



## **Day 0, Monday Feb 3<sup>rd</sup> – En route to Gatwick to pre-position for our flight**

The day to leave for Gatwick had been a long time coming, as it was in May 2019 when we booked our cruise at the TUI shop in Reading for February 2020. So today, mid morning, we finished off the packing, secured the house and loaded up the car.

We would be picking our friend Keith up from Reading on the way and the others Martin, his wife Gill and his half-brother John would be travelling in another car from the same town.

Premier Inn Gatwick South was booked back in June last year for our overnight stay before we fly out from Gatwick North. The cost for each of the 4 rooms was £38.00 per room (no breakfast). Premier Inn Gatwick South is not actually on the airport so it is much cheaper but you need to book as soon as you can - it fills up quickly and prices go up nearer your departure date!



*Premier Inn Gatwick South is a good place to pre-position for an early flight.*

The Premier Inn Gatwick South is about a seven minute drive from the North Terminal so its very convenient and is very comfortable. There is a reasonable Chef and Brewer restaurant on site within yards and as I've recently been diagnosed with Coeliac disease, I'm hoping that gluten free food will be on the menu

For car parking we are using Maple Parking Meet and Greet again as we always do. Great no buses!!! This was offered free to us for both cars as part of our cruise deal with TUI. Usually for the fortnight it costs around £120 for this service.

Instructions for where to drop off cars at the north terminal have changed from the Hampton by Hilton Hotel to the Sofitel Hotel car park. We've never had to drop off there before but I know exactly where it is (thanks to looking on Google Street View) and its much closer to the entrance to the terminal.

Right! So we were looking forward to getting down to Gatwick and having a glass of wine with the others. Take your own bottle of plonk and have it in your room as it will save you £7.00 for a glass in the bar! This has become a sort of tradition with us (plastic glasses of course!) and it signifies the very start of our adventures. Its also very nice to have a meal together there as it gives us the chance to make some plans

This time we will be on the Marella Discovery 2 after flying to Montego Bay Jamaica, and we'll visit Grand Cayman, Havana in Cuba, the Mexican Island of Cozumel, Jamaica (again) then Santa marta and Cartegena in Colombia, Panama Canal and Puerto Limon in Costa Rica.

Up at around 6:00am tomorrow and drop the cars off at around 7:30. I think we are just about ready for everything!

## **Day 1 Tuesday February 4th 2020 - Travelling to the ship and first impressions**

The alarm went off in our room at Gatwick South's Premier Inn after surprisingly quite a good night's sleep! We'd arranged to meet the others at ten past seven in the Premier Inn lobby with our cases ready to load up and set off to Gatwick's North Terminal in our 2 car convoy.

It should have taken only 7 minutes to get there as we have done the route a dozen times before, but after only 2 minutes we came across a sign saying the main road to the airport was closed due to road works and we had to follow a detour all around the district, all through Crawley and Horley! We travelled miles amid the rush hour, school runs, traffic queues and red traffic lights. Hardly anything was moving and time was getting on.

We eventually arrived at the airport an hour late completely stressed, especially after Martin who was leading in his car had taken a wrong turning taking us two miles out of our way.

But at least parking was easy with Maple Parking's 'meet and greet' service at the Sofitel hotel opposite the entrance to the terminal. As usual this service was very fast and very efficient with good instructions.

Through the queues to bag drop and security onto airside but unfortunately no time for our planned leisurely breakfast. Just a quick visit to WH Smiths to get a couple of sandwiches (nothing gluten free available), and after a quick bite to stave off the hunger, we headed to Gate 51 to board our Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner G-TUIK.

She was waiting for us and gleaming in the morning sunshine.



*TUI Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner G-TUIK at Gatwick Airport*

Once boarded we were quickly seated and on our way. A time to relax at last and take off was bang on time.

The drinks trolley arrived in under an hour and those partaking in an early tippie ordered their first free drink. I had orange juice but Gillie asked for decaf coffee only to be told that there was none! So good job she had bought her own little sachets which she dissolved in the cup of hot water she was given.

I would have expected better from TUI.

When lunch turned up, my order for a gluten free meal I had made in the TUI shop when I booked, had not been honoured, so I resided myself to the case of making the best of it with current offerings.

Andy our flight attendant was very helpful though, apologised, and said he'd make sure there was a gluten free dinner for me on our return trip.

He then checked the ingredients of the standard meal for me and luckily ascertained there was no gluten in it, so yes I could at least eat some of the supplied lunch. He also found me a gluten free chocolate brownie from somewhere! I thought I'd keep that for later in case there was nothing else later on.

For Gillie, he'd get some decaf coffee on board for the homeward flight.

It's a good job that my Coeliac disease (recently diagnosed) is not too severe (unlike my daughter's) and that my digestion can still tolerate small amounts of normal food.

Half way through the flight Andy kept his word and ordered me a gluten free meal and found Gillie a decaf coffee which probably one of the stewardesses had in her handbag.!

We were asked to fill in Jamaican immigration forms during our flight so we complied.

It was a long flight but towards the end we were flying over some small interesting islands which I needed to look up for the names.

We got ready for landing after our nine and a quarter hour flight (we were actually 30minutes ahead of schedule) and sitting on the right side of the plane with a window seat, there was a good but brief view of Discovery 2 docked in port as we landed at Montego Bay's (Mobay's) Sangster airport. After quite a mysterious delay at the air bridge, we were allowed to leave the aircraft.

As we entered the terminal, we cruisers were then hived off into separate queue from the other tourists.

There followed the most bizarre ritual which had airport operatives following us down the segregation barrier asking to look at our passports, collecting our immigration forms and thrusting new ones in our hands telling us to fill them out on the coaches we were being directed to.

We boarded the coaches with our hand luggage and because of my long legs I was unable to sit down properly. The leg room was non existent so it was quite a painful 35 minute journey to the port! The traffic was horrendous and also the schools were closing up for the day, so there was probably a lot more traffic on the roads.

Once at the cruise terminal, our newly filled in chits were officiously collected on the coach and we got off. The humidity and heat was considerable and black clouds had previously delivered a tropical downpour. But in the excitement, the weather was the last thing on our minds.

Lining up (hopefully for the last time), we took our turn at one of the desks (not really knowing what to do with the paper cone of orange juice we'd been given - why a 'cone'?) We showed our passports, answered questions about Coronavirus (while reading a sign saying we would not be allowed on the ship if we'd been to China in the last 14 days!) and after our mugshots were taken we were given an envelope with our ship cards. We registered a credit card for our on-board account. The reasoning for this were the stories we had heard about TUI taking double amounts when settling other people's bill. The monies had been returned to them but not promptly, so to avoid any bank problems, by using a credit card we get 56 days of free credit before interest starts to accumulate – any double amounts taken by TUI would surely be sorted out within 9 weeks of ending the cruise.

Finally we boarded ship



*Boarding Discovery 2 at Montego Bay after cruise registration*

!

We were not shown to our cabins as on other TUI (Thomson) cruises but it mattered not. We were very pleased with our deck 7 balcony deluxe cabin and so were Martin and Gill who were in next door. For some reason our rooms were interconnected but we'd agreed that the door would remain locked!

Keith and John, both being solo, had single cabins on deck 3.

After a quick look round the local vicinity we tried to make bookings for six using the flat screens on deck 5 near Reception. These provide TUI's Navigator App (which you can also access on your smart phone for free) and the app allows you to book the speciality restaurants, excursions and find out info about the ship and the cruise.

Although the actual process to book some of the speciality restaurants was very easy, the difficulty was trying to find available dates and times! The Navigator' app seemed to have shot itself in the foot, especially as we were trying to book a table for 6!

So after several tries and no joy with dates we went up to Bar 11 on deck 11 to get a more human service from smartly dressed very efficient maitre'd Hassan. He was very helpful and sorted us out dates and times for Kora La and Surf and Turf instantly!

Our cases had arrived as we walked back to our cabins, but as yet, not Keith's and John's.

Gillie and I set about organising ourselves and our belongings into our home for the next two weeks straight away, and negotiated meeting up with the others for Lifeboat Muster at 7pm.

We were told to check our Muster stations on the back of our cabin doors and head off to deck 4 WITHOUT life jackets. The sign on the door said station 6 but our ship cards said station 8. How confusing.

It was drummed into us that we had to attend the muster as it was a legal requirement for our safety.

Okay then so why this confusing information.

Asking one of the muster attendants I was told she would find out and clarify, but I could see a few moments later her thoughts were on other things as she was laughing and joking with one of the show team and had seemingly forgotten about my important question.

As passengers assembled in lines of 5 for the muster, I spotted an officer in his 'whites' walking towards us so I nobbled him and explained our predicament.

He took out his mobile phone and took notes while he listened to me and said he would check and sort it.

We met up in Bar 11 for our first cruise drink and toasted our forthcoming holiday. Then onto 47 restaurant for a late dinner.

Very attentive staff and helped me choose gluten free (GF) courses. They will organise a menu each night to be pushed thru our door for me to choose GF food for next day.

Back to cabin by 11pm and we both zonked straight out!!!

## **Day 2 Wednesday February 5th 2020 - George Town, Grand Cayman Island**

We woke early due to our body clocks still adjusting to Caribbean time and looking out from our balcony into the five a.m. darkness, just the faintest of light was breaking on the horizon behind us as we sped onwards to Grand Cayman.

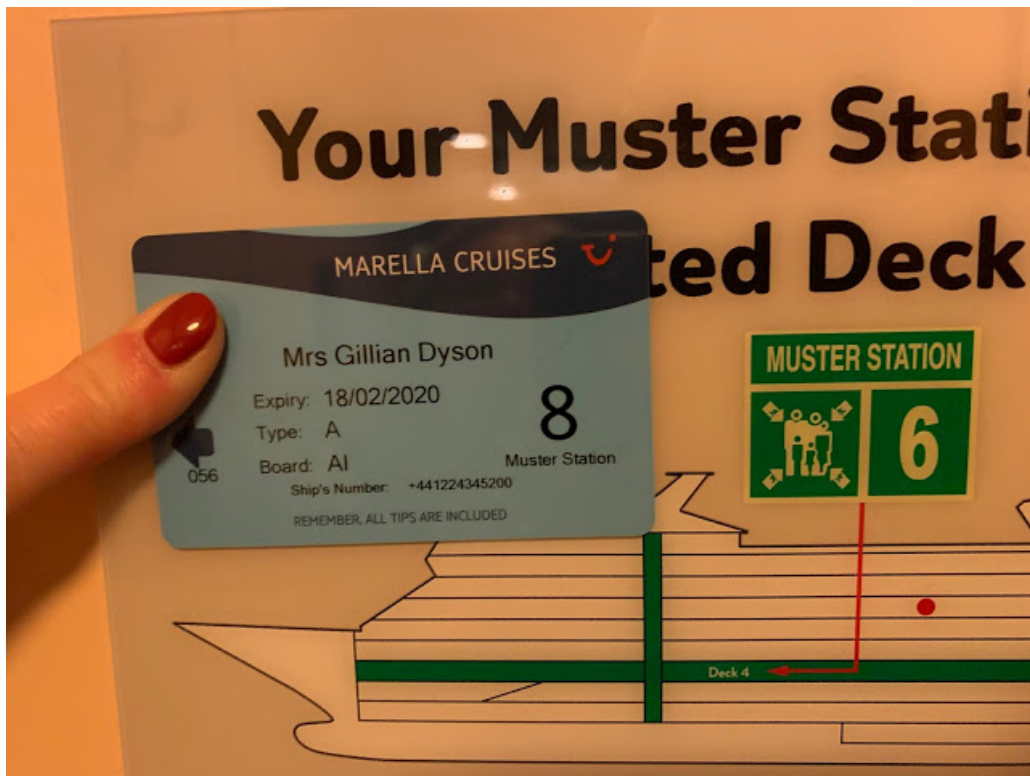


*A fleet of 5 ships were heading for Grand Cayman today*

In front of us, two other cruise ships were illuminating a guiding pathway into the port of George Town.

Today, we knew there would be four other cruise ship leviathans anchored off shore along with Discovery 2.

Gillie noticed some communications which had been pushed under our door while we slept. On investigation, one envelope contained our new cabin cards, this time showing the correct muster station (station 6 and not 8).



*Confusing information about which muster station to attend*

But exoneration for the mistake faded when we saw the letter had been addressed to some other couple along the corridor even though the cabin cards inside were definitely ours! In the other envelope was the promised menu for me to pre-select my gluten free dinner tonight.

After coffee on the balcony and watching our first sunrise of the cruise, we showered and dressed to find on our return, that we were about to pull into port and align with the other 4 ships in the bright morning sunlight.



*The four other cruise ships docked at George Town*



There was the Zuiderdam, Independence of the Seas, Norwegian Breakaway and Carnival Horizon. Quite a magnificent sight and I felt very proud to be anchoring on another big ship next to them. My only concern was that there could be anything up to ten thousand cruise ship visitors descending on this small island today!

We found our way to the top of the D2 overlooking the bow and watched the anchors being dropped in a cacophony of noise. We surveyed the views across the island and could see far off in the hazy distant sea the other island of Cayman Brac.



*Busy engineers handling our anchors*

All ships had anchored and were pointing to the east with their bows to the coast of the port. All visitors from all ships would be tendered to shore today.



*View of George Town, Grand Cayman from Discovery 2*

I managed to log onto the internet successfully for the first time in 'Islands' while we were having our breakfast buffet. I was pleased to see most single food sections had been labelled to denote if it was vegan, vegetarian or gluten free.

There was a most impressive breakfast choice but I must say as the enthusiastic and imaginative cook back home that I am, there was nothing which could compete with my 'signature' scrambled eggs!!! Scrambled eggs here were resting in some sort of murky liquid! I had a little grin!!!

One by one the others appeared and conversations turned to today's prospective activities.

Everyone seemed pretty washed out by yesterday's long flight so we decided to just tender to shore and bumble round the town maybe finding a nice bar for a cold drink. Nothing too adventurous - which was a bit sad I suppose.

Unlike our previous cruises, no ticket or queuing was required for the tender to shore in the ship's little boats and we were quickly despatched on the next one from midships on deck 1.

Once ashore we had a quick walkabout with the girls fussing over the prospective fridge magnets amid the throngs and hoards of people from ours and other cruise

ships. It was very busy and difficult to find a nice bar to sit, but eventually we found a great place high up on some decking overlooking a miniature beach where copious amounts of rum punch were imbibed!



*Relaxing in a bar at George Town with our Rum Punches*



*The view of the ships from the bar decking*

Staying for a couple of hours and taking a few shots of a fresh fish and lobsters on a make-shift stall down on the beach, we tendered back to our ship amid a light rain shower to spend the rest of the afternoon exploring our new home.

We had a short nap back in our cabin and on wakening, I noticed the other 4 ships had silently left earlier. I sat on our balcony writing my blog and it was obvious by a sudden change in the light, that the sun had set. It was nearly 6pm and Discovery 2 was making her preparations to leave Cayman.

Immediately below, stragglers had returned in the last tender boat and were re-boarding. All the tender boats would now be winched up into their davits and we would soon be heading back out into the Caribbean Sea.

It was time for Discovery to say goodbye to Grand Cayman and the ships horn blasted across the bay with the sound echoing back from the town. Gillie had gone walkabout and had found the others up on deck having a glass of wine. Her world was suddenly shattered by the volume of the unexpected horn blast!

Slowly, and imperceptibly at first, we weighed anchor and moved away from port backwards heading into the sunset. Next stop Havana, Cuba in two days time, but there was steak and a show to look forward to tonight!

I joined the others on deck 10 for a gin and tonic which turned out to be an awful tasting gin and **soda**! We surmised that the incorrect 'barrel' had been connected to the soft drink dispensing hose used for topping up spirits!!!



*Sunset after leaving Grand Cayman*

Staying there for about another hour and a half in the still warm windless twilight we enjoyed the banter between us while drank our drinks.

Looking at our watches we felt it was time to get showered and changed for dinner so we all went back to our cabins to get ready.

We were to try out and meet up in the Atrium on deck 4, but there were no seats left at 8pm and there was some sort of ballroom dancing thing going on, so we met up in Bar 11, that is until it was realised Gill and Martin were already down on deck 4 in the live room.

I was sent to fetch them but once in the atrium lift, none of the buttons worked and I was stuck! I tried pressing several floor buttons including the button to open the doors. I pressed the last one I had not tried – which usually closes the door - and the door suddenly opened!

I quickly and thankfully egressed and used another lift. I saw later that the offending lift was working again so I have no idea what happened.

I found Martin and Gill on the lower floor and escorted them back up to the bar on deck 11.

We stayed for half an hour more and then at around 8:30 moved down to the 47 restaurant on deck 4 where we were suddenly told there would be a 50 minute wait for our dinner!

Time-wise tonight we had definitely blown it and the chances of now going to see the show (which was the ship's band doing a tribute to all the old rock bands) was looking doubtful.

So it was back up to Bar 11 once more for the wait and another drink.

The staff at 47 had given us a pager and would let us know when we could return downstairs for dinner.

After 45 minutes the pager went off and summoned us as it nearly jumped off the table!

It was almost 9:45 and as we walked in to 47, we could see the restaurant was now virtually deserted.

I had made myself known to the restaurant desk staff so that they knew I had already chosen from the GF menu. They easily found my choices on screen, although the standard menu tonight was the same one I had chosen from with symbols denoting the GF dishes, so I partially felt that choosing, filling in and submitting my sheet was

a bit pointless. But there was no doubt in my mind at this stage that the crew were taking all food allergies very seriously and I was thankful.

We were served our starters, mains and desserts along with wines as promised on the AI plan. After a single modest glass we waited for the modest refill but no one came to attend. All the waiters seemed very busy clearing up and setting tables for the morning.

So Martin rose from the table and helped himself to the nearby bottle! It took a little while for him to be noticed and his incentive prompted action from our waiters who suddenly became attentive once more!

We finished a very tasty and well cooked 3 course meal and exited the restaurant looking for alternative entertainment. As we emerged there was a stampede of theatre goers who had just seen the show we wanted to watch but had been too late.

Arriving at the Squid and Anchor, last orders were in progress, Islands was shut, the glasshouse was deserted and the ship was starting to close down for the night.

Disappointed, we went back to our cabins.

Tomorrow's news sheet and another GF menu had been posted thru our door and two chocolates left on the bed for us.

We were well on the way to Cuba and I read that arrival would be late afternoon tomorrow which was a bit of a surprise and a change to the published itinerary. Whether we were being helped along by the weather I wasn't sure but it had been announced that the sea would start to get a bit choppy.

I must say that I certainly was already missing the little touches we enjoyed on our last cruise on the Spirit like the singing waiters in the restaurant at meal times.

Also we had yet to meet our cabin steward, on the Destiny, Celebration and the Spirit cruises our steward had been well in attendance by now. And where were the finely crafted towel animals which he or she had made and left on our beds to find when we returned to our cabins at night time?

All the crew seemed to be doing their jobs well but to me it was evident that a certain personal touch was missing.

### **Day 3 Thursday Feb 6th - At sea heading for Cuba**

So its a day at sea today on our way to Cuba.

I never ever even considered Cuba on my 'bucket list' (weird expression - how many buckets do you need and would you REALLY make a list of them?????), anyway here we are cruising in the middle of the Caribbean Sea heading for a country where only a few years ago no western cruise ship would have docked. I believe the Thomson Dream was one of the first cruise ships to visit Havana back in 2011.

Again rising early this morning around 6:00am, we sat out on the balcony in the dark and waited for the sun to appear with a coffee - (not the sun WITH a coffee, I mean Gillie and I with a coffee!!)

I must admit, usually I am never around at this time of day because as a working musician, I have some very late nights and like to sleep in when I can.

On this cruise Gillie my wife, and I are cruising with our lifelong friends, Martin and Gill, (2 Gillians in our group!) and Keith. Also travelling with us for the first time is Martin's long lost brother, (that's another story) who we have christened 'Brother John'!

Martin, Keith and I are part of the rock and soul band Uptown Traffic. I am the guitarist, Martin is the singer and Keith is the drummer. Brother John is our roadie and lighting operator. Keith is a bit of a celebrity having played with and lived with Jimi Hendrix back in the days of the mid sixties, when Keith and his friend Gordon Haskell (bass player who is another musical celebrity) were together in a band called Fleur de Lys. Remember the 60's track Circles????

Uptown Traffic's website is... [www.uptown-traffic.com](http://www.uptown-traffic.com) ...If you want to know more



*Uptown Traffic playing at the Newbury Retro Festival*

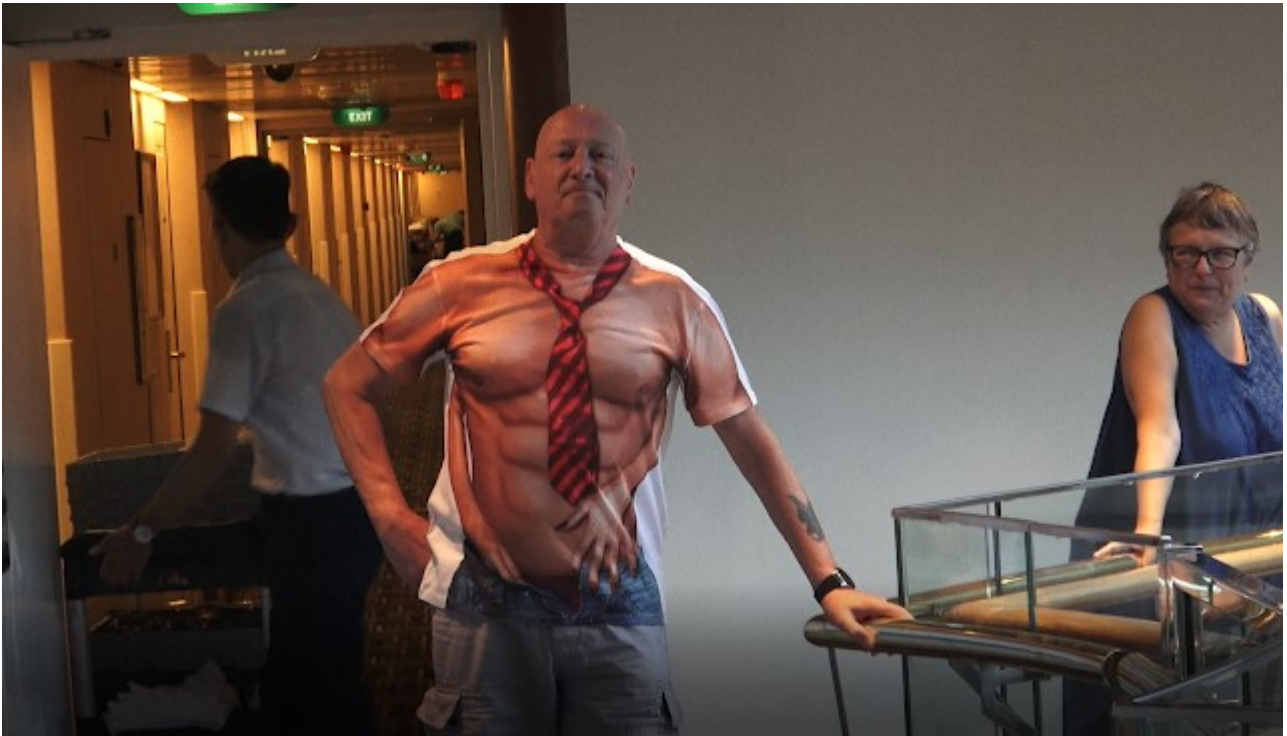
Sorry I digress! We should be talking Caribbean Cruises!!

We headed off to Islands this morning for breakfast around 9:00am. We met and sat down with Martin and Gill who were already half way through theirs, no sign of Keith who had got early stakes in a sun bed and we passed John who had already been to the gym and was just finishing off his breakfast.

The sea had got a little choppy as Captain Chis had predicted, and sitting in Islands over a plate of bacon and eggs, you could see the ship undulating as it dealt with a 4 to 5 foot swell.

We took our time for a natter with Gill and also Martin (who is a Magistrate, a black belt in Karate and proverbial legend in his own lunch break). Martin was enjoying the attention brought to him by his unorthodox tee shirt! Apparently he had several favourable(?) comments in Islands and believe me, if you were there between 8:30 and 9:30 today you would know what I was talking about! I hope to get a picture of it later!!!





*Martin's tee shirt received several comments!*

At 10:30 Gillie, Gill, Brother John and myself went to the Broadway Show Lounge for this week's TUI excursion presentations where we learned about the forthcoming available excursions in Cuba, Cozumel and Jamaica and also learned how not to stay awake while listening to the presenters! Zzzzzzz!

One thing I did get cleared up though was that in the daily Cruise News which is left every night on your bed by the cabin stewards, it said that we would be docking in Cuba this afternoon, but the truth is we will dock at 8:00 a.m. tomorrow Friday 7th. We will spend tomorrow night on the ship docked in port and will resume our cruise to Cozumel in Mexico at 2pm on Saturday.

We have booked the 3 hour Parisian Cafe Show with TUI in Havana tomorrow night leaving the ship at 9:00pm.

We have not yet decided what to do with the rest of our stay there, but no doubt this will be sorted out over dinner tonight.

After the presentation I am tempted to do the Mayan temples in Cozumel (I'm not a beach person!) but at £75 per person I will have to give it careful consideration! I don't yet know how Gillie feels about it!

The rest of the morning I spent on my balcony writing my blog, listening to the soothing sea (which had calmed down a bit by now) and enjoyed the peace and warmth of a virtual early summer as the others roasted and fried themselves on the sundeck. Keith and John and Gillie tried out the fayre in the Snack Shack (fried fish I understand!)

I had a light lunch (salad and a small jacket potato (GF of course) in Islands with Gillie around 1 pm where just as we were leaving, a whole roasted suckling pig was brought out on the carvery, much to Gillie's disgust(!) but I explained to her that others enjoy this and each to their own! We are not vegetarians and we do eat pork, but not today!!!! Besides tonight we will be having Prawn Vindaloos in Kora La (£29.95 extra per person - and as you can see, to coin a phrase... we are 'pushing the boat out' (pun intended!!!) So we are looking forward to that tonight and unlike last night, we WILL be organised and on time WON'T WE CHAPS!!!!

Gillie and I left Islands and headed for the coffee port. I do enjoy good strong coffee but only drink it about three times a week, so as a stimulant, I self-ration it!!!

Then back to the balcony on the lee side of the ship to write some more blog and have a read too. Although checking my emails for the first time today (yes WiFi DOES work in the cabins!) I had to unfortunately deal with a bit of work.

Although now being 'retired' I am still very active in my business of web and graphic design, film making and music production. I am self employed and have a small studio back home where I work. In fact I can't ever see myself retiring as I am still so into IT and creativity.

I popped down to the atrium bar on deck 4 for a gin and tonic and came back with two! The barman must have misheard me! Still I felt very content sitting on the balcony in the shade writing my blog and watching the sea drift by.

Later in the afternoon the wind started to increase and I could see spray blowing off the tops of the waves. The sun was getting low in the sky tinging the foam on the waves to a creamy yellow. I thought I would go up on deck to take footage of the sunset but when I stepped out on deck 9, I was nearly blown over so decided not to risk going up to deck 10 where I would have got a great view from the back of the ship.

All day our cabin balcony had been out of the wind in the lee side of Discovery 2.

Looking at the weather for Cuba tomorrow, heavy rain was forecast for the whole day and watching BBC World News on the cabin's TV you could see a serious swathe of cloud over Cuba.

We met up with the others in our usual place in Bar 11 at the top of the ship and we were well looked after by our young bar steward Guisti.

Our table at Kora La ( the Asian speciality restaurant) was at 8:30pm and we moved just a few yards from our seats in Bar 11 to our table.

Once again I could not fault the care and attention to my food as I am Coeliac and must not eat gluten or allow my food to become cross-contaminated by others eating food with gluten in it. So all my own food was served first and in separate dishes.

A muse-bouche was offered first - in my case a small fruity cocktail of pineapple and mango along with my own gluten free poppadums. Starter was spicy prawn satay and mains was a delicious Lamb Madras curry. There was a dessert too and the cover charge was £22.50 per person, but AI drinking was available.

The meal was politely and professionally served and was very enjoyable, but lacked the banter of relationship between diner and server which was evident on previous cruises with TUI (Thomson). Some said the curry was over salty, but I never found it so.

Keith and the girls went off to see the ballroom dancing show, while Mart and John headed back to cabins. I went down to the live room to assess the talents of the complete Discovery 2 musical fraternity jamming in the Live Room on deck 4.

I wasn't disappointed!!!

There are two bands on board, Entourage and High Waves. All members very competent musos to say the very least! But when they came together to 'jam', (meaning play alongside each other, improvising with feel and allowing music to come from the heart) - my God there were fireworks!!! Such energy from these guys and gals with great presentation and professionalism.



*Band Jam in the Live Room*

Keith, Martin and myself should know as we have played together for over 40 years, but alas too old now to play on cruise ships!!! But...don't let our age fool you, we can still 'kick arse' and let it rock!!!

Hopefully we will watch Band Jam again next Thursday!

We have to go through the rigmarole of getting through Cuban bureaucracy to see Havana tomorrow and I will spill all the beans of how we did it in my next blog page!

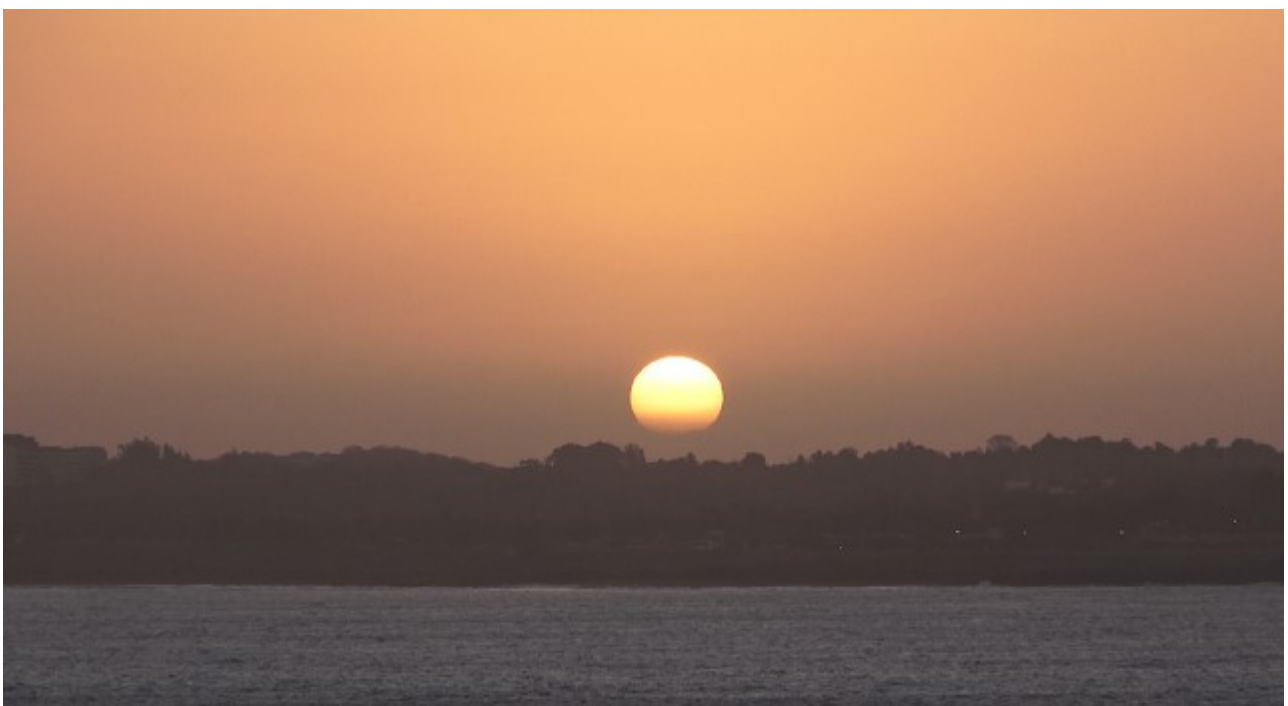
#### **Day 4 Friday Feb 7th - Havana, Cuba**

I was awake at 6:00 am - WIDE awake having trapped my thumb painfully in the bathroom door in the dark! I stifled a yell as Gillie was fast asleep and stuck my thumb in my mouth and hoped for the best!

Nursing my poor injured digit I opened the balcony curtains slightly and the sky was pinky-blue if there is such a colour. I opened the balcony door to test the temperature and felt the pleasant humid warmth.

Checking our position on CruiseMapper I could see we were close to the port of Havana so I rushed to get dressed, grabbed my new video camera and cabin keycard and headed for the high point at the sharp end of the ship.

Just as I got there the sun was rising and there was a modest crowd watching our sail in.



*Cuban sunrise*

The ship negotiated a narrow entrance to Havana harbour and the classic Spanish architecture wandered by as I filmed.



*Havana harbour entrance*

In particular was a tall domed building with golden panels which I had seen in several pictures and knew this to be the old government parliament.



*Havana cityscape*

As I filmed I could see the colourful vintage cars already out travelling tourists around in the warm early morning sun.



*Havana harbour – view to the west*

As We passed the harbour entrance and an old lighthouse, an old cruise ship terminal came into view flanked by a large derelict warehouse type building. A small military gunboat was moored up to the jetty.

I could also see a very tall structure glinting in the sunlight amid the city-scape and I thought this may have been at Revolution Square.

On the other side of the ship were the walls of an old fortress amid lush foliage and a number of palm trees with a large white religious statue standing guard over the harbour.



*Statue of Christ overlooking the Port of Havana*

Our ship had stopped dead in the water - so I thought, but actually the frantic activity of engineers on the bow busy with ropes and noisy machinery gave the game away that we were being docked. A little pilot boat was scurrying around us like a mouse. After it had obviously rendezvoused outside the harbour to off load the Pilot who would have guided us safely in, it was now relaying the ropes flung to it by our engineers to the dockers tying us up.

At that point John appeared on deck and a while after so did Keith who had been watching activities from the other end of the ship.

After reporting back to our cabin on deck 7 and rousing Gillie from slumber, we breakfasted in Islands and tried to decide plans for the day.

It had already clouded over and the weather forecast was not good. As we talked, rain spattered on the restaurant's huge panoramic windows.

The favourite idea of doing a tour in a couple of open top classic 57 Chevies was definitely out of the window. Thank goodness we had not booked this expensive escapade!!! But what to do? Ideas were not flowing.

So I went to ask destination services but they had no good ideas for Havana on a wet day.

I took one of the information sheets and read it. I saw that there was a covered market about 15 minutes walk from the port and also a restaurant called La

Bodeguita del Medio serving cocktails and local cuisine. It had been a haunt of the author Ernest Hemingway who had lived in Havana for many years. Maybe these would at least give us a chance of seeing some Cuban culture.

Cuba is under communist rule and there are perhaps more strict rules for visiting cruisers than other countries. As previously stated in my previous blogs, we had to purchase and fill in a visa costing £15.00 to hand in to security on our first visit ashore. Passports have to be carried all of the time and cruisers have to undergo facial recognition photography.

Currency for tourists are \$CUC whose exchange rate is tied to \$US although it is recommended to exchange £Stirling as there is a 10% levy on changing \$US. Some places do take \$US but the exchange rate would be very low. Apparently the USA is not a favourite country of Cuba and there is a fascinating history there which nearly caused World War 3 back in 1962!

We deliberated in how much money to exchange for \$CUC as any left over cannot be spent anywhere else in the world. Also there are rumours that the Cadecca (the Cuban exchange at the port) often run out of £Stirling when cruisers try to exchange their Cuban currency back.

So how much to actually exchange?

Well we considered that during our full day we would possibly need currency for any little souvenirs and also for food and drink. We had the TUI Cuban Cafe show excursion booked for this evening so we would need money for that and also activities for tomorrow if we went ashore before our sailing at 14:00.

Taking all this into consideration we decided to exchange £50 each and then pool the money between the six of us for whatever we needed. This way we could smooth out the peaks and troughs of individual expense in \$CUC and then reconcile what we each had spent once we had exchanged back to £.

We all also accepted to write-off the £50 each so that whatever we did get back (if anything at all) it would be a bonus! If we were short of a few bob on our second day we might buy a bit more currency!

With that decided we disembarked letting our cabin cards be scanned to register our absence so that it would be known we were off-ship in an emergency. They would be re-scanned on our return to let it be known we were safely aboard.

Once we had gone through shore security and exchanged our money, we exited from the cruise terminal into the streets of Havana on a wet and murky day.



First impressions were 'what a dump' with deep puddles hiding broken pavements and floating litter. There were shabby and derelict buildings astonishingly with people living in them and noisy traffic rattling past.

There were colourful classic cars and there were also the typical modern buses and vans which was just a little surprising as I was expecting all vehicles to be old.

We trudged on in fine rain carefully avoiding ponds of water and almost impassable footpaths. After 15 minutes of walking we found the covered market in a big dark and metallic warehouse. Inside were dozens of stalls selling almost identical 'tat' populated with identical sellers trying to get you interested in their own things for sale. Against the drab inside of the building the colours of the wares was bright and lurid. Fridge magnets, tee shirts showing pictures of Che Guava, baseball caps, wooden ornaments- it was all there!



*In the covered market in Havana*

We bought a couple of fridge magnets and I noticed some guitars for sale. The seller knew nothing about guitars so my assumption was that all the 'tat' had been cheaply bought wholesale on line and these people were the middle men and women trying to make a living.

But they were all very friendly and accepted no for an answer.

We spent a good 45 minutes looking round before we decided to find a bar for a drink. We altered course and headed off into the middle of the town.

It didn't take long to find a bar, we just followed the sound of Tijuana instruments! The bar was also serving food so it was ideal!

Knowing how good the guys and gals in that band were, I laid \$CUC10.00 on the table and asked them to play while I filmed. Their sound and their rhythms was sensational! So much energy and life!!!



*The fantastic Cuban band we found in a Havana bar*

Just as our food was being brought to the table, we noticed a road sweeper dancing to the Salsa!!! He was jolly good too!!!!

After a modest lunch and a drink we carried on down into the old town along roads with even much worse pavements and the buildings were black with mold and extremely run down. But it didn't seem to matter to the people!

We came across a large plaza with unusually grand looking buildings. Here there were more cafes and restaurants. Pity about the rain!



*Plaza in Havana*

We hit a cross roads about half a mile on and saw the Capitolio building in all its splendour at the end of the long street.



*The newly renovated Capitolio building in Havana*

This building with a dome used to be the home Havana's Parliament. It was white with a multitude of steps at the front leading to its own platform.

Keith and I crossed the busy road in front of the building and walked up the 4 flights of steps to see the view but it wasn't that inspiring. What we did see however when we looked through an open door which the crowds were standing in front of taking photographs, was a huge gold statue! At the moment I don't know who it was of or what it represented but it was very significant. Later back home I would find out this was called 'The Statue of the Republic'.



This beautiful building is a major icon of the city and the country. It has recently been renovated having first been built in 1929.

The gold panels on the dome are actually real gold supplied by Russia and so as gold is inert to corrosion, (copper turns green blue when it oxidises) the dome will always be golden.



*Walking some of the back streets in Havana*

Besides all of the glamour buildings and fancy hotels, the Havana streets were run down and poverty was obviously rife. But even on a wet day, Cuba was very colourful

Time was passing quickly and there was still drizzle from an overcast sky. So we headed back finding a short cut back to the cruise terminal and the ship.

After some free time writing my blog, it was time to meet up with the others in Islands for an early dinner as tonight we had tickets for the Parisian Cafe floor show.

Moving out through the cruise terminal for the second time today and showing passports again we were directed to our waiting coach.

A few minutes later we were watching the sea hitting the sea wall on the side of the coastal road we were travelling on. The sea was sending jets 30 - 40 feet into the air!

Our guide said we would be turning off soon to find an alternative route which we did. Soon we had arrived at the Parisian Hotel for the show and as we got off the coach there was a river of water running down the gutter by our parking space - obviously from the colossal amount of sea spray. However we stepped off the coach over the deluge with no consequences.

Walking into the darkened auditorium where the show was to take place, the first thing we saw was an old Piper Cub aircraft that had seen better days hanging from the ceiling. There were coloured classic cars intermingled with the tables around a circular dance floor leading up to the stage.



*A real light aircraft hanging from the ceiling of the Parisienne Café functions room*



*Vintage American Cars were also a feature of the functions room*

Free cocktails arrived (Mojitos) and while waiting free wine or beer was also served. Then a plate full of snacks each - hams, cheese balls, samosas, crackers which was very unexpected.

The show itself started at 10:00 - about an hour after we'd arrived.

The curtains on stage were pulled back to reveal a 10 piece band playing playing the most fascinating and lively Cuban rhythms. Then instantly young dancers appeared on the dance floor and we had started a fantastic evening of entertainment!!!

The band was really tight and featured two of the best percussionists I have ever seen playing congas. There was a pianist and double bass player and a 4 piece brass section consisting 2 trumpets sax and trombone. There was also an older guy on another trumpet - he was 81, but boy could he play!!! There were various singers too and I lost count of how many.



*A hot and fantastic Cuban Salsa band*

I couldn't take much notice of the dancers due to all this wonderful playing going on on stage! I suppose most people were watching them, but for me the highlight were the guys and their instruments.

In the finale which was an intense climax to the whole show, some of the dancers descended from the stage to pick members of the audience to participate. I suddenly looked around to find Keith our drummer, up and dancing with a lovely young lady. This must have just made his night!





*Keith dancing with one of the stage girls*

On the way back to the ship we had an impromptu 15 minute tour around Havana in the coach.

### **Day 5 - Saturday Feb 8th - Havana Cuba - second day**

Today Gillie and myself and also John had booked a TUI 3 hour Havana tour (Easy Havana).

There was a small problem in that John wasn't issued with a ticket from the Navigator podium where he booked the tour from. Later we would learn that this was because the podium's printer had run out of paper to print his ticket! So a hurried visit to Destination Services was required to collect it before we left for the coach.

We met the coach in the bay beneath the cruise terminal, grabbed our seats then moved to alternative ones which did not have a window pillar or window curtain.

The bus set off - it was just over half filled- and took us round the main streets of Havana ('Habana' as the locals call it) with our guide Alfredo recounting Cuban history.



*The 150 metretall memorial tower in Revolution Square*

Our first stop was Revolution Square where the rise and support for Fidel Castro had brought millions onto the streets in this location. Now it was a celebrated plaza with a huge concourse and a 150m tower which you could ascend up to the lookout.

Of note there were two Ministry buildings looking over the plaza. One had a huge neon picture of Fidel Castro while the other building had a similar Che Guevara.

There was a whole fleet of classic vintage cars in gaudy and pastel colours all gleaming and well looked after parked in Revolution Square and they were the focus of attention. Some of them were taxis taking tourists for short trips. You could even sit in the and have your partner take photos



*Vintage American Cars are a big part of the Cuban tourist industry*



After a 20 minute stop over we all reassembled on the coach. It has to be said that if you are taken short on a tour in Cuba, it's such a good idea to have a loo at the back of the coach! That said it was so tiny I found it quite difficult to 'adjust my dress' after I'd been, as the ceiling was so low and foot space was far too small for my great lumps of meat (feet!)

Next on the tour itinerary was a visit to a shop selling cigars rum and coffee. We tasted a choice of runs and learned about types of cigars, particularly those smoked by Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Winston Churchill, and a pack of the three preferences was on sale for \$30. Rum was on sale at \$6 too but neither merchandise interests me. But for some it was fascinating I'm sure.

Another little trip round Havana and we ended up at the National Hotel for a free Mojito cocktail.



*The very suave National Hotel on the coast just outside Havana*

The sky was looking a little more promising at this point and we sat drinking our Mojitas in the garden overlooking the sea which was still quite angry.



*Rough seas around Havana Harbour during February are frequent*

We realised that this lavish hotel was right next door to the hotel where the Parisian Cafe show was last night.

On the way back to the ship we learned from our guide about how Cuba worked. The state paid for many benefits including healthcare, education (even university) and gas and electricity was subsidised. But salaries seemed to be controlled pushing most people into drastic property. They are only allowed to earn between \$20 and \$40 per month. So looking at all of these grand hotels and grand buildings it made no sense that as we walked the back streets of Havana yesterday we saw so many people living in squalid, damp and mould ridden derelict apartments . From my chair it demonstrates that communism does not work - regardless of what is said about the capitalist western societies.

We gave Alfredo \$20, not because he asked or even mentioned it, but because we wanted to help.

Some may say that we did that out of guilt - well... perhaps that was also the case but I sadly reflected on what I had seen in Cuba these last 2 days as poignantly we went back to all of the comforts and lavishness of our huge ship.

Sail out from Havana was equally interesting as the sail in was yesterday. The sea was still crashing against Havana's sea wall and the wind was still rough. I think we are in for more choppy seas tonight!



*Rough seas on our way out of Havana*

We spent a restful afternoon after seeing the sail out from Havana and had a spot of lunch in islands then back to the cabin.

Martin and Gill next door were sitting out on the balcony. The sky was turning bluer and temperatures were rising. It seemed that we'd left the murky weather in Havana.

We all met up in our usual haunt in Bar 11 on deck 11 where our friendly young barman Guisti served us our drinks.

We'd planned the evening much better than of late and went into dinner earlier so that we could have a longer evening.

In the Broadway Theatre we went to see the comedian who had come aboard. He was very funny and we all said we would go back tomorrow night to see his second but more 'adult' show.

Then onto the live room to watch the band Entourage. We all made it to bed by 1:30am.

Cozumel and hopefully some sunshine there tomorrow!

## **Day 6 Sunday Feb 9th - San Miguel, Cozumel**

Overnight I had developed the 'cruise cough'.

I had it on our first Caribbean cruise back in 2011 and had to go to sick bay to try and get some relief. They gave me steroid nebuliser treatment over 3 days costing £180.00 I claimed all but £25 back from my travel insurance when I got home.

Hopefully on this cruise I won't need to seek medical help. Sick bay is on Deck one and only open at certain times.

Reading the news on my phone, it was depressing to learn that Coronavirus is steadily spreading and my heart went out to those stuck on the Diamond Princess cruise ship quarantined in Yokohama harbour. They didn't pay thousands of £€\$ to end up being in a situation like that! It must be very frightening. Thankfully it is highly unlikely for a similar situation to arise on Discovery 2 in the Caribbean during this trip - I hope!

Anyway - Cozumel came into view a little more earlier than planned and I took footage from our balcony knowing Keith and John would be doing the same top-side - and probably looking for me.



*Early morning in San Miguel, Cozumel, Mexico*

The Mexican island of Cozumel looked a lovely place with a long jetty that the ship slowly snuggled up to, and with countless coloured ferries zooming around or anchored in the port. On shore you could see the shops and restaurants and bars. The sun had risen around 7am and it was now lighting up all the surroundings. To the west I think you could make out Playa del Carmen on the Mexican mainland.

After breakfast in Islands we assembled mid-ships on deck 1 and hurried down the gangway.



*Discovery 2 docked in port at San Miguel*



The jetty was quite a walk and then a ninety degree bend and another walk. There were manned tricycles parked ready to transport you to the other end and would save you the trouble of using your own legs but I never saw anyone taking advantage of these, even if the cyclists did just work for tips.



*The sea going super yacht the Plus Ultra – registered in the Cayman Islands owners unknown*

We passed a very posh multi million pound ocean going motor yacht docked along the jetty and looking it up on Marine Traffic websites, the Plus Ultra (Plus Ultra I suppose?) was probably owned by some rich Arab or Russian Oligarch!

Moving onto the entrance to the cruise ship terminal we walked through a large shopping mall with shops selling the usual tat and bling.

Near the end was a lady with her photo of the tours she was selling. Today we had planned to try and find a minibus taxi to take us to a nice beach.

Martin approached the lady who told us there was a minibus waiting and could take us to the Aquarium private beach where there would be sun beds, parasols, a bar and restaurant and of course toilets. It ticked all of the requirements on our list and the taxi price would be US\$64.00 return for the six of us. (Just over US\$10.00 each!) but there would be a US\$20.00 charge each admission to the private beach complex. Considering we spent \$25.00 each on just a minibus taxi tour around other Caribbean Islands some years back, it seemed a good price!

We were safely delivered to the complex, paid our entrance fees and were directed through the restaurant, through a garden with a clean pool and shown some sun beds. Just the job! Hardly anyone else around, the sea was calm, the sky was blue and the sand (although a little sharp) clean and litter free.



*Swimming pool at Aquarium Beach resort*



*Aquarium private beach*



*Aquarium Beach looking toward the Mexican Mainland*

We chose our sun beds - Keith and Martin moving theirs out of the shade into direct sunlight, and we settled down with books.

“Time for a drink?” said someone and soon a bucket of 5 beers, a mojito in a 2 foot glass, agua sin gas and a whole real pineapple with Pina Colada for me appeared. It was in a whole hollowed out pineapple and had a straw.



*My Pina Colada came in a whole Pineapple!*

In the main, the drinks were quite expensive - the 5 beers were \$30 and my Pina Colada was \$13. I think Keith's mojito was \$15

Some of us dipped into the warm sea and I startingly saw John go under! But Martin was close by and made sure he was okay.

There were various large inflatables for us to climb over and also Jet Skis for hire.



*Pele, our friendly pelican!*

A large Pelican was flying round and diving into the shallows for fish just a few feet away. It seemed very tame.

Eventually lunch was ordered with another round of drinks and very soon was served to us at a table. We had ordered one plate each but when it came it would have fed at least 12!!! There was so much food there and inevitably we couldn't eat it all. The food was quite expensive too.

After lunch, Gillie and I walked along the beach as we always seem to, enjoying just our own company for a few minutes in this lovely setting. There were shady palm trees growing just feet away from the surf and strange looking shells in the wet sand. We couldn't walk too far though because there were private beaches either side of ours.

Keith was a bit restless because he was desperate for some sun and there were more clouds in the sky than he would have liked!

We got the bill which was a staggering \$205 and the girls spent time working out who owed what. The bill had tax and tip already added so this never helped the expense of it! But finally everyone coughed up and it was paid.

We decided to leave around 4pm and the taxi driver had stayed on the complex and was immediately ready to take us back to cruise ship port.

All aboard the 'Chucklebus' and we were whisked back to San Miguel and it's road humps! It was quite a long way and took about 20 minutes.

We walked 'the walk' back through the shopping Mall and started up the long jetty. I noticed the trikes had changed position on the quay hoping that tired cruisers would take advantage of a lift to the ship.

We reached the ship, sanitised our hands which we always do using the supplied gell and queued to have our boarding cards scanned on entry.

I noticed a couple of guitar cases up ahead and there seemed to be a hold up momentarily. As we drew nearer to the x-ray machine we saw that a group of musicians had boarded with their instruments to entertain the cruisers upstairs and out on deck 9 near the pool. It was the Cozumel Mariachi band!

After checking back into the cabin and dropping off beach attire, Gillie and I moved upstairs to deck 10's poolside gallery to watch this band in action. It was very crowded on deck but we managed to bag ourselves a space by moving sun beds out of the way.

There were 3 trumpets, an acoustic guitarist and an acoustic bass guitarist, another playing a ukulele, and two violinists. They were in full swing and the crowd loved them.



*The Cozumel Mariachi band playing on deck 9*

We stayed for a while listening to renditions of older standards played Tijuana style but then decided to go for coffee at the Coffee Port on deck 6. Gillie and I do like our coffee!

Tonight our plans were to meet up in the quieter Bar 11, go Italian in Gallery 47 for dinner then go onto the Broadway Show Lounge for a Broadway performance by the Show Team. I'd seen all the Broadway stuff on another cruise and didn't really want to see all that again so I'd been looking to see when and where the other ship band High Waves would be playing - their performance actually co-insides with the time that Broadway Show was on so that might get me out of that! We would then stay in the Show Lounge to safeguard our seats ready for the comedian's second show.



*Leaving Cozumel at dusk*

We left Cozumel in the dark while we met up in Bar 11 around 7:45. Guisti served us extra large gin and tonics and all too soon our pager paged us down to Gallery 47 for our Italian dinner.

The menu looked good and there were plenty of GF options for me. A plate of antipasti nibbles were brought to the table and a few minutes I was given my own separate GF version due to possible contamination of normal breads on the communal plate.

Keith knew that High Waves were playing an earlier set in the Live Room which meant we could go there immediately after dinner then go to see the Broadway Show. Oh... okay.

High Waves were a very talented band and I did prefer them to Entourage the other ship's band. But it was a very close match as Entourage were good too.

After their set had finished we got up to go into the Show Lounge but my cough had started up so I went back to the cabin to take some cough medicine. I just made it back for the start of the show. The guys had saved me a seat.

It was very packed and hot in the Show Lounge and immediately I started to cough again. I was trapped and couldn't really move out so I had to stay there watching all the stuff I didn't want to see! Although the Show Team were absolutely first class performers.

The coughing got so bad that Gillie and I never stayed for the comedian and we turned in for the night. The ship was swaying a bit tonight but that just rocked me off to sleep!

### **Day 7 Monday Feb 10 - at sea heading for Montego Bay, Jamaica**

Today was another day at sea. No hurry to get up, no hurry to go to breakfast, no hurry to do anything!!!

I had planned to walk the ship with my newly acquired Ultra High Definition video camera to take footage for our forthcoming holiday film. I'm afraid it never happened!!!

That task will have to be on another sea day, possibly this coming Wednesday when we are on our way to Colombia.



*Ubiquitous gulls following the ship*

No, today was a restful day, a chilling day, one of those catch-up-with-yourself days, one of those rare days when you can just please yourself! So nothing much to report really!

We spent a lot of today on our extended balcony - you may remember from the previous blog that Martin managed to get the frosted glass partition opened by the crew when they were swabbing the decks or rather the balconies, all of the partitions were folded to the open position for cleaning.





*Gillie and Gill on our now extended balcony!*

Gillie and I, and Martin and Gill have interconnecting rooms with a door. Although that door is never used, it's nice to join our outside spaces together so that it looks to be a larger area.

We had a look in Islands at tea time and there was quite a selection of sandwiches and cakes.

Almost every tray of food had a printed plastic label naming the dish and was showing a little Diamond shaped icon which throughout other restaurants on the ship means that a gluten free (GF) option for that food is available.

When asking a waiter, he knew nothing about it and went to get his supervisor. Speaking to her she indicated a sample plate of GF food which was nothing like the other selections.

So as I was querying this, a lady (obviously a fellow Coeliac and who had already been given a plate of this inferior food) backed me up with my observations and actually started to tell the staff off! I suggested they reprint the food labels without the diamond icon so that any Coeliac person would be clear on what they could eat.



*Confusion over special dietary food labelling in the 47 restaurant*

I took my plate and thanked the staff anyway and sat down with Martin, Gill and Gillie. I must admit I thought the two small rolls and two cookies on my tea plate were pretty awful! I left most of it.

A little later while on deck 5, I tackled reception about the way that Islands indicated GF options on their food and then had no intention of providing it. I was referred to the head waiter Jomar in 47 so we headed off down to deck 4 to talk to him. He apologised profusely but I don't believe he realised what was going on in Islands. After my little chat with him I will be looking out for an improvement!

But it begged another question about tomorrow's planned TUI excursion in Jamaica when we would be going for high tea.

I had been diagnosed with Coeliac disease just recently and it was some months after we booked the excursion in the shop.

So the question was - would there be a gluten free option on this high tea we'd booked? Destination Services didn't know but sent a message to try and find out. I heard nothing! So tomorrow I may have to forego my gluten free diet when offered food not sensitive to allergies.

We had booked the Surf and Turf speciality restaurant tonight as a treat. We had previously studied the menu and it looked very good! There were many GF dishes which pleased me. What didn't please me when looking at the menu was that dishes having a GF option had a different icon denoting such! Why can't something so simple, so obvious follow a ship-wide standard. I will be having a little chat with Surf and Turf's head waiter too me thinks. I know he is a stickler for detail so I am hopeful I can change his mind. I know it's a very small thing, but to get it right will help others.

Other than that, the food was impeccable! The fillet steak so tender, gluten free onion rings and my own dish of chips due to possible cross pollution to oil that had been used to fry breaded items. And the chocolate soufflé with the rich chocolate sauce was probably the most chocolaty pudding I've ever had.



*Photograph of Fillet Steak dish and accompaniments taken by Paula Fielding*

So was the service and once again we were the last table out from the restaurant!!!

Popping down to the atrium floor on deck 4 to grab some orange juice for the morning, people were gathered listening to an opera singer singing to backing tracks.

I'm sure many people like the sound of opera and they like to be seen listening to it! That's just my view - each to their own of course and good luck to you if you are an opera fan.

I am not! I don't see the need for unnecessary quivering vibrato all of the time when the voice has so many different qualities and timbres that can be used to express the soul of a song, and I also feel that some of the male opera singers sound almost hysterical! But as I say, if you love opera then you love opera and my opinion won't matter to you!!!

So we quickly made our way with our orange juice back to our cabin passing trolley being loaded with the bonded luggage of tomorrow's home-goers. I noted that the flight from Gatwick TOM66 was slated as already being an hour and a half late. That would also impact on the home-goers flight back to Gatwick using the same plane. Hopefully this won't be us following suite in a week's time.

## **Day 8 Tuesday Feb 11 - Montego Bay, Jamaica**

"I went to the Caribbean on a cruise ship with my wife"

"Oh really, Jamaica?"

"No no, she went of her own accord!!!"

(chortle) Sorry!!!

We got into Montego Bay this morning about 20 minutes earlier than scheduled at around 08:40.

The sea was calm and the sky blue. The sun had been up a couple of hours and the world was a lovely place!

I was monitoring our approach to Montego Bay by viewing channel 19 on the ship's TV and so when prompted, I emerged on Deck 10 to take footage just at the right time.

I didn't realise last week how very beautiful Montego Bay was. We'd had a long flight last week and the day had been stressful, so when we finally arrived, it was 'hit the cabin' first then go for a drink and by the time we had sat down to eat it was dark.



*Montego Bay is very pretty*

However this morning in the sunshine, everything looked green and lush. There were small curved islands caressed by azure waters along several inlets and peninsulas. It looked like the true paradise that a Caribbean location would be.

Today we had booked a TUI excursion to Good Hope House just south of Falmouth to the east in the central hills. The house along with its estate had a history going back to the 19th century of growing sugar cane and slave workers. Today in modern times it was a tourist attraction and also a bird sanctuary. We were going there for 'high tea'!

We walked off ship and thru the cruise terminal. Then shown PAST a waiting luxury coach(!) and invited to take a seat on board a 1970's service bus that had seen better days. It was obviously a Chinese hand me down as you could see the remnants of Chinese writing on the side which had been painted over!

I hoped it hadn't come from Wuhan!!!

We sat in cramped seats near the front and set off with our charming Jamaican girl guide filling us in on local history and all about the buildings we passed. "Irie!!"

She used the same jokes that we had heard a week ago when being ferried from plane to ship! '...and this hotel is where you will get overnight accommodation and three free meals per day. We call it the Police Station!' Well we still laughed of course!

Traffic moving (or trying to move) around MoBay is notorious for jams and delays. I have no idea why. So it took nearly 30 minutes to get us onto the main road out of town. Once there though the driver used his foot and hit the gas!

Okay now we are getting somewhere so I thought as we passed a herd of unattended goats trying to commit suicide on the lanes of traffic.

Just then we turned off the main Falmouth bypass and headed south. To say that the roads were bad would be like saying 3 Michelin Stars had been awarded to TUI Dreamliner cuisine!!!!

The bus was a bone shaker and as it rattled and vibrated, badly negotiated deep potholes, steered up roadside banks and clattered through low hanging tree branches we were all thrown about like a set of jugglers skittles. At one point we were side on a 45 degrees tilt to the vertical! This 'second leg' of our journey went on for another 35 minutes! It was exhausting as we white-knuckled the hand hold safety bars in front on our seats!

I looked doubtfully at the sign at the front of the bus saying... "After your safe and pleasant journey please tip your driver". Hmmmmmmm!  
(Tip? Er... get a new bus?)

Finally the buffeting came to an end as we screeched to a halt on the gravel at Good Hope House. Squeezing out of our under-generous bus seats we assembled on the front lawn to look at the beautiful view. Boy it was hot!

As far as your eye could see, you were looking at the extent of Good Hope estate which many years ago would have been laid to growing sugar cane.

A new girl guide came to show us around the house which amounted to a total of six rooms, but the schpiel was interesting non the less.  
Especially about the ghost!

After we had looked round we were shown to tables for our 'high tea' - it was only 12:10(!!!) Okay, a bit on the early side, but surprisingly she asked our group to identify the person that required a gluten free 'high tea'!

That was me!!!

The message HAD got through to them from Destination Services and for that I was pleased and thankful!

(Sorry to keep harping on about Coeliacs and gluten free, but if it helps just one person on their cruise then it will all be justified!)

'Tea' was served (oh god... I don't drink tea either and never have) and also Blue Mountain coffee - phew! okay I'll have some of that then!

They poured me a cup and I tasted it black . It was hot, strong and punchy with that taste that you can't quite determine between bitterness from the roasted sweetness. I liked it! I poured milk into my cup and sat back to enjoy it.

My 'high tea' was brought first. This should always be the case to minimise cross contamination eg - fingers in the soup (not that soup was on the bill of fayre of course but to coin a Jamaican phrase used by our lovely, bubbly Jamaican bus guide "y'catch me drift? Ya man!!!).

I had not one but FOUR pieces of Jerk Chicken, and some fresh pineapple and watermelon. Fab-u-lus!!!!

Then the others were brought their high teas - ONE piece of jerk chicken, a small sandwich, banana cake, and a scone with jam and cream and a couple of cookies. Quite a lunch in fact!

But no hard feelings, I was already gnawing away at my first piece of spiced chicken! Delicious!!!

Many thanks to Destination Services, you certainly came up trumps for me!!!



*Looking around the grounds of Goodhope House*



*Brilliant blooms around the gardens*



*Lead-lined bath which poisoned the owner*

After a quick tour around, we got back in the Chukka Bus (Charabang) and reversed most of the way down hill to look at the Aviary and the inevitable tat shops. At one point I was getting a little concerned about the driver reversing close to a sudden 60 foot drop next to the track!!!

But the Aviary was very interesting. We entered a closed in area with netting over the top to protect the birds from the outside world and inside were parrots and budgies. In another section sitting side by side were two beautiful Macaws. One blue and yellow and one scarlet. Photos and footage just had to be taken.





*Colourful Macaw parrots*

All too soon we were back on the rickety old bus to be pummelled and jostled all the way back to the ship.

We were relieved to disembark from the Chukka Bus which seemed to be owned by the excursion company and presenting the house. We were hot and thirsty and made straight for Islands for a cold drink.

Although there are no gluten free beers 'per se' onboard, Bottles of Corona beer contain just 30 parts per million of gluten. This falls short of GF Peroni in England by just 10 parts at 20ppm. In the UK 30ppm is not considered GF but it is in USA. So if you are not a too sensitive Coeliac like me, maybe Corona beer now and again may not harm you, but please seek professional advice!!! I am neither a doctor or a dietician! But sometime on a hot day you just need a beer!!

As it was change over day we knew that TUI Dreamliners would be flying in the next load of cruisers and those aircraft would take back home those who had finished their cruise.

I also knew from the FlightStats website that the Gatwick flight into MoBay was going to be approximately 2 hours late and this was due probably to the recent storms back home messing up all of the flight schedules.

So while we were on our balcony we watched the Birmingham Dreamliner come in around 4pm, then the Virgin 747 land 45 minutes later. finally at 6pm TOM66

appeared out of the sky two hours late and passed by the Discovery 2 at 1000 feet to also land at Sangster Airport.



*TOM 66 landing at Sangster airport almost 2 hours late*

Those going home will also have a 2 hour delay. I guess they will be transported to the airport at the scheduled time regardless of the delay to get them off the ship and make way for the new intakes.

It was curry night in Islands tonight and although we'd originally planned to do Tapas in the Glasshouse, we couldn't resist the curries. We ate out on deck as there was a sail away party starting 8pm as we left Jamaica.

High Waves kicked off the music and then the ship Master of Ceremonies took over and introduced a laser light show!

Choreographed and synchronised to music, 3 powerful lasers mounted on the ceiling spread their dancing beams in different colours from the forward end of deck 9 and projected onto a thin strip of the outside of the Sky deck.



*Laser light show*

They had been programmed very accurately so that no dangerous laser light could shine directly into people's eyes. I wondered what the people eating at the front tables of the Kora La restaurant thought of all these laser beams shooting at them just above their heads!

It was then time for disco music and the dreaded game shows.

I'm not a great fan of either and my cough was getting bad so I turned in while the others went to the Broadway show-lounge to watch the show.

I'm thinking about going to see the doc in sick bay tomorrow to try and get something for my cough. If I do, I will let you know how much it costs!!!!.

## **Day 9 Wednesday Feb 12 - day at sea**

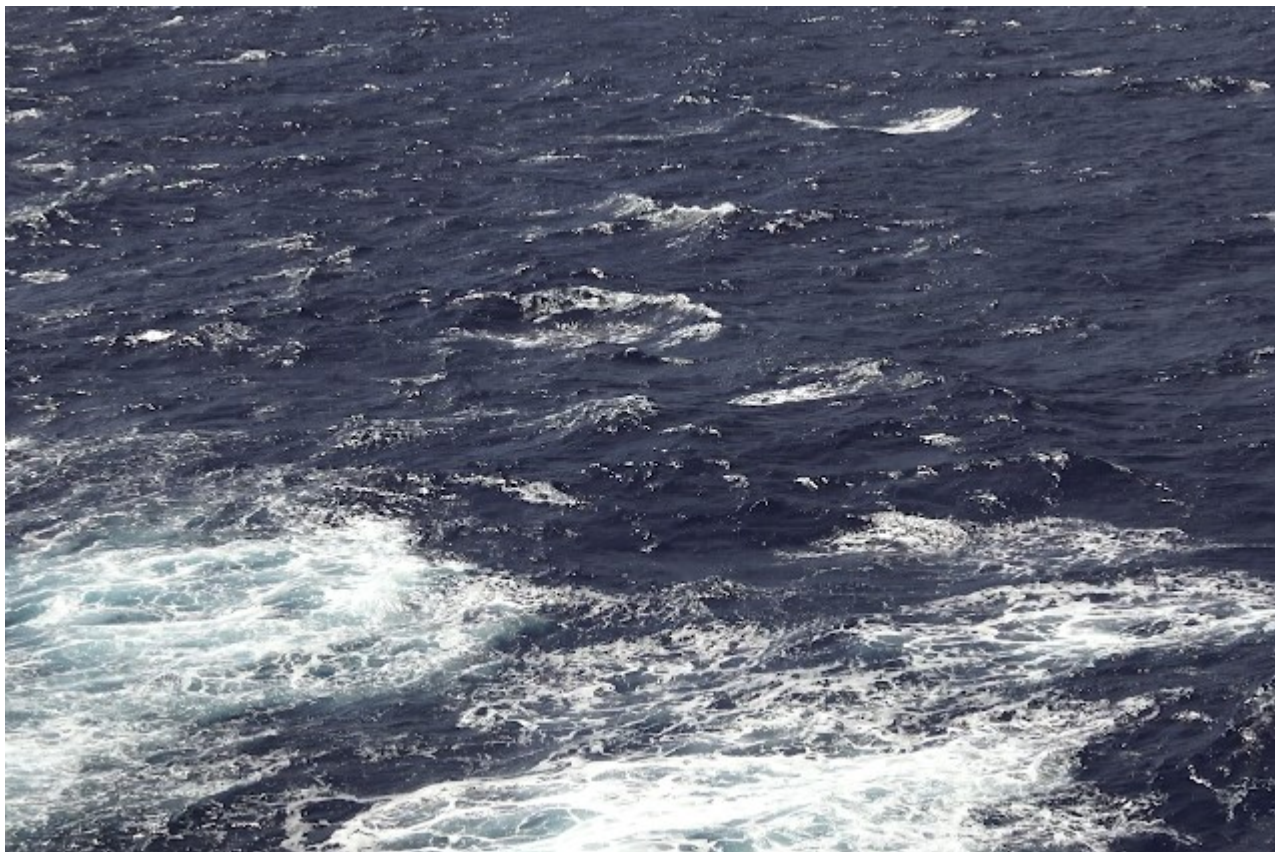
On this two week cruise we have four and a half days at sea.

Today on the way to Santa Marta the sea is more choppy (dare I say rougher?) than any other day we've experienced on this cruise so far.

But it is warm and sunny.

Sitting on our balcony on the windy side of the ship, some waves slapped along the side and we got a refreshing salty spray! Every time it did this you saw a momentary misty apparition of rainbow colours against the white turbulent foam.

It showed how strong the wind was as we were possibly 70 or 80 feet above the waterline where we were on deck 7!



*Seas were getting progressively rough*

I had the balcony door open while Gillie went to refill our carafe with fresh water. When she came back she couldn't open the main cabin door because of pressure of the wind blowing in from the balcony. I went over and struggled to open it for her and as I did, every single piece of paper not weighted down in the cabin shot past her at hurricane force nine into and down the corridor! We were lucky our excursion tickets didn't blow over the railings of the atrium as our cabins are very close to it.

Unlike other Caribbean cruises and we've been on 2 previous ones, we have not sailed the Caribbean Sea and seen any other ships on this cruise. We've not seen any aircraft in the skies either.

Last night Captain Chris handed over his command to a new captain - Captain Jason Ikiadis or Captain CJ as he seems to be known. I don't know if he's been Captain on D2 before.

"I relieve you Sir" - "I stand relieved" would probably have been the formality.

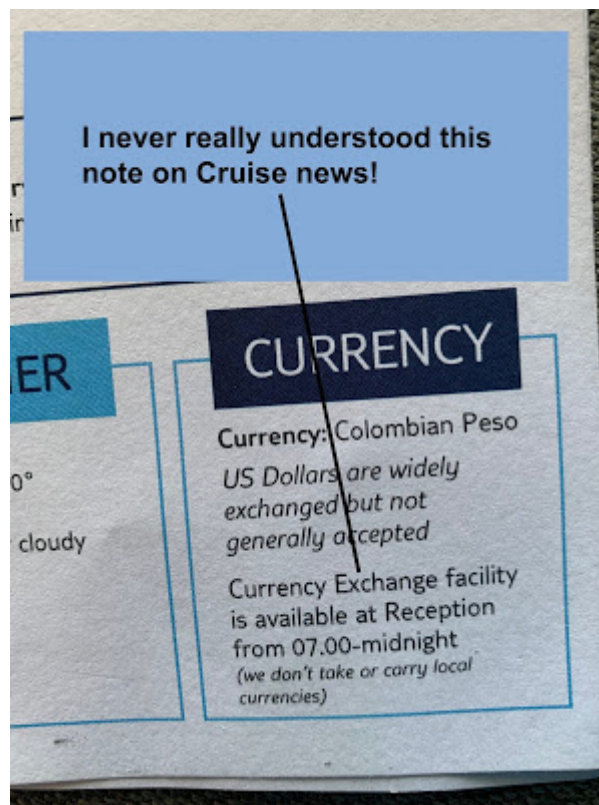
So this is the start of our second leg of the cruise - Pride of Panama.

We will be visiting Santa Marta and Cartagena in Colombia, Colon in Panama and Puerto Limon in Costa Rica before our last day at sea and arrival back in MoBay for our flight home.

Gill went to the show lounge to pick up info about excursions and such of our stop overs. We have two more TUI excursions booked.

In Panama we are going on a train ride alongside the canal and doing a riverboat ride in Costa Rica.

I'm not too sure about currency in Santa Marta tomorrow as Google says only Colombian Pesos are taken. But Cruise News says US\$ are readily taken in some areas.



... just been to Reception and although Cruise News tonight is saying you can change currencies up until 12pm tomorrow, the girl on the desk says they do not hold local currencies and that US\$ are widely accepted and it is not necessary to buy Colombian Pesos.

Clear???? Ummm NO!!!  
Why so many contradictions on this ship????

Apparently we will be docking at an industrial terminal and will be bussed by coach through the port to the entrance gates.

It is then a 10 minute walk along the coast road to get to the old town. I will report back on all this when it becomes clear to me.

After staying mostly on our balcony today being mesmerised by the sea's adverse behaviour, we took a trip down to the coffee port for our very decent cup of coffee. All the drinks and most of the cakes are chargeable but they are all cheaper than your average Starbucks or Costa back home.

They also stamp your loyalty card and if you collect 6 stamps you get a seventh coffee for free. They also do lovely milk shakes and ice creams (knickerbocker glory!) there as well but these fall under the chargeable heading.

The sea was getting quite noticeably rough now and walking down the corridor of deck 7 where our cabin was, we and others were having difficulty walking in a straight line! Most noticeably, you seemed to have to put more effort into your forward motion as you walked uphill, then the next second you were coasting downhill at an increased rate of knots. The ship was battling the oncoming swell then the swell released the ship before the next inevitable onslaught.

If it was bad enough on deck 7, on deck 11 the movement was amplified even more especially at Bar 11. It is nearer the back end of the ship and the highest point! It was my guess that our vertical movements whilst sitting sipping Screwdriver cocktails, was around 6 feet and would have been a respectable hump on any roller-coaster.

Our buzzer went off to page us down to Gallery 47 for our evening Italian dinner. I noticed that the menu changed only once every 3 days but was very similar anyway. Spaghetti Carbonara substituted for Spaghetti Bolognese tonight for example.

John decided to forgo dinner and went off to do his own 'thang'.

Despite stating my dietary requirement to the waitress, she completely forgot about my antipasti, although the others tucked in to not one but two plates of it! Obviously that was the mistake! Attention to dietary detail seemed to have gone out the window!

There were also queries about my main meal choice too... "yes sir we can do it", "sorry sir I will have to check with the chef", "yes sir that will be fine" and ultimately "no sir, you'll have to choose something else".

So back to Spag Bol then I suppose.

Nice, but not anywhere near as good as the Bag Spol I make at home!!!!

The girls wanted to go to the show to see 'The Musicals' performed by the Showteam. Keith and I went to the Live Room and saw the end of Entourage's set which was great.

It was then unfortunately the turn of the man at the piano for a while.

I have never heard a pianist play so many notes to the bar and at double the tempo for any song. This guy must have been on Speed!!!!

It's all very well showing you are a clever-clogs able to play you the piano - but to me as a gigging musician for almost 50 years and still doing 40-50 gigs a year, this young man has sadly missed the whole point!

A piano is a beautiful instrument able to portray emotions and feelings with its timbre and its full range of 88 keys. Yes it can be played fast - rock, reggae, blues, hip hop, ballad, soul.... what ever, but surely not on every song and at twice the speed of light!!! Not once did he allow that to come through even though he had a good voice.

Sometimes, (most times) less is more and I try to observe that in my compositions and arrangements and do it with love, taste and sensitivity. Okay play fast and hard when you feel it is right, but this guy just 'raped' his instrument with the sustain pedal mostly on permanently so that all his notes were just an ugly blur and you could hear lots of his mistakes.

(Sorry - rant over!!!!)

Once he had finished, the act we had really come to see in the Live Room were preparing to go on stage.

This was the Band Jam performed once per week where all the other musicians from Entourage and High Waves and some of the ship's solo artists perform on stage together. They were brilliant last week!

Martin joined us then the girls and we had front seats allowing us as part of our band Uptown Traffic to scrutinise the proceedings.

Keith because of his addiction to 'air drumming' when watching other bands was spotted by the girl singer in Entourage and asked over the mic "excuse me but are you a drummer"!!! Bet your life he is and one of the very best!!!

The Band Jam started with clapping along to 'We Will Rock You' then went into exactly the same routine as last week. But no matter, it was great!

I admired the fact they were all joining in and looking as though they were having great fun. Very professional!

The drummers and bass players took turns on different songs as did the female acoustic guitarist from High Waves with the ship's solo guitarist.

As before the whole thing took off and rocketed skywards. The sum of all on stage far exceeded their component parts. What a show, what a band!!!!



*Jam band 2!*



*Martin gets in on the act!*

At one point Martin our singer and front man took the liberty of jumping up and grabbing their tambourine with the band! Mart often takes the initiative for



performance, so much so that we say he does a 'turn' every time the light comes on when he opens the fridge!

## **Day 10 Thursday Feb 13 - Santa Marta, Colombia**

Sail in at 8:00am this morning offered the best views yet. There was nothing in the blue sky except a few birds and in the hazy distance could be seen the bump of the land and maybe a few small islands too.

There were cargo ships anchored in the bay and as we drew closer we could just make out that we were heading for an industrial container port.

The islands defined themselves in to one larger hump crowned a lighthouse and one smaller topped by some sort of monument.



*Lighthouse topped island at the entrance to Santa Marta harbour*

I took footage from our cabin balcony again so did not see the actual town on our arrival. I had no idea that on the other side of the ship I would be seeing a huge HUGE mountain range, apparently the second highest in the South American continent!

Still focusing on the waterside, first a Pilot boat, then a tug boat came to meet us. I think it must have been a difficult berthing as progress was slow as the tug boat waited patiently standing off by only a few yards, Three other tug boats suddenly burst into life and approached D2 but simply pirouetted like a synchro swimming team which I thought was utterly bizarre as they never even approach Discovery 2!



*Tug boat pirouetting hopefuls*

Then the first tug sped off to the bow of D2 and nuzzling up on to the other side of the ship ensured we docked properly by pushing gently with its tyre cushioned nose.

All of a sudden we had docked and various announcements were made about arrangements to get off the ship. We would be bussed off the container ports to the dock gates.

So after a good breakfast in islands we set off from mid ships on deck 1. We were ushered onto a coach and found our seats while one of the bus crew desperately fashioned a notice saying “Voluntary Tipping”!!!!

I thought what a cheek!!! It was only 100 yds to the street and anyway on my cabin card it clearly states ‘all tips are included’! Needless to say no one on our bus ‘volunteered’ a tip! We all probably only had \$50 notes on us anyway!

But this was just the beginning! We were hassled and harassed by the tat sellers trying to sell useless artifacts and some were quite aggressive too. I realise that they are desperate to make some cash but there is no need to be threatening.

One bloke followed me trying to sell me sun glasses - WHEN I WAS WEARING MY OWN!!!! In the end I started to speak in French to him and this totally confused the bugger!!!! Ha !!!

It took some while to run the gauntlet down 'tat alley' but eventually we crossed the road into town looking for the main church or was it a Cathedral.

Around the church were more tat sellers but these were of a different class. They were polite and left us alone when said "no". One even opened the door of the church for us.

The church was very beautiful inside and I could tell it was well looked after. Walking round the perimeter of the inside there were beautiful religious statues probably of great age.



*Inside Santa Marta Cathedral*

I expected it to be reasonably cool in church but with the temperature outside around 34 degrees it was hot and clammy.

I needed to find a pharmacy to try and get some more cough sweets. Gill was on the ball! She has medical experience and she is very reassuring. She directed me into a pharmacy. I went up to the lady behind the desk "Hablo Inglese?" A blank face stared back... Do you speak English? "Non".

My brain ticked for a second. Reaching in my pocket I pulled out my very last cough sweet and held it up. To punctuate it's purpose I gave a cough...

“Ah!!!!”

She went to rummage in a drawer and came back with a little packet. “Dos Mille” (2000) I looked at Gillie then the tiny packet and said “Tres por favor” (3 please). She rummaged again and came back “six mille” (6000)

I held up a wadge of notes “dollars?”

“Non” then something beyond my amateur Spanish but I understood she meant “the exchange is down the road”

My brain ticked over for another second but instead of testing my Spanish further (which would probably have been interpreted as “my hovercraft is full of eels” I suddenly pronounced “carte?” (card?)

He face lightened as my wife handed over her credit card.

With the transaction done and three packs of cough sweets in my pocket, I smiled sweetly at the lady and probably said “I’s thanking to you extra kindly for all your slop!”

(Note to self - must improve my Spanish).

Time for a cold drink.

Gill and Gillie wanted decaf coffee, the rest of us wanted cold beer. Finding an establishment with seat selling both beverages was unbelievably difficult and resulting in us walking out of a couple of establishments.

Then we did find one bar right on the seafront and had drinks there and also free WiFi! The general consensus was that after these last two hours we should give up and head back to the ship.

Very disappointing and aimless bimbbling about! We could have explored Santa Marta much more. I doubt very much if we will ever come back. I hope our group can get it together in Cartagena tomorrow. It’s going to be a short day as our ship sails at 16:00.

Back on board we headed for the salad bar in Islands. I’m sure these last 10 days weight and girth have increased and we will all be big fat bloaters (even more so) by the time we get home

The afternoon was again spent on the balcony which was pleasant enough. I was happy writing my blog up and Gillie had a sleep.

Around 4:30pm we went down to the Coffee Port for an ice cream sundae. I had a Knickerbocker Glory and justified the indulgence on the fact that there were only 2 scoops ice cream and Gillie nicked most of my cream on the top anyway!



*Iced indulgencies!*

Afterwards we walked round on deck with the video camera. There was activity on the climbing wall at the back of the boat where two intrepid youngsters of around the age of 12 were working their way very carefully and skilfully to the top using the footholds and ledges. They were strapped up and roped to a pulley to stop them falling. Experienced members of the climbing team were counterbalancing their fly-weight and everyone watching applauded when they made it to the top to ring the hand bell.

I must say that I haven't seen that many children on board for this cruise but wasn't it cited as Adults only?

The sky was turning the colours I remembered of an orange and raspberry chew from my childhood. The sun was sinking very fast as it might if you are near the equator and it was turning to blush.



*Sunset from Santa Marta*

I filmed the total sequence and also the surrounding views of the town and the enormous mountains beyond.

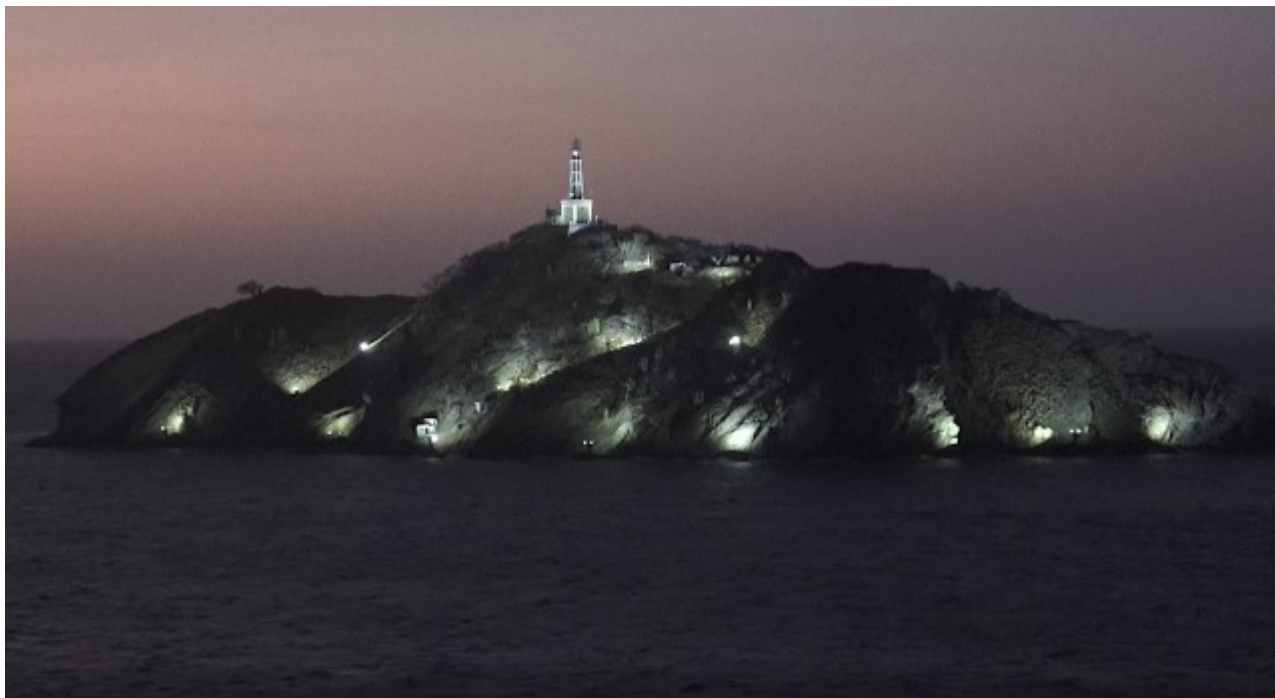
The ship was ready to bid adieu to Santa Marta and bang on 6pm she reversed slowly and carefully into the bay so that she could turn around.



*Mountain ranges behind Santa Marta*

We pointed due west and headed off to see if we could chase the sun. But light was fading and the captain's message tonight was that once again we would have some rough weather.

Just as we exited the harbour, the island crowned with the lighthouse passed by and it was beautifully illuminated.



*The illuminated lighthouse island*

The plan for tonight's dinner was to try Hot Stone in the Glasshouse. You could choose, lamb, pork, beef kebab, fish and prawns and other offerings too like Tapas. There was a cover charge of £11:95

We trooped along to the glasshouse around 7:30 and were told we would have to wait about an hour and fifty minutes for a table. We should have been there before 6:30 really.

The wait for a table in 47 was 30 minutes, so as that was more acceptable, we took a pager and went down to the Live Room to watch Entourage and wait.

After nearly an hour a table was ready for us and we filed into 47 for dinner. All went mostly to plan but my advice is that if you do have a food allergy, then keep on the case and speak up! I never received any gluten free antipasti this time.

The girls went off to the Show Lounge again while Keith and I set up camp to watch Entourage's last set of the evening with our gin and tonics.

Panama tomorrow and the weather is uncertain as thunder and lightning is forecast, but certainly better than what is being forecast back home - storm Dennis!!!

## Day 11 Friday Feb 14 - Cartagena, Colombia

The day started with a message over the cabin tannoy (which I thought was broken as I'd not heard any announcements since we moved in) urgently saying "Code Alpha Cabin 25xx" And this was repeated several times.

(I'm substituting xx for the actual cabin number of course)

The time was around 6:15am. A few minutes later we got up, made some coffee and drew back the curtains to the promise of another beautiful day.

I could see land far off and assumed that we would not be docking for a while. I turned on the TV channel showing the view from the webcam at the front of the ship to monitor our progress.

I looked up 'code alpha' and found it to be code for a medical emergency. So probably someone, passenger or crew member had become ill.

Cartegena came up rather quickly and although I was taking footage from the balcony, I needed to get higher with a 360 degree vista. I got to deck 10 as soon as I could but missed the shot I really wanted to take! Damn! Oh well, I'd find another way.



*Fabulous sight of approaching Cartagena from the sea*

The white skyscrapers of Cartagena rising out of the sea against a clear blue sky was probably the best sight to behold yet on this cruise.





*Celebrity Reflection already docked at Cartagena*

The Celebrity Reflection cruise ship was already docked in port and eventually D2 snuggled up beside her, tugs busy in attendance.



*More Macaws*

After breakfast we went ashore and found this cruise terminal was absolutely fantastic with its mini zoo, shops, and loads of Macaw parrots (free to fly away)

standing guard on any perch available. At one point there was a chain reaction of parrot squawk as one parrot set off every other parrot!!!

There was a giant ant eater sticking his proboscis into holes in the ground and sharing his pen with a tortoise and a big rat-like creature called I think an agouti? Which the ant water seemed to blatantly kick out of the way

We stopped for a while to take it all in and were shaded by copious foliage from the canopy of large leafed trees above. Very lush and green and very humid. It was a lovely place to linger for a while.

Okay time to move on.

Our plan was to find a minibus taxi to take us around the city. There were a plethora of offers as we struggled through the masses. The First Lady we spoke to offered a trip for \$40 each. But we had done a little research and many people on this FB group had found tours costing half this amount.

Just as we left the terminal gates Martin was talking to a big guy who had an official 'Taxi' shirt on and he was offering to take us in his minibus taxi for \$20 each! That was more like it.

We clambered aboard his vehicle and found lots of space, very comfortable seats and cool air conditioning. Once we were settled, Douglas (our driver's name) seemed to have a few problems finding the reverse gear to back us out. A good start! Eventually he clicked us into gear and we drove slowly out of the port.

He pulled up at the side of the road and declared that his friend would be driving us and he would be the guide today on the mic.

Er... okay...

A tall guy with a red tee shirt climbed in the drivers seat after Douglas climbed out. His name was Santander or 'Santa' (as we would call him!) and he assumed the driving position and were on our way.

I've heard that traffic is bad in Rome and Delhi and I guess Cartagena was definitely no different. Wha???? Lookout!!! Ooer!!!! Cripes!!!

There were hold ups and horns honking and traffic lights and close shaves! Hold ups were frequent. I wondered whether we would have time to see very much on our trip as we needed to be back on ship at 3:30 for our 4pm sailing and we'd only gone 250yards down the road!

Winding our way through the heavy traffic, Douglas gave a good account of the history of the city and had his own opinions. We surmised that he was very honest

and trustworthy. He gave us good tips about the tat sellers we would encounter and also what not to buy.

We stopped at The Castillo San Felipe de Barajas which is a huge walled castle. There were lots of tourists here and many more tat sellers pushing their wares into your face. They were very insistent. While walking I noticed some women dressed in colourful national costume with baskets of fruit on their heads. They came over to me and I waived them away. They then targeted Bro John who was walking behind me. I heard a shout and turned round to see John laying on the floor. This woman had tried to grab him to have her photo taken to get money from him and she pushed against him instead. His foot had gone down a gully at the side of the footpath and he had fallen flat on his face.

Everyone was looking at the woman who suddenly, in a fit of temper started shouting and swearing that it was all John's fault and not hers. But any sympathy soon faded for her as John was helped up with seriously bleeding arms and legs. They were profusely bleeding and he was brushing off the blood dripping from his injuries. And it was leaving big spots on the pavement.

Immediately Santa who was accompanying us was there and led him over to sit on a wall in the shade. We and two dozen others gathered around. I stared at the woman and she walked away.

Then by some miracle a Colombian lady appeared to give him first aid. She had a first aid kit on her and she somehow reduced the bleeding, cleaned his wounds and sterilised them with an iodine solution then applied several plasters and bandages.

John was okay but very annoyed. He tipped this kind lady but she was very reluctant to take anything at all. A real Florence Nightingale.

The visit to the castle was abandoned and we got back in the minibus.

More driving through the chaos! Tat routers were jay-walking in the middle of the roads and dual carriageways trying to flag down cars to sell their wares. Cars were stopping in unexpected places to slow people to alight and take photos regardless of the 20 buses behind them honking horns, swearing and gesticulating. Some tat sellers were jumping on buses with their knapsacks while bus's we stopped at traffic lights. I never saw a single policeman or traffic cop!!!

In the midst of all this pandemonium we'd asked Douglas to find us somewhere to go for a drink. He obliged — no problem at all.

The minibus found a small car park near the town and as we were about to get out he announced that his two sons who had suddenly appeared would take us to a nice restaurant bar. He told us that he and his wife had adopted several orphans over the years and they had brought them up well to be part of his taxi and guide business.

We exited from our vehicle and set off with the two young guys and also Santa too.



*Downtown Cartagena*

We were taken into what was probably the tourist centre of the city, running the gauntlet of the tat routers and being more wary of the women in national costume.



*The busy plaza viewed from the bar balcony*

We stopped at a busy square where artists, break dancers and flower and fruit sellers were trying their luck to make a buck.

Santa (who spoke no English) said something to the boys and they seemed to be dismissed. But they had been very helpful when we were crossing roads and when the routers were getting too much.

Santa pointed to a restaurant then pointed up to its shady balcony overlooking the square. It looked extremely nice.

We went in and he assertively escorted us straight to the most promising seats on the balcony and then left us buy our drinks. Santa was a very good man to have around on your side! We would have had him join us for a drink but he just vanished!

We order cooling beers and iced waters to help refresh our sweaty brows. La cuenta was asked for and although it was provided showing Colombian Pesos, \$US were readily accepted. Each bottled beer was about \$2.50 or about £2.20

We were growing to like our host and his driver. They both came across as very nice people you would like to meet again and we were very lucky to have found them and have them as guides in Cartegena.

If you ever travel there keep a look out for Douglas. I'm sure he would not mind me saying that he was a very big man, he gives a very good tour for \$20.00 each and a nicer, more genuine man you will never meet!

We made one more short stop at some craft stores in the Artisan Centre and then he took us back to the ship, well in time for departure.

We paid our \$20.00 each and made sure there was a generous extra amount to say thank you to him and to Santa

We returned to the cruise terminal and stopped a while longer to revisit the menageries once more.



*Flamingos at the cruise terminal*

There was a pond of beautiful pink Flamingos! But I loved the Macaw parrots and we bought Harrison and Jackson my two grandsons of ages 3 and 2, a wooden parrot each which they could hang from the ceiling of their bedrooms so that they flew in the breeze.



*...and another Macaw*

I've sent lots of Macaw pictures to them whilst on the cruise and I know they will be inspired and be asking about them. (It will make a change from dinosaurs and dragons!)

We had a late lunch once back on board in Islands - a slice of freshly roasted rare beef and a few salad leaves. Trouble with cruises - the food is very tempting!!!!

We watched the sailout bathed by the warm sun. There was a gentle breeze and I hoped it continue to be calm when we finally got out to sea.

Whilst taking footage of our sail out, I noticed something a little bit odd floating in the water about half a mile away. We got closer - could it be? No surely not! Yes it was - it was a Colombian submarine!



*The Colombian submarine*

Tonight we were going to meet early in Bar 11 so we could pre-position for Hot Stone in the glass house. You have to be there before 6:30 which we were tonight, and a table for 6 was forthcoming.

I thought everyone wanted Hot Stone (extra charge of £11.95) but everyone except me ended up with pizza and tapas.

I ordered a beef skewer and sides. I really enjoyed cooking my beef myself and did a little experimentation as well like putting a tiny knob of butter on my meat. As the main cook at home, that's how I cook fillet steaks after seasoning and dressing them first with a little olive oil before putting them on la plancha.

During the meal I could feel the ship juddering and rocking and rolling in the rough sea. It felt very different to previous nights.

There were two or three severe shudders too followed by a crash of crockery somewhere in the glasshouse then chairs began falling over. The waiters scurrying round to keep things on the level.

I think there were incidents all over the ship like this due to violent movement.

The Captain came on the Tannoy to say that the ship had turned around and had been heading back to Cartagena because of a medical emergency but had now turned again back on course for Colon in Panama. He also said that he had now slowed the ship down to minimise the possibility of further discomfort and breakages. I hoped he had also instigated using the ship's stabilisers.



So that was the second medical emergency of the day.

Later I heard the unfortunate news that the first medical emergency this morning had resulted in a death on board. I know no further details but for any relatives travelling with the deceased it must have been truly devastating and I hoped TUI would provide maximum support to them.

As there was nothing much on that interested us during the evening after dinner, Gillie and I went back to our cabin and read (I wrote up my blog) I had quite a job trying to get my post up on Facebook, every time I tried to, it got to 95% then froze.

I couldn't delete it from my phone app so I paused the upload and made a new one. Luckily that worked okay.

I'm still trying to fathom out why!

I will sort this out at home on my studio PC

When we left the Glasshouse tonight, no one was waxing lyrical about their pizzas and I heard words like 'tasteless' and 'cardboard' 'cold' and one phrase from my wife, "my pizza was nowhere near as good as a pizza Kev makes".

I had a little smile to myself and hoped no one had seen it!!!

Panama tomorrow. I hope the ship gets there on time for our excursion!

## **Day 12 Saturday Feb 15 - Colon, Panama**

Everything looked a bit grey when emerging on our balcony - both the sky and the sea. So weather not too promising.

We were in the outer parts of the harbour amidst dozens of static ships, mostly container carriers waiting either to go thru the Panama Canal or perhaps having come thru from the Pacific side and were waiting for fuel before setting off elsewhere.

Today we would be finding out about the Panama Canal on the TUI excursion by train and coach.

Last night the ship had turned back to Cartegena because of a medical emergency but then half an hour later had resumed course to Panama. The rough sea had also slowed us down.

We arrived at the port of Colon on the northern side of the canal entrance and we immediately noticed that the town itself was very run down and very industrial.



*Wrecks at the port of Colon in Panama*

There were several small rusty shipwrecks laying like sad discarded fish skeletons and sprawled untidily on a small dirty beach.

There must be great poverty here which obviously accounted for the high levels of street crimes we had read about.

After breakfast we trooped down to the Broadway Show lounge as instructed to wait to be called for our trip out today.

There were already hundreds of people in there and heat was building up. On the stage, a screen was showing whereabouts we should sit for each of the excursions going out today. Im

I guess most people took an official TUI tour rather than doing their thing wandering around the town. We'd also heard that you were not allowed ashore unless you were doing a TUI tour, but we saw no evidence of anyone being prevented from doing so. There were warnings that going it alone was certainly not recommended.

We'd been asked to meet up in the Show Lounge 15 minutes before the trip so we had sat down in the seats at 09:15.

**We were finally called for our trip at 10:45!**

The ship had been late to dock this morning due to the delay from the medical emergency last night, so it looked like the Panama Port Authorities at Colon were dragging their heels - maybe on purpose?

Relieved to be out of the heat (hundreds more still waiting for their call) we boarded the coach and Gill was our guide.

She was American but lived now in Panama just outside of Colon. She cleared up the pronunciation of Colon as 'Collone'.

She explained we would be going to the station to pick up the train. That would take us down the side of the Panama Canal to a station near Panama City. We would then get back on the coach and tour around the old and new parts of the city then travel north back along the canal to the visitors centre and one of the locks.

Okay, sounded good!

The trip cost £125 each for what was called 'The Panama Canal by Standard Train' and if we had opted for an upgrade to the domed observation carriage with a glasshouse upper deck, it would have cost a lot more.

The coach set off out of the port and we saw many delapidated buildings black with mould, filthy from neglect and probably in need of urgent demolition due to lack of hygiene.

The traffic was seriously and dangerously ludicrous.

None of the traffic lights were working in the town and there were no road signs.

It was a total free for all like fair ground dogemts! You only went forward on the basis of 'who dares- wins' and we had to pull up sharply every few seconds. We finally made it out of the town but I know not how!



*Our diesel train taking us south to Panama City*

We found the train, it was a rather glorious old fashioned diesel painted red and yellow, probably vintage 1960s. We were shown to our carriage and found the seats spacious and comfortable. The decor inside was delightfully vintage as well. The windows could have done with a bit of a clean on the outside though!

We soon set off and we had to accept that the train was going to run rather slowly at a maximum of 30mph.

Gill gave us a good schpiel about 'the Panama Canal railroad' using a map. Then a free box of snacks was given to each of us. That was quite unexpected! We could also buy beer water or Coca Cola and it was very pleasant trundling along while snacking on our tempting morsels.

The route running parallel to the canal was mostly vegetation with glimpses of Lake Gatun on the way.

Lake Gatun, being the first part of the Panama Canal is actually a man-made lake. The Panamanian countryside was flooded by the USA to kick off construction. After the failure of the French to dig a direct canal through to the Pacific, the Americans succeeded as this was the easiest first step. It reduced excavation, time and money.

As the train travelled past the sides of the lake

It could be seen that hundreds of trees which had been submerged under the water during the flooding were still growing. Black stumps of branches and trunks were poking up above the surface of the water like in protest.)

Now the train was travelling down a causeway track with water on both sides. Obviously this causeway had been purposely laid especially for the railway.

The train passed by the first set of locks at the end of Lake Gatun, although we could see nothing from our carriage. Maybe they could upstairs in Business Class?

Further on, we passed the second and third locks and soon we were arriving at our destination station near to Panama City.

It was back on the coach at this point and a ride around the area. Also free ham rolls and bottles of water were issued.

We visited the island at the end of a causeway going out into the Pacific. We spent a good 20 minutes at a car park where further refreshments could be bought.

On the way there we beheld a fantastic view of the skyscrapers of Panama City. Unfortunately there was a building construction underway between the car park and the city, so a good picture was not possible to take from there.



*Beautiful Panama City*

Instead Gill arranged for us to stop down the causeway on our return and the view was stupendous. Snaps were taken!

A trip around the new city followed. The city itself was laid out very neatly from what we saw and it was a very surprising opulent place. So different from neglected Colon.



*One of the locks on the Panama Canal*

Our final visit was to the Agua Clara visitor centre where we could watch the procedures of huge container ships travelling through the locks. We watched a film about the canal and the locks but the workings of it were not explained, which I thought was a bit strange.

I think the answer came from Gill our guide on the he way home.

Building the new locks and expansion to the canal had been an affirmative when a referendum was held for the Panamanian people. But it seems that bad design and bad management of the project caused delays and the initial budget went through the roof.

Concrete had come from Spain to build the lock basins but because of the poor quality it was dissolving and leaking.

Lake Gatun is primarily a fresh water lake but salt water is creeping in destroying the environment for wildlife, fauna and fish.

The huge reservoirs on the sides of the locks were designed to recycle the water of the gravity fed mechanism used to fill the locks. These are hardly ever used and perhaps that was why the film did not elaborate.

Finally the new locks themselves may need to be increased in size sooner rather than later due to the growing sizes of new ships currently being built.

The Panama Canal is definitely a modern wonder of the world but it I was very sad to learn of its shortcomings probably due to incompetence. Still, I will never forget standing on its edge watching the ships go through. Something I never ever thought I would do.

We returned to the ship in a heavy rain shower and we sailed at 19:30 as scheduled.

During the evening I learned that the medical emergency from yesterday evening had resulted in the second death on this cruise. I don't know of any details but I suspect that the ship had turned around to race back to Cartegena and when the tragic oassibg suddenly occurred, the Captain turned around again to resume our original course because he had done all he could. There was no longer any point returning to Cartegena.

During the night we encountered rough seas again on our way to Puerto Limon in Costa Rica and the weather forecast tomorrow is for heavy rain.

### **Day 13 Sunday Feb 16 - Puerto Limon, Costa Rica**

We docked at Puerto Limon in Costa Rica a little before 9am. The sea had been quite rough during the night but on this cruise we had not bothered with anti sea-sickness tablets (Stugeron)

On previous cruises we had been a little wary once or twice and dosed up, but I suppose there was a certain familiarity from the past of the rocking and rolling of the ship, that it installed a certain confidence in that we could cope with it this time.

But we were lucky to have cabins mid-ships as rocking and rolling is substantially reduced. In Islands and the Squid and Anchor, it is much more pronounced as they are both at extreme ends of the ship. You could feel yourself consistently going up and down slowly by possibly 6 to 10 feet!!!



*Bleak morning at Puerto Limon*

The weather looked really gloomy this morning and surveying the surrounding countryside, thick dark clouds were masking the huge mountains over the back of the port. There were lower bright white clouds or fog just above the extensive tree canopy which I thought might be caused by the humidity rising from the dense foliage. Costa Rica has lots of rainforest.

The shoreline moving away from the port which stretched for miles and miles to the south was being pummelled by huge breakers crashing and smashing against the beach. This was evident even with your own eyesight It was definitely not beach weather today!

The Captain announced that the ship was having to run engines and bow thrusters to keep us stable in dock as it was a very high tide today. You could feel us bobbing about in dock when we were having breakfast, and that was for the first time on this cruise.

It would seem that at this time of year the Caribbean Sea is usually more vigorous than other times (excepting tropical storms and hurricanes of course in the late summer)

Captain Jason announced that 'deck 2 mid ships' was to be the point of access to shore today.

The Celebrity Reflection was already berthed alongside us on the other pier. She was bigger than D2 and had followed us from Cartagena and Panama.



We descended in the lift down from deck 7 to deck 2 in anticipation of moving ashore for our excursion today - 'Boat Ride along the Tortuguero Canal and the Chocolate Experience'.

Along the corridor on deck 2 leading to the gangway, we came to a dead stop with a large queue of cruisers in front of us also wishing to go ashore. I thought it was just sheer numbers going through the check out scanning that was slowing down the egress, but after 15 minutes that clearly was not the case.

Nobody knew what hold up was!!!

After 40 minutes of static frustration and with all the bodies around us, the heat building up was making us sweat. As we knew we would be on the river today we had worn long trousers and sprayed on lots of 50% Deet to try and deter the misery of being bitten by mosquitoes and their mates.

Due to our age and various medical conditions we were advised not to have shots for Yellow Fever, so we wanted to make sure we had a bit of protection from the known common tropical diseases and illnesses. So not being bitten by insects was paramount, if rather unlikely.

The queue suddenly liquefied slightly and there was some movement forward. I hoped that the excursion bus would still be waiting for us! It was due to leave more than 30 minutes ago!

It still took another 10 minutes to get to the end of the corridor where we found out that the exit to shore on deck 2 had been shut off and everyone was being rerouted to deck 1. The instability of the ship was still a problem so a lower gangway had been directed and prepared.

From 6 different directions all landlubbers were making their way at the pace of a drunken mollusc into the claustrophobic funnel of two single lines going down the staircase to the new gangway.

Finally we arrived outside on the quayside to fresh air and the persistent tingle of drizzly warm rain. It was quite a walk to the coaches and spectacles misted up as we approached our coach in the humidity, but I could see Martin standing at the door looking for us and waving. It was good to sit down in the coach after that.

A young Costa Rican guy was to be our guide and he was extremely likeable, knowledgeable and had a good sense of humour too!

A quick tour round to see the streets of Puerto Limon (Port Lemon) and then the coach headed out of town.

Lionel our guide, (I'll call him Lionel as I forgot his name but he looked like Lionel Ritchie!) had the coach stop by some trees. He had suddenly spotted a sloth hanging from one of the top branches. But it was very difficult to see it - Lionel must have had the eyes of an eagle!

We pulled into a small make-shift coach park and we could see the canal. It was fed from its sea inlet just a few hundred yards away. There were small boats looking like pontoons with seats and canopies on top, ambling along the canal like ducks on a pond.

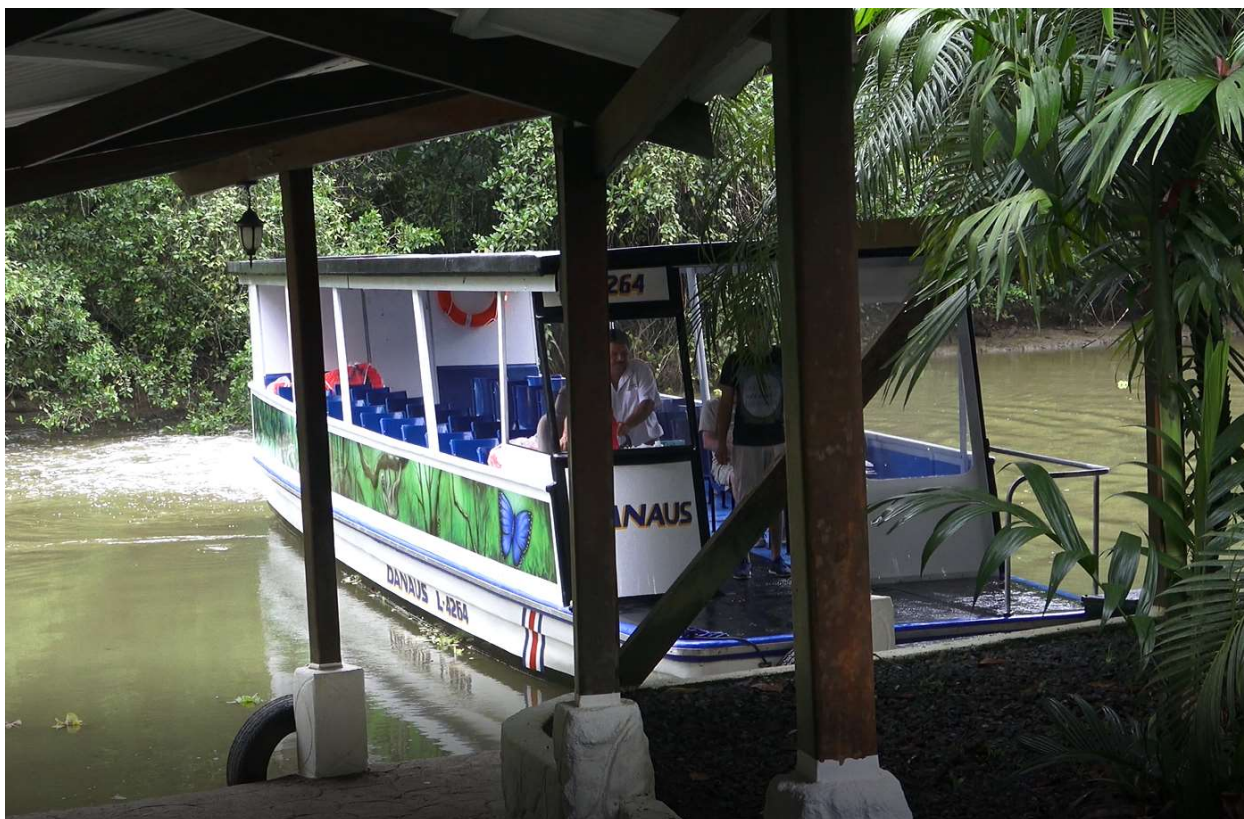
The Tortuguero Canal had really dense rainforest along both sides of its riverbanks. 'Rain' forest was a true description as it was now absolutely tipping it down. But the more this tour went on, the less the weather seemed to matter.



*Raincoat in the rain forest!*

Costa Rica apart from its necessary industries for its logistics, food, fuel, exports of bananas and pineapples, seemed to be the most eco-friendly place I'd ever been to. This was a definite impression I got and this little excursion today only accentuated that. It was very good to know.

We were shown to our waiting boat and we took our seats.



*Tortuguera boat*

As the boat was shoved away from its moorings, we just ambled along looking for wildlife along the canals edge. We didn't have wait for long!

There was plenty to see, more sloths only this time a lot closer, and howler monkeys who gave off eerie and surprisingly deep screams. There were female monkeys with babies on their backs and lots of different birds too hiding in the mangroves.



*Howler Monkey*

On one corner we came across a young crocodile asleep on the riverbank. Very intriguing!



*Young Crocodile – or was it plastic?*

Now, close footage at Ultra High Definition (4K to you techies) was carefully taken and when I return home to my studio, I will carefully study the shots because I think it was a PLASTIC croc!!!!!! So the jury is out on that one! The joke could be on us and why do I see Lionel laughing in my mind's eye????!!

After looking carefully at the 4K on a big screen footage a couple of days after getting home, and taking the best snapshot I could, my conclusion is that it WAS a real croc, a young one, and definitely a real one! If the croc had been manufactured it was done so with the greatest of detail and would have cost a small fortune. No! That croc was real alright!



Lionel spent the next couple of hours telling us all about Costa Rican wildlife, the spiders, the snakes, the insects. He said that Tarantulas, and Black Widow spiders were prevalent in Costa Rica and that there were poisonous Banana spiders which could bite lurking in the banana trees!!! Sometimes they turn up in the banana bunches sold in British supermarkets, so be careful the on your next visit to Tesco/Sainsbury's/Waitrose!!!

He also said that we had been very lucky to get ashore this morning as he'd seen many a cruise ship fail to dock in these high tides and simply sail away.

Each time wildlife was pointed out to us to gawp at, Luis our 'Captain' would swirl the boat around so that all the people on the left - a-wop-bam-boogie and all the people on the right - boog-a-loo!!



*Boats on the Tortuguero Canal*

The boat trip came to an end and we went back to the little covered reception building on the wooden quay. It was still pouring with rain but it was very cheery sight to see that plates of fresh pineapple, watermelon and a big box of bananas were ready for our partaking. A very unexpected but very nice healthy lunch. Bottles of water were provided as well.

After elegant sufficiency we were invited to gather into another area where seats were already laid out. This was presumably for the forthcoming chocolate experience.

I really had no idea what expect for this.

It turned out to be a fascinating presentation by the director of a local chocolate company. I could go into some of the details but probably it is best to just say that we were each given a cacao fruit, told to crack it and suck one of the seeds. This we did to experience the taste of the rawest form of chocolate. It was sweet and sort of creamy, not too pleasant!



*Raw Cacao fruit showing the seeds that make chocolate*

Then after explanation, we tasted chocolate at every single stage of making it - little samples of roasted chocolate beans and then chocolate sweets were dishes out.

Each later stage you tasted, brought you nearer to the dark chocolate we enjoy today. Each sample created a chocolate flavour more and more as you chewed it and gave you a definite feeling pleasure on your taste buds.

As the family cook back home it gave me some marvellous ideas for recipes.... and did you know that dark chocolate is very good for you? And cocoa butter (which we were given a sample of as well) is very good for the skin?

We were driven back to the ship and went for tea in Islands.

Just as we went for dinner at 7:30 Discovery 2 eased out of the quay at Puerto Limon in the dim twilight and headed out to sea. That was our final port of call and we had now begun our journey back to Mobay our home port, ready for our Dreamliner flight back across the North Atlantic to Gatwick on Tuesday night.

Moving around the ship was more precarious tonight as even stronger Sargasso waves lashed the front and sides of the ship. You could really feel the motion when laying down - but soon I was .....

## Day 14 Monday Feb 17 - At sea heading for Jamaica

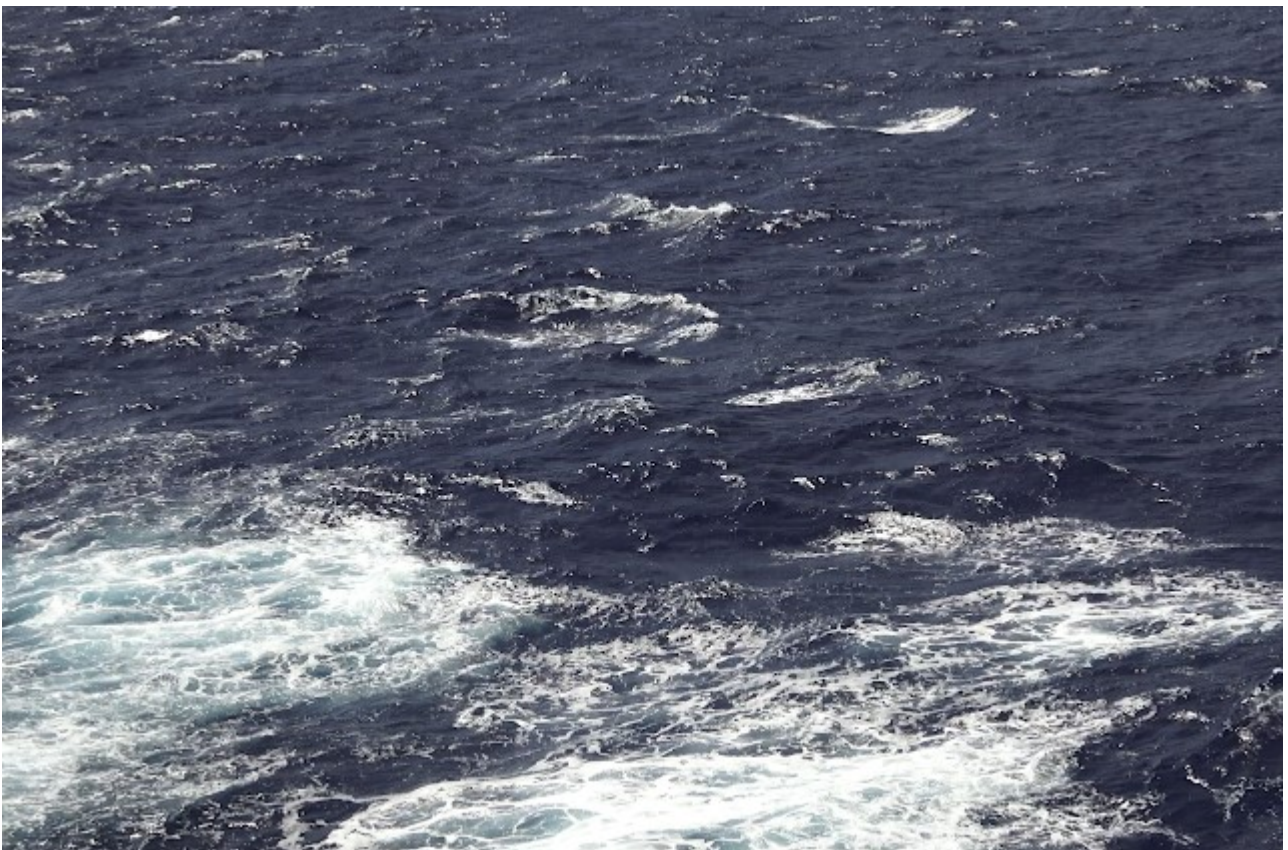
A day at sea to Gillie and I usually means a bit of a lay in, but this morning we had really over done it - it was 9:20 by my watch when woke up. Imagine my shock when I realised the real ship's time was plus one hour! It was actually 10:20!!! Breakfast finishes at 11:00!!!

Something to be wary of when visiting Costa Rica is that they are on a different time zone and they are 1 hour behind to the other ports we visited.

The ship had stayed strictly on 'ships time' but my iPhone and Apple Watch auto detected where we were on the planet, and adjusted themselves minus one hour to suit the longitude.

So it was a frantic rush up to Islands on deck 9 for breakfast and the mopping up the last of the eggs all with broken and hard yolks!!!! Well serves us right!

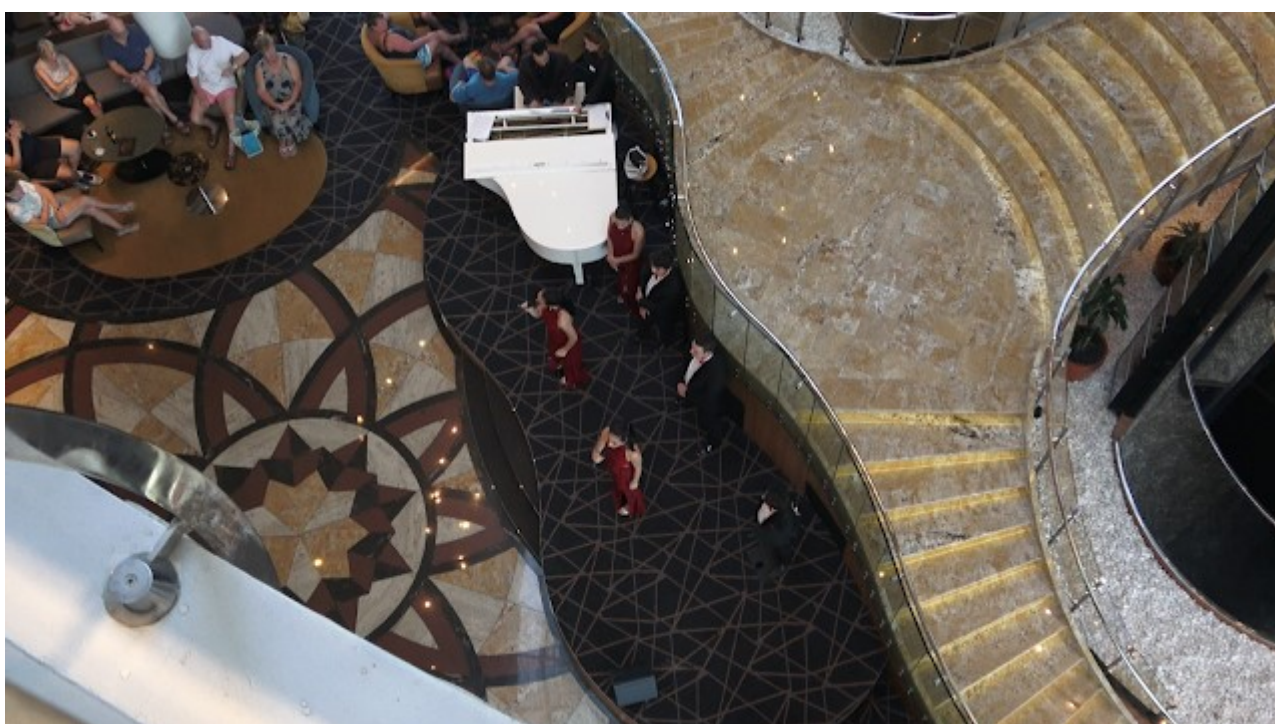
From Islands we could see this morning that the sea was still quite rough.

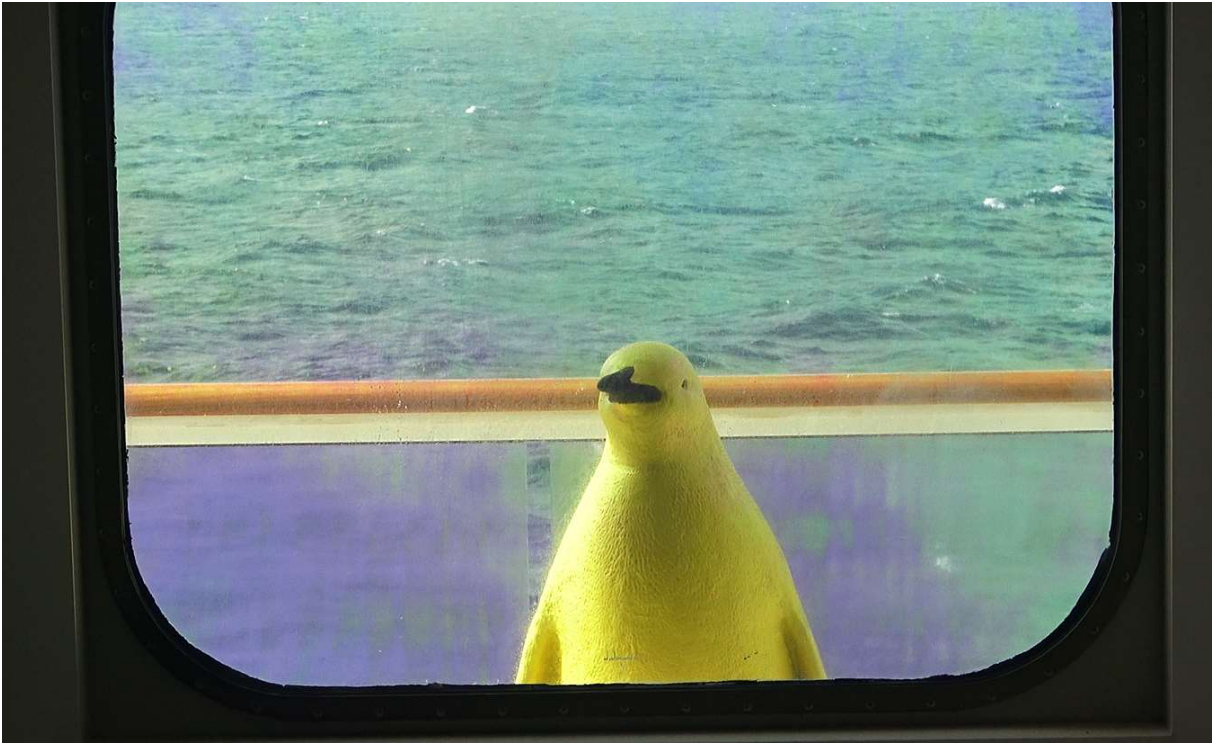


*Rough Seas*



Later on I toured the ship to get a few more snaps and some extra footage for my film.











The rest of this sea day was dedicated to a bit of uninspired, lacksidaisical packing and tidying up, and for Gillie, a two and a half hour nap until 5pm!

I sat on the balmy balcony writing my blog and watching the beautiful skyscrapes pass by overhead projecting shadows onto the surface of the omnipresent sea. Very relaxing with the sound of the waves and an ice cold gin and tonic within easy reach.

I continued to watch as the silent sun sank it's weakening embers into the sheets of chiffon cloud on the far distant horizon, its connection charging the passive sky and morphing it to the colour of pale vermillion; the finale of dusty rays sending gold extrusions into the silver sea below and somewhere far above into God's heaven.

Just for an instant for me, all time stood still.  
and my mind took the snapshot. I will always remember that moment - the last Caribbean sunset of the cruise

With a gentle sigh I woke Gillie from slumber and we shared that passing moment.



*The final Caribbean sunset*

But practicalities kicked in rudely and we showered and readied ourselves for our final dinner with the others.

It was 'Ready Freddy' night in the Showlounge and we took our seats just before 10:30pm.

It was looking like the show was going to be well attended. It started with a very clever life sized projection of Mr Mercury strutting his stuff up and down the stage and singing 'One Visio'n.

Somehow someone had taken footage of an old Queen concert and then electronically removed the background leaving just Freddie so that he appeared to be onstage here in the Broadway Showlounge. I used to work for the famous video company 'Quantel', who's products would have easily done this (at a price of course!) but it was more likely to have been some cheaper video editing software that was used to do the job.



*Ready Freddy – very clever*

'Freddy' was eventually joined on stage by the wonderful Discovery 2 Show Team, but...the treatment of their vocal sound was awful!

Several of the particular notes they were singing were harsh and highly distorted every time they sang them! This is definitely a 'no no' for a professional show and the problem I knew was down to incorrect EQ settings on the Show Lounge's mixing desk.

I looked around but from my seat I couldn't see the sound man anywhere. Was he AWOL from his controls? If he was - Disgraceful!

As a gigging musician for the last 40 years and as a recording engineer as well for the last 15 I could tell exactly what was wrong.

I endured this total sacrilege of ruined performance for another 5 minutes, then finally tossed in the towel and walked out in sheer embarrassment for the hardworking Showteam who were probably unaware of the bad sound.

So back to the cabin to finish packing the big suitcases. Our bag tags had been delivered earlier with instructions on how to fit them and indicating which sticker to stick on what and where.

I followed the instructions to the letter but ended up with some light green coloured card things. I checked the instructions again and then threw them away!

Aghhhhh! I was supposed to clip these to the suitcases!!!! I dashed to the door But the suitcases had been taken away already!  
So I really hope they get to baggage reclaim at Gatwick successfully!

I will let you know!!!

Shortly after I realised that Gillie had packed my shorts and the tee shirt in the now absent suitcases which I was going to wear the next day. I would now have to wear my jeans and shirt not only for the flight home as planned, but all day in the Jamaican heat too!

I'd taken the trouble and foresight to promptly book a late checkout cabin for £35 and a letter had just been posted under the door saying we could keep our original room. Good!

Normal checkout time was 9.00am and recently it had been as early as 8:00am, but if you booked a late checkout, you could stay there until 1:00pm.

That would be very convenient as the coach pickup back to the airport would be at 2:00pm and of course all the others could share and relax in our cabin until we had to finally vacate it.

Before turning in we checked passports, flight confirmations and that we had filled in once again, the dreaded Jamaican immigration form that was provided with our bag tags.

We charged iPhones and iPads and counted up what was left of the holiday money. We had only spent half of what we'd brought with us so we had done well.

Our bill was just over £135.00 each per week, for the two weeks cruise (£540)

Yet we had done so much, eaten in the speciality restaurants, taken an extra TUI excursion in Havana, had the occasional soft drink from the cabin mini bar, coffees and ice creams from the Coffee Port, late checkout cabin and spent a 'shed load' on internet access! That also covered the cost of off-ship activities too - and all the blimmin' fridge magnets!!!! I couldn't believe it!

We had had great time and although we had not been extravagant, we had wanted for nothing!

We'd pack our cabin cases in the morning, but now it was time to get some rest, tomorrow would be a very long day to get back to Gatwick!

## **Day 15 Tuesday Feb 18th, Travelling Home**

On waking this morning, it was the grim realisation of leaving this beautiful ship later on today! But it had been a wonderful holiday seeing so many sights I never ever thought I would see; even just a year ago I had no idea we would be sailing to what I considered as Latin America.

Drawing back the curtains and letting the 7 o'clock light fill the cabin for the last time I stepped out onto the sunny and warm balcony and took a deep breath. We were still at sea with as yet no sign of the Jamaican coast. I went to check our position on CruiseMapper but my WiFi had stopped working again. Damn!



Only yesterday I had bought 3 more days worth of WiFi to make sure I was amply covered until we actually left the ship. So first thing on the list this morning was a visit to Reception!

Turning on the TV and tuning to the channel showing the webcam footage from the camera on the front deck, I could now see land slowly appearing on the starboard side. I estimated I had about 10 minutes until it was worth it to start filming the final sail in.

My thoughts turned to the task I would have later on of starting to write my final and concluding blog. I would make a few notes during this long day as I would need to remember as much as I could when I actually writing about it, which would probably at home on Friday in my studio.

We went up to Islands for the final breakfast with the others; Gill, Martin, John and Keith. Gillie went ahead to organise the drinks and the table and I met up with Keith just as I entered.

Keith was in 'Eeyore' (Winnie the Pooh?) mode as I have experienced many many times when holidaying with him! Keith never likes to go home, he never likes to pack to go home and he always seems to get frisked and queried at airport security when going home! I offered a little placation as always!

I was still suffering from a bad cough (which a visit to the doctors 2 days later was to be diagnosed as a type of Asthma) so I needed a large supply of cough sweets to get me through the long flight back to Gatwick.

Checking at the ship shop last night there were no cough sweets and the ample supply of Night Nurse and Benalyn was completely depleted.

So the plan was to get a taxi to a pharmacy in town to find and buy cough sweets. Gillie was concerned about going into town with me so Martin (Karate Black Belt, Reading Magistrate and Uptown Traffic band singer and front man... oh wearer of an ear-ring), came with me for support!

I loaded up my US dollars (unfortunately no Jamaican dollars in my wallet), and Mart and I left the ship. The port staff found us a taxi telling me it would \$20.00 return for the whole trip. A bit steep but oh well its only money.

We climbed in to this very hi-tech mini bus with auto-closing sliding doors and off we shot. Our short journey featured the obligatory Bob Marley catalogue on an expensive vehicle sound system to which Mart and I (to the delight of our 'Irie' happy driver) joined in providing the other two parts of three part harmony to Bob's tracks just at the right points! Our driver was very impressed especially when we reeled off Mart's martial, judiciary and musical attributes! If our taxi driver was a villain then he should be very afraid!!!

We pulled up at a very big MoBay Supermarket and we went in. The Pharmacy was integral just like the ones in the UK at Tesco and Sainsbury's.

I walked over to where I could see the medical confectionary I thought I needed and a helpful voice beside me offered assistance. He pointed at some very old fashioned (circa 1950's) sweet jars containing different coloured and flavoured boiled sweets. "These are good" came the advice. They looked like metholypus types and I also spotted some lemon, menthol and honey.

I said I would like to take 10 of each as they would surely be enough to see me through the flight without erupting into a complete bronchial spasm over everyone.

The man kindly took ten of each out of the jars, double checked the quantity and passed them along to a Jamaican lady operating the till. She wrapped them, I paid my money and only then did I realise the guy helping me was the taxi driver!!! How very kind. I thanked him and we all returned to his vehicle.

It only took a few minutes to get back to the port and I held out my dollars together with a significant tip as he had been so helpful. I said "The lady in the terminal said \$20.00 return right?" He winced and said "Well it should actually be \$20.00 dollars each way" then he saw the \$7.00 tip I was offering and he said "No no, that's okay man, thank you"

So although it had cost me less than \$2.00 for the sweets, the taxi ride cost me \$20.00 plus tip and could have cost \$40,00!!!

Oh well at least I was set up for the plane journey later tonight.

We met up back in our own cabin (which had been booked as our late checkout), WiFi was now working again after my 'little word' with reception, the balcony door was open and the sun was shining on a beautiful view over Montego Bay. We stayed for our maximum time except Brother John who had been spied down below in the Atrium with an overly large G&T and his crossword!

At 1:00pm we moved out and joined him downstairs. It gave me the chance to take a few more photos and a bit more footage for the film.

The call for our coach came at 13:20 and as we trundled our hand luggage down to our egress on Deck 1, and with a failing heart, we said goodbye to our lovely ship Discovery 2. She would be leaving tonight for a new cruise with new cruisers onboard and would be sailing to The Dominican Republic for the first Port of Call.

The coach was a much more luxuriant vehicle for our ride back to Sangster Airport and this time cases and bags were offered refuge in the coach's

hold, rather than having to contend with them on our laps as experienced on our trip from the airport two weeks ago.

I'd finally checked our flight time earlier only to find we would be 30 minutes delayed. Cruisers leaving Gatwick this morning had endured nearly an hours delay. But now our flight was slated to take off just 15 minutes later than planned at 18:05. Obviously the pilot had managed to make up some time on his east to west Transatlantic flight. Good!

After only 15 minutes, the bus dropped us off at Sangster Airport's only terminal. We walked in to a maize of confused travellers queuing up, scurrying around stopping to try and find out info from signs, tripping over cases....

Sheer chaos.

We joined the main queue not knowing where it was leading. There were no TUI reps around that we could see despite being told by the TUI rep who saw us off on the coach that the TUI reps would direct us at the airport. We had no idea of where we should be going.

I stopped and asked someone who sort of looked official and he told us to head in the opposite direction. He didn't really know. So we took a chance and followed his advice looking for 'something, ANYTHING TUI'.

Eventually I spotted a TUI screen over some check in desks. Ah! Here we go.

We queued up with our passports and flight confirmations and handed them over when our turn came. Boarding passes were forthcoming after the ubiquitous passport checks.

We then had to rejoin the huge queue which was actually the queue to pass through to security. It took about 25 minutes to reach the other end. Passports and boarding cards being checked again

Then the usual place your items in the tray, take off your belt, your shoes and anything else holding your drawers in place and then walk through the body scanner "when I tell you sir" And then another boarding card and passport check. Keith went first and to his and my surprise he got through without any problems! I went next then Gillie – all okay.

Then a shout from Martin behind us.

I turned round and there seemed to be a problem with one of the officials gesticulating. Mart was holding up his boarding pass to me but with the noisy hubbub

I couldn't hear what he was saying. He pointed to Keith who had decided he was swiftly on his roll of freedom and was about to gleefully exit through to duty free on the airside.

I suddenly 'twigged' Martin had Keith's Boarding Pass and most certainly Keith had Martin's. It took a lot of loud embarrassing calling to bring Keith back. Eventually Boarding cards were reconciled, and everyone was through, but as Keith pointed out, two people checking Passport and boarding cards had not done their jobs properly and it was lax security. That wasn't good.

We'd read about the problems and chaos encountered at Sangster Airport on Facebook. We'd now certainly experienced it! Good job we had booked the Moby Airport Lounge for our 3 hour wait for our flight to escape the rest of all the dross. All we had to do was find out where it was!

It didn't take too long but it was a bit of a trek. But we were warmly welcomed when I showed the email pass and we were escorted to some comfy seats in our own spacious booth, free drinks were offered and ordered and we were told if we were hungry we could help ourselves to the buffet. For the privilege we had paid \$20.00 each before we left UK

There was free WiFi too and for the first time in two weeks some of us logged on to collect our emails (mostly spam) and more importantly check FaceBook. I was hard at it writing my blog on my phone and for once did not need WiFi!

Time passed, drinks came, food was devoured (no gluten free though!) and everyone seemed quite happy up to the time when our flight was about to be called.

We anticipated the call and walked down to Gate 18 where our Dreamliner G-TUIM would be waiting.

Again there was chaos, the flight had not been called, there did not seem to be any orderly queue, just people getting irate because somebody had walked in front of them.

It was us!

But then our seat numbers had been called to invite us onboard first. Ya boo sucks!

We embarked and did the usual lengthy delay while people fumbled with their hand luggage and tried to fit them snugly into the overhead lockers, then remembered they had forgotten to get something else out of their cases and took them back down again! It took a long time to find our seats in the back cabin of the aircraft.

As usual I had the window seat to allow me to take footage for the film (always a good excuse for a window seat but please don't tell the others!)

The Jamaican sun had set just before we rolled back on the apron and the Dreamliner made its way back along to the west end of the one and a half mile runway to position itself for take off. We took off bang on time at 18:05 and I had my camera rolling until we were well into the air (camera on 'flight mode' of course!)



*Take off TOM 67 back to Gatwick*

I was quite amazed at how the twilight faded to darkness – it only took about 5 minutes but by that time the aircraft was flying at over 450 knots

Only thing to do now was sit back, suck those sweets, check out the entertainment on the screen in front of me (I love to watch just the maps and read the numbers the nerd I am!!!) and maybe look forward to that gluten free meal tonight that our flight attendant Andy had promised to order me on the flight over.

Dinner came. No gluten free meal.

The stewardess said I should have ordered it on the ship. But the ship had my dietary requirements on file and so did the shop when we paid our balance.

Useless!

Well luckily I am not too gluten intolerant and I can get away with some things as long as its not this bread roll in my hand! The bread roll was snatched away!

I think I slept a while but quite fitfully and although we had extra legroom seats, there still wasn't quite enough room for my long legs. I am just over six feet tall. Flying is very trendy but it sure is uncomfortable!

But one thing that really does 'nark' me about flying – and I'm sure many think the same, is that I wish people sitting in those seats in front of you would ASK if they might tilt their seat back into your private space instead of just doing it causing things to spill or drop to the floor. It would only be polite and would reduce angst.

I must admit that I found it quite hard to move from my seat into the aisle for a comfort break and I 'accidentally' bumped that reclined seat rather fiercely with my bottom during the clambering process. Needless to say that perhaps my prompt was heeded as when I returned from the toilet, that seat was reclined no longer!

The flight was I'm pleased to say much shorter back to Gatwick than the flight over to Montego Bay. The outbound trip was almost 10 hours but the flight back due to prevailing winds of the jetstream gave us a tailwind at times of 150mph, our flight back to Gatwick took a little over 8 hours.

Dawn burst over southern England as quickly as dusk had died to darkness back in Jamaica. Down below in the early morning mist I could see flooded fields and roads too. The weather had not been kind to Blighty while we were away.

A decent landing was performed and we taxied quickly to the stand.

Then came all the chores of passport and immigration control, baggage collection and customs. But this time they were carried out without event or fuss and we were on our way with our bags on trolleys to pick up the cars at the Maple Manor Meet and Greet Point in the Sofitel carpark.

I had a thought that Meet and Greet is ironically not the actual service you pay for these days. It used to be that a driver would meet you at the drop off point and drive your car to the carpark for the duration of your holiday. Then on your return after a quick call to say you were leaving baggage collection, your driver would pull up with your car just as you were crossing the road outside the terminal. Brill!

Now it's a 200 yd walk in the freezing cold across 3 lanes of traffic! HmMMM

Well that's it now. We are home, cases to unload and washing to do. But we have treasured memories that will always stay with us. I have my blog and eventually I will make a holiday film and hold an evening where the six of us will watch it on my big screen.

It was a good trip, but there were problems and inefficiencies that were not rectified and being honest I think that Marella Cruises are not up to the standard that Thomson Cruises were. Although now its All Inclusive (for an even bigger increase in price to when it was an option!)

There have been quite a few cut backs, lack of personal service and in some cases staff in my view needed more training, like the muster girl who I asked why my

Muster station number shown on my ship card was not the same number as should have been on my cabin door. She didn't know and she didn't find out for me either. I had to ask an officer.

But I these are not the visions I reflect upon. The ship is a good ship, the places we visited were unique, the food was good and the company brilliant the excursions were worth the money and if I were asked would I do another Marella cruise, then of course I would say.....

**...well you know the answer to that!!!**



This is Koozer Kev signing off and thanking you all for reading and for your comments. I wish you all a fantastic cruise or if you've already 'been and gorn and dunnit', then go book another one - TOMORROW!!!