

Cruise Report

Ship: MV Aurora
Dates: 11 January 2004
Itinerary: Southampton, UK to San Francisco, USA
Duration: 21 Days
Add-ons: UK holiday pre-cruise, San Francisco and LA stopovers post cruise

This report was written two and a half years after the event [I just never got around to writing it] and whilst some of the memories may not be as sharp as they were, I am sure that the essence of the cruise has lived on.

We landed in Manchester, UK on New Years Eve and Verdun was there to meet us. As we drove back to Blackpool [a well known British holiday seaside town] it was dark, it was snowing and the weather was all-round awful, Welcome to the UK.

A couple of hours later, we went out to celebrate New Year in the local time honoured tradition of dinner at 'Michaels' Chinese restaurant with excellent company. We grazed through the courses and washed everything down with copious amounts of beer, wine and spirits. As we left the restaurant some time in the wee small hours, full of good food and bonhomie, the snow fell lightly, but we were oblivious.

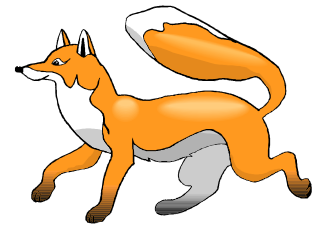
The next week or so was spent largely in and about Blackpool although we [Robyn and I and Verd and Gill] did visit Birmingham for a night out with my sister Val and her better half Jim and some of her gang, which was great. It was also spent fighting off a bout of flu that I managed to catch and did not want to take on the cruise.

The time flew by and pretty soon it was time to go cruising.

The Cruise Coach

When I booked this cruise I used a UK agent, Sail'n'Save from Blackpool. The main reason was that the cruise sector [the first 21 days of an 80 day world cruise] hadn't been advertised for sale in either the USA or Australia and whilst I was eventually quoted a price locally, it was about \$1000 per person more than the UK price. So of course I went with value [never go with cheap] and one of the optional add-ons was the cruise coach, which we took as being a pretty neat way to get from point A to point B.

Our coach picked us up at Blackpool coach station at about 07.30 on a very, very, brisk morning and the plan was that it would drive us straight to the Mayflower terminal in Southampton. Similar coaches were doing the same thing all over the country and you can imagine this fleet of coaches converging on the dock.



The interesting thing here [for someone that thinks like me] is that a similar fleet of vehicles was already in Southampton ready to take people home and that all vehicles would travel in one direction completely empty. It's the way it has to work but it just seems wrong.

The coach, by the way, was great. It was usually used by a northern premier league football team [the name of which eludes me at the moment] so it came fully fitted with leather seats, tables, kitchen and bathroom. Very spacious and very comfortable!

The journey took next to no time and after a couple of stops, one to let passengers on – Eric and Val sat with us and we continued this friendship throughout the cruise and during a subsequent visit to Fremantle that they made on their way home - and one stop just to kill a little time I suspect, we were soon in Southampton.

Southampton

The coach drivers had been told that Aurora had arrived late that day because they'd helped out in some sort of emergency [or was it bad weather] which was why we'd taken our time getting to town. This subsequently meant that 2pm embarkation became 2pm disembarkation, and there were more coaches in the streets of Southampton than cars, ergo the incoming fleet was asked to 'go away' for a while.

So, 11 January 2004, being not only an anniversary, but the day before the QM2 made her inaugural voyage, we went around to the Cunard terminal and had a close up look at how big the QM2 really was and yes, she was big and beautiful. I made a mental note that day that we'd go for a sail on her 'some time'. I have a wonderful photograph in my office of the Aurora arriving in Southampton as she passed the QM2 at quay.

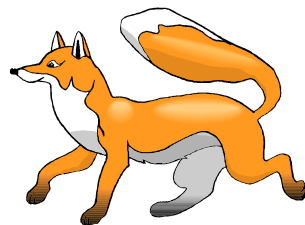
A couple of hours later, after more touring of Southampton [a town I spent a lot of my time in as a youth, when I was at sea but hardly recognised] we were deposited at the terminal, queued, processed, penned for a while until boarding time, enjoyed a couple of beers with Eric while we waited, and then the time came to board – cruise time folks.

First Night

Sailing was of course delayed; our luggage had only just shown up by dinner time, so it was off to second sitting in the days clothes but hey? Wasn't everybody?

It was a table for eight and in addition to Robyn and I there was; John and Terri, Des and Angela, and Mike and Dee. These were the folks that we would spend a lot of time with in the next 21 days and we got on famously from that first meal.

John and Terri said afterwards that they like to check out proposed companions before actually joining them, just in case they don't like the look of them. We must have passed the test.



The table itself was adjacent to the rear windows and looked out over the wake. If I had been asked to pick a table in the dining room that would be the one. I loved that view. Here

The Ship

The Aurora weighs in at 76,000 tonnes, carries 1900 passengers and she is a lovely and well maintained ship.

The décor is stately and sedate with marble floors, and thick carpets and a main atrium sporting a 2 storey waterfall. She is an absolute thoroughbred and there's little or no *flash* and *bling* about this lady.



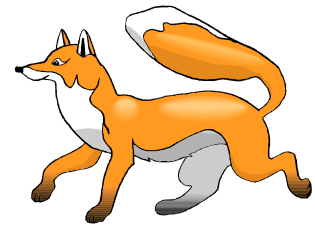
It's a British ship that features British service and British entertainment.

- Mike Craig was one of the true highlights of the cruise. His daily [at sea] lectures on the early days of British comedy were wonderful. Although I have to confess that the theatre had a hypnotic effect on me and I always struggled to stay awake, any time of day or night. The eerie coincidence was that Verdun had played me a Mike Craig tape whilst we were staying in Blackpool and told me how funny the man was.
- Cruise cuisine is traditional in the sense that it has two sitting dining rooms and doesn't have too many alternative restaurants – although it has the buffet and the Café Bordeaux. But there's none of that *nouveau cuisine* stuff. Here's the main course and we put veg on top of that, with the choice of at least 2 different potatoes and gravy.
- The last night at the proms with the whole audience waving union jacks was a treasure to be part of and a wonderful memory.
- Draught beer is available at selected bars in pint glasses, not the buckets that you find on board other lines.
- Tea and coffee making facilities are in your cabin so you don't have to bother room service.

One of the nicest areas on the ship was the Crystal Pool. This area has a sliding roof which means that they can open it when the weather is nice and keep it closed when the weather is inclement [or down right rough as it was on the first day or two, but you get that in January in the Bay of Biscay].

Our Cabin

When I booked, I booked an outside cabin. About a fortnight before we set off I contacted my agent and upgraded us to a balcony. Just one of those things I suppose, seemed ok when I booked but kept niggling at me, so I fixed it.



It was standard for a balcony cabin but had a lot of wardrobe space and a bath, so one of the more comfortable we've had.

The actual 'balcony' was more like a hole in the side of the ship than a balcony stuck on the side, if you get the difference. The opening was the full extent of the exposure and the connecting walls were metal whereas some balconies are all glass and little or no roof.

Daily Routines

Robyn and I love sea days and we love the routines that we fall into. I'd go off in the morning and have a walk around the promenade deck, followed by a spa in my very own spa at the rear pool [it felt that way because I seldom shared] then off to a lecture and Robyn would start the day in a leisurely manner and we'd catch up late morning.

Around lunch time we'd meet up with Des and Ang and whoever else drifted by and have a mini 'session'. A couple of hours and a couple of pints with a bit of lunch. Thereafter we'd wander off and catch up again around dinner time and do something very similar.

Dinner was always a great event, wonderful company, lively conversation and some great running humour. *Ask me about the custard one day.*

After dinner of course there was the show and John and Des often made a quick deposit or [less likely] a withdrawal from the Casino. Finally, a night cap in the Crows Nest maybe?

All Ashore

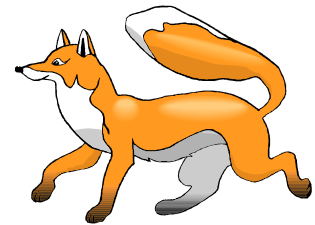
Although we were on a 21 day cruise we didn't stop very often, a characteristic of a World Cruise Voyage rather than a 7 day cruise where you 'visit-a-port-a-day'. Our ports of call were;

- **Madeira:** we arrived late and consequently the Captain advised we would sail at 10pm instead of 6pm. Had a great day – Cable Car to the top of the mountain – Wicker basket sled down the side of the mountain – visit markets – buy myself a new jacket – enjoy life as a tourist.

That evening we went to Reids Palace Hotel for dinner with John and Terri.

Service was impeccable, food was excellent and a thoroughly grand night was enjoyed by all.





- **Barbados:** This was our second visit so we knew what we wanted to do – the 4wd tour of the Island had been a lot of fun before and so it was again - followed by a walk around the town, a bite of lunch and some ambling back to the ship.

Following the success of the Madeira dinner, we ventured out again and had a wonderful evening at The Cliff Restaurant.



The Cliff is named because of the venue. The

restaurant is curved around the bay and is over three levels. The ocean laps at the sand at the lowest levels and the lanterns make it look like a scene from an early Elvis movie

- **Aruba:** One Friendly Island is the slogan and we had a wonderful time. We were first off the ship that morning, in fact nobody else seemed remotely interested in getting off that early .. but we were going quad bike riding and had a mini bus to catch.



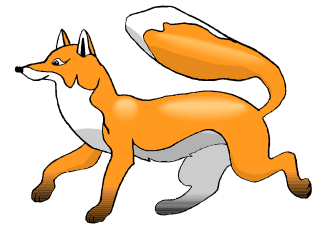
The quad bikes were fantastic – only later did I get an idea of how dangerous they can be – but with about 10 minutes instruction and a bit of practice we were racing them over sand and rock.

It was a real hoot to dive into the tourist spots like motorcycle rebels and to see people off the ship sedately going around on the bus.

After all that exercise we did a little shopping, had lunch at the marina next to the casino, with Mike and Dee and picked up a little gift for John & Terri. It was their 1st Anniversary and they had been married at Aruba 12 months previously.

We met at the Champagne bar that evening and celebrated in style, as one does.

- **Panama Canal:** OK we didn't stop or get off but it was a whole days event and spent a thoroughly enjoyable day [mostly] in the Crystal Pool area. Good service and a great view and of course one of the engineering marvels of the world, with a great story behind it.



- **Acapulco:** When in Rome do as the Romans and we opted to go and see the famous Cliff Divers. You have to do this once in your life because the hotel is simply unchanged in the last 50 years and it is a real spectacle. The fact that the divers are unionised and the whole thing is super commercialised, well that's life!.

Acapulco has some fabulous areas for the rich and famous and some terrible areas for the not so rich and famous. Unfortunately nearly everyone, including ourselves, seemed to come back with a war story of how pushy and menacing local shop keepers could be. A nice day but not somewhere I care whether I come back to frankly.

The sail away that evening was great and I think Des, Ang and Robyn would have been happy to continue the deck party well into the night.

- **San Francisco:** was our port of disembarkation. The end of the first sector of the World Cruise. Eric and Val carried on until the end of the next sector, Auckland, but the rest of us left the ship. Other trippers would complete the whole journey and we did meet people who had been on every Aurora World Cruise to date and were already booked on the next one, in the same cabin!

The Staff

Robyn and I were reflecting recently how good the staff had been on Aurora. And by this I don't just mean the dining room and the cabin folks, who were very good, but the number of other staff on board that got to know your name, when you were likely to want a drink, what you drank etc. It was very good and something that we take for granted sometimes.

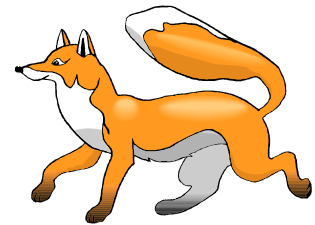
Cruise Conclusion

An excellent cruise! We love sea days and there were lots of them. The days we spent in port were fun filled and memorable and most of all we met some terrific people.

As this was part of a World Voyage I do believe that people behaved somewhat different and I think that the morning in Aruba symbolises this perfectly. We had arrived alongside and the gangways were open but there was no one waiting to get ashore but us. Almost a case of - Let's be civilised, enjoy a spot of breakfast and go take a look at the locals a little later in the day.

San Francisco

When we got off the ship [around 11am because we were independent travellers who were staying in town, ergo leave till last and get rid of the folks that have planes to catch] we crossed town and booked into the St Francis on Union Square. It was a great, sunny, winter's day and proved to be the only day that it didn't rain. This is a lovely old hotel and one that we heartily recommend and she made a perfect base for the time we had in the city.



We had a lot of stuff pre-arranged;

- Helicopter tour of the city. We started at Sausalito across the bay and after take off we went over and under the bridge
- Vampire tour of Nob Hill. We met this Vampire in full attire and went into all of the main buildings on the Hill whilst she shared the history of San Francisco vampires. It was fun.
- Trip to Alcatraz on the Blue Ferry. Oh boy, what a hike it is up the hill but you just step back so far in time when you see the real cells and how grim it must have all been.
- Jeep Tour of the city and Sausalito. In a private jeep. Couldn't believe that he didn't know where the house was that they used to film 'Charmed'. He knew everything else.
- Theatre Dinner at 'Tetro Zanzinni'. A vintage circus tent where the show carried on throughout the courses. Very entertaining and not unlike Cirque de Soleil.

And the hi-lite of the stay in SF was getting together with **Ray & Sandra**. Ray had suggested SF rather than LA, which was closer to him in San Diego, but he said wouldn't be as much fun. We understood after we'd visited LA. SF is tourist friendly, it's on a few hills and you can cross them by walking, by tram or by taxi, real easy. LA is flat and covered by freeways.

We met for after dinner cognac the evening they arrived and made our plans for the next day. We started the day with Irish Coffees at the Buena Vista, Fisherman Wharf; bought chocolate at Ghirardelli's, had lunch at Scomas on the bay, strolled and shopped in and out of the rain. *Had a rest.* Met for beer in Lefty O'douls went for Chinese at the top of Chinatown and wrapped out the evening with Martinis on the 19th floor at the Top of the Mark Sky Bar at the Mark Hopkins Hotel.

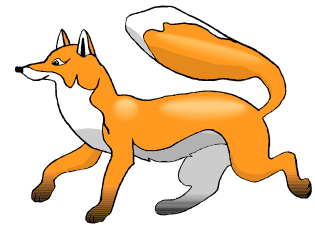
We may not get together often but we sure enjoy it when we do and we look forward to the next time, somewhere, sometime.

Los Angeles

We were flying home from Los Angeles and wanted to be in town with a day or so to spare so we planned to relocate by Amtrak. It is after all an American institution, so why not give it a go, and it turned out to be a nice way to travel.

It wasn't exactly door to door however.

- You catch a bus shuttle to the train terminus at Emeryville, check in similar to a flight except heavy luggage is rejected and whereas it can still travel, you get to carry it yourself. We got 2 bags accepted and one to look after, 'thems were the rules !'
- Leaving Emeryville at 10.15 we arrived in Bakersfield by 4.15. It had been leisurely and peaceful as we passed through rural California. From Bakersfield we transferred to a Stateliner to Union Station, Los Angeles at 6.45pm.
- Transfer from the station to the hotel took another hour by mini bus. Welcome to LA!



We arrived at the Century Plaza hotel, checked in, had dinner and hit the sack.

The next day we spent on a VIP tour of Los Angeles – everything there is to see in 8 hours – which gave us at least a basic understanding of the lie of the land and a good understanding of the extent of the freeway system. If I ever go back I'm staying on the coast.

That night we flew home via Sydney. This is always fun because you have to collect your luggage and then physically check in again. More than once I've successfully flown from America to arrive in Sydney and have a weight problem when I try to put the suitcases back in.

Travellers Tip: Unless you're trying to get to Sydney, avoid flying there.

And so ended another great adventure and of course it would only be a matter of time before we started looking for the next one.

Post Cruise Note:

Several weeks later, when the cruise was rapidly becoming nothing much more than a memory Eric and Val arrived in town. They had sailed on until Auckland, checked out NZ, flown across to the east coast of Australia for a look around, and then flown to Perth on their way [generally] home.

Knowing when they were arriving and where they were staying Robyn and I took the weekend off, collected Eric and Val, went across to Fremantle and checked into their hotel with them.

We spent the next day and half showing off our home town, wining and dining and of course Eric and I found the time for a quiet pint or two.