World cruise

04 JUNE 2023 sun sydney

The 15 hour red eye flight was very empty so we were able to spread out and sleep lying down in our own rows. The T-Mobile inflight WiFi worked seamlessly and the seats were more comfortable than most. There was absolutely no lines through immigration with the ePassport system at SYD. With our early arrival, we did wait about 3 hours before boarding the Princess bus to Darling Harbour. Once there, it was another 90 minutes before the ship was ready for boarding so we hung out in the park and watched kiwis hunting for left over french fries. The check in process appeared to be a lot better organized that what we experienced in Yokohama, however, there was a shortage of security X-ray stations that delayed us from getting to our cabin for an hour.

The Coral Princess is the oldest ship in the Princess inventory, originally built in 2003 for the Panama Canal and refurbished in 2019. We have a starboard aft mini suite on Dolphin deck 9. We uncharacteristically signed up for the spa thermal suite package for the entire cruise and noticed that the Horizon Court is at the front of the ship instead of aft where it belongs. Ramon is our friendly cabin steward.

Although we reserved a private table for dinner, it is less than 3 feet away from another table so it is no different than sharing a table. The vast majority of passengers are white Aussies so we thought it coincidental that we were seated next to another Asian couple. Gina and Frank from Irvine, CA are Chinese from Singapore and Taiwan respectively and were very affable. Frank is an engineer and also has a daughter that went to Cal Poly Pomona and is an F1 fan that went to the Singapore Grand Prix last year. Too many eery similarities.

05 JUNE 2023 mon

We really needed today to recover from jet lag. The International café was not ready for business at 5 in the morning and the Horizon court did not have pastries available until closer to 6. We visited the sparse thermal suite then to the Brisbane port lecture where we discovered that our plan to get to town and take a ferry to the Koala Sanctuary was not logistically feasible. Luckily we were able to purchase a last minute Princess excursion.

We had lunch at the Bordeaux dining room that had a more appetizing menu than the Horizon Court. So far, we are noticing that the food on this ship is much better than our experience on the Diamond Princess.

We are suspecting that it’s more than coincidence that we were seated with another Asian couple at a shared table for dinner. Kim and Sing, are originally from Malaysia but now live in Melbourne. Kim is very quiet while Sing is very worldly and talked constantly throughout the entire dinner about everything Chinese.

We supposedly saw the Princess premiere of their newest production show, Encore, which was inspired by but not as good as Bravo, which is one of my all-time favorite shows.

06 JUNE 2023 tues brisbane

Brisbane was founded as an English penal colony in 1824 when the mayor of Sydney wanted to rid himself of the worst criminals as free settlers were coming to Sydney. It remained a penal colony for approximately 15 years before free settlers started arriving there. Our great Princess guide, Julie, told us that Brisbane is the metropolitan that it is today due to two significant historic events. The first being General Douglas McArthur establishing his operational command here in 1942. One million “Overpaid, oversexed, and over there” American military personnel passed through Brisbane during WWII. The second event being the World Expo in 1988. Brisbane is currently preparing to host the 2032 Olympics.

Julie was extraordinarily informative during our 4 hour excursion to the Lone Pine Koala Sanctuary, Mt Coot Summit Lookout, and city tour. Lone Pine is a relatively small zoo but had over a hundred koalas every where you turned. Reminded me of the Cleland Wildlife park in Adelaide. Also had an open range kangaroo feeding area where there were more tourists than kangaroos so none of the kangaroos seemed interested in eating. There were also displays of wombats, Tasmanian devils, platypus, exotic birds and reptiles in a very lush setting.

We met Robin and Daniel from Koolina on the bus. Daniel was born in South Korea, lived in Minnesota, then moved to Hawaii and married Robin in 1996. Robin grew up in St Louis Heights and graduated from Kaimuki High School. Coincidentally, they are on the same Sun Princess inaugural cruise next Feb.

07 JUNE 2023 wed

First sea day of six. Thermal suite wasn’t working in the morning. Walked 5 laps on deck 7. Watched a movie in the Princess Theater.

We’re passing through the Coral Sea and the beginning of the Great Barrier Reef.

Reserved dining tables with Gina and Frank for remainder of cruise? Saw a hypnotist at night.

08 JUNE 2023 thurs

Walked 6 laps. Continued reading a book. Spent the afternoon at the Sanctuary. Very pleasant, cushy chaises, special menu, attentive service. The jacuzzi I was looking forward to using turned out to be an unheated pool. Forgot how to tie a tie for formal night. Gina says I have a rich looking nose shape. Diva songs by an Australian singer in the evening.

09 JUNE 2023 fri

Noticed artwork on aft stairwell just below deck 9 that looks like the print we bought many years ago. We must’ve purchased it in 2012 on the Coral on the Alaska cruise.

10 JUNE 2023 sat

We’ve been seeing dark patches of ocean all day that I’ve been assuming are coral reefs. Jacer from the Sanctuary tells us that it is part of the Great Barrier Reef. We are past the protected area of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park so I’m not so sure. The GBR is actually a collection of about 3000 reef systems covering an area 1400 miles long and encompassing over 900 islands.

Learned about Komodo Island from port lecturer Hutch and I’m now thinking it might be one of the most interesting destinations of this entire cruise. Indonesia is made up of over 17,000 islands of which around 6000 are inhabited. Komodo Island is part of a National Park and is considered one of the 7 wonders of the modern world in 2012. The dragons are much larger and more dangerous than I had imagined. Average male is over 200 lbs while the largest recorded is 366 lbs. the average life span is 30 years and they exclusively eat meat. They feed about once a month and consume 80% of their body weight at a single feeding. There are less than 4000 dragons in the world. There has been a handful of human attacks in the last 15 years. The park rangers carry stick weapons in front and behind the tour group to fend off dragons. Their tongues can smell prey up to 3 miles away. They caution any woman on a menstrual cycle to inform and stay close to a guide. Apparently only 18 families live on the island and peacefully co-exist with the dragons. Can’t wait for Tuesday.

11 JUNE 2023 sun

Sing from Malaysia tells me that my Chong Chinese character (張) has two parts. The left side means bow and the right side means long. Long bow.

Rakesh, Said, and Jacer treat us like royalty at the Sanctuary. Lacer is a basketball player from the Philippines.

Frank Wuu says my middle name translates to a trillion (兆)(siu) foundation (基)(kee).

Production show “On The Bayou” was performed at the Universe Lounge and simulcast at the Princess Theater. We had a poor view at the absolutely back of the lounge of the very average show featuring any songs mentioning Louisiana.

12 JUNE 2023 mon

Passage through the Timor Sea between Indonesia and Australia today.

Erwin G. Urbi is a Filipino/Hawaiian singer from Waipahu who lives in England. His show at the Princess theater warmed my heart as he sang many of my favorites. I thought it risky to sing Aloha Oe in Hawaiian to a theater full of Aussies. He sang in Miss Saigon on Broadway and was at his best when singing opera songs Nessus Dorma and Conte Partido. Of course, he gave tribute to Bruddah IZ.

13 JUNE 2023 tues komodo island, Id

Komodo Island might be one of the more remote places we’ve ever been. You can only get here by boat from Bali or Labuan Bajo or by cruise ship. You have to have an organized to land on the island. It is bigger than Lanai and smaller than Molokai. The permanent residents are descendants of the original convicts that were incarcerated on the island. Pink Beach is one of only 7 pink beaches in the world. Komodo Island is also a World Heritage Site.

Woke up with a cough. We anchored in the middle of Loh Liang Bay and took a tender to the island. The stairs to reach the dock on Komodo Island has no rails and open to the ocean on one side and looks like the concrete is about to crumble.

The tour was a little disappointing, walked for 2 miles and only saw a few dragons near a staged watering area. Yes, the dragons put on a good show but then it was over in 20 minutes. We learned that the Dragons kill their prey by injecting venom and tearing flesh and waiting for the prey to die. They can run up to 12 mph for short distances and can swim.

Took another boat to Pink Beach on the edge of the bay and had to get on a panga to get to the beach. Our boat had a big hole in the hull but I guess it’s okay being above the water line. The panga beached on the sand but still needed to wade in shin deep water getting out. We finally saw the pink sand with proper lighting and only where the waves exposed the sand. Spent a hour at the beach and got some seaweed potato chips and coke from the local tent vendors.

Back at the dock, we had to wait almost 90 minutes in line because the dilapidated dock stairs was so dangerous for the aging passengers to navigate. Knowing that Princess comes here frequently, it upset me that they hadn’t done improvements to make the boarding process faster. By the time we got back on the ship, my cough sounded awful and I was officially sick.

14 JUNE 2023 wed

Just a commentary on the ship’s elevators, all 4 elevators are always on the same floor at the same time and the up/down buttons appear to expire after a length of time. Longest waiting for elevators in cruise memory.

15 JUNE 2023 thurs

Heard from the ship’s daily navigation status that we were in the South China Sea.

Production show Stardust, music from days past, was a snoozer. Literally missed the entire show napping. I believe it was music from the 50s.

16 JUNE 2023 fri singapore

Very glad that Gina and Frank recommended the Jewel at Changi Airport instead of Sentosa Island as a place to visit. Didn’t realize that the Jewel is a shopping mall that connects toTerminals

Very glad that Gina and Frank recommended the Jewel at Changi Airport instead of Sentosa Island as a place to visit. Didn’t realize that the Jewel is a massive shopping mall that connects to Terminal 1. We were stunned by the Rain Vortex as we entered the mall. It felt like a scene from Close Encounters. Above us was a 10,000 gallon per minute, 130 ft waterfall coming from a funnel in the ceiling of the glass dome that encompasses the mall. The water falls into another glass vortex that is viewable from the level below. It was impossible to not take 50pictures of this incredible scenery. The vortex is surrounded by the 5 story Shiseido Forest Valley garden which looks like a valley in the Amazon jungle.

We first headed to the lowest level, 4 stories under ground, to the Hawker food center and grocery store. Could’ve made a more exotic food selection but the fresh chili noodles with beef and fish cake soup was good but less than exciting.

The roof top Canopy Park is another stunning area that included a glass bridge, a mirror maze, topiary maze, the Sky net, and a slide, all with a unique viewing angle of the Rain Vortex. There was an Avengers theme that displayed various characters all around the gardens. We walked down 4 flights on the inside of the Forest Valley garden passing multiple smaller waterfalls. We spent just under 4 hours at the mall and didn’t even explore the other 7 levels of shops.

17 JUNE 2023 sat

We’re passing through the Straits of Malaga today, one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world.

Room 527, just 7 cabins from us, is blocked with a table with a red biohazard bag on top, indicating a COVID quarantine. Have seen a few before but never so close by.

Another random factoid from Frank. He said that my name pronounced in Chinese, “Bái rén” means Caucasian. He mentioned that association helped him remember my name.

18 june 2023 sun

Because we are entering a high risk area, the ship’s crew performed a Piracy drill today. The passengers were asked to avoid deck 7 during the drill. There’s been 5 attacks on cruise ships since 2005 and only one was successful against a ship with no passengers. The last attack was in 2012. Cruise ships use maneuvers to create wake and water and sound cannons for defense.

We had our first rainy day with water sloshing on deck 14 and the Sanctuary chairs being covered up.

19 JUNE 2023 mon

Sri Lanka has a population of 22M and was known as Ceylon until 1972. They are in debt to China and India for $8B as they try to reclaim land from the sea. Sounds like their economy is in shambles.

The ship is having problems with the diesel engines so we be arriving in Colombo 5 hours late. Our Elephants of Pinnawela excursion has been cancelled so we booked a last minute City Tour which I am not excited about.

20 JUNE 2023 tues colombo, sri lanka

Due to the engine issues, we docked at 1:30 pm. I had low expectations of the city tour and it still managed to be underwhelming. The port is a working port so the ship dock is a 20 min drive from the port entrance. Princess provides a shuttle. We boarded our excursion bus at the ship dock and the 20 minute drive looked like we were going through a war zone with so many damaged buildings. The drive to the National Museum of Natural History passed by the outdoor Pettah Market and the Red Mosque. While we could see some skyrises around the city, the majority of what we drove through reminded me of a run down Saigon or Bangkok. Lots of Tuk Tuk vehicle on the streets. We did learn that Ceylon was held by the Portuguese, Dutch, and English in the 17th-19th centuries so quite a few colonial buildings were being preserved.

The Natural History museum is an older open air, white, building with low lighting, no AC. We spent an hour at the museum following a maze of signs leading us through two stories of exhibits. Didn’t feel the need to take more than a handful of pictures.

The Asokaramaya Buddhist Temple was the only Kodak worthy stop of the day with its colorful, intricate, and large statue carvings.

Was irritated at being herded to a worthless, kickback souvenir shop and waiting a half hour for someone who didn’t return to the bus on time.

The final grueling stop was at the colonial Kingsbury Hotel for tea. The tea pastries were more than passable. Back to the ship at 7:30.

21 JUNE 2023 wed

More bad news. We still have engine problems so the ship is cancelling the port of Muscat, Oman and heading directly to Dubai where maintenance parts and crew will be waiting.

Can’t help but think that not having functioning engines would not be good during a Pirate attack.

22 JUNE 2023 thurs

Sanctuary day. Already had the 4th formal night. Surprise steak and lobster for dinner even though Putu told us no free lobster meals.

23 JUNE 2023 fri

Learned that Singaporeans that learn only English look down on bilingual Singaporeans. Met an English only Singaporean at dinner who has a distinctive Singlish accent.

Motor City production show had Motown music.

24 JUNE 2023 sat muscat, oman

Cancelled port of call. More disturbing news as deck 8 aft, just below us, has been closed down for maintenance in Dubai due to “creaking” noises.

Similar to Japan, we got a notice to expect that shows and meals will be similar during next segment of cruise after Dubai.

**25 JUNE 2023 sun Dubai, uae**

The United Arab Emirates is composed of seven separate econonomic Shiekhdoms who were part of nine British Trucial States. Oil was only discovered in the region in 1958 when the Bedouin economies relied on pearls and fishing. 7 of the 9 states formed the UAE in 1972 to wrest away control of the oil from the British. Dubai city is the capital of the Emirate of Dubai. Abu Dhabi is the richest emirate with most of its wealth coming from its vast oil reserves. Oil provided the resources to develop Dubai to the tourist Mecca that it is today. However, Dubai did not have the vast reserves of its neighbors so they planned for their future without oil. Oil accounts for only 4% of its income today, the majority coming from tourism and finance.

Only 8% of Dubai’s population are citizens of the emirate. You can only become a citizen if your father is a citizen. The mother’s citizenship doesn’t matter. The majority of residents are imported workers, primarily from India. The official religion is Islam even though most of the Indians are Hindu.

We arrived at Dubai Harbour instead of Port Rashid. Not sure if because of repairs but it is a much better location overlooking Palm Jumeirah and the Dubai Marina. Our deck has a direct view of the Dubai Ain Observation Wheel and the odd looking Address Jumeirah Resort and the skyscrapers of Shiekh Zayad Road. Our approach to the pier, along the southern end of Palm Jumeirah was gorgeous, passing by the iconic Atlantis Palm and the Atlantis Royal hotels. We could see the outline of the leaves of the spectacular man made islands.

The Easy Dubai morning excursion gave us a glimpse of the city as we had photo ops at the Burj Al Arab and the Jumeirah Mosque. The 104 temps and 80% humidity made the Spice and Gold Souks visit almost unbearable. We saw the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world at a distance, and drove by other famous architectural marvels like the Dubai Museum of the Future, the Dubai Frame, and the Cayan Tower. Dubai, similar to Singapore, has amazing architecture and newly industrialized within the last 50 years with very little crime and great wealth. It’s just so damn hot and humid. We are here during the nice weather season and it will get only worse in the next few months.

The desert Safari was a lot of fun due to the infectious personality of guide Mohammed of Dream Journey. The evening started at a sketchy meeting area in the Al Badayer (Big Red) desert where we were adorned with traditional Muslim head wear and was able to rent ATVs. Soon we heard air being let of the tires and our 4WD adventure began. 40 minutes of wild driving to the beat of Arabic rap music around the red sand dunes was exhilarating. It was amusing to see a variety of car bumpers littered among the dunes. We paused at the top of a dune to refill the tires and sandboard down the slopes as the sun started to set.

Camels are much bigger animals than I expected, similar in height to elephants. We saddled onto the camels lying down and it felt like a bronco bucking machine as they stood up. Very cute and seemingly affectionate animals, they appeared to snuggle up to us to get a head scratch.

The bbq dinner and belly dance ended the evening. There was a wide variety of salads and kabobs in the dinner buffet and the entertainment included an Egyptian Tanoura dance, an Arabic fire dance, and the anticipated belly dancers. Long drive back to the ship concluded the exhausting day.

**26 JUNE 2023 mon dubai, uae**

The highly anticipated helicopter air tour of Dubai was as advertised. The heliport was next to the Atlantis Palm and Aquaventure water park. There nothing like seeing the spectacular entirety of the Palm Jumeirah Islands from a Birds Eye view. What could possibly be more spectacular is the not yet inhabited World Islands, 300 individual man made islands in the geography of the globe. Only Europe is currently inhabited as the rest of the world is under construction. Formula One driver Michael Schumacher must have friends in high places since he owns one of the inhabited islands. We cruised past every famous building in Dubai and witnessed the Queen Elizabeth II hotel and the Shiekh’s fourth largest yacht in the world. Also got an aerial view of the Shiekh’s mansion and the mansions that he has provided to all of his wives. Helicopter rides always gives us a mild headache and today was no different.

The Viator Souks, Creeks, Old Dubai and tastings was a last minute attempt to fill our final hours in Dubai and it was a dud. The meeting point was 45 minutes away at the Hilton Curio Al Seek hotel which is designed to look like an outdoor bazaar. We didn’t realize the walking tour was mainly around the hotel shopping area with a too long coffee and tea tasting at a lounge. Lots of informative discussions on history, culture, and clothing but not what I expected. We caught a taxi back to the ship after an hour as the tour headed to the Souks that we visited yesterday.

Next trip consider the HOHO bus and visit the Dubai Frame and the Mall of the Emirates Mall/Ski Dubai and the Dubai Mall/Fountain.

Need to watch Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol

27 june 2023 tues

Crewchat indicated that engine problems have been fixed. That turned out to be an untruth.

28 JUNE 2023 wed

Slight headaches in the morning but we decide to go to he Sanctuary anyway.

Noticed two new water canons have been deployed and crew officers are now patrolling deck 7.

The ship announced that ocean conditions will get worse as we enter monsoons in the Indian Ocean and in order to maintain the comfort of the passengers the ship will have a delayed arrival at Aqaba.

29 JUNE 2023 thurs

Another day of rough ocean conditions but not bad enough to skip Tai Chi and Arts & Crafts in the afternoon.

We entered the Gulf of Aden today and lookout crew are carrying binoculars.

30 JUNE 2023 fri

Captain reported that engine repairs are continuing and indicated that engine 2 is operating. Ocean conditions have improved since last night so we are making better time and project arriving at Aqaba only 2 hours late instead of 6.

01 JUly 2023 sat

We passed through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait from the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea early this morning. No more lookouts on deck 7 today.

The nightmare continues. Engine problems will delay arrival to Aqaba, Jordan by a day and force the ship to bypass Mykonos and head to Sicily for repairs. I’m not horribly disappointed about missing Mykonos and Sicily sounds like a better destination but just unhappy with all the disruptions and Princess’s inability to fix the problem.

Dinner at The Bayou was very good. Appetizers and Crème Brûlée cheesecake and Key Lime bar were excellent. Rib eyes were just good.

Production show “I Got The Music”

02 july 2023 sun

The Voice of the Ocean was a very enjoyable Princess passenger talent show. The coach’s chair were identical to the Voice and the audience voted with remote transmitters. The contestants were unbelievably good.

03 july 2023 mon

I notice that cabins 615 and 605 are quarantined.

04 JUly 2023 tues aqaba, jordan

Jordan is 80% desert and 10% mountains with few natural resources and little oil. It imports almost everything and depends on tourism and foreign assistance. Todays Jordan declared independence from England in 1946.

Petra can trace its history back to 7000 BC and the Nabatean Bedouin Tribe. The city is unique for its rock cut architecture. After being controlled by the Greeks, the Romans, and the Byzantines, the city was abandoned and lost in the 8th century.

As you approach the end of the Gulf of Aqaba you can see Saudi Arabia on the right, Jordan straight ahead, Egypt and Israel on the left.

A 2.5 hour bus ride along the Kings Highway took us to the town of Wadi Musa which is translated as the Valley of Moses. The Kings Highway is mentioned in the Old Testament as the path Moses led the Israelites in their escape from Egypt. History has Moses traveling through the valley and finding water from a rock now called Moses’ Well. The city is the gateway to Petra and is also the burial spot of Aaron, brother of Moses.

Not knowing what to expect, the first mile of of walking was a little disappointing as we saw a couple of carvings in the Siq, which was a slot canyon reminding me of the Subway in Zion and Antelope Canyon. However, you start to glimpse a tall bright structure at the end of the canyon. Suddenly you’re staring at this incredible, majestic structure called the Treasury carved into the red rock cliffs. It takes your breath away. Then you notice that you’re surrounded by a thousand people and local kids selling camel rides. It’s hard to leave the spectacle of the Treasury but guide Hussein leads us away to see the rest of the city. It’s a 10 mile round trip to see all of Petra but Hussein only takes us in about 3 miles. We pass the Street of Facades (row of tombs), the High Place of Sacrafice (buildings high on the mountain), the Theatre, and we end at the Royal Tombs. We were running late, it was hot, we haven’t eaten, and it’s a hour walk back up so almost everyone is told to return on our own. If I had researched better, I would’ve gone a little further to see the Great Temple, the Church, and the Monastery.

It didn’t take us long to negotiate a mule ride back to the Treasury for $40 USD. We grinned as other members of our group gave envious glances our way. I didn’t think the mile back through the Siq would be too bad but Karen was struggling and resting every few hundred feet. Karen capitulated for a $10 horse ride the last 200 yards up the steepest slope with no shade cover. I decided to tough it out and beat Karen back to The Guest House for lunch. I was exhausted and could imagine having a heat stroke like fellow passenger Lia.

Guide Hussein requires special mention. He was English educated, lived in Wellington, divorced British and American wives, and now has 6 daughters with a wife his mom picked for him. He would weave in and out of a British accent and was a closet comedian. He was extremely informative and kept everyone entertained.

Need to watch Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade

05 JUly 2023 wed suez canal

Early morning we exit the Gulf of Aqaba at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula and head north in the Gulf of Suez. I see a lot of ocean oil rigs off the starboard side throughout the day.

I finally understand why we had 2 days of scenic cruising to travel the 120 miles of the Suez Canal and why we had a projected anchor time. We have to wait. We anchored at 3:45 pm and are first in queue to enter the canal tomorrow morning at 4 am.

06 JUly 2023 thurs suez canal

The Suez Canal was built between 1859-1869 by a French consortium that also negotiated a 99-year lease to operate and manage the canal. In 1888, the Convention of Constantinople declared the canal a neutral zone under the protection of the British.

In 1956 Egypt nationalized the canal to pay for the Aswan dam construction which initiated the Suez Crisis where the UK, France, and Israel invaded Egypt. A United Nations resolution established a UN peace keeping force and withdrawal of Israeli troops a week later.

The canal was closed between 1965 to 1973 due to conflicts between Egypt and Israel in the form of the 6 Day War and the Yom Kippur War.

We entered the canal at Port Tawfiq at 5:15. The canal is 205 meters wide, and the Coral Princess is 294 meters long so it’s easy to imagine how the Ever Given blocked the canal in 2021 after being blown off course by strong winds.

We approached the Great Bitter Lake at 7:15 while traveling approximately 9 mph. We saw lots of greenery and buildings along the port side and understand that there’s a freshwater irrigation canal parallel to the Suez Canal fed by water from the Nile River. The starboard Sinai side is barren and desolate.

We exit the Great Bitter Lake at 9:30 into the 22-mile-long Ballah Bypass, a section of the canal that is wide enough for 2-way traffic. This part of the canal was widened in 2014 from 200 ft to 1024 feet. The rest of the canal is one direction at a time.

On average 60 ships a day pass through the canal, the convoy heading north starts at 4am while the southbound convoy starts at 3:30 and travel time is 12-14 hours. Ships are spaced 1.25 miles apart. Northbound ships must get in queue by 2am or pay higher costs. We are number 3 in the northbound convoy of 38.

9 miles past the Great Bitter Lake we see the New Ismailia City on the Sinai side. Two roadway tunnels and one railway tunnel were constructed in 2019 in an effort to develop the Sinai side. Two more tunnels were built near Port Said.

At 12:30 we pass the last southbound ship and the Japanese Friendship Bridge. We previously passed a few swinging bridges including the worlds largest swinging railroad bridge.

We depart the Suez Canal at 3:15 pm through Port Said. Total transit time 10 hours.

Neil Diamond Tribute show

07 JUly 2023 fri

Nothing happening today

08 JUly 2023 sat Sicily, it

Messina is near the closest point between Sicily and the toe of Italy’s boot. Largely reconstructed after severe bombing in WWII, it still has the charm and architecture of an old city.

Mt Etna is close by and is one of the most active volcanoes in the world. Guide Francesca said it erupted last month for only a few hours. We docked at 3pm and only had 5 ½ hours in port.

A 45 min bus ride to the “Pearl of Italy” along the southern coast of Sicily provided pleasant views of lush foliage, in contrast to the deserts of our recent stops. Taormina is at the top of a mountain with expansive views of the ocean in every direction. We walked along the Via Del Teatro Greco, a long street of typical Italian shops and restaurants to the Teatro Taormina, a Greek Roman outdoor amphitheatre. It was originally constructed in 301 BC by the Greeks and completely rebuilt by the Romans in 87 AD and is still a very active theater that happened to be hosting a Puccini opera tonight. I imagine watching an opera in a 2000 year old ancient ruin overlooking the Ionian Sea must be an incredible experience. We sample a strawberry Granita and search for a quick pasta restaurant but there’s not enough time before the bus departure. At every turn, we saw so many beautiful views of the surrounding bays.

09 july 2023 sun salerno, it

Salerno played an important role as the starting point of the invasion of Italy, Operation Avalanche, in WWII.

We boarded a bus for a 40 minute ride to the ruins of Herculaneum on the hottest day of the year. Although the city is located a half mile from the ocean today, it was a beach resort for the Roman wealthy in 79 AD when the same Mt Vesuvius eruption that covered Pompeii also destroyed Herculaneum. The ancient city was discovered by a farmer in 1710. Herculaneum was named after the Greek God Heracles and was inhabited as early as 6th century BC.

Herculaneum was much better preserved than Pompeii despite being covered by 50-80 feet of ash and lava. The population was much smaller at 5,000 vs 25,000 at Pompeii. Herculaneum also has many more human skeletons supposedly because more residents took cover in protecting structures, mostly under “garages” for the boats.

We walked along perfectly preserved cobblestone streets and saw almost complete structures that included preserved wooden doors, floor mosaics, and clean frescos. Only part of Herculaneum city has been uncovered while much still remains buried under the modern city of Ercolano.

After returning to Salerno, Karen recuperated on ship while I went into town. I walked along the Lungomare Trieste, the longest seafront promenade in all of Italy in search of the Duomo of San Matteo (Cathedral of St Matthew). Saint Matthew was one of Jesus’s 12 apostles. The church courtyard is simple and not very large and belies the splendor of the cathedral and the crypt. The cathedral is similar to some of the great Italian cathedrals while not quite as ornate it is still awe inspiring. However, entering the lower crypt where Saint Matthew is buried is like walking into the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican. Frescos everywhere on the domed ceilings, the curved arches, the walls and anterooms. Scenes include the history of the life of Jesus from birth. I also happened to observe the singing of a hymn and a prayer session.

Lunch was at La Smorfia Pizzeria right outside the cathedral entrance. Travelled back to the ship past outdoor markets, the old town, and the Villa Comunale di Salerno Park.

10 JUly 2023 mon civitavechia

Weather forecast is 101 with 60% humidity. The heat wave continues. The ShoreExcursionsGroup Panorama Rome was cancelled so we booked a Princess Orvieto trip that turned out to be a better option. The city is in the Umbria countryside 90 minutes north of the port as we passed fields of sunflowers and olive orchards. Orvieto is a very old, 9th century BC, Etruscan city at the top of a hill with a population of just 20k and famous for their ceramic ware. The construction of the city was made from the local volcanic rocks of tuff, basalt, and travertine.

We walked through typical narrow streets lined with merchants with a few buildings connected by elevated walkways similar to Venice. After a half mile we reached a major intersection that splits the city into four sections.

Very soon we emerge from the narrow streets into a massive square where a beautiful, but somewhat out of place, magnificent cathedral is revealed. I was skeptical when our guide tells us the Duomo Orvieto is the most beautiful in the world, but it’s a declaration that the LA Times arguably supports. I wonder why such a stunning cathedral is found in this very small town in the middle of nowhere.

Pictures and a description of the cathedral would never do it justice so I won’t try and only say that it is gorgeous and may be in the world’s top 10. Our guide is too passionate and knowledgeable and described every nuance of every item in the cathedral and I don’t remember a word she said.

The much-anticipated Umbrian lunch was awful and was served with French fries !§#\* what the heck? Shopping was a little difficult in the stifling heat and we were anxious to return to the air-conditioned bus.

The trip home was a nightmare as we waited 30 minutes for a couple that never returned and we had to pick up in a town 20 minutes away from Orvieto……and the bus AC wasn’t working.

11 JUly 2023 tues elba, it

Portoferrairo is a tender port.

Elba is one of 7 islands that make up the Tuscany Archipelago. It is generally in the shape of a left facing fish. It’s only apparent historical significance was the home of Napoleon’s first exile that lasted only 10 months in 1814. Elba was under French control at the time.

As told to us by prior guide, Napoleon is one of 5 people who tried to conquer the world. The others being Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan, and Adolph Hitler. He was exiled with 600 of his soldiers on Elba and had a primary, opulent residence in Portoferrairo at the Pallazina del Mulini that we did not visit. However, we did travel 30 minutes to his summer residence, the Villa San Martino, on the outskirts of Portoferrairo. The country home has a wonderful view but is small and plain, so unlike Napoleon’s image of himself. One room has a ceiling adorned with Napoleon’s Golden Bees, a symbol of immortality and his chosen symbol of his status as Emperor. The lover’s knot room contains a fresco of two doves representing the love between Napoleon and his second wife Maria Luisa. He apparently divorced Josephine, who was 6 years older than himself and could no longer produce an heir, and married Maria Luisa of Austria who was only 18 at the time. The largest room is the Egypt room that celebrates Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt.

What was marginally more interesting was the Napoleon museum that was later built under San Martino and was designed to act as a pedestal for Napoleon’s home. The museum was built in 1856 by Russian oligarch Anatoli Demidov, a strong collector and admirer of Napoleon’s exploits.

We reboarded the bus to the seaside town of Porto Azzura, a quaint fishing and tourist town with a beautiful beach and a friendly piazza with eateries and shops. It is located in the V of the tail of Elba’s fish shape. Weather was nice but 11:45 was a little too early for restaurants to open until we wandered into La Rissaca, who invited us to sit and took our order. We had a fantastic antipasto di mare, an appetizer of oysters, salmon, tuna, octopus, whitefish, and ceviche that was as close to sashimi as we’ve seen this trip. Also nice to have had authentic pasta carbonara and clam linguine.

12 JUly 2023 wed marseille, fr

Marseille is the 2nd largest city in France. It has a sister city Aix-en-Provence only 30 km away. One is a working port town, dirty, poor, and rough. The other is cultured, pretty, smart, and snooty and they have a love/hate relationship. We visited both and, surprise, they both have cathedrals. Paul Cezanne and Pablo Picasso got their inspiration and made their homes in the Provence region. Marseille is the ugly sister, dry hills, low vegetation, lots of graffiti. Aix is lush and beautiful.

We walked through more cobblestoned, narrow, 18th century medieval streets with shops, past the town center and a farmers market on the way to Aix-en-Provence Cathedral. We had French poke at a nearby shop that consisted of undercooked jasmine rice with avocado, red cabbage, mango, and smoked salmon.

Bussed back to Marseille, around the waterfront, and up the hill to the Basilique Notre Dame De La Gard cathedral. It was 170 steps up to the cathedral and plaza with panoramic views of the city and the Gulf of Lion. The Crypt was two levels down and reserved only for prayers.

We returned down the narrow, winding road, passed the Cathedral de la Major and back to the waterfront as the city was preparing for the July 14 Bastille Day celebration.

13 JUly 2023 thurs barcelona

Barcelona requires a shuttle bus to get out of the port that drops you off near one end of La Rumbla.

The Gaudi Barcelona tour bus takes us past the World Trade Center, the Christopher Columbus statue, La Rumbla, the Arco de Triunfo, and the Placa Reial (and its Gaudi designed lamp posts) on the way to the Sagrada Familia, the most famous of Antoni Gaudi’s creations. The church is still at least 10 years years away from completion and the initial construction started in 1882. The original architect, Francisco Paula De Villar resigned after just one year and a young Gaudi accepted the challenge and spent his entire life completing the design. Once complete, it will be the tallest church in the world, however, there are still 9 out of the 18 total, towers that need to be completed.

Yes, it’s a unique, strange looking design in Gaudi’s creative interpretation of Gothic architecture. While the exterior feels dark and ominous, the interior feels much lighter due to the massive use of brightly colored stained glass and lack of creepy figures. The interior pillars are very many and tall to support the massive exterior towers.

Our guide walks quickly forcing everyone to pay attention or get left behind. 10 blocks away, we approach the Casa Mila aka La Pedrera, one of two residences that Gaudi designed. The exterior is all curves with no straight lines to be seen. We had 20 minutes to have coffee in the Café La Pedrera, with its Gaudi curved ceiling, which wasn’t enough time for the busy barista.

Another 4 blocks takes us back to the bus on Avinguda Diagonal next to Casa Les Punxes in the Eixample area of the city near the Placa de Catalunya. The ride back to the ship passes Casa Batlló, the other Gaudi designed residence.

Gaudi’s architecture can be described as organic, and features biomimicry, a design style that mimics shapes and patterns found in the natural world.

14 JUly 2023 fri

The Mediterranean Sea is incredibly, eerily, flat today as we cruise the coast of Spain. Knock on wood, the ocean conditions have been fantastic the whole cruise except for the 2-3 days after leaving Dubai.

15 JUly 2023 sat malaga, sp

Malaga is in the Andalusia region of Spain on the southern coast of the Iberian peninsula. It is the 4th largest city and is the driest and hottest part of the country. Andalusia is the world’s largest olive oil producing region. Malaga is also the birthplace of Pablo Picasso and is home to the Picasso Museum. Guide Angela said they are suffering a drought at this time.

Granada is a 2 hour drive from Malaga as we head to the historic city of Alhambra, Spain’s most popular tourist destination. Granada is also the word for pomegranate.

The Princess bus dropped us off at the Neptuno commercial center where we had a mile walk to the Plaza Nuevo. We then hailed a taxi to take us up to the Alhambra entrance gate.

I was surprised to learn that Alhambra is one of the best preserved historic Islamic cities in the world. It’s name comes from the Arabic word for “Red Castle”. Muslims ruled the Spain/Portugal region from 711 AD to 1492 before Christians invaded the region. Alhambra was built in 1292 and was the center of the Nasrid Dynasty.

It wasn’t buried like Pompeii and is much newer so it’s in excellent condition. The Generalife (pronounce Generaleaf’) gardens are maintained lush. The Nasrid palace has incredible stone and wood carvings. The Comares Palace and the Palace of the Lions have beautiful courtyards and fountains. The Alcazaba fortress is the only area that’s more Pompeii ruin like.

The city didn’t have the wow factor as other places we’ve visited but I’m very glad we got to see this place.

16 JUly 2023 sun tangier, mar

The city provides a bus shuttle to the outside of the port from our dock.

We passed through the Strait of Gibraltar, which is only 8 miles wide at its narrowest point, early this morning as we exited the Med into the Atlantic. Tangiers lies at the western end of the strait on the African side and has a view of the Rock of Gibraltar on the European side.

The Kingdom of Morocco has a population of 40M and is the world’s third leading olive oil producer behind Spain and Italy. It only declared its independence from France and Spain in 1956 and, unlike other African and Iberian countries, it has plentiful rainfall and snow to provide water.

Tangiers has a slightly different history as it was declared an international zone in 1912 before it became part on Morocco in 1956. It is the 4th largest city with a population of 1.4 M.

Chefchaouen, the Blue Pearl, is one of the prettiest cities in the country and was founded in 1471 as a fortress (kasbah) to defend against the invading Portuguese. Coincidentally, the city expanded with the arrival of Muslim and Jewish refugees fleeing from forced conversion to Christianity from yesterday's visit, Granada.

We left the port of Tangiers past the Tangiers Kasbah and Tanja Marina bay and beach. It was 78 miles but a 2.5 hour drive to reach Chefchaouen. As we neared the town we saw large pine trees and olive orchards. The city is the Blue Pearl because of the tradition of using indigo blue and white as the primary colors for all of the buildings. An interesting fact that guide Noori told us is that Casablanca is the white city (makes sense) and Marrakech is the red city.

As we walked from the bus drop off, I noticed a lot of blue trim on the buildings but it wasn’t overwhelming until we entered through the gateway of the kasbah into the narrow streets and shopping areas inside. There were lots of steps and slopes throughout the maze that was the city. Yes, almost everything was blue. The tour did not provide much time for shopping and Noori told us 99% of all the items for sale came from China. It was interesting to see the local art on the building walls and the symbols on doors and the colorful decorations hanging overhead. Just as we were getting sick of blue, we stepped into a restaurant for lunch that could’ve also doubled as a museum of Arabic artifacts and architecture. I took just as many pictures in the restaurant as I did in the streets. Lunch consisted of of chicken, beef, cous cous, and vegetables that felt like authentic cuisine but what would I know. We stopped at a rug shop where we watched a master making a rug with a manual loom in the traditional way.

Need to watch movies Inception, Spectre, and Bourne Ultimatum filmed in Tangiers.

17 july 2023 mon lisbon

The approach into Lisbon is spectacular as we cruise under the 25 de Abril Bridge with Christ the King monument looking down upon us. A tug is giving us a water salute as the ship’s horns reply in acknowledgement. The Jardim do Tabaco terminal is right next to the city in front of the Church of Santa Engrácia which has been converted into the National Pantheon. The 25 April Bridge has a striking similarity to the Golden Gate Bridge. The Christ the King statue was inspired by Brazil’s Christ the Redeemer.

Like Rome, Lisbon is built on 7 hills and is preparing for the arrival of the Pope on Aug 6. We learned the the letter S is pronounced like SH in Portuguese. Lisbon is pronounced “Lish Bo A” and the city of Cascais that we’re visiting is pronounced “Cush Ka Ish”.

The ship arrived early at 11 and our excursion meeting time wasn’t until 2 so we went into town in search of a Tuk Tuk city tour. They were pricey at 80Є for an hour but they were much bigger and nicer than the ones in Asia. It was actually a lot of fun as we zipped around the city and saw so many more sights than would’ve been possible with a big 40 passenger bus. We saw the National Pantheon, stopped at the Miradouro da Senhora do Monte lookout, saw the Igeja de SaoVicente de Fora Monastery, stopped at Miradouro das Portas do Sol lookout near the beach, saw the Lisbon Cathedral, passed by Casa en Santo Antonio church and the Arco da Rua Augusta Arch, and followed a similar route if we had taken the tourist tram 28 around the city. The Tuk Tuk was better because driver Diego narrated the entire trip. I hope he is successful in his next Ironman competition.

The late afternoon Princess excursion took us to the UNESCO Heritage Site, mountain town of Sintra. The center Vila de Sintra is surrounded by 19th century Romanticist architecture and looks up at the Castle of the Moors high on the mountain. We spent most of our hour at the National Palace de Sintra which was mostly average interesting except for the gold ceiling chamber which was eye popping.

The town of Cascais is along the coast and we were dropped off near the picturesque Praia Da Ribeira beach. We passed the Jardim Visconde da Luz park and plopped down at the Mir Traditional Portuguese restaurant for dinner. Took a quick look at the beach but spent the time relaxing under the umbrellas of the restaurant. It was a half hour along the Tagus River back to Lisbon.

It bothered me that two women on the bus had phlegmy, persistent coughs that caused others to mask up but refused to wear a mask themselves.

James Bond movie On Her Majesty’s Sercret Service was filmed on the 25 April Bridge

18 JUly 2023 tues

The news indicates that Europe, Asia, and the United States are suffering extremely hot weather as part of a global heatwave. We certainly felt it in Europe. The last 10 days in Europe have been a blur. We now have two days at sea before reaching the British Isles. We’ve bought rain jackets in anticipation of wet weather.

Production show “What the World Needs Now” was a pleasant collection of Petula Clark, BJ Thomas, Tom Jones and Burt Bacharach era music.

19 JUly 2023 wed

I’m starting to look forward to spending time in London. Cant wait to see Stonehenge and we just booked a Viator day trip to Paris on Eurostar train through the Channel Tunnel under the English Channel.

20 JUly 2023 thurs holyhead, wales

Wales is the land of castles with over 400.

This is a working port requiring a shuttle to the port gate. The ship docks at the end of a ½ mile long jetty that is only wide enough for a single lane of traffic. The port connects to Holyhead city over a causeway.

Holyhead is a city on the very small Holy Island. A bridge connects it to the larger island of Anglesey in North Wales. Our tour bus cuts through the center of Anglesey to the eastern end of the island to Beaumaris Castle. The castle along with other nearby castles of Conwy, Caernarfon, and Harlech are a UNESCO heritage site. The castles were built in the late 13th century by King Edward I of England to fortify his takeover of Wales from the Kingdom of Gwynedd (pronounced Gwyneth). They were designed by James of St. George, the greatest military architect of the time.

The castle is more fortress like with a moat surrounding exterior walls with parapets. We are able to climb inside and up the walls. The interior is just a large open space today and the fortress walls show significant erosion. Not a very inspiring visit so I go in search of an ATM in the city of Beaumaris. The quaint city has some old architecture and a large harbor with a long pier.

We return to Holyhead on a scenic route along the north coast of the island. Our guide points out a few Standing Stones from the Neolithic period, ~3000 BC, that she says served the same astronomical purpose as Stonehenge and are nearly as old. The rolling hills and abundance of sheep remind me of New Zealand. We learn that the nearby Bristol Channel has the third highest tides in the world.

With another 4 hours until all aboard we take the shuttle to the port gate and walk across the Celtic Gateway Bridge to the small shops of Holyhead city. We find St. Cybi’s Church in the corner of the city which looks like it was burned sometime in its history. It doesn’t take long to walk the Main Street before we pick up some gifts and a caffe mocha to take back to the ship. Todays weather was perfect despite a wet forecast a few days ago.

I find it interesting that the UK, which is a metric country uses metric measures for short distances but miles for longer distances. I also observe that the Welsh language must be as difficult to learn as Finnish.

21 JUly 2023 fri belfast, no ireland

Princess has a shuttle from port to Donegall Square.

Belfast has a long and deep blue collar harbor area that covers 25% of the entire city. I can imagine IRA soldiers hiding weapons in the various containers. The island of Ireland (Eire) contains the country of Ireland and the province of Northern Ireland which is part of the UK. Ireland is still part of the EU while Northern Island is not. Ireland declared independence in 1920. Historically, Henry VIII, was the first English King to declare himself King of Ireland in 1542.

Belfast was a thriving ship and aircraft building city in the 20th century but its been 20 years since they built their last ship.

Our ship is only 20 miles from Winterfell (Castle Ward) from GoT.

As we leave the port, we pass Samson and Goliath, 2 large overhead cranes that were used to construct the Titanic. Harland and Wolff was the builder.

We take the coastal route to the Giants Causeway from Larne along the Antrim Coastal Causeway to Ballygally Castle hotel for scones and tea. The outside of Winterfell was filmed at close by Cairncastle and Glens of Atrim so the hotel has a GoT themed door leading into their restaurant.

We continue on past Glenarm and learn about the O’Neil and McDonnell clans. We arrive at the Giants Causeway just past the northern tip of the island.

The UNESCO Heritage Site causeway is a formation of mostly hexagonal basalt columns, each approximately two feet in diameter, the tallest at 39 feet. The formation is 2-3 miles long along the coast with ~40,000 columns. We’ve seen similar columns near Mammoth Mountain but at a much reduced scale. I’m surprised that a million visitors a year climbing on the columns don’t do any damage.

We do a quick photo stop to see Dunluce Castle on a sheer cliff overlooking the North Atlantic.

Linner was at the Portrush Atlantic Hotel.

We detour to the Titanic Quarter as we enter the port. We see the Nomadic, the tender ship for the Titanic built for White Star Line. The Titanic Experience is a huge glistening building in an otherwise drab area. We also drive by the Titanic Hotel and movie set Quonset huts from GoT.

22 july 2023 sat Greenock, scotland

The port of Greenock provides easy walking access to the city.

Scotland is a land of 3000 lochs. Interesting that Scotland prints their own banknotes that’s not commonly used outside of Scotland. They use different portraits and scenes on the notes. Both British and Scottish pound sterlings are accepted in Scotland.

The The Greenock/Belfast area was a large shipbuilding city in the early 20th century. They built the Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth, and the Britannia. Our excursion today does not go to Glasgow.

Our Highlands tour leaves Greenrock eastward along Firth of Clyde and crosses the Erskine Bridge into the mountainous area of the Scottish Highlands. The Gaels inhabited the Highlands in the 5th century. We continue north and enter Trossachs National Park at the southern end of Loch Lomond and stop at Luss Village. We have 45 minutes to walk around a small 5 block town where nothing is open. Go figure.

We listen to the song “Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomand” as we head toward Loch Long, an area of Viking raids in the 10th century.

We turn north at Artgartan and pause at the Rest and be Thankful viewpoint and pass by the Butter Bridge. We travel down the western shore of Loch Fyne to the village of Inveraray. We again, have too much time to visit the small village before having lunch at Brambles.

Inveraray Castle is the family home of the Dukes of Argyll and is mildly interesting. The armory hall had a nice display of weapons and the bridge had graffiti from 1897.

We return around the north end of Loch Fyne and follow the south shore until we cut across past Loch Eck and Holy Loch to Dunoon where we catch a vehicle ferry back to Greenock.

During dinner, the Coral Princess salutes the Waverly Paddle Steamer as it passes. The Waverly, built in 1946, is the last of the paddle steamers that is still in operation.

23 JUly 2023 sun

Completed my 12th book this cruise.

24 JUly 2023 mon cobh, ireland

The sail into Cobh is another pretty approach with colorful, tight knit buildings surrounding the St Colton cathedral. The ship is docked an easy 100 yards from the waterfront promenade. The port of Cobh is on the small Great Island. It is famous for the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 and being the last port of the Titanic before its fateful sinking. 1197 passengers died when a German U boat torpedoed the Lusitania in WWI and was the trigger event for the US participation in the war.

Ireland’s top economic industries are pharmaceutical (Pfizer) and Information Technology with agriculture, including whiskey, being 4th. Only 2% of the population speak Irish on a daily basis while English is the primary language.

Did an early morning stroll through Cobh city to see the Annie Moore statue, the Lusitania memorial in the center of town, St Colton’s Cathedral, the Deck of Cards houses, the Sonia O’Sullivan statue, and the Titanic Museum.

The Princess “Rock of Cashel, the Vee, and Lismore” tour is todays excursion. The Lismore Castle is one of the few castles that are inhabitable out of more than 30,000, although many are just ruins. We stop for a photo op on a bridge on the River Blackwater in County Waterford.

The Vee is nothing more than sharp hairpin turn with a panoramic view of the Irish countryside.

The Rock of Cashel in County Tipperary is what I imagine a 12th century Irish Castle should look like. Lichen covered stone and limestone give it an ominous feel. Cormac Chapel is the oldest building in the castle. Absent minded guide Michael had a hard time remembering facts and frequently asks the passengers to help him complete his thoughts. He mentions that some stones from Cashel were used as a cornerstone of St Bernard’s church in Watertown, Wisconsin.

25 JUly 2023 tues

Got to give a shout to head waiter Hector from Mexico. This guy can really sing. He sang “Time to Say Goodbye” to wish 450 passengers farewell at the culinary demonstration.

26 JUly 2023 wed london

Disembarkation was super easy and it took 10 seconds to find the Viator Leeds Castle and Canterbury tour guide. We were joined by 3 others, a couple from Oregon and the husbands brother from Guam.

Canterbury is a small town of 45k but it has the UNESCO World Heritage Canterbury Cathedral, home of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the leader of the Church of England and the person who anoints the King/Queen of England. When I mention that we’ve seen a lot of beautiful cathedrals he says he understands ABC, another bloody church. The cathedral is truly outstanding, and it’s corridors, crypts, and side rooms seem to go on forever. It’s so large that it seems like no one is in the church with us but we know there has to be a thousand people somewhere. It seemed strange when I saw a likeness of Ariel (Little Mermaid) in one of the stained glass windows so I ask Tony our guide. He tells us that some original stained glass in the church was destroyed a long time ago and was replaced with clear glass. New stained glass was added in the 1960 with contemporary designs.

Leeds Castle was built in the 12th century and was a royal castle owned by Kings Henry I- VIII and various queens until the 16th century. It was then given to private ownership and suffered from disrepair and bankruptcies and many changes in ownership until Lady Baille purchased it in 1925 and restored it to a great residence. Upon her death in 1974, she created a charity trust to preserve the castle for future generations. The castle is in superb condition so much that it doesn’t feel like a medieval castle. Everything is nicely painted and stonework has been repaired and it seems strange to complain about a castle being a little too nice. It is also surrounded by huge manicured gardens and fields.

Our hotel, the Trafalgar St James is literally at the corner of Trafalgar Square, an incredible location for sightseeing all the London landmarks. We wander around the square and marvel at all the buildings and see Big Ben bell tower at a distance. The hotel is a nicely remodeled 6 story building with a non existent lobby area but our room has a brick wall just outside the window. Space is at a premium in downtown London, the worlds 4th most expensive city.

27 JUly 2023 thurs london

Premium tours is the operator of our Viator booked excursion and they run a big operation out of the Victoria Coach Station. Taxi was 12£ for the 1.7 mile drive. Our tour had 150 people on 3 buses with ours being a double decker bus. They also had 3 other tours boarding within 15 minutes of ours.

It’s getting very repetitive but Windsor Castle was spectacular. It has been the Royal residence since 1100 when King Henry I took residence. Built in 1066 by William the Conqueror. We were told it’s always possible to see King Charles III during the visit.

We saw the State Rooms in Windsor Castle and St George’s Chapel where Harry and Meghan were married and Queen Elizabeth is buried. Unfortunately pictures are not allowed in either location. Each room in the castle looks like a mini cathedral with high arched or painted ceilings. I wanted to sneak some pictures but too many attendants wandering around.

St George’s Church is almost as nice any other cathedral we’ve seen.

The changing of the guard ceremony occurs only 3 times a week but we were fortunate to be there when it was happening. Got to see most of it before we needed to leave for all aboard time.

Stonehenge was first constructed 3000 BC and is a formation of large stones in a series of rings that are aligned toward the sunrise of the summer solstice. It  is believed there were once 220 stones, now only 83. There is also some evidence that Stonehenge may have been a burial grounds. The blue stones in the inner ring were found similar to stones at an ancient Wales quarry so they are believed to have been brought from the Preseli Hills in Wales.

Lacock is a small village that hasn’t escaped the 18th century and because of its old look it was a popular Harry Potter filming location. The city was given to the National Trust by Matilda Talbot upon her death. The National Trust is the largest conservation charity in Europe.  Lacock Abbey was filmed extensively in Philosopher’s Stone and Chamber of Secrets. Lunch was at The George Inn.

Our last stop is the UNESCO World Heritage city of Bath and their famous Roman Baths constructed in 60 AD around natural hot springs that still run today. I was surprised by the exposed foundations, pre bath, and post bath areas on display. The pool is surrounded by Roman statues. The entire city of 90k inhabitants is a UNESCO site so every building must be preserved and cannot be modified.

Guide Eugene was informative but had diarrhea of the mouth. Uber, 17£, worked really well for our trip home from the Gloucester Road tube station in South Kensington.

28 july 2023 fri london/Paris

Talk about a long but very special day. Meet up was at 6:30 at St Pancras Eurostar station where Premium Tours rep gave us train tickets. Guide Anna from Latvia met us on the train. It’s a 2 hr 20 min ride to Gare du Nord station under the English Channel through the “Chunnel” traveling at 300km/hour (11:30am).

We learn that Napoleon Bonaparte significantly rebuilt and modernized the city by building parks, widening streets and creating a running water and sewer system in 1853 despite overthrowing the government and declaring himself emperor.

Gare Du Nord is the busiest station in Europe handling 700,000 passengers per day. Anna does a good job taking us on an hour long drive through Paris attempting to pass all of their famous sights. We arrive at the Eiffel Tower where we have 3 hours to to lunch at the Tower restaurant and walk around before getting on the hour long River Seine cruise (3:45pm). Most of the cruise is dry as we viewed many iconic sights from the upper deck but we had to take cover from the rain for the last 15 minutes. (5:00pm)

It continues to rain when we arrive at the Le Carousel du Louvre museum/mall where we have 2 hours to ourselves. Back at Gare du Nord by 7:30 for Eurostar at 9:10pm, arrive St Pancras at 10:30.

I try to snap pictures of every interesting looking building on the city drive depending on my iPhone to tell me what they are later. I do hear Anna mentioning the Champs-Élysées and glimpsing the Arc de Triompf.

Taking the funicular up to the Eiffel Tower restaurant was a highlight despite battling crowds and very tight security to get there. Disappointed that we really couldn’t see the city from the restaurant deck. Lunch was special but missed on 2.5 hours of sightseeing on your own.

The river cruise enabled us to see other sights that I missed from the bus tour such as Notre Dame Cathedral and the Louvre museum.

Seeing the Louvre Pyramid surrounded by the various buildings of the Musee du Louvre complex was stunning despite the heavy rains.

It was a tiring day but I couldn’t forgive myself if we didn’t do it.

29 JUly 2023 sat london

Viator The London palaces and parliament tour covered everything you could wish for. Struggling actress guide Sandra led us from Ritz Hotel down along eastern edge of The Green Park to The Mall and Buckingham Palace. From the Palace we walked east on The Mall to Trafalgar Square and then down Parliament Street to Westminster Abbey and The Palace of Westminster aka Houses of Parliament. 20k step day but full of forever memories.

Learned that Westminster Abbey has been the site of 40 coronations since 1040 AD. Buckingham Palace was built 1703 and has 750 rooms and Queen Victoria was the first to take up residence.

Had to see Hamilton at the Victoria Palace Theatre in London. A parade at Trafalgar Square blocked all taxis so we hoofed through St James Park to the south side of Buckingham Palace where we got on a rip off pedicab to the theatre. Uber was our friend after the show.

30 JUly 2023 sun london

Got on the TOOT HOHO yellow route at 8:30 at the National Gallery. Fabulous views from the upper, open-air deck. Wish we had earphones for the audio guide. Had a different perspective of the Parliament area and crossed the Thames over the Westminster Bridge through the Waterloo area and back across the Waterloo Bridge. Highlights were many but St Paul’s Cathedral stood out. Crossed over on the London Bridge and circled back over the Tower Bridge. Hopped off at Westminster Pier to catch the Thames River Cruise.

Cruise was great except for 200 Italian high schoolers as we made our way up to the Tower Bridge and the Tower of London. Highlights included getting an unobstructed, close-up view of the London Eye and the Tower Bridge. Hopped on the yellow line towards Piccadilly but a celebration near Trafalgar closed the route so we HOHO’d onto the blue line to get there.

Very crowded on Sunday, the Fortnum & Mason store was a dud so we headed to Piccadilly Circus and Leicester Square. TKTS and the Leicester Square Box Office are two place to get discounted theater tickets so we got Jersey Boys at the Trafalgar Theatre, one of the few performances on Sundays and very close by our hotel.

Got a pair of JBL ANC headphones to replace the Bose’s I left on the Coral Princess at TK Maxx. Heading back to the hotel we squeezed pass a huge throng at Trafalgar Square celebrating the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

Had a relaxing cocktail on the Rooftop of the Trafalgar St James before the show.

31 JUly 2023 mon

I notice that guides in England actively solicit tips. We did not have a chance to use the subway here which I was looking forward to. Uber was easier to hail than taxis at about the same price. Karen was ready to go home but I wish we could’ve continued this great adventure.