amazed at how much we did in a week.

It was an excellent trip and whilst I reiterate that I've never been on a cruise that I did not enjoy - I would think twice about going on an Asian Cruise as distinct to a Cruise to Asia.

Costa Crociere was OK, but not, quite frankly, as Italian as we expected or as they need to be if they are going to advertise an 'Italian Experience'.

The Italian Night dinner was fantastic, with singing and dancing taking place in the dining room and complimentary wine oiling the proceedings. On any other night you'd be hard pressed to notice that you're on an Italian ship because the Italians are in the engine room or are Officers. The majority of the crew are Chinese, Philippine etc. and whilst many of them are excellent you could be on any ship anywhere in the world.

The more cruises we experience the more we consolidate our preferences;

- We cruise for the ship experience and the ports are an added bonus
- We enjoy the theatre of dressing for pre-dinner drinks and dinner
- We enjoy the camaraderie of dining with the same folks every night
- We enjoy doing nothing more demanding than reading a good book

So that's it for the Easter Cruise to Asia .. I hoped you enjoyed the review ..

Bring on the Wind Surf .. Barcelona to Barbados .. November 2007 ..