

Dear Friends and Family,

My plan was to write to you this time about my Caribbean cruise and about my second home, Agadir, Morocco. How surprising then for the two to tie together so perfectly my first evening “home”. As I stepped onto the corniche just before sunset, there was a huge cruise ship filling my view, stretching from the exit of the Port to the ball of sun, and not very far off shore! Although cruise ships have been stopping here for some time, I usually see them from my balcony, arriving around 7 am when I am breakfasting, and their scale is not so apparent when my view encompasses the entire bay, horizon, and hill above the port. But now, having cruised in the Caribbean on a sailing ship of modest size and having spent a day at San Juan Puerto Rico next to two behemoths, I am very conscious of the differences of scale.



Looking at the log of Port of Agadir for January 17th, I see that it was the Norwegian Jade which departed at 6 pm (965 feet long, 2042 passengers and 1075 crew). This is about the same size as the Holland American Line Eurodam, pictured below. Looking at the calendar for 2011 I see that five different cruise lines will have no fewer than 50 day-visits to Agadir. This has to be good for business in some way or another. Hopefully at least some of those passengers are availing themselves of a day trip to Taroudant to see a traditional Moroccan walled town, or at the very least of a walk on our 4 km beach and/or corniche and a taste of mint tea.



But I suspect you are much more interested in my experience on the cruise Bleu Caraibes, Dec 11-18 on Club Med 2 (187 meters long, beam 20 meters, 222 staff, 312 passengers capacity – we were 150). As many of you know, I had never before taken a cruise, despite having spent 10 years exploring the waters of Puget Sound, Hood Canal and the

San Juan Islands by boat. I had also never been in the Caribbean (somewhat unusual for a much-travelled American) except for a one-week golfing holiday at the Hyatt Dorado Beach on Puerto Rico. I had also never vacationed with Club Med. But a good Parisian friend persuaded me that all of the above were major gaps in my life experience and should be remedied in celebration of the sale of my original Paris studio and my 68th birthday. And she was right! The joy of unpacking once for visits to six different destinations, the idea that “known” foods and beverages, 3 meals a day plus tea plus cocktail hour hors d’oeuvres if one so desired, were all included was a wonderful draw. The boat itself, which movingly played the Van Gelis theme

song from the 1992 movie Christophe Colomb as we raised sails each evening departing port, was immaculate, well appointed and staffed with very friendly and professional Mauritians.



So, where did we go? After flying Paris to Fort du France, Martinique on an Air France 777 (part of the package) we arrived in the evening (leaving snowy Paris behind) to very well-organized logistics and a meal if desired. We sailed (or rather motored) the night. I awoke early due to the time difference, did my water aerobics in the small pool before anyone was up and about and absorbed my first view of the islands before we anchored off Portsmouth (not the capital but a good bay for mooring) on the island Dominique, the only stop which is an independent country (since 1978 from Great Britain).

It was Sunday and everything was closed except for church meetings happening in various meeting halls. I felt as if I was back in West Africa, probably because the island's population of 70,000 are descendents of slaves. At the Christian Union Church the congregation members were having vigorous debates with each other over the meaning of various passages in the Bible. At another, the attendees were celebrating the Lord with a visiting minister from Martinique with energetic hallelujahs and singing.



We were cordially invited to join in. The colorful nature of daily life was readily apparent in the buildings, even though shuttered. The inhabitants call it the island of the three "R"s, romance, rivers and rainbows. Although I had to await my very last morning for a rainbow.



Back on board, lunch included fresh oysters and at dinner the largest shrimp scampi I have ever seen (the size of small lobsters) and perfect pink and tender rack of lamb. In between we had our emergency practice drill and a beautiful Captain's opening reception.



After a long overnight "sail" (247 nautical miles) we found ourselves at Virgin Gorda (UK), part of the Virgin Islands discovered and so-named by Christopher Columbus in 1493. We availed ourselves of an onshore excursion in vehicles reminiscent of Manila and Thailand. This



island had a seemingly unlimited number of bays with each vista more fabulous than the one before! At one point only 1 km of land separated the Atlantic Ocean from the Caribbean. The total population is 3500 and, although British, the currency in use is the US dollar. These are volcanic islands and rock formations called "the baths" formed small swimming bays where yachts anchored offshore and people came in by dinghy to swim.

Today all our passengers enjoyed a sumptuous lobster barbecue lunch on the beach accompanied by Caribbean music. When we depart by way of Drake's Channel en route to Puerto Rico we pass Norman Island which Robert Louis Stevenson made famous in "Treasure Island".



Next day was San Juan, Puerto Rico. Fortunately, the cruise ship port is adjacent to Old San Juan, whose buildings are extremely colorful with interesting shops and streets whose pavers have turned blue over the years.



Many of us shopped and were happy to have done so in the morning, since when we returned 'home' for lunch we had acquired neighbors which were busily disgorging about



3000 passengers into Old San Juan. I am sure the merchants were ecstatic, and I had not too much competition visiting the Castillo San Cristobal World Heritage Site later in the afternoon.

That night we set sail to St. John (US) while our own Elvis impersonator reminded us that we were in the US. I did not manage to stay awake for the late-night disco (11 pm to 1 am) any night, but I did thoroughly enjoy the band, Dixie Swing Connection, during the cocktail hour each evening.



A professional dance couple was part of the entertainment team, taught a dance class (mostly salsa) each day, and performed as part of each evening's entertainment spectacle.



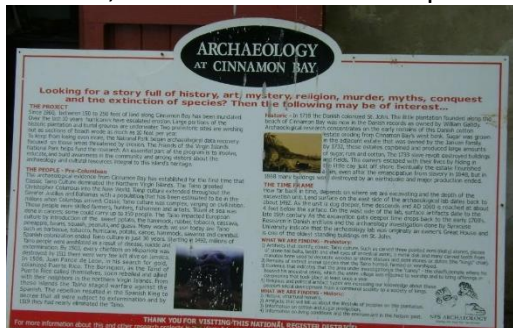
St. John is also a myriad of beautiful tiny bays and vistas plus the ruins of the Annaberg (Danish) sugar plantation. Of even greater interest is the archeology work going on there in

Cinnamon Bay by volunteers who are part of a National Park Service project



people, indigenous south Americans to about 1500, pre 'discovery' and Thomas, St John and Saint Croix plus 50 small islands for \$25 million after WWI to deprive the

unearthing artifacts of the Taino who populated the area from 1000 colonization. The US bought St



Germans of a strategic

base.

For lunch on the boat I availed myself of the pasta bar (it was Moroccan tajine on the buffet) where the chef sautéed for me a mix of the Moroccan kefta, capers, anchovies, garlic and olives from the salad bar, which I paired with a lovely mesclun salad. Evening dinner, therefore, I ate "light", an ostrich steak in mushroom port wine sauce.

One of the talents of the cabin staff was to make animal decorations from towels. This afternoon I was welcomed back to my room by a pair of swans.



During the cocktail hour the band's "Rock Around the Clock" had me dancing in preparation for the evening's nostalgic production of Grease.



The next day we were on St Barthelemy (France, named by Christopher Columbus for his brother, known popularly as Saint Barth), a millionaire's island whose port, Gustavia, is presided over by a lighthouse and crucifix and is home to boutiques of all the designer labels you could dream about plus giant yachts from Cayman Islands, Georgetown, YCM and prices to match.



Although at one time Swedish, the 8500 inhabitants are mostly descended from French Bretons and Normans, and former African slaves.

The flame trees in town reminded me of Benin.



That evening we escaped into our own fantasy land on board with Carnaval. The hors d'oeuvres were themed around the countries of the costumes. I opted to be transformed into a Geisha in honor of my trip to Japan in April 2009 from which I managed to lose ALL of my photos. My make-up, applied by the on-board beauty salon staff, was creative (although the face white was not white enough so I looked more like a ghost than a Geisha), the costume authentic, but the wig precarious,

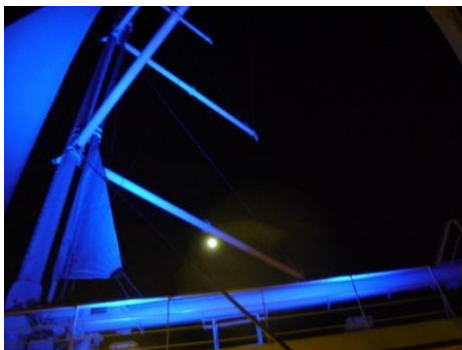
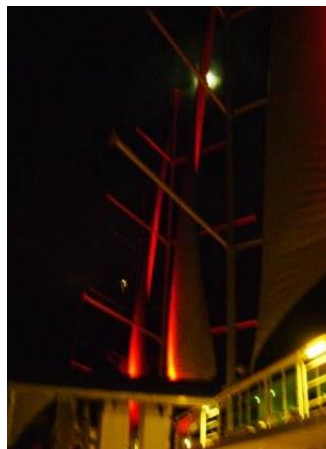


resulting in lots of laughter. My dinner steak was actually the best piece of beef I have ever had in France, but the chef wouldn't own up to whether they acquired American beef at the Puerto Rico stop. I do know that the mesclun salad they bring from France (must come on the plane with the passengers). The Carnival party and spectacle allowed everyone to "ham it up" behind their masks and costumes.



I closed the evening by availing myself of the full moon to take many photos of the sails with the colored lights since we didn't sail until 11:30 pm.

All in all a memorable birthday.



Next stop was Deshaies (pronounced day hay) Guadelupe (France), a charming small town of fishing, colorful homes and gift shops, Creole food and a church.

We were welcomed by a band and local products brought right to the harbor





by the Chamber of Commerce. This is supposedly the most tranquil village on Guadalupe. We opted to just stroll the town, light candles in church, and soak up this last bit of Caribbean culture rather than touring the island.

This is the deepest bay of the Caribbean coast and the most naturally protected, and our beautiful boat seems to fill it! (10



That evening was themed “very elegant” and was also the birthday of a fellow passenger and neighbor in Paris, a closing evening Captain’s cocktail party and spectacle BOLERO, homage to dance.

Overnight we headed to Point a Pitre, Guadalupe from where we debarked for the return Air France flight to a Paris, which was again encased in snow. A rainbow greeted our final morning as we prepared to debark.



As you may have guessed, I am hooked and would cruise again!

I am writing to you from Agadir, where I also spent the time from my fall travels in former USSR countries until just a couple of days before the cruise.

Just a few words and photos to say how much improved Agadir is. There is now a beautiful corniche the entire arc of the bay, about 4 km, clean and well maintained.



Parks have been rehabilitated and every possible area of public right of way is newly planted. A new Gare Routiere on the edge of town means all the long-distance buses now do

not clog and pollute the down town area, plus the bus company, ALSA, with all brand-new energy efficient non-polluting buses, serves all the local routes. There are street cleaning trucks and no hawkers or beggars on the beach. People even seem to be learning that the streets and sidewalks are not receptacles for their personal trash. The toll road from Agadir to Marrakesh opened in June so it is now only 3 hours by bus instead of five, and a much, much safer journey. It is possible to go to Marrakesh for a day trip and during the summer I saw many Marrakesh families come to Agadir to the beach for the day! The Arabic “God Country King” words on the Kasbah hill are now lighted every night and so I have quite a stunning view both day and night (note it is again a full moon as I am writing).



My next travels will be to Egypt and northern India, so you won't hear from me for a while. But I'll come back to Agadir to digest those travels and share them with you.

I wish you and your loved ones health and all the best for 2011.

Marilee