

Canary Isle Cruise - 2011

A WHOLE TEAM OF WRITERS TELL US ABOUT THEIR FANTASTIC EXPERIENCE

Friday/Saturday 14th & 15th October (Dierdre Stewart)

Derek and Anne worked their socks off to organise this amazing value cruise. It worked out at a little over €50 a day. We had a party, dressed as pirates to meet each other and we were updated on things like insurance and being an American ship it was cards and dollars.

On the day we left by coach it was up at 6:45 am in pitch dark with clouds hiding a half moon.

We were due to leave at 7:30 am prompt, and we did right on the dot. Sylvia had lain awake for hours in case the alarm didn't work. Well, it didn't. It said 5:00 am, so she was surprised at the door being banged and shouts from the road at 6:30. So without a wash and wound up like a clock she arrived with her friends who took it all in their strides.

The journey which started at 7:30 and ended at 5:15 was broken by a coffee and breakfast stop and a lunch stop.

Some slept, on and off. Some talked. Some looked at the changing landscape. No more grapes and oranges – sparse cream and peach soil that miraculously produce miles of crops and then mile after mile of olives until we reached our overnight 4 star hotel on the sea front at Benimedina.

The dinner was a 3 course buffet that was presented very creatively, especially the postres. Some people, who shall remain nameless sampled everyone's - we are talking double figures here, and I'm not just referring to the selection.

A wonderful breakfast and then off to Malaga, within three quarters of an hour more we saw the huge liner we were to board.



After security checks we went exploring as the ship is so long (almost half a mile). We saw casinos, swimming pools, theatres, restaurants, an English pub, an arcade of shops – none of which sold postcards. We had the mandatory safety drill, but a few of the oldies knew we would never find our safety stations, so we just accepted failing memory, failing limbs and sight. “Accept the things we cannot change.”



The food was amazing, varied and presented beautifully. This may account for the huge Americans one sees.

Tomorrow we go to an ice show.

Yes, an ice rink and climbing walls. No bungee jumping or go-carting.....yet.

Sunday 16th October – Cruising *(Pat Thorpe)*

Sunday morning saw us leaving Malaga and setting sail for our first port of call – Madeira. The ship is so impressive, with theatres, several pools and Jacuzzis and even an ice rink. This latter gave us the chance to see a truly astounding ice show.



Drinks were quite expensive but the food in the numerous restaurants was free, and of a good quality. The staff were from 40 different nationalities and were so efficient, yet not without a sense of humour. At one meal I ordered a steak with no vegetables but just fries. The waiter took my order and commented, “How childlike!” I found this quite funny and throughout the cruise we had a great rapport with the two of them.

The restaurants were not all “posh” though. On the upper deck was an American diner named Johnny Rocket’s. This was great fun, with non-stop chips and onion rings and lovely burgers. Every half hour the staff lined up on cue and performed a great dance routine, grabbing diners to join them. Great fun!

The Lyric theatre put on a different show each night of true international stature. My wife was sent back to her teens with the Motown night!! In addition there were various bars with pianists and some excellent two or three piece bands.

Monday 17th October – Madeira (Angela Woodhouse)

We arrived in Funchal, Madeira, our first port of call.

We breakfasted like Kings before disembarking to explore this beautiful Portuguese island.

A variety of excursions were available :- local markets, embroidery shop, cable car, sledge ride in large wicker baskets, botanical gardens, whale and dolphin safari and of course the famous Madeira wine tasting – not to be missed.:- With only a few hours ashore it was a difficult choice.

We departed promptly at 4 o’clock!

A fabulous dinner awaited us, followed by the evening’s entertainment a show, visit to the casino, pub trivia, poker machines, dancing or simply relaxing in one of the many bars.

Some interesting facts about the ship:-

Built in 2001

Length 311.12 metres

Breadth 38.6 metres

Total crew members 1,200

Total passengers 3,820

Total of 96,000 meals prepared each week

Total of 63,000 desserts prepared each week

Total of 49,000 appetizers prepared each week

Total of 14,000 steaks prepared each week

We asked the Captain, Ole-Johan Gronhaug – what was his worst fear about being responsible for such a large number of passengers and staff – his reply – “My waistline!” Apparently 10 years ago he boasted a 27” waistline – this was now 37” – “The food is too good to resist!”

Our thanks to Anne and Derek for making this cruise possible,

Monday 17th October – Madeira (Pat Thorpe)

We awoke on Monday morning to find ourselves in Madeira. This is a beautiful island and arguably the most attractive of those we visited, with green mountains and fascinating flora.

Here, we were met by friends of ours who are native Madeirans. In this we were most fortunate as we had a guided tour by “locals”. We were taken to a great viewing point where we could see a huge amount of the island and then on to the quaint little seaside town of Machico. After a brief sojourn on a bar we went back to Funchal on up on the cable car to Monte Sao Roque, again with stupendous views, although we found the climate up here several degrees cooler.

From here the famous sledges take hardy tourist down the steep lanes with only the drivers feet as brakes – not for the faint-hearted. We went down by cable car!!!

Funchal has a lovely “old town” with numerous bars and small restaurants, and streets which lead along to the yellow painted fort on the coast. I would definitely return to Madeira!

Tuesday 18th October – Tenerife

I have to say, was not too taken with Tenerife. I must admit, in the time we had, it was not possible to see too much, and although it had a fairly bustling port and a very nice shopping

street, there was not too much else. There was the obligatory fort near the harbour, reminding us of the various upheavals in the Canary Islands' past.

Wednesday 19th October – Gran Canaria

(Sue Thorpe)

I was very impressed with Las Palmas the capital of Gran Canaria. The city was very beautiful, quite colonial in parts with tree lined streets and a café culture. The old town showed its historic past, its links with the British and of course Cristobal Colon (Christopher Columbus) who used this Island as a staging post across the Atlantic, and whose descendants (according to our guide) still live here.

We were to hike to the bottom of a volcano, but as some of our fellow trippers had unsuitable foot-ware so our guide Manfred would only allow us to go part of the way before the path became steep and treacherous, a fact I was grateful for when it came to climbing back out. I expected a red-hot gaping maw, but this was a volcano that had last erupted 3500 year ago, and now had a small farm in the bottom growing crops and raising animals.



One farmer living alone, who had to use a donkey to get out along the narrow steep trail. At one time over 30 people had lived there, but I guess the remoteness got to them. It was called Caldera de Bandama, Bandama after Vandam a Dutchman whose name the Spanish pronounced Bandam, and Caldera after the large round cooking pot used to heat water. It was indeed round and about a kilometre across, it had both granite and lava uprising and steep sandstone cliffs on the edges, but the majority of the sides were just shaley volcanic ash. There were buzzards rising on the thermals waiting to pick off lizards and lots of holes either in the soft sandstone or natural caves in the volcanic rocks that were inhabited with pigeons or seagulls, evidenced by the guano at the entrance. Many types of Cactus and Agaves grew all over the sides in the volcanic ash/soil, but all in all it seemed a bleak and colourless landscape quite ethereal. What a contrast when we climbed back out and found a green and lush golf course right on the rim, apparently this was the very first golf course built in Spain and built by an Englishman in 1917. 10 years after the first cruise ship landed, It would seem the British can't do without their golf.



Some aspects of the agriculture and economy of Gran Canaria

Manfred our guide was a very knowledgeable naturalist about his adopted home. Of course the islands are famous for bananas and tomatoes which are exported all over Europe, they grow a very diverse range of crops, although nowadays agriculture only accounts for 15% of the GDP. Tourism being the highest earner with the peak season being the winter months. He said the biggest attraction for tourists was the very stable temperatures throughout the year. The heat coming from its location near Africa and southerly position, but due to the surrounding seas it never got too hot unlike mainland Spain. The temperature usually doesn't drop below 19 or rise above 29 degrees, which is very comfortable and its cooler at night so even in summer you can sleep. He explained that the climate was very suitable for people with asthma and arthritis, and some Northern European countries actually pay for sufferers to spend time in the Canary Islands.

The stable climate has encouraged a diverse range of plants, and Manfred said that there were around 270 species of plants endemic to the Canary Islands (i.e. are not found anywhere else) a lot of these are related to species found in both Africa and Northern Europe and this is due to the islands being on the migration route of birds, where seeds from distant parts are deposited in the bird droppings and have then evolved separately.

In the past when the economy relied on agriculture one of the exports was cochineal, a red food colouring, Manfred showed us the cochineal louse (not beetle) living on the cactus plants in a white fluffy deposit. The louse was quite large almost half a centimetre in length, he squashed it (ugh) and its copious blood was the cochineal that used to be sold, thank goodness for the chemical additives that have now replaced it!

Franco did a lot to help with agriculture in that he built several lakes designed to collect runoff from the mountains (some of the higher ones even have snow on them). The water is then distributed in aquifers to the growing areas, and these are still in action today.

Sugar cane used to be grown which was made into rum, nowadays rum production is still done but they no longer grow the labour intensive sugar-cane. Unfortunately distilling rum requires heat and this has led to the deforestation of the mountains, this was getting to be a bit of a disaster with fast runoff of rain and soil erosion. This is currently being addressed by a grant from the EEC to plant 30 hectares a year of a special pine tree. The Teardrop Pine. This special tree has finely rough needles, (we felt them and it felt a bit like a cats tongue). The moisture laden night air adheres to the needles overnight leaving a drop on each needle by morning (hence its name), the morning breezes shake the tree, the drops fall off and water the ground.

One of the famous beaches is called Playas de las Ingles, which many people think is so called because nowadays a lot of the holidaymakers there are British, however it is named after an English man who was one of the first tomato growers on the island and he had the largest tomato farm in the area just behind the beach. A lot of itinerate agricultural workers would camp on the beach in the picking season, and referred to it as the beach of the Englishman and the name has stuck.

After the war in the 40's and 50's there was lots of poverty and many sugar-cane workers emigrated to South America where they could find work. With the boost in the tourist trade in the 60's and 70's a lot of them or their descendants came back and stayed with family or even in the old family property. Even now lots of Venezuelans and Columbians live in Gran Canaria where they do not need a permit to get work. However since the crisis there is a lot of unemployment 26% of the working population are unemployed and 50% of the under 23 year old are unemployed. As there is little social security, this has led to a lot of petty crime, so much so, that they are now building a new prison. Fortunately I don't think any of our party encountered this seedier side, and we found the people very gracious and friendly.

Thursday 20th October – Lanzarote

(David Sharman)

Ships log Thursday Oct 20 2011. We docked in Lanzarote on time 7.00am and enjoyed a hearty breakfast, and set forth to see the National park Timanfaya, created by numerous volcanoes erupting starting on the first of Sept 1730 at 2100 as chronicled by the local priest Andros Curbelo who monitored the eruption's for six years, in that time 600 cubic kilometres of material "lava" was deposited over 51 Square kilometres, creating a lunar type landscape that is now a National Park, we were treated to displays that show just how hot the surface still is (400/600c) just a few metres down, and the scenery is stunning. There is a restaurant on one of the summits that uses the natural heat of the earth to cook all their food, that's recycling for you.

The best excursion of the voyage for me.



Saturday 21st October – Return to Jalon

(Malcolm Brooks)

An early breakfast and final packing before disembarcation at about 8.00am.

Unscrewed the wooden leg, squeezed the mangy-looking stuffed parrot into the kitbag and then checked the bar bill and accounts.

Re-checked the bar bill, vainly hoping they'd accidentally written the date into the total! Didn't think it was possible to drink that much money in a week and not get a hangover!

After 24 hours at sea and reaching terra firma, it was interesting to re-discover that land didn't move but someone had forgotten to tell the legs!

Beforehand I was expecting to find 3000 people at the terminal walking up and down dragging suitcases, scratching their heads, wondering where the hell the coach was, as they all look alike from the front.

However, this was not the case, as suitcases had been collected the night before and were now sedately going around the carousel in the terminal. Boarding the coach was quick and efficient - *ALMOST!* Two of our crew lost cases which had been put on the wrong carousel and we were delayed about an hour.

Return to Jalon was uneventful, except I received a free cup of coffee down the front of my trousers at the first service area. Thanks to the serving lady, my beige trousers resembled army camouflaged battledress when I returned to the coach!

We arrived incident-free at the Jalon rastro site just after 5.00pm.

Many thanks to Derek '*The Parrot*', '*Poop Deck*' Annie and Gandia Tours for organising the trip. It will be interesting to learn more about the next one.