

Cruise Report

Ship: Grand Princess
Dates: 15 April 2006
Itinerary: Galveston, USA to Rome, Italy, Transatlantic Crossing
Duration: 20 Days
Add-ons: Pre-cruise stay at Galveston
Post Cruise 1 week in Spain and 4 days in London

Introduction ..

This was a great trip and as I start to write this report I'm cognisant of the fact that I need to show some constraint, otherwise the report will be pages and pages long, so sit back and enjoy the read whilst I try to practice literary restraint.

Getting there is half the fun ..

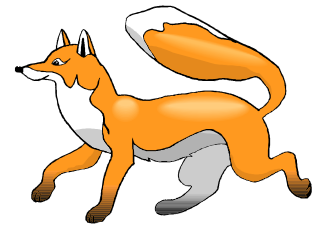
We've said before that we see the trip as part of the adventure and this is mostly because we travel so far to go on holiday [in comparison to say someone that lives in the USA]. So we try and make travelling as comfortable as possible.

Cars with drivers; a non stress way to start the trip is to be collected by someone in a smart suit and a nice car. They are always amazingly helpful when you need a hand with luggage and it's surprising how they can always get the closest parking spot.

Check-in early; allow plenty of time to work out how to check-in your baggage to the final destination. You don't want to see it again – unless of course you're travelling through USA, where you collect it, x'ray it, and hand it back. First is often best dressed when it comes to seat allocations. Emergency exit seats all the way makes economy a little more comfortable.

Use the lounges; if you have membership to a club such as Qantas Club use the reciprocal clubs to have a rest, a snack and sometimes a shower. For the record the stuff that Qantas provides free .. drinks, food, phones, computers .. usually attracts a charge elsewhere.

Brisbane lounge was good for breakfast. Los Angeles was great for a quick shower. Dallas was fun playing on the Sky Track. Rome and Barcelona couldn't get in the lounge because of some snafu. London BA lounge cooked a'la carte noodles and pasta – great dinner. Singapore lounge was big and modern and clean and just like an Australian lounge.



Allow time for transfers; we allowed 3 ¼ hours to pass through Los Angeles and only just made it because of the baggage collection, lost formal clothes case, found formal clothes case, seat allocation [used the self service terminal – worked great], exiting the terminal and joining about 400 people in the queue to get back in the line for more x’rays and in the spirit of not offending fellow travellers - grabbing a quick shower.

Galveston ..

We arrived on Wednesday at 5pm and collected most of our luggage. Robyn’s suitcase hadn’t made it and we were assured that it would be delivered to our hotel by 10pm that night. So off we went without it.

After being delivered to the Moody Gardens Hotel we had dinner in the restaurant and by 9pm we were fast asleep. Having slept in fits and spurts for the past 36 hours however I was awake at 5am and went down to reception to collect the suitcases. Yep, we’d had two missing bags delivered, one of which was thankfully Robyn’s, and the other bag [which wasn’t] was still in reception on Saturday morning when we checked out ,even after we’d said twice that it wasn’t ours and they really should alert the airline or the owners.

Nice hotel, very much a destination in itself. If I was returning I might try something at the other end of the island along the sea wall and a little closer to the action.

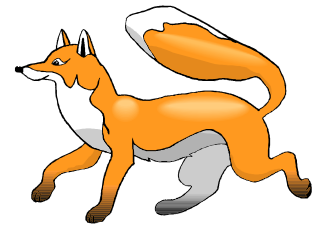
Galveston was a surprise, with a nice little main drag, we went on a horse and carriage tour, rode the trams, shopped a bit, visited Bank of America [really nice and helpful but awful exchange rates], had popcorn shrimp and beer at Magees [sp?], had Mexican at the Authentic Mexican Restaurant where the sample dish comprised no less than 2 large plates each, plus chips and dip, and margarites of course.

The taxis to and from cost more than the meal and we were in and out in 45 minutes.

The highlight however was the visit to Johnson Space Centre where we joined what they call the Level 9 Tour [behind the scenes], visited the training pool where the astronauts simulate zero gravity, walked on the training floor where the various simulators were [could see the regular tourists looking on], went into the mission control for the space station and saw the astronauts at work and rest, and visited the Apollo 13 Mission Control room from where ‘Houston we have a problem’ became famous. I sat in the Mission Controllers chair [after shouldering aside someone else who had aspirations] while they told the story.

Grand Princess ..

So on Saturday morning it was pack the bags and go to the ‘cruise meeting’. This hotel has so many cruisers stopping pre and post cruise that they have ‘Norm’ the Cruise Porter. You go down and congregate and he tells you the game plan for the day. Call him and he’ll whisk away your bags, turn up at noon for the bus, and have a good cruise y’all.



Embarkation was fairly painless. The Grand Princess had just completed 6 months of weekly cruising from Galveston and had done this a few times before we got there. We usually tell people that the worst thing about a cruise is the embarkation, ergo if you get a good one it's a bonus.

The Ship; at 109,000 tonne she's big [read something yesterday that said there were 15 ships over 100,000 tonne] and carries 2600 passengers.

She was in great condition, and throughout the cruise the deck crew worked non-stop polishing, and painting. Was this because we changed Captains in Spain, because she was starting Mediterranean Cruising or simply because that was the way the ship ran? Don't know, but we got the benefit of this.

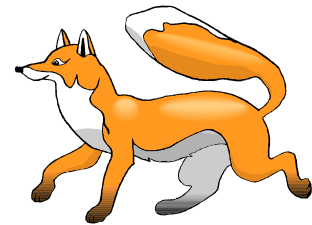
After you get a grasp on the layout, decks 5,6, and 7 are the restaurants, shops, internet café, cruise consultants, library and pursers desk. At the top we have decks 14, 15, and 16 which have the pools, spas, deck bars, buffet, burgers and grills, pizzas, movies under the stars [all day actually] and of course popcorn. Deck 17 is the Skywalker Night Club but it's our experience that it wasn't used an awful lot and I see they have moved it on the new build.

Strange thing about the this ship .. I actually felt as though there were less 'get together for a drink' spots than on [say] the Infinity which is 20,000 tonnes smaller.

The food; was excellent and probably the best we'd ever had. And I include the buffet which was open 24 x 7 and still looked great anytime we ventured in there. Menus were very heavy with lobster, shrimp, crab and other sea foods [which I loved] and there was a good alternative, always available menu, if you weren't inspired by the set menu.

The service staff; was a bit of a mixed bag.

- The boys in the dining room worked hard and were attentive. We were overwhelmed sometimes with the quantity of food that was brought along each meal but at least we got to try a lot .. and it was good!
- The cabin steward was fine .. he did everything he was supposed to do but just lacked a bit of 'character'.
- The shop staff was, in our view, disinterested. And it's not as if we didn't spend a few shillings with them, we went to see them every day. The exception was the jewellery store lady that let Robyn play with the USD\$150k diamond necklace.
- The Pursers office had a terrible job. People simply lined up to complain hour after hour and as far as I could tell a lot of it was 'space waste'. So they mostly did ok to put half a smile on their face. Andre, one of the staff, joined us on the tour of Gibraltar, he was funny, camp as a row of tents and loved it. I see him now playing diva in St Michaels cave.
- Bar staff had some stand out characters and a few that remembered us but on a big ship you didn't get to know them very well.
- Others: as I wandered round the ship I continually came across staff sneaking a smoke in passenger areas and I didn't think that this presented a good image.



The First Half of the Cruise; In 11 days we spent 9 hours in port. 3 hours at Ft Lauderdale to top up on food, oil, gas and passengers and 6 hours at Madeira.

Robyn and I loved the long sea days and we fell into our routines. Morning walk, shower, breakfast, spa, read, snooze, lunch, read, snooze, spa, dress for dinner, drinks, dinner, and bed.

Two things we note about Anytime Dining versus Fixed sitting. Grand Princess has 1 restaurant for fixed sitting and 2 restaurants for anytime dining. We prefer fixed sitting.

Observation 1 – the dress code is diluted, for whatever reason, and you get lots of people roaming around in very casual clothing i.e. shorts and t-shirts, in the evening. The formal evenings themselves had some people who dressed for the event although there were a lot of lounge suits and some that should have been sent to bed with no supper.

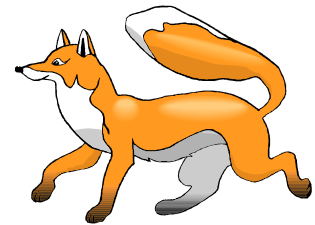
Observation 2 – the evening entertainment was staged simultaneously in 3 venues and it literally wasn't possible to see all shows. The late shows were staged about an hour after we finished dinner and this wasn't good timing for us, we were fed and watered and wanted to be entertained, not to have to wait for an hour.

The Second Half of the Cruise; In 9 days we visited 9 ports. We didn't want to run ourselves ragged so we planned lazy days every other day, which worked pretty well.

- **Casablanca:** interesting place but felt very uncomfortable in the streets and markets the way people looked at us.
- **Gibraltar:** love any place that used to be in the Empire. Shops looked British whilst staff all spoke Spanish. The main road runs across the runway.
- **Alicante:** enjoyed a walk round the town and a healthy paella for lunch.
- **Barcelona:** we liked this town, had a nice tour of the city and looked at Gaudi stuff, followed by a walk up and down Los Ramblas and a tapas lunch.
- **Cannes:** it was a public holiday and the shops were closed [and they were all those posh brands so we were really unlucky]. Rode on the open top bus and the little train.
- **Genoa:** another country another public holiday but had a nice tour of the old city and a walk through the cathedral to look at the paintings.
- **Elba:** a stroll through the city.
- **Pisa:** went to visit the LTOP and if you're not fit this isn't a good idea. The coach park is miles from the location but good fun when you get there.
- **Rome:** Stayed long enough to catch a plane.

This sector of the cruise changed the dynamic of the ship and people on board and I suspect that this is because it's tiring to get up every day and go play tourist. You don't feel like going out on the town if you're exhausted.

2600 Passengers on board; it became horribly obvious that whenever 2600 people do something together, such as getting on and off, the system strains to cope. Another good reason not to want to be off first every day, the chaos would drive you mad.



Our Dining Companions; without wanting to sound clichéd, we are very lucky when it comes to meeting people because once again we met lovely folks.



Let me introduce you to ‘Allan’s Angels’, the gals from Texas.

Left to right, Linda, Martha, Peggy, Robyn and Nancy.

Apparently there was another couple on the first night – we failed to make it on time, long story, so settled for a steak [which was excellent by the

way] – but they opted for any-time and we never saw them again..

Quick story, heard a couple proclaiming the benefits of anytime dining. They worked it out that if they went in the same time and asked for the same waitress they got the service that they wanted. Sounds like fixed seating to me?

So how do we rate the cruise? We love all cruises so of course we had a great time. It was tough to get off after 19 days and go back to putting your hand in your pocket every time you asked for something but all good things come to an end.

Alicante ..

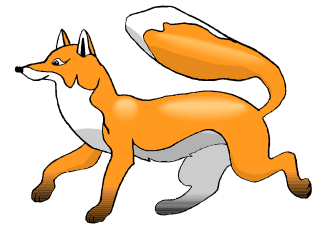
We disembarked early, grabbed the bags, car arrived at 8.30am and off we went to airport, checked in to find that Robyn was listed as a minor. Resolved problem and flew to Rome – Barcelona – Alicante where Verdun and Gil collected us at 5.15pm and returned us to Villa Aston, Gran Alacan

The plan was to spend 8 days in Spain and it was almost as restful as the first half of the cruise. Daily plan – get up, breakfast, get ready and head off to a market. Lunch somewhere or at home [smelly sausage, cheese, crusty bread and wine], siestas, prepare for dinner, eat drink and go home for a well deserved rest.

It was a real eye opener to see home many ‘Brits’ have places in Spain, and how they make it home. Wherever the British live there are British bars, British supermarkets, British restaurants and nothing Spanish except the banks. Long live the Empire!

Special thanks to Verdun and Gil for sharing their second home with us. We’re looking forward to reciprocating in February 07.

Checked in early for the flight to Gatwick and scored business class seats in the economy cabin. No idea why but we accepted the good luck.



London ..

The plane landed on time but took an hour to deliver the baggage. The driver was waiting when we came out and off we headed to London.

For those who don't know the geography Gatwick is about 90 mins from London by motorway. Longer if traffic is delayed or it's a Friday afternoon, as it was.

The Marriot County Hall Hotel has to have one of the best locations in London. It sits on the banks of the Thames, the London Eye is outside the window. You could walk to Leicester square in 20 minutes etc etc etc. Of course it cost an arm and a leg, but life is too short for cheap [anything].

After we checked in we did go straight to Leicester Square and found the last minute ticket seller. The best tickets for the night were in row 12 for We Will Rock You, so that was the evening organised. Did we enjoy it, of course, and there were some subtle differences between this version and the one we'd seen in Australia.

On Saturday morning we hit Harrods and wandered round the floors like tourists [which we were] and then grabbed an open top bus tour – and whilst the trip was fun the weather was cold and wintry.

Saturday night was a night to remember with Lord John and Lady Terri. Collected in a chauffer driven BMW 7 series. Pre dinner drinks at the Savoy [2 bottles bubbly] then whisked to the show [The Producers] with minutes to spare. Straight into the car after closing curtain [always a parking space on a yellow line says Rowland] and off to the Caprice for supper. Sometime in the wee small hours we called it a night.

And it had been a wonderful night with old friends, so much so that we went out again on Sunday to visit Flicker and Girlie, Terri's 2 week old foal [well not actually Terri it was Flicker who had the foal]. We managed to include morning tea in Burford, lunch at the Plough, and afternoon tea at the Farm Shop. What a gourmet day it was.

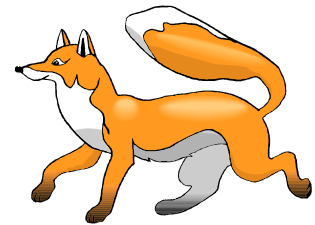
As we leave London, special thanks to John and Terri for making it a wonderful weekend. We look forward to the next time we meet, somewhere, sometime.

Singapore ..

We flew by BA and had business class seats. I don't know if the alternate [one forward facing one backward facing] layout works as well as it should. I think Qantas has a better product.

At the Hilton we were ushered to the 21st floor check-in, where cold drinks were awaiting us [some days you do get treated the way you'd like to be treated].

That night we met up with Ken and Sandra, who had flown from London 12 hours before us, for dinner. We only ever seem to meet when we cruise but always good to catch up.



Business class check in at Singapore is conducted in a separate VIP lounge area. Very civilized. After being ushered into the lounge they take the bags away and return with your stubs while you sit down show your passports and receive boarding passes.

The flight home was with Qantas and whilst Robyn was ordering another glass of champagne I lay down and woke up in Perth.

We had been away for five weeks and it had been wonderful.

How long before we started to plan the next trip .. tough to say .. but the plan is to look at sometime in the September 07 to January 08 window.

In the meantime there are a couple of decisions to be made about the kind of cruise we want next time. We started out wanting to try all cruise lines and all cruise products but I think we're deciding that we like the old style cruising, fixed sittings, and proper dress standards. I don't know if I need to go and try Carnival now?

So until next time, bon voyage.