

CRUISE VIEWS

The cruisers had a great time again this year – thanks to the impeccable organisation of Anne and Derek Martyr. There are lots of photos on the Gallery ... and here are three eventful reports from three of the happy holidaymakers of Jalón ..



SNAPSHOTS OF THE 2013 CRUISE - by DENNIS ARTHURS

Day 1 to Valencia by coach. Great to see that everyone is keen...two people, who shall remain nameless, arrived an hour before we were due to leave!! Had they forgotten to put their clocks back? Arriving at the port, everything looked chaotic but, once on board the *Grand Celebration*, everything was fine.

The ship: 47000 tonnes, 1900 odd passengers, 600 odd crew and 11 decks. It had plenty of bars; a swimming pool and Jacuzzi; a big theatre; and two restaurants plus a spacious buffet area. There was plenty of space for the eclectic mix of passengers both inside and outside on deck. For the vain amongst us, there was a beauty Spa and a gym. The messaging system was in both Spanish and English.

The cabin: we had an inside cabin which was spacious. It had lots of storage areas, good shower space, and a colour television with multi-language audio and, overall, was very comfortable.

Day 2 at sea. This was an opportunity to familiarise ourselves with the ship and all its facilities as well as finalise our bookings for the excursions we wished to do from the various ports we were to call at. We had opted for first sitting in the restaurant throughout the cruise. The menu on each evening was excellent. There were always two appetisers, a soup, a salad, a choice from at least 5 main courses (meat, fish and vegetarian options) and 5 deserts. And the wine flowed very freely!!!! The food and drink was followed by a lively theatre show which had a Greek theme.

Day 3 at Civitavecchia for Rome. We opted to take ourselves into Rome on the train although there were at least 4 organised excursions for passengers to opt into if they wished. We managed to squeeze in an escorted tour to the Coliseum and The Forum, and benefitted from the knowledge and enthusiasm of Tiberius, our guide. Back on board, and following another lovely evening meal, we were treated to a great Flamenco show. Our quiz boss (aka Anne) stole *The Battle of the Sexes* game for the ladies with the only question she answered correctly. Talk about luck!

Day 4 at Naples. From our organised tour of Naples we will always have the image of kamikaze motor cyclists doing their best to cause, or was it to avoid, accidents!! Another abiding memory will be our very laid-back guide declaring that Naples is a *mystic* rather than a *smoggy* city. We returned to the ship at mid-day and

listened to stories of thieves and bandits from those who had chosen to go on the tram to Herculaneum. Naples has a reputation to maintain, and its youth do their very best to uphold it!!

Day 5 at Messina in Sicily. Linda was keen to visit Vigata, aka Raguzzo, home of TV's Montalbano Detective series but, as it was too far away, she settled for an organised excursion to Taormina, a beautiful mountain town. As we arrived early in Taormina it was very quiet and we were able to sight-see and visit the Greek theatre, on the edge of the town, as well as take in the stunning views over the sea. Halloween was the evening theme. Many of the passengers went to town with costumes ranging from ghouls and witches to Leprechauns but the best was one of our number who wore very little (no names, no pack drill)! Everyone had great fun and the dressing up (or the lack of clothing) proved to be the highlight of the evening.

Day 6 at Kotor, Montenegro. Our tour today was the Highlights of Montenegro tour which took us on a roller-coaster mountain ride overlooking the Bay of Kotor. From there we visited a mountain restaurant where we feasted on smoked cheese and pork sandwiches and tried the local wines and beers. Following that we travelled to the picturesque medieval town of Budva before returning to the ship in time to dress up in something white ready for the evening meal. This was followed by a game of *Majority Rules* which I am delighted to report our U3A team won.

Day 7 at Split, Croatia. The Sightseeing Tour of Split was led by an excellent guide and took in the Diocletian Palace, built in 500AD, the Temple of Jupiter, the Golden Gate and the Cathedral. This was followed by some free time during which we explored the town and the market. Returning to the ship, we prepared ourselves for the Gala Night which gave everyone an opportunity to smarten up in their glad rags and parade in front of the Captain.

Days 8 and 9 at Venice. On both days of our stay in this watery city, there was a high tide resulting in some low flooding in St. Mark's Square and the cancelling of some of the Vaporettos. As always, the intrepid entrepreneurs of Venice, always out to find ways of parting the tourists from their Euros, were selling bootees which allowed one to wade through the floods. Many were sold, possibly never to be used again. However, much enjoyment was had and Venice was explored magnificently by one and all. Abiding memories are the magnificent sun set over the lagoon, on the first day on our way back from Burano, and the superb pasta lunch, in a workers' café, by the side of a canal, we enjoyed on our second day.

Day 10 at Dubrovnik. Our tour today was to the fishing village of Cavtat followed by a tour around the fortress section of the city of Dubrovnik. Cavtat reminded us of some Spanish sea-side villages north of Barcelona – very picturesque. What was really special about this tour was the personal account given by the guide of the life that Croatians had to lead during the recent war – all very moving. On a more positive note, it was my birthday and the treat was the best ice cream banana split I have ever tasted. Yum!

Day 11 at Corfu. On this excursion, we took in the sights of an ancient monastery and visited Bon Repos where Prince Phillip was born and raised. Corfu town is a tourist trap and wherever we went we were met by 'Hello' which was a little disconcerting when it was aimed at getting you to buy!!

Day 12 at Malta. Entering Valletta was very dramatic – the limestone fortresses bordering the harbour gave the impression of invincibility and strength – it was easy to understand how this island fortress held out during the last war. On a more prosaic note, we were surprised to find a Marks & Spencer and a Sainsbury tucked away in the small and narrow side streets. Our visit to the Cathedral was amazing. All the gold work, the various altars and the two magnificent Caravaggio paintings struck us all dumb. We were then taken to MDina where all the past and present aristocrats live. The ancient Roman aqueduct, joining Valletta with MDina was also very impressive but the memory we will keep is the number of cars there were – every one of them moving at a snails pace because there were too many of them.

Day 13 at Tunis. Our tour today took in the souk, Sidi Bou Said and shopping. The souk was very atmospheric, full of twisty lanes and tradesmen desperate to sell their wares. At Sidi Bou Said we relaxed at a typical café overlooking the sea and tasted mint tea with pine nuts (delicious and refreshing) and a plate of sweet delicacies. It was a delightful way to end our brief stay in Tunis.

Day 13 at sea. A relaxing day, with no worry about rising early or getting off or on the ship.

The weather was good and the sea calm so that everyone could just take their time and get themselves ready for disembarkation the following day.

Day 14 at Valencia and then home. A delightfully enjoyable cruise. Yes, there were some downsides – chaotic disembarkation arrangements at most ports of call, having to book excursions once on board, the strange *Mr and Mrs* game show and the Trivia Quiz on the penultimate night – but, the cruise far exceeded our expectations. The food was excellent, the ship was comfortable, there were lots of organised activities, all drinks (alcoholic and non-alcoholic) were free, the excursions were excellent value for money and the weather was kind to us as we only had a day and a half of rain all the time we were away.

A huge thanks to Anne and Derek for organising all this for us (all but the weather, of course). We hope that they enjoyed themselves as much as we have done.



A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM - By Anne Martyr



On 10th November 58 of us came back to the real world with a bump.

No more wonderful ports of call to wake up to each day.

No more free fancy cocktails.

No more delicious food awaiting us morning, noon and night.

Making our own beds and tidying up.

Our own cleaning and cooking to do.

Worst of all ... no one to create our towelling animal sculptures every evening for us.

What a wonderful time we all had – 10 beautiful ports of call in two weeks.

The miraculous excavations of Herculaneum near Naples buried 2,000 years ago under 60 feet of mud.

Being serenaded 'A Capella' by 6 men in traditional dress in Split old town. Heavenly !

Paddling in St Mark's Square, Venice. Being enthralled by the beautiful glassware, jewellery and mask shops which decorate its tourist-filled streets.

Wobbling dangerously trying to get onto a gondola. Watching the elegant city glide by as we sailed away at dusk accompanied by an informative commentary from our Captain.

Magical Kotor ! We all fell in love with this tiny town. Set like a jewel at the head of a fjord-like inlet, the approach by ship was akin to something from a film set.

The artists' heaven that is Sidi Bou Said in Tunisia. Everywhere; the bluest of blue shutters, exquisitely decorated doors, white buildings and streets. The bustle of the market and the towering minarets.

So..what was the 'funny thing' that happened ?

After our tour of the Coliseum we both needed a quick visit to the loo. Derek was typically in and out of his facilities in a flash (!) but the queue for the 'Ladies' was depressingly long.

“Why not use the Gents ?” he helpfully suggested. So I did. Averting my eyes, I slid into the nearest cubicle as discreetly as possible. What a relief ! Adjusting my toga, I re-emerged into a sweeter smelling environment and we made our way to the Forum. When in Rome....



YOUR CRUISE CORRESPONDENT REPORTS: - By Michael Bulleid

We were coached up to the port of Valencia: our first view of the ship included a very long queue of people and their cases. Our worries of how long will this take, were swiftly removed: they have done this many time before; 1800 passengers presented no problem at all.

Before ever we had our first dinner on board, we were instructed how to get off... in an orderly hurry. The Lifeboat Drill was a noisy affair; silence was not an easy order; it might be 10 times noisier if it happened for real?!

Dinner was a 5 course meal: for 1900 people in 2 restaurants in 2 sittings. Who would want to be a ship's chef?

Breakfast and lunch were also buffet meals. "Has anyone found the cold plates for the salad? **Hot** plates were in abundance for all choices of meals! As for saucers: everybody gave up looking; until one day when all saucers were found; but they were scalding hot; so back to saucer-less tea and coffee.

We managed to see the flooded version of Venice and St Marks for one day, then a drier version the next day. The Venice style of wellies were on sale for 10€. As for picture-post-cards of sunny Dubrovnik: it was a howling wind and rain: the umbrella sellers had a field day for inside-out broken umbrellas!

The majority of the 15 days were total sunshine: much sunbathing in the first week for those who cannot survive without the daily dose of Vitamin D; no towels allowed for reserving sun-beds!

The Grand Canal of Venice was most picturesque on Sunday; then on Monday the romance was removed for canal business (as the picture reveals!) We did manage to sail along it as we left at night: viewing it illuminated either from inside and windows; or anoraks for the rain up on deck.



We celebrated 2 separate birthdays: Dennis and our valiant leader Anne, one night after each other; a passing Minstrel and Minstreless sang the first notes: the choir of 800 completed the chant!

Whilst in a Venice side-street the Plague Doctor mannequin was spotted: he was asked to protect our ship: (as the photo illustrates) alas many coughs and colds were not classified by him as plagues; he gave us no protection; perhaps an odd euro may have changed his mind?



Memories of 10 ports in 15 days abound; thank goodness for digital cameras: my 364 photos would have needed many rolls of film!