

Exploring Three Seas – 2023 – Part 1

Thursday June 15 – Prepositioning at Gatwick for our flight to Corfu

It was nearly a year ago the opportunity arose to be able to book another cruise – this would be our fifth. We usually cruise as a group of five but this time it was three – my wife Gillie and myself and the drummer from our band Keith.

We were so lucky to be able to complete our last cruise in 2020 before Covid 19 crashed the whole world onto it's knees, after which cruise liners were like ghost ships with skeleton crews, empty and devoid of happy passengers and unceremoniously anchored somewhere in a lonely sea.

So back in February 2020 the five of us had flown to Jamaica for our previous cruise on the Marella Discovery 2 and we visited Grand Cayman, Cuba, the Mexican island of Cozamel, Santa Marta and Cartagena in Colombia, then onto Panama and finally Puerto Limon in Costa Rica.



Just a few weeks later everyone was placed under restrictions of movement.

But last June we booked a cruise around the Adriatic, Ionian and Aegean seas on the Marella Explorer sailing from her home port of Kerkyra in Corfu. We would be calling at Koper in Slovenia, Trieste in Italy, Split and Dubrovnik in Croatia, Kotor in Montenegro, Heraklion in Crete, Santorini, Kusadasi in Turkiye, Athens in Greece and Argostoli in Kefalonia.

It was to be a regally rich itinerary!

Thursday June 15 could not come quick enough! But at first there were some difficult Covid terms and conditions to comply with such as extra Covid tests and confirmation of acquiring insurances covering Covid.

Luckily by May 2023 all of these difficult pre-conditions had been waived.

So we left Thatcham, West Berkshire at 12:15pm but I needed to blow up a tyre on my Vauxhall Insignia on the way to Reading (which was thankfully very quick to do) before we picked Keith up

The weather was hot and sunny for our ride down to Gatwick and we'd planned to break the journey with a stop for lunch at The Pheasant at Buckland near Reigate.



The Pheasant is one of the nicest gastro pubs I've ever been to with great selections of beer and wines and very tasty food. I had a smoked salmon open sandwich and Gillie had paté and toast.

Resuming our journey to Gatwick and heading for the Premier Inn Gatwick Manor where we were pre-positioning for the night. Unfortunately we hit a bit of a traffic queue. We were soon thru it and arrived at our hotel.



Checking in was simple and we were soon settled. We met Keith for dinner - we all had fish and chips, and we retired extra early as we needed to be up at 3am ready for our four o'clock meet and greet car drop off and our 06:40 flight out to Corfu to meet the ship..

Friday June 16 – Our early morning flight and arrival on Explorer

A truly awful night to try and get some sleep. The rooms at the Premiere Inn have no air conditioning- only a fan which I switched on to maximum. Due to the on-going hot weather, our room was about 25C and although the bed was comfy, I was sweating so much it was like trying to sleep in a river!

Our alarms went off at 3am and I rang and asked Keith “are you pukin” (are you awake?). He was!

So the stressful ritual of vacating our rooms and getting to the airport in good time for the flight began once again after the 3 year break from cruising.

This time I’d practised the route in my mind several times so I was well rehearsed. But reflections turned to the same panic for our last cruise when we discovered that the main road leading to Gatwick had been closed due to road works, and we all got lost!

Handing over the car was surprisingly easy as was dropping off our suitcases at bag-drop. Soon we were thru security and airside waiting for our flight’s gate number to be displayed.

Although still a TUI flight, Titan Airways was handling the flight on their behalf.



The aircraft - an Airbus A320 was 17 years old, yet despite that, it seemed really powerful on takeoff thrusting ourselves back into our seats. We’d booked extra leg room seats by the emergency exits so I wasn’t expecting a window, but I was very pleased that there was. Camera on my phone ready for take off!

We took off to the east at 07:07

A very uneventful if tiring flight, and after the rough night before for once I nodded off for a few minutes.

As we descended through the clouds after nearly 3 hours, Corfu airport was cloudy and over cast. There had been heavy rain that morning and thunder storms had been threatened.



Our aircraft – G-POWM, came into land at 11:57 Corfu time at Ioannis Kapodistrias airport just south of Kerkyra town.

As we were the fifth plane to land in Corfu this morning, there was only a small queue to enter the terminal, but the queue turned into a much longer one inside, snaking in numerous rows before you got to passport control.

After 45 minutes since leaving the aircraft we were through and we collected our cases from the carousel in baggage reclaim. Then we moved outside and onto a coach having first given our main cases to the coach driver to stow in the coach's hold. Our hand luggage had to be balanced on our laps inside the coach, but it was to be a short journey to the ship.

It took about twenty minutes to get to the port in Kerkyra and we seemed to travel straight through the congested town centre.

But once we entered the port we got our first exciting glimpse at Explorer waiting for us.



We registered our credit cards in the terminal, had ID photos taken, did our chits and were given our cruise cards, (I noted that the reception crew were not interested to see proof of our travel insurance copies of which we had extracted pertinent information from the 23 pages we had to read back home!)

Then it was time for the longish walk down the dock to embark on Explorer. She was massive! But not as massive as the gargantuan Virgin Resilient Lady berthed next to us.



We found our large-balcony cabin 10072 up on deck 10, Keith found his solo cabin on deck 5 (5045) and we agreed to meet up later. Our cases were very promptly delivered outside of our cabin

The cabin was nice enough although a little less roomy than the cabin we had on Discovery 2. but with plenty of storage space. There was a fridge, a kettle, a TV, a bathroom with a decent shower and on our extended balcony two chairs, a table, a sun bed and surprisingly a hammock ready to be set up! The bed was comfortable, not overly hard or soft, but for those requiring a softer bed, a memory-foam topper was available on request. We would be spending the rest of the afternoon unpacking and organising what would be our home for the next 14 nights.

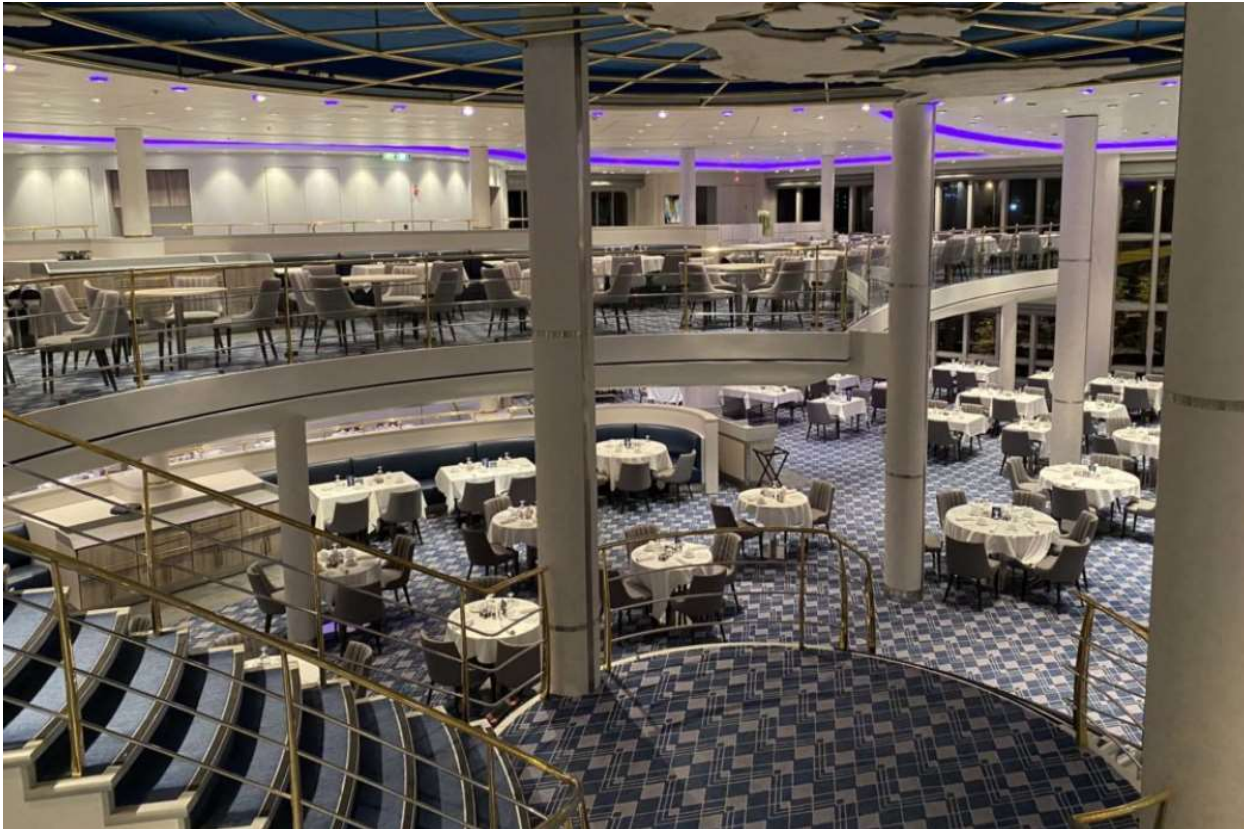


But our first job (as we were frequently being reminded over the ship's PA), was to watch the 6 minute safety video on our TV and then attend our muster station on deck 7. This would be where we would gather for lifeboats in case of any emergency on board. There was no 'having to wear life jackets' as we did on previous ship musters, although we now knew where they were kept in our wardrobes thanks to the safety video. Once at the muster station, a member of the crew simply recorded our attendance and activated our ship cards. This meant that they could now be shown to obtain food and drink from our all-inclusive tariff and also use them for any on-board purchases we wanted to make.

Finally a shower and a change of clothes made us feel more awake and we headed off to meet Keith for gin and tonics in the lounge bar

We decided to eat in the main dining room Latitude 53 this evening and we were shown to our table. But I got a shock as the Maitre'd informed me in front of the others that my open-toed sandals were not the preferred dress code, but I would be let off as it was our first night.

I picked gluten free duck a l'orange from the menu and the Maitre'd set me up with a daily Coeliac menu delivery so that I could spend time choosing my gluten free food. The ship was well set up for gluten free food for Coeliacs.



Sail away party was to be at our sail-out time of 23:00 but as it had been raining and the deck was wet, it was going to be in the Indigo bar on deck 12. Also we heard that our sail-out would be delayed until 01:00 as some of the passengers' flights had not yet landed.

We returned to our room around 22:30 and declined going to the party as we were just too tired. The weather had improved by now and the last rays of a watery sun disappeared, but the promise of good weather from now on was displayed on the BBC Weather app!

Gillie went off to sleep immediately but I lay on our bed looking out of our balcony door window until 01:15 and watched our ship slowly pull out of Corfu

The final thing I remember before sleep took control was the sight of old Corfu castle lit up. A fantastic sight and one I shall try film next week when we revisit Corfu



Saturday June 17 – Day At Sea

With all of the stresses and strains of yesterday behind us, waking up to clear sunny skies, a warm zephyr, a blue sparkling sea and just the sound of the waves rushing by was all I needed to set me up for the cruise. Absolutely serene!

There was much to explore on our huge ship, but first things first - breakfast.

We found our way to the Market Place buffet, just a handy one deck up and very close to the stairs.

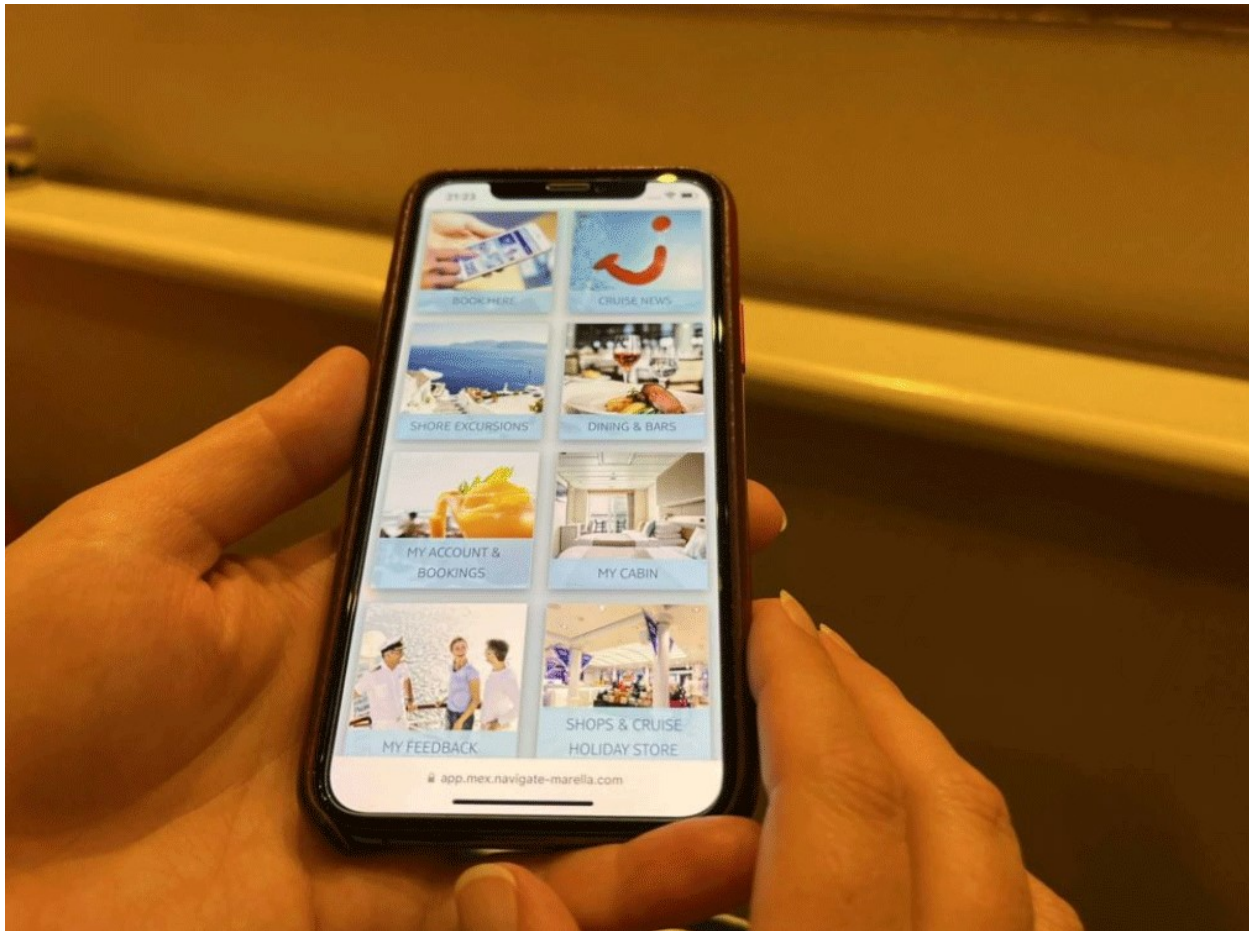
The Market place was very long and had a mirror image layout on the other side of the ship. Entrances were at both ends which was a little confusing when you wanted to leave! The fayre was good - everything you could possibly wish for and scrambled egg cooked nicely too - not the usual hard baked or overly runny.



The ship had an on-board intranet with which you can book excursions, restaurants and other offerings. I bought 15 days of WiFi for £95.00 for 5,000mb and it seemed to work okay - as long as I remembered to log off when done!

I didn't have to buy wifi for the full 15 days, but it worked out at only £6.33 per day and I'd rather pay that rate to stay in touch as the alternative was £8.00 per HOUR!!!

Another good feature of Navigator was that you could see a tally of your on-board spending at any time.



There were approximately 2,000 passengers on board and about 700 very hard working crew – many from the Philippines or Malaysia. Captain Meinhardt was our Captain for our first week and then Captain Richard Watkins took over for the second week. Every single crew member acknowledged you when you encountered them and were very polite.

We started to work our way around the ship whose layout was a labyrinth! Everything was spread out over 12 decks so it was really like a small town.



There was a central Atrium, maybe not as big or glamorous as Discovery 2's atrium but still the centre of the ship. Reception was on it's ground floor on deck 5. There was often a long queue to speak to a receptionist for help, and after a wait of 10 minutes or so, when you started to speak to someone the telephone would ring and they would answer that immediately leaving you with a further frustrating wait. So when I needed to talk to reception I would always phone them on 5555, because I knew I'd be able to speak to a receptionist immediately!



The Pool Deck (deck 11) was a huge space for sunbathers with a swimming pool and several whirlpool baths. There was a giant video screen at one end and two stages for use by entertainers for outdoor entertainment. Deck 12 was a promenade deck above the Pool Deck where you could look down and watch what was happening below.



There were 8 bars on the ship and several other restaurants – in some venues you had to pay an extra charge as the bill of fayre was very special.



Latitude 53 was the main dining room



Vista above Latitude 53 was for Italian food lovers



Kora La was an Asian restaurant serving curries and Thai food



Surf and Turf specialised in steaks and seafood



The Market Place was the 'help yourself buffet' and was open early for breakfasts until very late for midnight suppers.



The Mediterranean had a restaurant for Pizzas and Pastas...



...and another for Tapas



At the back of the Mediterranean there was an outside eating area

Food was very good on board ship and the service was excellent. But as on the last cruise we noticed many more culinary cutbacks when compared to our earlier Thomson cruises.

The gluten-free food choice was very good and the chefs go out of their way to please.

Our day was spent wandering around and making mental notes where everything was and how to get back to those places.

Keith found a sun bed above the pool deck and spent his day there with the live deck entertainment.

After our walk round we spent some quiet time on our cabin balcony

We had decided to have dinner tonight in Vista serving Italian dishes and for me it would be gluten free Carbonara. First though, we met up in the Lounge for a drink at 7:00pm and listened to one of the ship bands 'Music Unlimited. They were very good. Rendezvous with Keith in the Lounge bar would be our usual evening ritual.

Afterwards we went to the Broadway show lounge to watch the Motown show featuring another live band with superb musicians – 'The Collective'. The accompanying singers and dancers of the Explorer Show-cast were so good that they'd compliment any west-end show.

Although we had put our watches forward by 2 hours before landing at Corfu yesterday, we had a note telling us to put our watches back by 1 hour before we got to Koper. This was because travelling up the Adriatic from Corfu to Koper we would cross the time-line of longitude on the way and this meant that Koper was one hour behind Corfu. So we had a extra hour in bed!

Sunday June 18 – Koper, Slovenia

I woke early as is customary on our cruises and leaving Gillie still asleep, I headed up to the top deck to watch our sail into the port of Koper Slovenia. At 7:00am it was already hot and sunny.

Once up on deck 12 above the pool deck I climbed the steps to the top deck at the front of the ship and there I met Keith who had been there long before me.

The sea was calm and smooth and I saw the pilot boat heading off after dropping off the pilot onto our ship. The pilot is an official and well experienced mariner who knowing the local harbour well, helps to steer large ships safely into and out of port.



We were fast approaching Koper and I could already see the container port which I knew was close to the city.

Explorer slowly spun 180 degrees before backing gingerly into the cruise ship dock. As we finished the manoeuvre I looked ashore to try and see the glass lift I had heard about. It would take people from the dock up to street level a couple of floors above.

And there it was! I think it was installed recently to entice cruise ship passengers up into the old town..



The moment we came to a stop, the church bells rang out from Koper's clock tower. What a lovely welcome for Explorer's visit.



Turning round I took footage of containers being unloaded from a container ship By huge cranes in the container port.



I had a plan for today. As it was Sunday many of the shops were shut and I also had heard that there was not really that much to do in Koper. So my plan was to catch a service bus to Piran which was another coastal town on a peninsular about 6 miles along the coast. Piran is sometimes called 'Little Venice' so there was a clue to what we might be finding.

I went back to the cabin to get ready for breakfast in the Market Place buffet with Gillie

After breakfast we checked out of the ship on deck three around 10:10 having our ship cards scanned as we left, and we made our way along the road a couple of hundred yards to the glass lift. There was quite a queue waiting and also a wheelchair, so there would be no chance of a photographic panorama with all those people in the lift. But with the bulk of Explorer straight in front of the windows, it wasn't an option anyway, so the thought went out of my mind.

From the top of the lift we crossed the road and followed others into town down an avenue to Tito Square. We saw the tall 177 foot clock tower, it was adjoined to Koper's Cathedral of the Assumption near to the famous 15th century Venetian Praetorian Palace.



A wedding was in progress inside the church and there was a band waiting to play outside. The wedding was being professionally filmed for TV so who ever was getting married, it must have been someone famous.



We walked on through an archway and found the Da Ponte fountain. The fountain was not working so we took a couple of snaps and walked on into the narrow shopping lanes looking for somewhere to have coffee.

We found a bar with outside seating and ordered cappuccinos. We asked where we could get the bus to Piran and were told that we would have to go to the bus station over 2 miles away on the other side of the city. My plan for Piran was scuppered.



After our coffee we seemed to walk aimlessly thru the narrow lanes until we met the main road and then decided to walk back to the ship. But on the way I remembered that there was the marina nearby so back at the dock we turned left and followed the road.

We found the marina, it was a hive of activity with restaurants and a market. There was a restaurant on a boat with wonderful garlic and seafood smells coming from it and along the walls and roads were shrubs bursting with colours.



We looked round some stalls, bought a fridge magnet and then fancied a cold drink – the sun was high in the sky now and it was getting hot.



We found a bar and settled down to relax and take in the atmosphere.

We enjoyed a couple of drinks, beer for Gillie and me and wine for Keith and after about an hour or so asked for the bill. To our surprise another round of drinks turned up as the novice girl waiter had misunderstood!!!

Okay so we can spend another half hour and prolong our drink!



Eventually we made our way back to the ship for a snack and to watch sail out, which was lovely with people waving to us from the prom.



Once out at sea we could see the lights of Trieste just 8 miles up the coast. This was our destination for tomorrow.

We had dinner in Mediterranean for pasta and afterwards we went to the Broadway Show Lounge to see The Man they call G who was a singing impressionist – but we didn't think he was very good.

Monday June 19 – Trieste, Italy

We came to Trieste in 2017 when we cruised the Adriatic on board the Thomson Spirit. We thought it was a very beautiful city and we looked forward to another visit on this cruise.

Due to the very early sail-in from Koper just 8 miles up the coast, we had already docked when we drew back the cabin curtains. The day was already hot and sunny and by looking at the weather forecasts for all of the ports we would be visiting, there was no sign of any rain. Keith would be pleased!

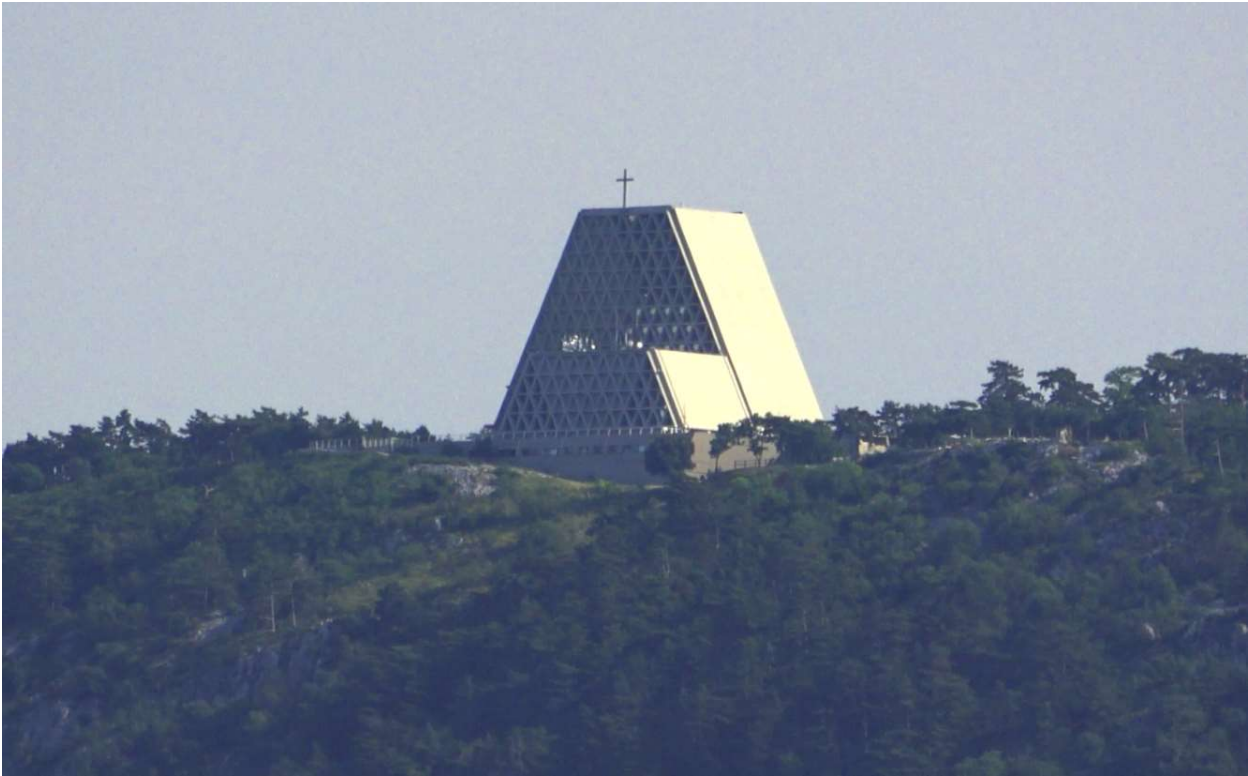
We had docked so that the stern of the ship was facing the town so we were looking to the north-east with the same views we had last time.

Using my new binoculars I surveyed the landscape and picked out the Cathedral and the Castello above Trieste, the Piazza Unita d'Italia (which we often looked at on the webcam) and Faro della Vittoria – the lighthouse monument to the fallen of WW1 far away on the other side of the port.





I also picked out the strange geometrical shape of the Sanctuary of Monte Grisaon the horizon which is another monument to the Fallen, it looked a lot bigger and nearer than I remember.



Also visiting Trieste today was the Marella Explorer 2, our own ship's sister ship. She had come up from Split overnight which was ironically where we would be heading off to tonight.

We got our first look at Explorer 2 during breakfast as we chose a table on the other side of the ship. It was very close and as far as I could see, Explorer 2 was identical in every detail to our own ship.

We left the ship and the plan was to revisit some of the places which we saw before, but we remembered last time the trudge all the way up to the castello and cathedral was very challenging. This time we'd try to find the lift!

First job though was to take photos of both ships together. A friend of Gillie's at Specsavers was about to take a honeymoon cruise on Explorer 2, so Gillie wanted to send her a picture.



Its always nice to have a good cup of coffee mid-morning when you are ashore so we were looking for a great place to stop. We walked across the expanse of the Piazza Unita d'Italia. The architecture is very beautiful especially the Fountain of the Four Continents.



The plaza is often used for exhibitions and concerts like it was being prepared for when we returned home.





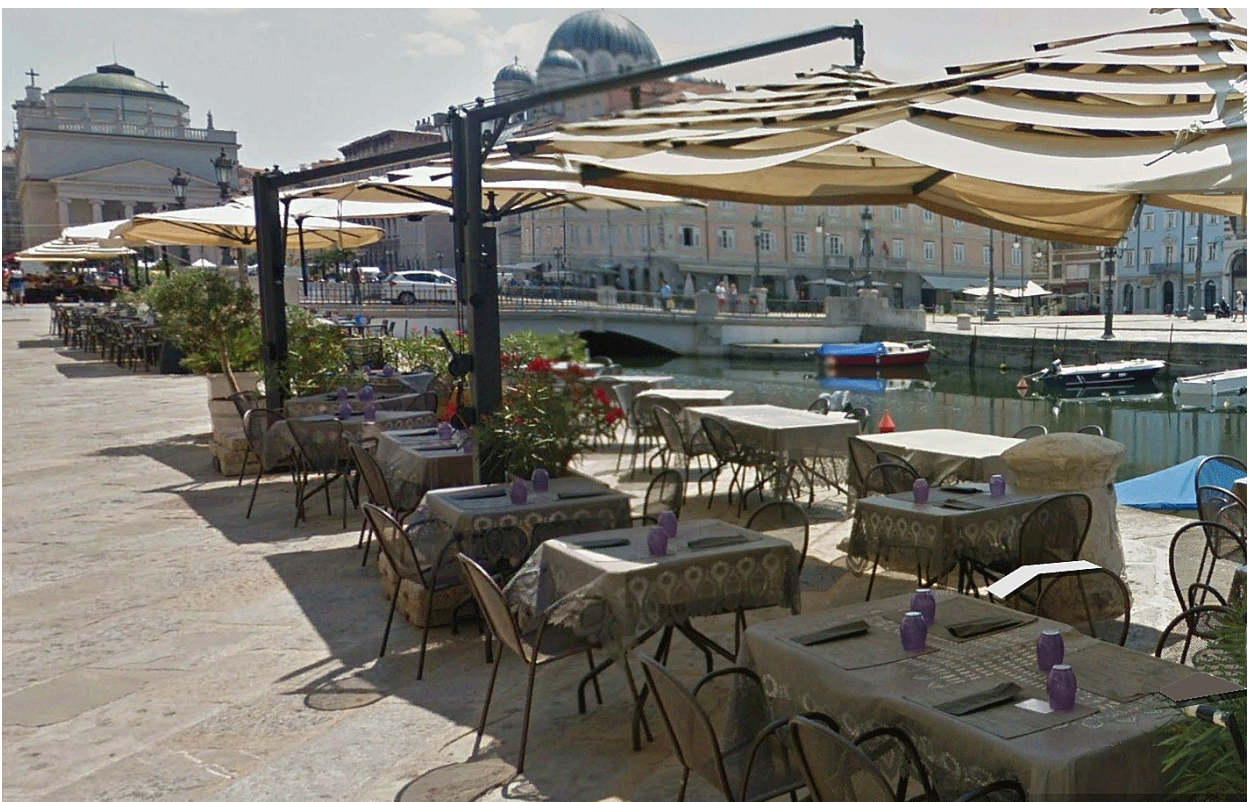
Walking around the plaza in the hot sun, we decided to walk up to the Grand Canal as we knew that there were coffee shops along the promenades.



Taking pictures and footage on the way, we found Trieste's Grand Canal with it's waterside cafes.



We crossed over canal by one of the little bridges and spotted a busy-ish café with shade on the north side of the canal.



We took our seats and ordered cappuccinos. After a leisurely respite we walked up to the end of the canal and headed into the town. I knew that the Roman

amphitheatre was close down a main street and that would be where we might find the lift.

It wasn't too long before we found the amphitheatre along one of the main streets and we could see the Trieste Castello high above the trees.



After a few obligatory shots we walked about 100 yards to the left of the amphitheatre and there was the underground car park and I could see signs for the lift. I was confident that we had found it.



We walked into the rather dark car park following the lift signage and then walked down a long illuminated tunnel. I think Gillie was a little unsure of going on at this point, but there were others walking down the tunnel besides ourselves.



At the bottom of the tunnel we easily found 2 lifts. We used one to ascend the 10 floors to the Castello's park above. The doors opened and walking up a few steps we came into blazing sunlight, just a few yards from the cathedral.

There was a wedding in progress and we hung around to wait for the bride and groom. But waiting directly in burning sunshine with no shade was uncomfortable so we moved onwards to the Castello.

As we were all over the age of 65 there was a concession on the entrance fee and we each paid just two and a half Euros.

We'd seen the museums in the fortress before but I was eager to get a good shot of the two ships in the harbour, so we climbed to walls to the highest point with the best views.



We started talking to a couple who were on Explorer 2 and discovered that they came from Reading! They had a cheese making business and they said that some of their cheeses had been featured on James Martin's Saturday cooking show. The Wigmores were also very interested to learn a bit about our band too. We exchanged information about the future ports of call that we would be visiting on our respective cruises.

We said goodbye and wished them a great cruise and walked out of the fortress, past the cathedral and down the long steep cobbled road heading back to the town. There were loads of steps down and I was pleased that we'd found the lift for our ascent.

Walking across the plaza again we looked for the bar where we'd previously had lunch last time. We couldn't find it but we did find a nice shady restaurant for lunch.



We had calamari and salad and also some wine, then another round of drinks. After a bit of a wait we asked for the bill. The new drinks hadn't been served but we wanted to get back to the ship. The bill arrived and we were about to pay it when the drinks turned up. With great apologies the waitress asked us to accept the drinks free and gratis anyway, so we did!

We walked back along the promenade to the ship around 4pm.



We rested for a while on our cabin balcony



We met up with Keith to watch Explorer 2 sail out. Both ships were due out at the same time, but obviously having two 70,000 ton leviathans moving closely together at the same time would be very dangerous. We lost the toss and Explorer 2 departed first. We watched her from Promenade deck 7 and turning south she headed into the late afternoon sun for Messina in Sicily.



It would take 2 days for her to get there and we'd told the Wigmores that the Taormina excursion was well worth doing with its views of Mount Etna.

Then our own Explorer slowly left port and also turned south heading for Split in Croatia – our next port of call.



After a few drinks in The Lounge we ate in Latitude 53. I had ensured that I was wearing closed shoes this time as I didn't want to be scolded for wearing open toed sandals again..

After dinner we headed of to the Broadway Showlounge to watch the Showcast perform the Queen show. I was very disappointed and thought that Freddy Mercury would have turned in his grave if he'd seen it!

Back to the cabin to find a little towel bear on our bed made by the housekeeping boys, chocolates on our pillows and also a note telling us that our balcony would be cleaned tomorrow so could we please remove all personal items.



Tuesday June 20 – Split, Croatia

The Marella Explorer can travel at a top speed of 25knots – which is just under 30mph, so the ship would dock in Split, Croatia at 11:00am this morning after travelling 270 miles from Trieste.



The route took us past many of the Dalmation islands which we could see from the moment we got up and had coffee on our balcony. These islands are part of the Croatia chain and range from very small uninhabited rocks in the sea to long islands with communities. Most of them have unpronounceable names but one of them was Hvar which we visited in 2017. In fact we passed by it and was just able to see the northern tip of it in the hazy distance.



So by 10:30 we were sailing into Split harbour. We could see the town clearly with its tall tower at the Diocletian palace, the pine tree lined promenade and the huge mountains painting the backdrop.



It was a very busy harbour as Split is one of Croatia's biggest hubs for ferries as well as cruise ships and small private craft. This morning the city looked wonderful in the mid-morning light and held the promise of a great day out.



Instead of walking around Split (which I really would have liked to explore) Gillie and I we going on an excursion to the Krka waterfalls. The excursion would consist of a 45 minute coach trip to the massive Krka national park where we would see many waterfalls and be given free time. It certainly sounded like spending 90 minutes on a coach there and back would be really worth it and we were excited.

So after breakfast in the Market Place we got ready for our trip and met coach number 6 on the quayside at 11:30.

We were soon travelling out of the city and through some very impressive landscape. Higher and higher up the mountain on the main hi-way, through tunnels and finally onto a flat plain of rugged countryside between distant peaks.



On the way our lady guide Irena told us about Croatia and Croatian culture and history. She was full of interesting facts which helped to pass the time of the journey.

We exited from the motorway and sped towards the Krka national park and came to a standstill at the main gate. We were sitting there for almost 20 minutes because the park's policy is only to allow 10,000 people into the park at any one time.

Time was ticking away and eventually our coach was allowed through the gate. As we travelled down to the bottom of the valley at Lozovac, our guide polled us to see if we needed a toilet stop. (Of course we did!). She said it would hold us up for at least 15 minutes as there would be a queue.



We came to a halt in a small coach park, alighted from the bus and made our way down several sets of steps for a comfort break. Irena seemed to be frustrated that we would be spending time at the toilets!

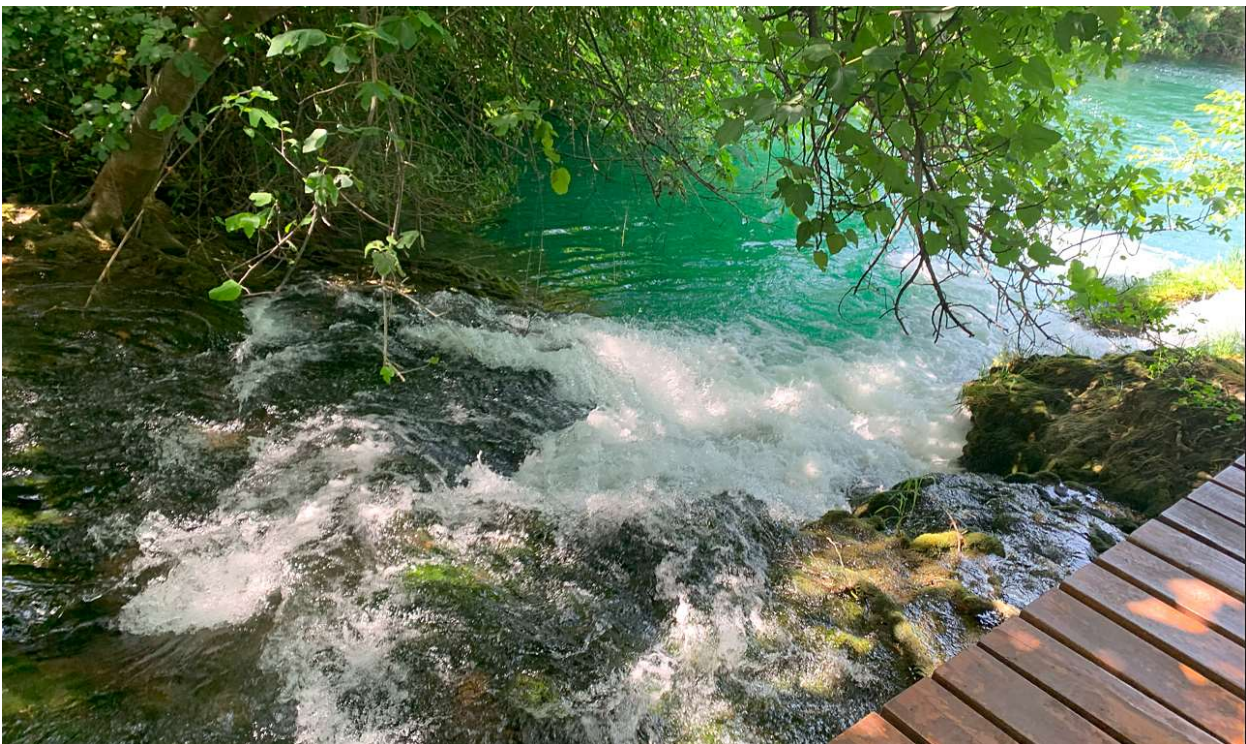
Once everyone was reassembled she told us to follow her along the wooden decked pathways in the wooded area through the waterfalls. We were told we must keep up and not stop to take pictures.

(What??? Sod that!!! It was the whole idea of the trip!!!)

She set off at a very brisk rate along the decking and up and down stone steps. The decking was about 4 feet wide over the tops of the rushing white waters and not very even with some planks sticking up higher than others. It was very pretty in the woodland but my focus was on treading carefully as the decking was very uneven, so I feel I missed out a lot of the sights we came to see.

Gillie did take some pictures as we hurried on, but they were not composed – simply snapped.





At the end of this 'assault course' we arrived at a camping area with a few shops and restaurants called Stradinski Buk. We were told that the main waterfall we came to see was viewable from a wooden walkway over the river. But we needed to be reassembled ready to go on a boat in 25 minutes.

Gillie and I walked onto the very crowded walkway and took some photos and a little bit of footage. We were probably only there for 5 minutes. After a toilet break we sat in the camp's restaurant and order a ham and cheese platter and cold beers.



We waited just a little while for the food and drink to arrive, but then realised we only had 10 minutes before our group would move on. So we rushed our food and only drank half of our beers.

We were marched 300 yards down to a pier on the river where a dilapidated boat was waiting for us to board. But it wasn't just our group that got onto the boat, several other groups from other coaches also came on board. We were packed in like sardines both down stairs and the upper deck and I had the image in my mind of the crowded passenger boat that had sunk in India just a few weeks back.



The boat set off in a cloud of diesel exhaust with the engine creaking and complaining. Thankfully the trip was only about 15 minutes and we landed at the pier at Skradin.



It was here that I thought we would be given free time, but no, everyone was ushered back on the bus and there was no time for a toilet stop.

I was very annoyed that we'd spent £61.00 each on the excursion to see the waterfalls and we'd only seen one for about 5 minutes. We'd been rushed through the park and not supposed to have stopped to take any photos.

Then it was the coach ride back to Split. As we got close to town Irena said she liked to sing and so she gave us a rendition of a Croatian folk song.

I could have done without it!

We got off of the coach and we never left a tip which we usually give our guides. I didn't think she deserved one because she had not looked after us.

What a disappointing day. If TUI are going to offer tours to the Krka waterfalls then they should make sure there is enough time for the excursion.

Explorer did not leave until 8:00pm so there would have been enough time to allow at least another hour on the trip.

As Explorer slowly sailed out of Split, we rendezvoused with Keith in the Lounge for our usual pre-dinner drink before heading off to the speciality restaurant for our Asian dinner which we had each paid £23:00 extra for. Keith told us that he did not leave the ship today and I expect he found a sun bed up on deck and stayed there all day.

We found Kora La on deck seven, it was quite full and looked very smart. We were shown to our table.

For an appetiser we had some sushi and a dip, For starters I had gluten free watermelon and crispy duck, Gillie had Crab and scallop Dumplings and Keith had Samosas, although he thought the ones he usually bought from Sainsbury's were much better!

For mains I had Lamb Kashmiri with fried rice, yellow dal and steamed vegetables, Gillie had Lamb Korma with Fried Rice and Onion Bajhee and Keith went for a Chicken Makahani with some Fried Rice, Onion Bajhee and Naan Bread.

Delicious!



We all had Mochi Ice Cream (which was ice cream in a rice dough shell) and which I don't think any of us liked very much – it was very chewy. But the rest of the dinner was great and well worth the extra money!

We finished off the evening with a visit to The Squid and Anchor on-board pub and watched The Collective do their last set.

Wednesday June 21 – Dubrovnik, Croatia

Dubrovnik was another port we visited in 2017 on our Adriatic cruise. Actually as the Thomson Spirit's home port on that cruise was Dubrovnik we actually visited Dubrovnik 3 times. But it was only the middle visit where we had the time to explore – but what a great day that was!

We had decided previously that today we would revisit those places from last time being Mount Srd by cable car and the Old Town.

As normal, Explorer was about to dock much earlier than stated. So when I walked onto our balcony I could already see other ships - the MSC Lyrica and the Viking Sea, docked in the port near the Franje Tutman suspension bridge.



After breakfast in the Market Place by one of the windows to get a good view, we met Keith down on deck 3 ready to get off-ship and explore Dubrovnik again.

I knew from past experience in 2017 and also by doing a little research that there was a regular bus service from the port up to Pile (Pee-lay) Gate. Pile Gate was the main entrance to the Old Town and the walls. The cable car station for the top of Mount Srd was a short walk from there. The bus stop was just outside the port gates and past the bus station. There was a little kiosk there where there you could buy your bus tickets next to the bus stop.

We acquired our return tickets for three and a half Euros each and waited at the bus stop. Very soon an articulated bus arrived and we jumped on and the bus driver scanned our tickets. No vacant seats on the bus of course and we had to

stand and hang on for dear life as the driver accelerated aggressively. It was an uncomfortable ride but probably better than get a taxi costing 20 Euros each way.

At one point where bus stopped to allow passengers off, there was a group of protesting students (probably protesting about climate change) walking by carrying a lit firework whose acrid smoke filled the bus. Luckily the air conditioning got rid of it quite quickly.

We arrived at the very busy Pile Gate and looked around for signs to the cable car.



The signs directed us further along the road following the city walls and up quite a steep incline. The cable car ticket office was near the top so we bought return tickets which were quite expensive at 27 Euros each.

But the cable car station was still further up an even more steep hill. I certainly don't remember having to climb all these hills last time! Luckily as we were there earlier in the morning, there was not too much of a queue and we only had to wait a few minutes for the next cable car to arrive.



Due to the number of people in the cable car there wasn't an opportunity to take good footage of our ascent like there was last time.

The ascent was just as breath-taking as it was before.



It took about 3 minutes to get to the top cable car station and the views were spectacular on this clear and hot sunny morning.



We had a look around the site and saw the newly restored antenna which during the Balkan war had been shot to pieces as we saw last time. This tall antenna had been a major component of air traffic control for Cilipi airport jst a few miles away, so it was an obvious target for the Serbs.



We knew that there was a restaurant with superb views over the Adriatic next to the cable car station and we hoped to get a table there again for our morning coffee. We approached the waitress and she took us to a very good table overlooking Dubrovnik and we ordered cappuccinos. We lingered there for quite a while.



Afterwards we took some more footage and photos and decided then and there that we would not walk the walls today. Our limbs were not in the best of shape these days and also at 35 Euros each, the price had increased to an astronomical amount. Anyway, we had walked the walls before so we decided as it was really hot to find a bar and have a cold drink.

The ride back down in the cable car again did not provide a good filming opportunity but I had the footage from last time on file.

We walked back from the lower cable car station and over the road to the nearest entrance to the old town. Passing through the arch we descended the never-ending staircase - very carefully!



We walked along the Stradun which is the main street of the Old Town, and chose a bar with shady parasols near the corner of the square. Perfect position!



We sat down and had some cold drinks and Keith had some cheesy chips as he hadn't eaten breakfast.



We were ready to leave and asked for the bill. It was quite a shock at 49 Euros!!!

We walked back to Pile Gate and caught the bus back to the ship at Port Gruz.

I made a mistake in following a couple from our ship who seemed to know where they were going and when they got off the bus, we did too. But it was the wrong bus stop and we had to walk another 400 yards to get back to the ship!

Back on board Explorer Gillie and I went up to the Market Place for some salad. A bit later on, we would all be going back into Dubrovnik on an evening excursion taking in the Dubrovnik sunset and some free time in the Old Town.

After balcony cleaning yesterday, we were surprised to find that we had no chairs out there to sit on. A phone call was made to reception and they promised to get chairs for us quickly.

It was mid-summer's evening so there would not be very much of a sunset around at 7:30pm. The sun would be going down at around 9:00pm, but still, it would be fun to take in the views.

At 6:10pm I headed off down to the minibus which had an open top. Gillie followed me down about 10 minutes after as she wasn't quite ready and we looked for Keith.



We couldn't see him. But at around 6:20 our bus headed off 10 minutes early and we were worried that we'd left Keith behind.

There was some frantic texting and phone calling but he replied that he had got on another bus doing the same tour and that had gone off earlier as well.

All the buses stopped at a roadside park overlooking the Franje Tutman suspension bridge and that was where we met up with Keith. He swapped buses and completed the excursion sitting with us.

It was a great view of our ship from the car park and the sky seemed to be turning a golden colour, so maybe we might get some good pictures after all.



All aboard the bus again and we were taken up over the hills and beyond Mount Srd to a lookout point where we could take in a slightly different aspect of the view over Dubrovnik.



In the distance the MSC Lyrica had left port and was heading for Kotor. She would beat us there.



The bus then took us to another location for us to get some closer photos of the fortress and the walls.



It was unthinkable that this lovely city had been under massive and aggressive military attack from the Serbian army in the Balkan war back in 1991.



Also the cable car station had been destroyed by the Serbs



We were dropped off at Pile Gate again and given an hour and a half's free time. So we made straight for the Stradun again and chose the same bar as we visited during the morning. We knew it would be expensive again but it was more a case of finding an available table.





The light was starting to fade and the old town's heart came alive. We were people watching and taking in the great atmosphere. We noticed that there were a cloud of birds flying around. They looked like Swifts or were they Swallows with a forked tail.



Suddenly one of them bombed Gillie and crapped on her hand! A waitress came out instantly to Gillie's dilemma with antiseptic wipes. All was well again but it made you a little bit wary about making sure bird poo didn't go into your expensive drink!

As we were sitting there, we slowly became aware of music being played. At first I thought it was the from the bar behind us but Gillie said no and went to investigate further down the Stradun.

She found a live orchestra playing classical tunes and it sounded wonderful on this lovely evening. But as they were not playing on a stage, it was difficult to see them because of the crowds in front. Gillie came back to tell us so as Keith had already paid the bill we rushed down to the corner. Gillie did manage to get a picture.



Our time at the Stradun was coming to a close and we walked back to Pile Gate to pick up the coach. Our driver had done a really good job and this excursion which we had decided to do and had booked since we first boarded Explorer, had exceeded our expectations.



Back on the ship and checking into our cabin, the balcony chairs had been replaced. It was gone 10:00pm and we were a little hungry so we went to the Market place for something to eat. All of the other restaurants had closed between 9:00 and 9:30 so it was a limited choice.

There was a beef curry on in the Market Place so Keith and I had some of that while Gillie went for some more salad.

The curry was probably the worse one I have ever eaten! It was tasteless and watery and the beef was chewy and tough. Oh well you can't have everything I suppose.



Before we turned in, our ship sailed out of Dubrovnik around 11:00pm Gillie took this fantastic shot of the Franje Tutman bridge all lit up.

We were on our way to Kotor and I was looking forward to sail in which last time was one of the cruise highlights. But we'd have to be up very early to be able to watch it.

After a very busy day today, we have another tomorrow.

Thursday June 22 – Kotor, Montenegro

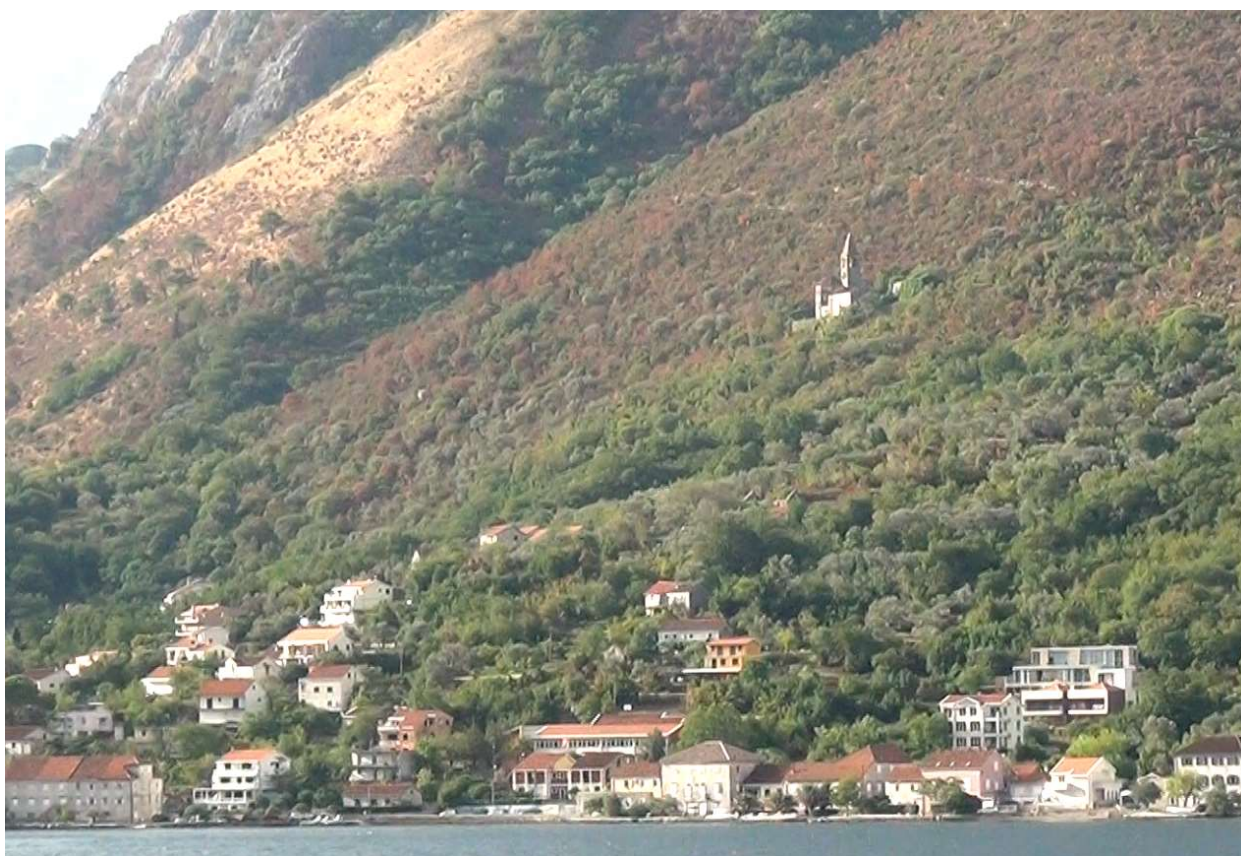
I awoke at around 5:45 and walked onto our balcony. The sun was not yet up and due to the landscape's huge mountains it probably wouldn't peer over the peaks until much later.



The water was like glass as it was so calm little villages we passed were reflected upside down in mirror image.



As the fjord-like landscape narrowed we came closer to the banks and could see little towns with their church towers reminiscent of candles.



There were a couple of runners taking a breath from their early morning exercise to watch our ship glide through the channels.



The landscape was getting very dramatic and sunlight was falling on the heights illuminating detail. Some of these mountains must have soared to over 3,500 feet.



I remembered last time that we'd passed by a strange looking man-made feature cut into the banks of the shoreline. Analysing and researching the images of this When I'd returned home, I discovered it was a derelict U-boat pen – a left over from Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia (now fragmented onto many independent countries – Montenegro being one), since the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991.

But on this sail in I filmed a total of 3 similar derelict U-boat pens, so the lakes around Kotor must have been a very important base for the German navy.



I'd heard from Anne Wigmore who we'd met at the top of the fortress in Trieste that speedboat tours in Kotor (which they had done a few days ago) actually ventured inside these creepy man-made caves.

We'd taken some sandwiches from the snack shack yesterday so we would have something to eat before we left the ship for our Kotor excursion at 8:15. But as it was a tender to shore today we'd have to be waiting in the Broadway Show Lounge at 7:40 ready to be called for our tender boat. Keith would not be joining us today.

We sat on the balcony with coffee and our sandwiches watching our gentle progress through the lakes which eventually would lead to Kotor city.

We heard a noise from below and looked over the balcony to see the tender boats being readied to take people ashore



We got to the Broadway Showlounge and were given a sticker with a '1' on it meaning that we would be coach number one. We were also the first to be called to the tender boat.

We walked down 4 flights of stairs and left the ship on deck 3. After our ship cards were scanned to record our egress we walked onto a platform lowered from the ship's hull where our boat was waiting. The crew assisted everyone safely onto the tender and they took their seats.

The sun was now fully up above the mountains and there was a warm breeze. The tender boat set off on a short jaunt to the quay at Kotor.



Once safely ashore we looked for coach number one, gave up our tickets and took our seats. Our guide was Ivan, a fiercely patriotic Montenegrin who used to be a school teacher. He changed career because there was more money to be made in the tourist industry.

Ivan told us about the forth coming trip and reassured us that our coach driver was a very skilled and very experienced driver as we would witness on the route very shortly.

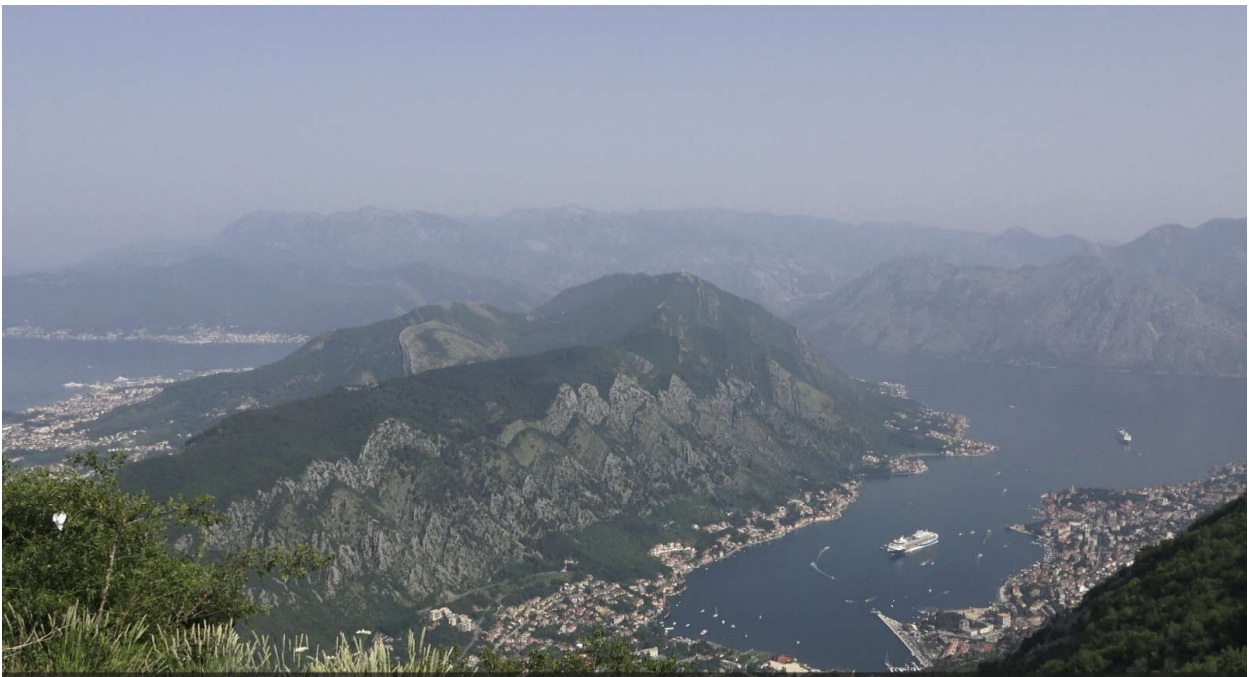
The coach moved off and straight away negotiated the hills taking us out of Kotor. Ivan said we would be travelling up the Kotor Serpentine road which featured 26 switchbacks rising to 3,700 feet. We would be stopping for breakfast at a mountain restaurant near Njegusi, then onward to Cetinje and final a ride into Budva on the coast where we would have some free time.

(I rather hoped 'free time' wouldn't just be a 25 minute rush like we had at the Krka waterfalls!)

Soon we had started our serpentine climb up the mountain. There were a few difficult moments when the coach encountered cars coming from the other direction but the coach driver knew exactly what to do to get past safely. I hadn't elaborated to Gillie about this mountain road prior to our cruise so that she wouldn't be anxious. Thankfully she was taking it on the chin and actually quite enjoying the ride!



I knew that the views were going to be stupendous and I wasn't disappointed! We stopped at a parking point to take pictures of the view. What some fabulous scenery!



Explorer was anchored in the bay way below and the view opened up so that we could see all three of the Kotor approach lakes.

A short way off we could see the restaurant where we would be stopping just short of Njegusi. The proprietors provided everyone with a doorstep-style local cheese and ham sandwich and a drink. We both chose a cold beer.

We continued our journey through the beautiful Montenegran countryside called the Valley of the Gods and we finally came to a coach park outside the Palace of King Nikola.

Ivan took us in for a 'thorough' guided tour through the museum, which I thought was a little too long-winded, but give the guy his due, he was very versed and proud of his country's history. The museum held the relics of cruel and vicious wars where different tribe pre-Yugoslavic ethnic groups jostled for power.

Once back in the coach park Gillie and I stopped at one of the few market stores and bought 2 umbrellas to use at Corfu airport on our return next week. There had been horror stories of hour long queues in direct sunlight and 32 degree temperatures just to get inside the terminal. As our flight was an early one, we hoped the umbrellas would not need to be used, but they were insurance if needed.

The coach set off for our next destination – Budva – a Montenegran holiday resort on the coast south of Kotor. It took about 40 minutes to get there and Ivan told us that there was an old town and a new town. Whilst the old town was charming and lovely to walk through, the new town was like the Benidorm of Montenegro with loads of hi-rise buildings and hotels. Budva was a truly over-developed town which the natives hated, but of course it was bringing in the Euros.

Our trek down from the high mountains along the main highway provided dramatic views of Budva's old and new towns.



The heat was scorching when we got off the bus and Ivan walked us the short distance to the old town. We would have an hour and a quarter to look around. Great! We could get some cold drinks and find some shade.



The old town was a labyrinth of narrow lanes with lots of shops and restaurants. We stopped at a bar and drank our cold beers then looked around for a while before going back to the bus stop to meet the coach.



Our journey back to Kotor was supposed to be via a 350m tunnel, but as traffic was very congested, the driver had decided to take us back over the mountains.

Back in Kotor we could appreciate the traffic situation and we were delayed at every junction. Eventually we were dropped off back at the quay. Unfortunately there was no time to look around Kotor's old town as everyone had to be back on the ship in half an hour. We climbed aboard a tender boat and we headed back to our ship static in Kotor Bay.

There were two other big cruise ships in today. The MSC Lyrica was further down the bay and the AIDAblu was actually docked at the port.

Back on board we headed off to the Market Place for some salad and walked around on deck to see if we could find Keith.

Sail out from Kotor was quite early at 4:00pm and the sail out was every bit as spectacular as the sail in. Obviously the light was very different and some of the haze had burned off.



As we ventured down the lake we passed Perast which was the town where we crossed over to Our Lady of the Rocks island back in 2017.



We also passed right by Our Lady of the Rocks Island too



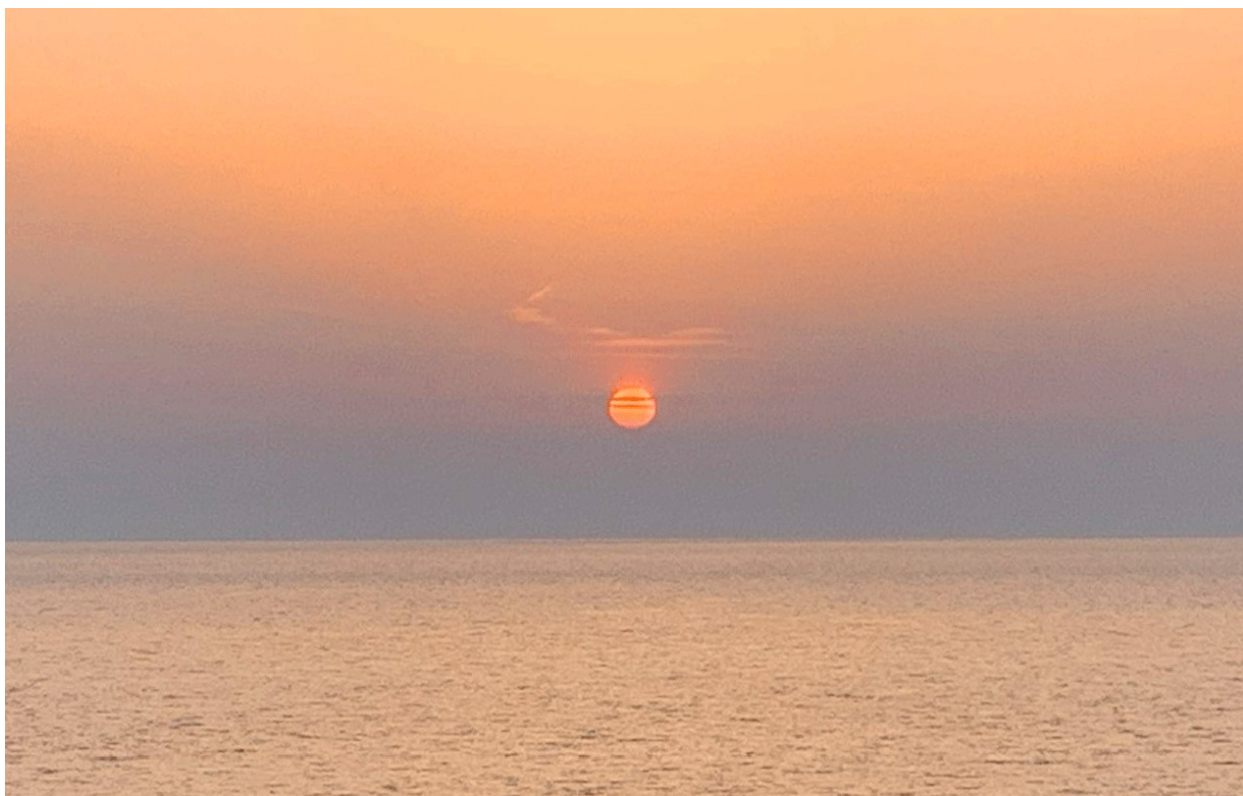
At 7.00pm we met up with Keith in The Lounge and listened to very young and talented guitarist Jobie. He was playing a very interesting see-thru electro-acoustic guitar made by Yamaha. We were very impressed with his singing and playing but were shocked when he revealed that after tonight his contract had come to an end and he would be moving on,



Dinner tonight was Tapas in the Mediterranean. I had a salmon and prawn Espetada skewer. It was really good.



We finished off the evening by taking the only sunset picture we were able to take on this cruise and then we went to the Squid and Anchor to watch The Collective. We were very impressed by the guitarist, bass guitarist and drummer. But Sophie the singer was certainly not up to their standard.



Exploring Three Seas – 2023 – Part 2

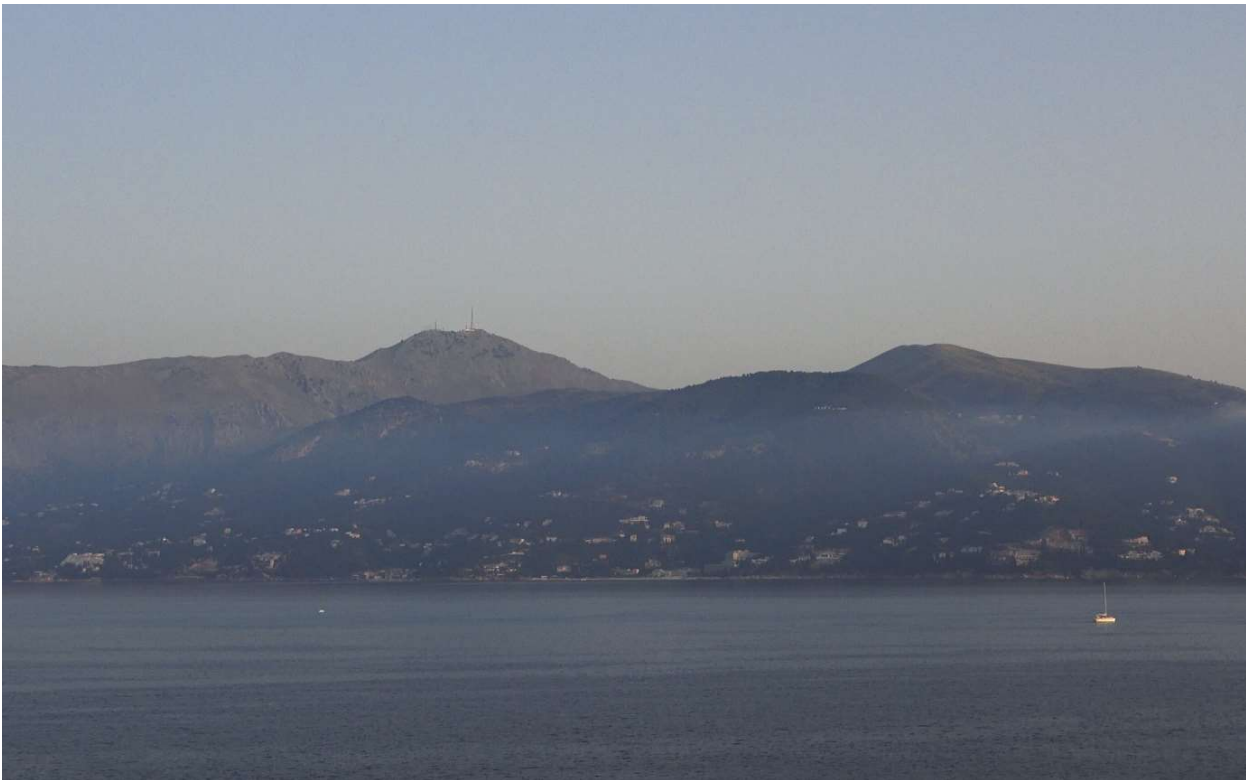
Friday June 23 – Kerkyra, Corfu

I woke to the realisation that we had been on Explorer for a week and that we were half way through our cruise.

Turning on the TV and selecting the Bridge webcam I realised that we had already passed the northern end of Corfu and I had missed sailing past Kalamí where we stayed on our week-long visit to Corfu in May 2017. I really would have liked to have taken footage to juxtapose the view of cruise ships we saw sailing up the channel when we were there.

Oh well, it wasn't to be, our Captain likes to be in port early!

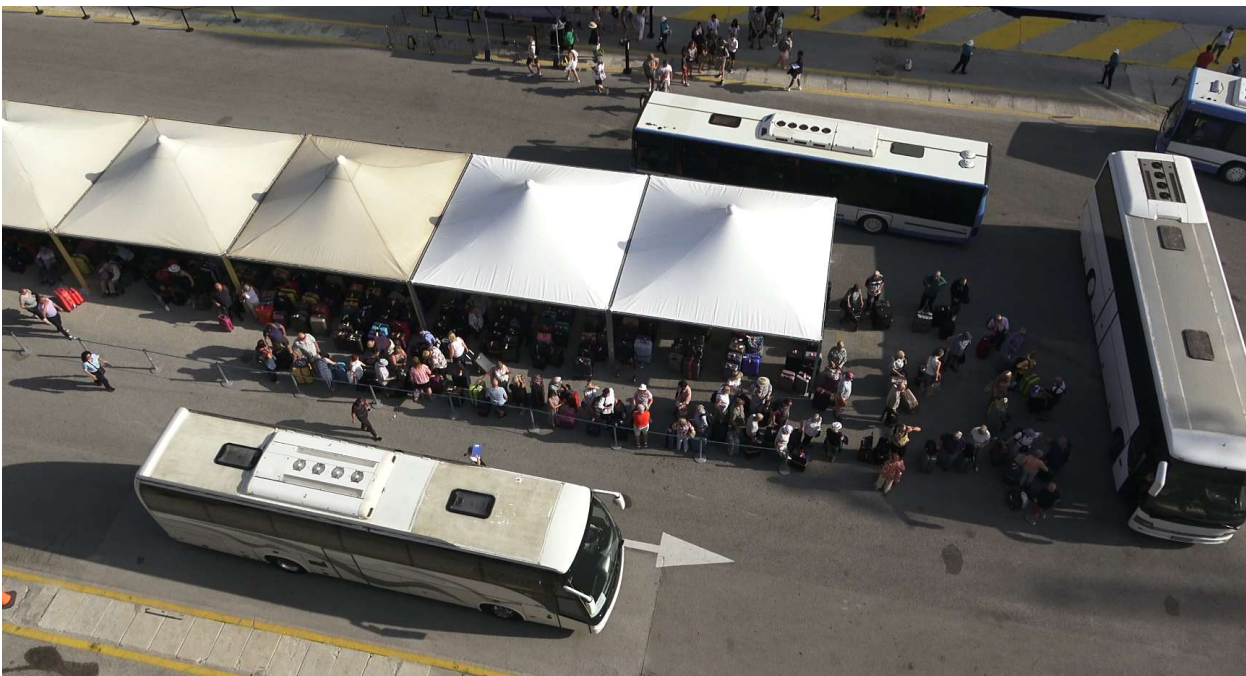
I could see from the webcam that we were in Kerkyra's harbour. Walking out on the balcony on this hazy morning Mount Pantokratoras was standing guard high over the port, and as the ship turned the fortress came into view.



I could also see the MSC Lyrica was already docked and the Wind Surf – a tall mast sailing ship was slowly heading into port just in front of us.



Once our docking was complete I looked over the side of the ship to see all of the suitcases of passengers leaving the ship today lined up under some tents. I perished the thought that this would be us a week from today, but even so, there was a great week ahead of us visiting Crete, Santorini, Turkiye and Athens.



From our vantage on a window table in the Market Place while we were having breakfast, I noticed the hydrofoil ferry leaving port. This was a very fast vessel which had aerofoils (wings beneath the waves) to make the hull rise out of the water. The hydrofoil concept is at least 60 years old but you rarely see them in action.



I was looking forward to our excursion today as we would be revisiting Pailiokastritsa on Corfu's west coast. There were wonderful views over this seaside town when we were last there.

Keith was joining us on this 'Beauty Spots of Corfu' excursion and he met us downstairs after breakfast down on deck 3 ready to leave the ship with us.

We found our coach waiting in the port's coach park and handed in our tickets. We found our seats, sat back and started to relax.

The coach headed north out of Kerkyra and we noticed all of the beautiful blooming shrubs along the sides of the road. It certainly felt like summer was here!

After about 35 minutes we arrived by the beach at Palaiokastri. It was exactly as I remembered it.



Looking up to the hills above the beach I could see the cluster of restaurants overlooking the coast and I had a good feeling that our next stop would be up there later.



We found a place for our morning coffee ritual and ordered cappuccinos. We could spend 45 minutes there before we were due back on the coach. I paid the bill at the counter as it was getting near the time to reassemble on the coach. I asked the waiter how to say 'thank you' in Greek and he told me 'efaristo'.

I thought this would come in useful as many of the places we would visit in our second week of the cruise would be Greek speaking. I decided to learn the few fundamental Greek phrases as well – ‘please, hello, goodbye, yes and no’. I looked up the translations on my phone and started to memorise them

The coach travelled down the road to exit Pailiokastritsa then suddenly swung left. I knew then for sure that we were going up to the Bella Vista viewpoint I’d seen when gazing up.

The road was very windy and narrow, maybe not so much as our Kotor trip yesterday, but it was extremely difficult passing cars who were meeting our bus from the opposite direction. At one point we came to a complete standstill as an altercation broke out between our driver and the aggravated driver of the car we had met head on and he was insisting that our coach backed up to let him through. Looking out the back window of our coach I saw several cars and two more coaches also held up behind us. There was no other way, the driver of the offending car in front had to submit and back up to resolve the situation.

At another critical point a few minutes later, our coach had to squeeze past a parked car and a building. The side of the coach was within just half an inch of the building’s wall as we slowly passed by. Yes, very skilful driving!

We finally reached the viewpoint at the top of Bella Vista and we all trooped out and were ushered into a particular restaurant where we had fantastic views over the coast and the rest of Corfu.



We ordered drinks, cold beer for Gillie and me and a carafe of rosé wine for Keith. We continued looking at the wondrous view. We could see an old fortress to our right which was even higher up than we were.



We didn't have too much time at the restaurant at Bella Vista and things once again seemed rushed. That's a great shame as we could have spent much longer than 40 minutes there.

Gillie went to the ladies' as there was a queue. She told me to watch her handbag and her hat. What she didn't tell me was that she'd put her hat over my iPhone. As Keith was drinking his rosé I suddenly felt my pocket to make sure that my iPhone was still with me.

It wasn't!

I thought it had fallen out in the coach, maybe somewhere down near the beach. My heart began to race as I rushed back to the coach to look under the seats, but of course it wasn't there.

I text Gillie to ask her if she had my phone and then raced back to Keith at the table. He had my iPhone and found it under Gillie's hat. Thank God for that!!! Well done Keith!

Unfortunately Keith had to leave half of his carafe of wine as we had to get back on the coach which travelled a short way along the top road. I thought we might next be visiting the fortress I'd seen from Bella Vista. That would have been great, but the guide told us that we were going to visit a monastery.

I wasn't very happy, it would have made more sense to spend more time at Bella Vista, maybe for a nice lunch with a great view.

Gillie went down the pathway to look at the monastery, myself, Keith and a number of others on the coach didn't, they were perhaps feeling just a cheated out of quality free time as I was.



I got off the bus and started to film some wildlife for the twenty five minutes the coach was stopped at the side of the road by this monastery.

With everyone back on the coach, the driver took us the long way back to the cruise port. He seemed to be going very fast. The drone of the guide's voice going on about the monastery and religion was sending me to sleep. The scenery wasn't very exhilarating either so I didn't take any footage. I'd hoped we would be stopping at Agios Stefanos which was a little fishing town on the coast overlooking some beautiful islands we'd seen on our last visit and maybe descend via the switchback road from the mountain heights. No such luck.

But as we were approaching the cruise port I did get a good view of the ships docked at the terminal.



Soon we were checked into our ship and we needed lunch. Gillie got some fish and chips from the snack shack and it looked so good I got some as well. It wasn't gluten free but it was a small portion and so delicious.

We had a nap in our cabin afterwards as we'd had some very early mornings. When we came-to we thought we'd go upstairs to the pool deck and get a cold drink

When we got up there Muzik Unlimited were just finish a live set with an absolutely blistering guitar solo. I'd liked to have seen more of them

Back in the cabin with our drinks, Gillie was surprised by the balcony cleaning crew washing down the windows on a 'cherry-picker' platform. Luckily they had already been past our cabin!



We met Keith in the Lounge before we went off to the Vista restaurant for an Italian dinner.

Tonight the promised Sail Away party would go ahead out on deck, last week's had been moved inside to the Indigo nightclub due to the weather. But tonight with a balmy breeze and clear skies we spent about an hour up above the pool deck listening to Muzik Unlimited playing another live set.



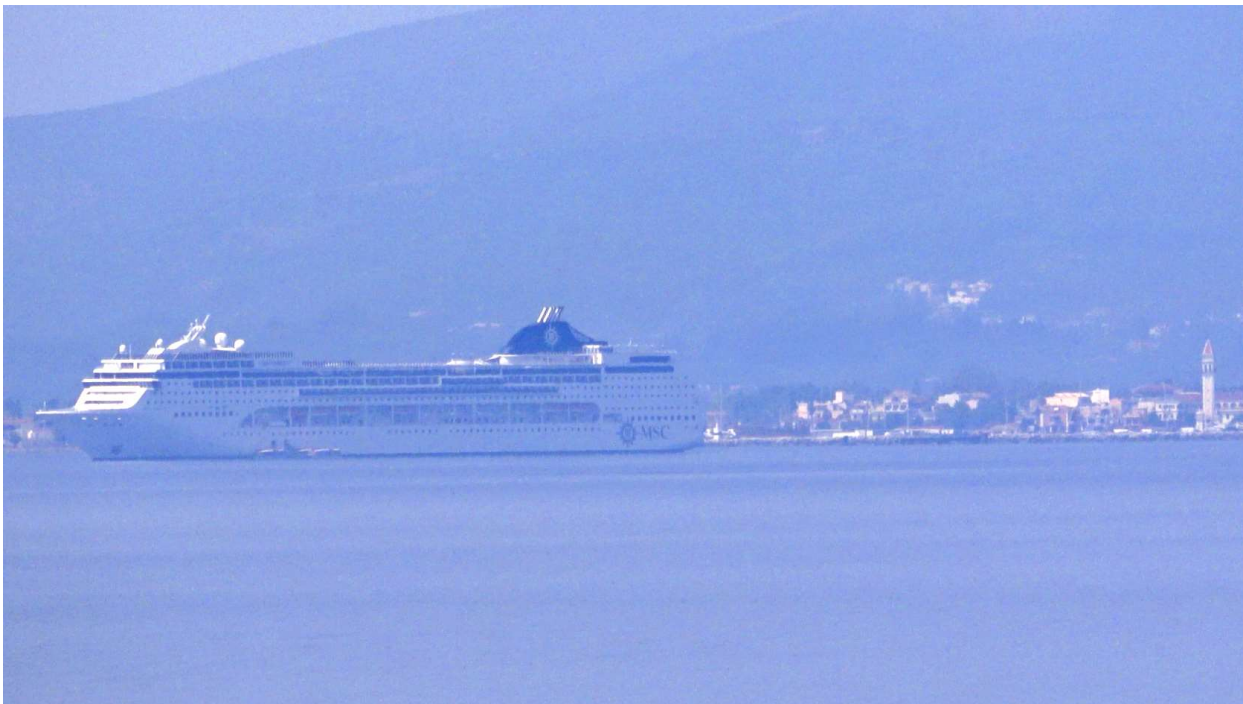
Later on we heard the announcement that the ship would not be leaving at its scheduled time of 11:00pm, instead it would leave Corfu at around 2:30am as there were still passengers en route from Glasgow due to a delayed flight.

During the night I stirred from my slumber, looked out of our window and realised we were still in port. The time was 3:20am.

Saturday June 24 – Day At Sea

Our second full sea-day. I walked out on the balcony not long after sunrise to see the island of Kefalonia passing by. We would be docking there on the last day of our cruise next week.

Soon I was watching the island of Zakynthos as well. Zakynthos holds a special place in our hearts from the fantastic holiday we had there for two weeks in 2009. As we were passing Zakynthos on the eastern side I could make out Tsivily beach where we used to sunbathe and a little later Zante Town came into view. I remember seeing a cruise ship anchored in the bay there at the time and today at anchor was the MSC Lyrica. I could just about make her out with my binoculars.



After the usual breakfast in the Market Place we talked about what we could do on board today. In the Broadway Showlounge this morning Destination Services were presenting their excursion show, telling everyone attending about the excursions taking place during the week. As we'd booked all of our excursions there was no point in going to this today.

As we were having breakfast I saw a ship passing and I thought it might be the Marella Discovery. But it obviously wasn't as it was not painted in the Marella colour scheme. But the profile of the ship looked very similar.

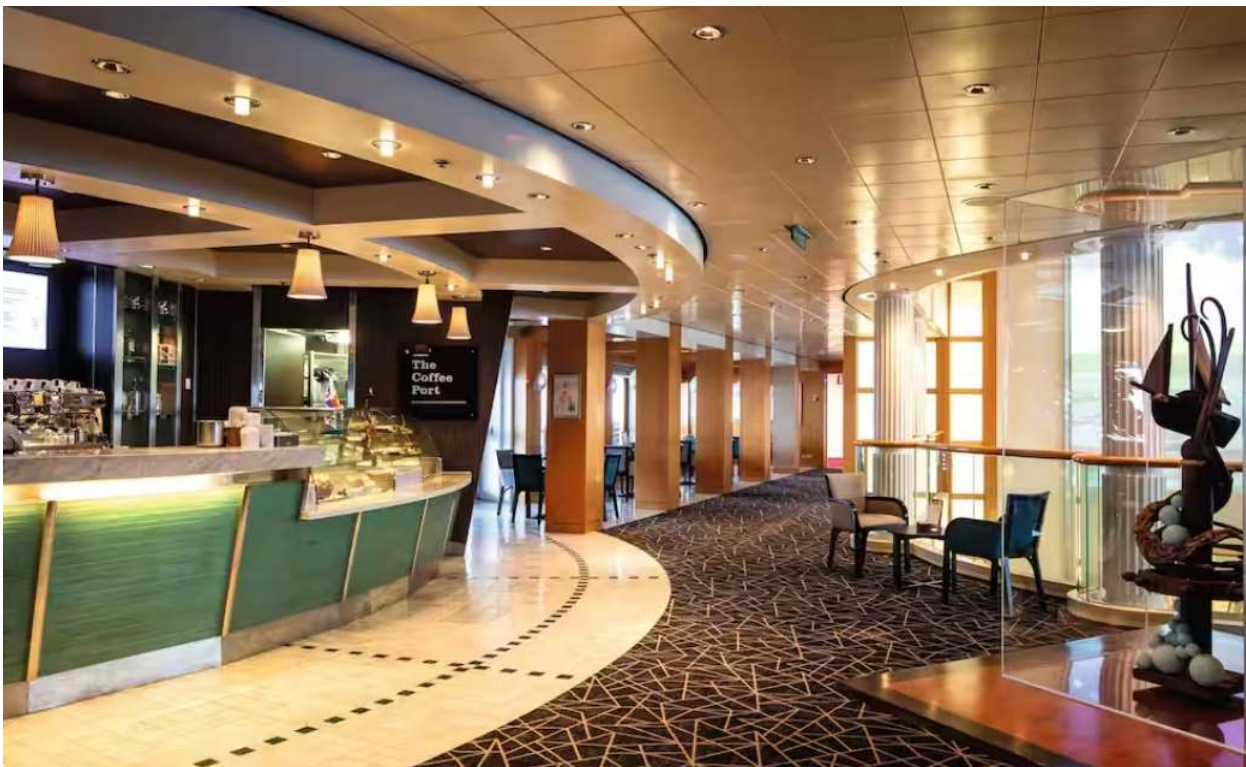


Making a decision we walked round the ship where the Broad Street shops were open.



Gillie was looking for some ear-rings and I needed some shaving cream. The message is that it is far cheaper to buy from the Broad Street shops than shops ashore because the Broad Street shops are duty free. Well this certainly wasn't the case in my experience having to shell out £4.75 for a can of Gillette foamy costing £2.89 back home. Gillie didn't buy anything.

After a great deal of window shopping we walked down to deck 6 and had cappuccinos in the Coffee Port. As we had not taken up the option of the Premium drinks package the cost of the coffee was added to our bill. I think it was £1:50 each, but still very much cheaper than Costa Coffee back home. We also tried a couple of their delicious macarons.



We sat in those very chairs above to have our coffee! Beyond the hand rail was the ship's atrium which started at deck 8 and went all the way down to deck 5 where Reception and Destination Services would be found



After our coffee we walked towards the front (bow) of the ship, past the cinema who's films were also shown on the big screen up on deck and the Photo studio.

We had a quick look in the Broadway Showlounge again and the stage was being set up for tonight's show 'Rockology'. The Showteam were going to be accompanied by a live band as I could see a drum kit and keyboard set up.

The Broadway showlounge was much bigger than the showlounge on Discovery 2 and it had an upper floor with boxes, very much like the Reading Hexagon.



This venue was where Jane MacDonald performed and rose to fame when she was part of the showteam. This ship at the time was called the Celebrity Galaxy and back in the mid 1990's she was the very state of the art. The Galaxy was sold to TUI and became Mein Schiff 1 for German cruisers and then was repainted to become the Marella Explorer.



On our walk around the ship we went on deck to see if we could spot Keith. We couldn't see him but knew he was on a sun-bed somewhere.

Walking further on and up on deck 12 the sun was blazing down and it was very hot. The sea was calm and numerous ships were passing by in both directions. We were on our way to Crete and we could just make out the mainland of Greece.



We walked into the Indigo nightclub and bar. This is where discos were held and there was a casino with tables for Roulette and Black Jack all ready to take peoples money! Indigo was very large and was situated over the captain's bridge. There were large windows overlooking the ship's bow and there was also an outside area which today was very windy as the ship was travelling at 22 knots towards our next port of call – Heraklion, Crete.



Towards the back (stern) of Explorer was a Mini Golf course and The Hideout which was a games room and meeting place for teenagers.

There were many bars on the ship but strangely most of them seemed to be shut during the day. Most people went to the Pool Bar outside on deck 11 for their drinks. The bar was often very busy and you had to shout to be heard sometimes as the deck events were very noisy.



The Lounge was the place where we would meet up with Keith as it always had live music going on. We had enjoyed Jobie there and The Collective but when the Collective's vocalist Sophie was doing her turn to backing tracks we found her emotion-less and she had an annoying habit of not holding onto her notes. I supposed she was young and inexperienced and frankly very lucky to get such a job on this ship.

Other bars on Explorer included Bar 53 next to Latitude 53, Aperitif just in front of the speciality restaurants, and The Mediterranean bar with its sliding roof and outside seating right at the back of the ship.

All in all 8 bars and 10 restaurants, including the Dining Club which we didn't visit as Gillie and Keith were not too keen on the unusual bill of fare and Uni Sushi which we had booked for the evening after Santorini. Dining Club was an extra £47.50 each so we saved our money and Gillie and I had booked Surf and Turf this evening.

The ship had other features we never used like Champenays Spa and Gym with a sauna and treatments.

We spent the afternoon on our cabin balcony with Gin and Tonics as we watched islands and ships go by. As we'd booked a 'large balcony cabin' it was twice as deep as the balcony on Discovery 2 and this meant that there was always shade for us to sit.

During the afternoon we began to feel hungry and the temptation was to go and get some fish and chips again. We caved in! I went up to get the drinks and Gillie got the lunch.

During the evening we met Keith for a drink in the Lounge bar as usual.



Gillie and I then headed off to Surf and Turf for dinner. I had lobster with fillet steak and Gillie had Tuna steak. It was very good and we enjoyed it.

We had arranged to meet Keith outside the Broadway Showlounge for tonight's show – Rockology; a tribute to many rock anthems over the years.



We sat in front seats in one of the balcony boxes with our drinks as our live band 'The Collective' came to the stage and started the show. The Collective was also joined by keyboard player Lana who was the ship's pianist playing jazz and classics solo in the various bars and lounges aboard.

They were all reading dots (manuscript) from iPads and they were sensational musicians. Complete concentration and never dropping a note. Awesome! The Showteam singers and dancers were good but it was a case of seeing them in every show, so they were a bit boring at times.



On our first cruise on the Thomson Destiny, we used to all go to sit in the outside buffet for a hot drink before going to bed. I remember looking out to sea at night and seeing the moon reflected on the water. There were midnight feasts and snacks to have from the buffet too. But its all change on Marella cruises where most restaurants and bars seem to close after 10:30pm. The Indigo bar is open until late though.

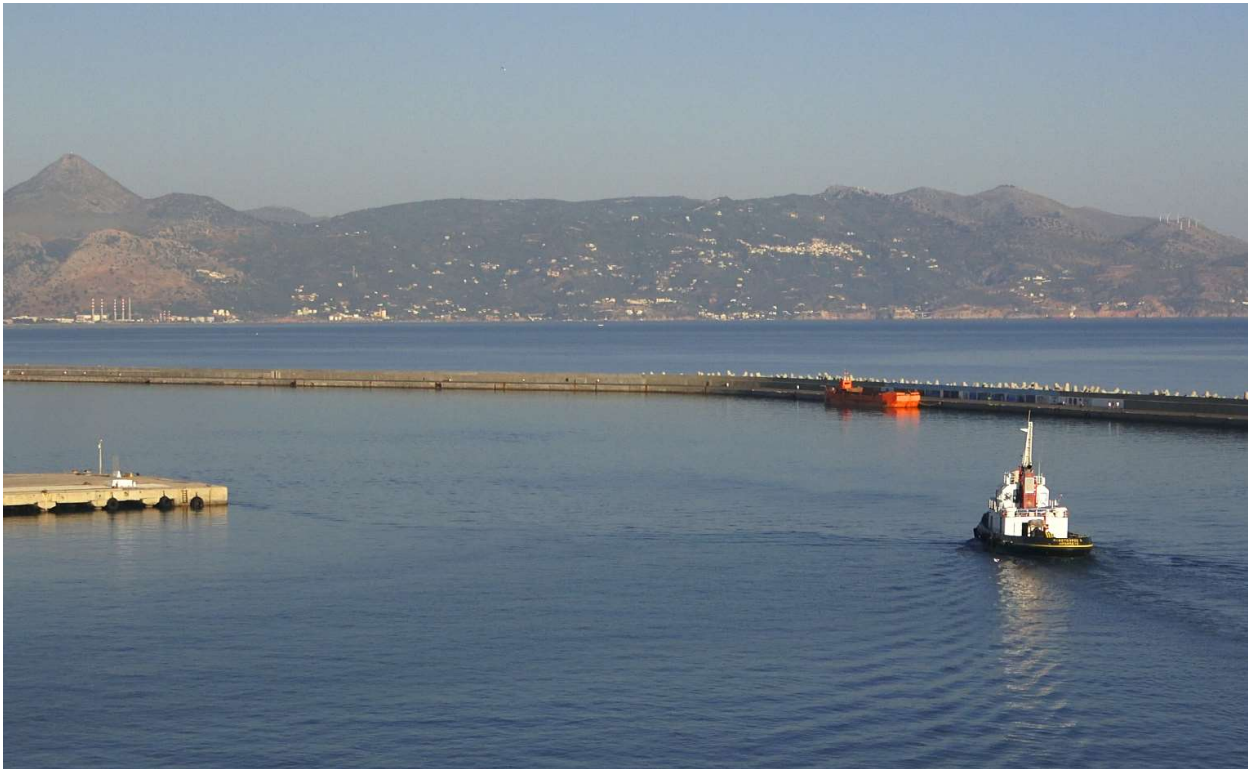
However I did get a shot of the moonlight on the water from our balcony



Sunday June 24 – Heraklion, Crete

Up on top deck with Keith this morning to watch our sail-in to Heraklion Crete. Again it was a beautiful sunny morning with a cloudless blue sky and the temperature at 7:45 already in the low eighties.

I wasn't sure what I was going to make of Heraklion but the views from the ship as we sailed in were stunning. We had entered port and were behind a long breakwater.



From the other side of the ship was a higglety-pigglety huddle of low rise sun bleached dwellings and in the foreground – a ferris wheel!



The airport was beyond the city laying on a plain before the huge mountains behind it. It was a very busy airport with Airbuses and 737s taking off every few minutes. The seaport itself was also very busy with ferries darting in and out of the harbour.

But there was one vessel in port that was extremely interesting. Nestling unexpectedly in one of the docks, there was a ship which seemed to have a most familiar profile. She was the Celestyal Olympia but twelve years ago we knew her (and knew her well) as the Thomson Destiny!!!

She was sold by Thomson (TUI) in 2012 and probably should have gone to be broken up like the Spirit. But she had been bought by a Greek cruise line – Celestyal. She was like an old friend and it was good to see her again wearing her smart new livery.



After breakfast we took the coach into town which was laid on by TUI. The return fare was £9:00 and it gave us free time to look around Heraklion.

Our first priority when we got off the coach was a good cup of coffee and we found a perfect place with shade for us and sun for Keith. I tried out some of the few Greek words I'd looked up and said 'thank you' in Greek. I got a pleasant and polite response which I presume meant 'you're welcome'.

The coffee was great and the café owner told us how to get down to Heraklion's coast. We took his advice and it led us into Heraklion's 'Lion's Square' where there were cafés and bars beneath a rich umbrella of shady trees. The famous Morosini fountain was there with water spouting from the mouth of four sculptured lions – hence the name 'Lion's Square' I suppose.

Off to the right was a long windy street which by our reckoning would take us down to the harbour.



It did!

Gillie stopped to choose and buy a fridge magnet which is what we like to do in every port we visit on a cruise if we can.

The harbour was alive with activity and was very pretty with lots of colourful fishing boats.



There was a walkway leading to an old fortress - Rocca a Mare, built in the 16th century when the Venetians invaded Crete.



We walked along the walkway until we got to the fortress and passed a busking musician playing the accordion. When we got to the entrance of the fortress we just felt too hot to go in, so we walked back and I gave the muso €5.00. He said 'thank you' with a posh English accent!!! I was quite taken aback!!!

As it was so very hot, we needed to find shade and a cold drink. We found a bar right on the corner of the main street.



We stayed about an hour then decided to make our way back to the coach, but by a less challenging route – we didn't like the prospect of having to walk back up that long hill. We made our alternative calculations and set off for the Plateia Eleftherias - the square where the coach dropped us off.



But very soon we saw the ship and realised our alternative route was taking us on a short cut back to the port. It was less than half a mile!



As we were walking, we noticed that the Celestyal Olympia had left port and she was sailing out to sea on the horizon.



There was a little bit of confusion when we entered the port through the gate because we were not allowed to walk back to the ship. We had to be taken by coach. So we found the coach which took us 400 yds down the dock to the ship.

Back on Explorer, Gillie and I went to the Market Place for some salad for lunch and we nabbed some sandwiches from the Snack Shack to put in our little fridge ready for tomorrow mornings very early breakfast.

We past the time reading on our balcony until about 4 o'clock and then went down to the Coffee Port for a cappuccino.

After showers and a change of clothes we watched sail out from Heraklion.



We then met Keith in the Lounge bar before we headed off to Vista for another Italian dinner. But tonight the food and service wasn't quite as good as last time.

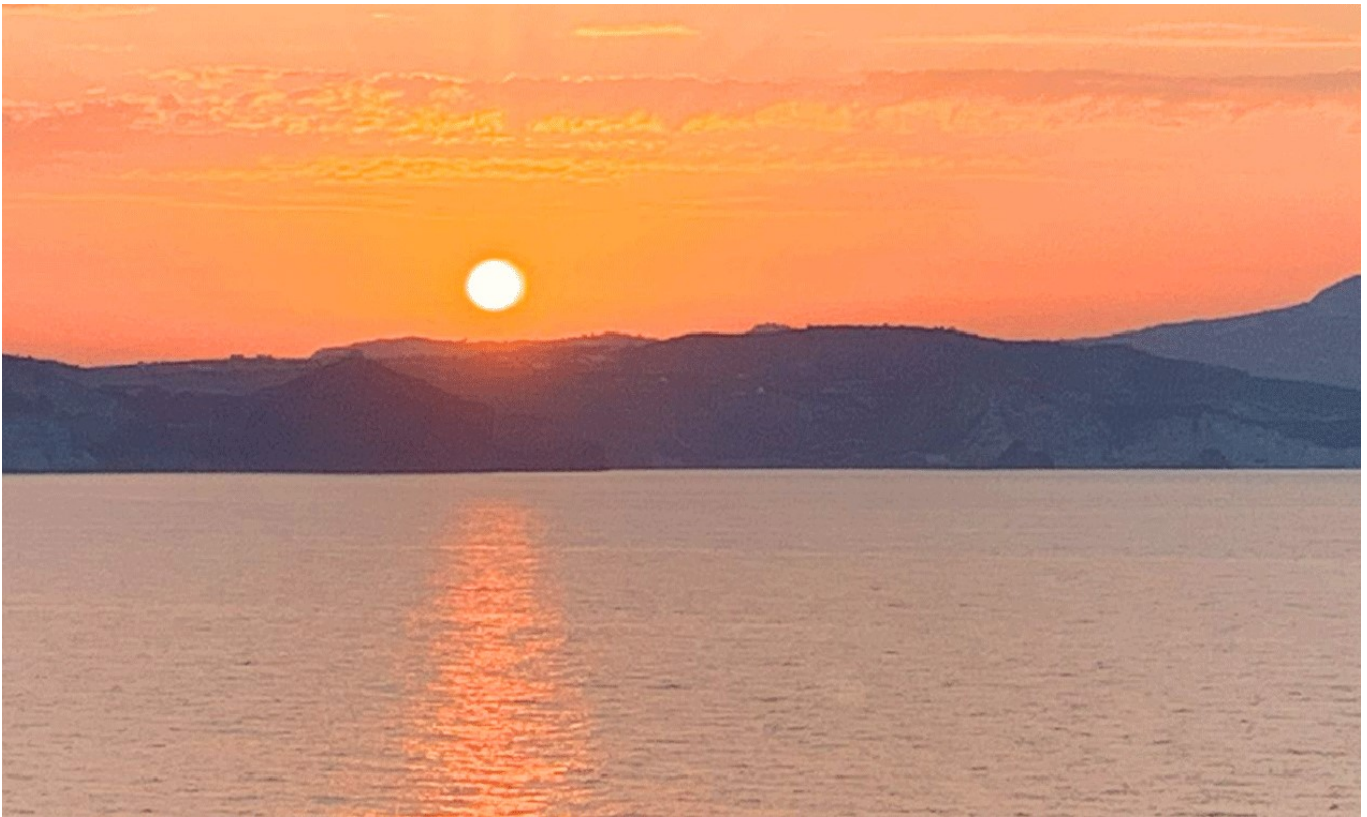
We finished off the evening in the Broadway Showlounge watching the Showteams production of 'Elton' – a tribute to the music of Elton John who ironically was playing his last ever UK concert at Glastonbury tonight!

The show was very good but there was some distortion on some of the vocals. I told one of the showteam as we were leaving and told him to have a chat to his soundman.

Back in cabin 10072, we found a towel bear made by the housekeeping boys and as we got ready for bed we wondered what tomorrow would bring on our trip to Santorini!

Monday June 25 – Thira, Santorini

Up at 5 o'clock this morning to watch the sunrise on this very exciting day – visiting Santorini!



Santorini is probably one of the most beautiful Greek islands. It's towns are perched high on the cliff of an extinct volcano which has a flooded caldera where the cruise ships stop. In the centre of the caldera is a small island with hot springs and the pinnacle of the volcano which has not been active for millions of years.

We had picked up some sandwiches from the snack shack yesterday afternoon for our early breakfast this morning and we ate them sitting on our balcony watching the scenery as we got closer to the place where we would drop anchor.



Keith was coming with us today and we met him in the Broadway Showlounge at 7:40am. We would be tendered ashore by boat and we would pick up a coach to take us all over the island today on this TUI tour.

But from what we were reading, because Santorini is such a popular destination, this Grecian paradise has difficulties getting tourists on and off the island. There is a 537 step pathway up the cliffs to Thira which is the capital, and this is used by trains of donkeys and mules to carry luggage and sometimes people. The steps get very slippery and smelly with donkey wee and pooh.

There is also a cable car near the steps which carries 36 people up and 36 people down at the same time, but the queues for this can be horrendous.

Today there would be a total of 5 cruise ships visiting Santorini including ourselves, so at a guess there would be over 10,000 tourists invading the island today, all requiring food, drink, pictures and selfies on their phones. It was a daunting prospect that we would be among them!

As we closed in on our prospective anchorage we could just make out the 537 steps leading up to Thira the capital.



There are other small ports down at sea level around the island too serviced by switch-back roads up to the heights because heavy freight and supplies need to be taken regularly all over the island by road transport.

We were bus number 3 this morning and we were called to transfer to the tender boat down on deck 3. The boat was quite a large vessel and not one of Explorer's lifeboats as usually used. We were carefully helped over the threshold into the tender and we took our seats.

As we cast off and sailed across the water from Explorer, I had anticipated that we would turn west to come ashore beneath Oia village at the little port there, but our tender boat turned east.

It was a about a 30 minute trip in the tender boat and we past two other cruise ships anchored in the bay tendering their own passengers ashore. The MSC Lyrica who had been following us around the Adriatic and Aegean seas and Virgin's leviathan 'Resilient Lady' who we had met in Corfu last week.



We docked at the new ferry port of Athinios where we found several coaches parked who would be taking excursions today.



We disembarked from the tender and found our coach. Within a couple of minutes the coach set off on a very difficult journey on the zig-zag road up the cliff face. Our guide started to tell us about the history of Santorini and said our first visit would be to the top of Mount Profitis Elias, which was Santorini's highest mountain.



The coach driver negotiated more zig-zag roads to get us up to the top where the coach parked. From there we could see all around the island, the caldera, Thira and Oia and the airport on the other side.





Looking down we could see that there was an Airbus taking off from the airport.



Having taken some pictures we all got back onto the coach for our next visit - Oia.

So from one side of Santorini to the other. The coach travelled on the back slopes of the island for about 30 minutes passing whitewashed hamlets and lush vegetation growing on the organic volcanic soil



We arrived at a coach park at the back of Oia and had to walk up a steep pathway of steps to get to the top. But once there and looking over the balcony from street level, it was certainly worth it. We could see our ship in the distance over the other side of the caldera below Thira.



We walked to the square with the white domed church. By now the streets and the square were getting very crowded and it was very hard to move.

I was determined to get 'the' Oia photo of the blue domes and as I moved into the street I was swept along by a riptide of people. It was at that point I got separated from Gillie.

On my mission, I realised I must be very close to the spot to take the shot and I turned left and started down a flight of stairs. There was a mass of people at the bottom taking pictures with their phones of the hidden view to my right. I would have to wait until I could get to the front.

My phone rang – it was Gillie. I couldn't answer as I was holding onto the step's railings with one hand and carrying my camcorder with the other.

My phone rang again and I knew Gillie was anxious to find me. After a few minutes I got to the bottom and pushed my way to the front ready with my camera.

Ah! There were the beautiful blue domes with the background of the island and the sea.

My phone rang again

I had about 5 seconds to take the picture and only then could I answer. I told Gillie I would meet her back in the square outside the domed church.

When I got home I would realise that the shot wasn't very good. In the pressure of it all there wasn't enough time to set the shot up properly and it was spoiled by unwanted people in the picture.



So I had to make do with a picture from the internet.

This was the shot I wanted to take. But at least I'd seen it with my own eyes!



It was really hot and we needed a drink so we walked along the narrow street a hundred yards or so and were enticed into a rather bosh looking bar with eastern influences. 'That'll do for me' I thought! The al fresco bar looked very comfortable. We sat down at the table gestured by the waitress.



Keith ordered a glass of wine, Gillie had a small beer and I had a cappuccino and a small beer as I needed an early morning boost and a cold drink. We sat back and took in the moment. The restaurant was almost empty when we came in but it was filling up fast. Also the crowds were building up in the streets too. It looked like we arrived just in time and so it was worth the very early morning.

I was enjoying my cappuccino and I was particularly charmed by the cup!



We took a few selfies...



...and took one of Keith!



We sat for maybe half an hour and then I called for the bill. I knew it wasn't going to be cheap, but then again how often do you come to Santorini and sit at a bar with such a stunning view. It was €49.00. Keith instantly paid the bill before I could suggest otherwise. Than you again Keith!

We struggled our way back to the coach. By now there must have been 20 or 30 coaches parked in the coach park.

The coach set off for Thira the principal town of Santorini. We would be dropped there and then we would have free time before making our own way back to the ship. The ship would be sailing at 18:00 so everyone had to be back on board by 17:30. The guide recommended using the cable car to get back down the cliff for our return tender back to the ship. She warned us that we should be very cautious of using the steps as the donkeys tend to run down the steps to get to the bottom for their food and water.

The coach parked up and to get up to street level we had to walk up a very steep hill for about 200yds



We reached the summit and looked over the edge of the baracade and were amazed at the view of the ships below



The time was around 12:30 so we looked for somewhere for lunch. We found another restaurant with a balcony view. We ordered beers and wine then I had Moussaka and Gillie had a salad. I can't quite remember what Keith had, I think it was Samosas.



As I remember lunch was also ultra expensive and again Keith picked up the bill!!!

We'd heard that the worst time to get the cable car down was between midday and 2:00pm. It was about 1:30pm now so perhaps not the best time to queue up.

But we needed to actually find the cable car station and there was always the dark prospect of the queue being so long that you would not make it back to the ship on time. But we had been told that providing we were in the queue by the 'everyone-onboard' deadline of 5:30pm, the ship wouldn't leave without us..

So we walked along the top narrow streets brushing by people coming the other way for about 300yds – and came across the queue!

I don't remember why but we joined the queue there and then by default



It must have been about 400yds long, but it was moving very slowly.



It was chaos. With the street barely 6 feet wide there were people trying to get ahead of us probably to get to a restaurant or shop further on. There were people coming back from the opposite direction. It was noisy with a plethora of languages being spoken. We were in full sunlight and there was little shade.



There were some Italian speaking tourists and German speaking tourists trying to push in front of us. Keith was getting very frustrated and his comments were being overheard and contested. There was a woman from our ship trying to push in front of Gillie and me so I grabbed Gillie's hand to make a cordon so she could not get through.

It must have been over 75 minutes before we reached the ticket office and there was now a police woman and a nurse present; I suppose as a precaution in case of any unrest or medical need.



We gave up our vouchers and received back real tickets and then joined the queue again, but this time we were inside the cable car station. It was still very hot so I opened a couple of windows while I was standing.

Finally we were next to get onto the cable car.

It arrived and its doors opened. I was determined that the three of us would get in the same car and we did.



Our train of 6 cars smoothly left the station and the fantastic view opened up below us.



I couldn't get any footage due to the other people in the car but it was all over in about 2 minutes. Maybe Keith got footage?

We 'landed' at the lower station, and got out to experience further chaos on the jetty as people were looking for the right boat to get them back to their own ship and others queuing to get the cable car up to Thira.

Our Captain Richard Watkins was helping to supervise the transfers for the Explorer and we were assisted onto another large tender boat.



The boat left the dock and after a few minutes our view widened to show the white buildings of Thira on the top of the cliff. The light was now very different to the light early this morning and everything was illuminated in the afternoon sun.

We could see the cable cars going up and down on their overhead cables and also a good view of the infamous steps. But I could not make out any donkeys. I could imagine that any donkeys working the steps today might be the last to have to suffer the indignity of having people riding them up the steps due to public opinion. But of course the donkeys would have been the main income for their owners.



Back onboard Explorer we took a cold drink back to have on our balcony. I was looking at the view with my binoculars. I discovered that there were far more blue-domed churches that I thought there were.



As we sailed out of the caldera at 6:00pm I searched Oia with my binoculars as we passed, and eventually found the blue domed churches I had filmed earlier in the day, and also saw the balcony from where I filmed them.



Santorini had been a great experience – most of it good and I was very pleased we had visited. But if multiple cruise ships are going to continue to call then possibly another cable car or even 2 needs to be constructed.

What a day! But our day wasn't over yet!

Gillie and I had booked the Umi Sushi restaurant for our evening meal. Keith had declined to join us as the food wasn't to his taste, but we would meet him afterwards for a show in the Broadway Showlounge.

After the usual drinks in the Lounge listening to Sophie Gillie and I made our way down to deck 6 and found the sushi bar.

We took a table to the side and the young waitress came over to help us choose. In the end we went for Seaweed Soup and then the Chef's Selection which consisted of Sashimi, Nigiri and DimSum. There was a lot of raw fish but we found every mouthful delicious. It tasted so fresh.



To end the day we met Keith in the front seats of our 'balcony box' with our drinks to watch Brian Connolly Jr. He was brilliant! Brian was the son of the late Brian Connolly who front the band The Sweet. He sang several of the songs recorded by the Sweet and a few other songs from the 1970's. The Collective backed him reading their musical parts on their iPads.

The Collective had just one hour of rehearsal time with Brian and in his words 'they absolutely smashed it!'. Brilliant musos!



I would have liked to have spoken to Brian about BC Sweet. This was his Dad's band after Sweet broke up. I wondered whether Brian (who was very young at the time) knew drummer Jeff Davies or as he called himself, Jeff King. Jeff died in 2004 from cancer but he was my drummer in Final Decision during the early 1970's.

Tuesday June 26 – Kusadasi, Turkiye

I completely missed the sail-in to ?Kusadasi. After a very long and exciting day in Santorini yesterday, I slept well and woke at 7:45.

We hadn't quite docked and the pilot had finished his work and got back onto the pilot boat. While drinking our usual first cup of coffee on the balcony I took some footage



Kusadasi seemed like a large seaside town and much bigger than I had expected, and more modern too. We'd never experienced any middle eastern culture before and so this day would be quite unique. But I think also it wouldn't be too active for us due to yesterday's excursion!



After breakfast we met Keith and left the ship.



There was a large shopping centre inside the cruise terminal and it seemed endless walking through it. Maybe that was testament to Türkiye's reputation of selling merchandise. It was mostly 'tat' as you might expect, but there were a few more interesting things to look at.



We finally walked out of the cruise terminal into the road where there were more shops. I had suggested that we look round the Turkish markets today but I expected them to be stalls sitting in dark mysterious passages.

These were stores of the kind you find in town at home, except there were so many of them.

First though – coffee. We sat down at what looked like a pop-up café. Upon asking for decaffeinated coffee the waiter did not understand. Decaffenata? Descaffinado? Sin Caffeine? Ah yes!

“No! No sin caffeine coffee!” So Gillie had water instead while Keith and I had cappuccinos.



The town's toilets were inside a fortress and it cost €1.00 to go in payable to the lady sitting at a desk outside.. We had a quick look around the fort but I wasn't sure it was authentic



We set off having a recce but only window shopping. There were some absolutely lovely looking weaved rugs in a Wedgewood blue colour. There were women in the shop doorways actually weaving these rugs on huge frames. All the silk and wool on bobbins was very colourful. If you bought one of these rugs it might cost you over a thousand pounds,



We walked on looking around the shops looking up at the towers of a Turkish mosque. I could make out the speakers on the side of one of the towers which in the very early hours of the morning would blare out a loud cacophony calling the Turks to prayer.



We then turned down a shady street with plants hanging from the open ceiling. The proprietors of the shops sitting outside peddling their wares.



It was time for a bite to eat so we chose a restaurant along one of the mall streets and ordered cooling beers and wine.

We looked at the menu and Gillie and I ordered Nachos.



We whiled away an hour or so before making our way back to the ship at 3:15. The MSC Musica was docked beside us and she was much bigger than Explorer.

The Musica was very noisy with loud disco music being played on deck, even when we were eating our breakfast. Perhaps that was why she was named 'Musica?'



Both Heraklion and Kusadasi days were very similar In some ways, but the two countries felt totally different. It was good to be able to say we'd been to both.

Sail out was at 5:00 and there were some strange looking buildings that we could see. As Kusadasi was so obviously a holiday destination, I wondered if the buildings could be posh hotels.



As we sailed we grabbed some more sandwiches for tomorrow's sojourn to Athens. It would be a very early start again.



We met up at 7:30 in the evening in the Lounge for a gin and tonic then went to Vista for dinner.

Muzik Unlimited were playing in the Squid and Anchor pub so we managed to get some seats to watch them for a while. But we headed off to bed before 11:00.

Back in the cabin we had been given another towel animal and our usual chocolates left on our pillows. We were spoiled on this cruise like every other we'd been on!

My final activity after getting into bed was always to turn on the TV and switch to the channel showing the positions of all the Marella ships – Explorer, Explorer 2, Discovery, Discovery 2 and the newest to the fleet – Voyager.

Once I'd established whereabouts in the world they all were and where we were too, I flicked through the other channels and found the Frank Sinatra film 'Von Ryan's Express' which I last saw 20 years or more ago.

It was lights out and TV off when it finished!

Wednesday June 27 – Piraeus (Athens)

Another early morning, but probably today might be the most memorable one and also the most physically demanding of this cruise.

We were going to The Acropolis in Athens!

I pulled back the curtains to see the first moments of a most stunning sunrise.



I spent quite a while watching this glorious spectacle. It was certainly 'the sunrise' of the cruise and we had been lucky that we were on the correct side of the ship to see it. Gillie made some coffee while I continued to film. We sat on our balcony drinking it in silence and watching the sun appear above the distant mountains.



We entered into Piraeus harbour in the hazy golden light. In the jumble of Box-like apartments, windows reflecting the early morning sun glinted back at us.



Aida Blu followed Explorer into port and docked somewhere behind us.



You could hardly fail to notice dozens of tankers and container ships waiting their turn to come into port to be loaded. Piraeus was a very busy port indeed.



We ate our sandwiches for breakfast and got ready to leave the ship. Keith would not be coming with us today. The weather was already hot and we knew there would be lots of queuing again as there were 4 ships in port. We also knew that there would be many steps up to the Acropolis as the site is so high up on a plateau overlooking Athens.

We'd agreed that we would abort if it became too difficult for us in the heat.

We left the ship and took our seats on the bus for the short trip to Athens a few miles away. Athens was absolutely choked with traffic as we knew it would be and every traffic light we encountered was red. The ride took 35 minutes.

Then we could see the Parthenon on the Acropolis in the distance.



There are more ancient monuments on the Acropolis besides the Parthenon such as the Temple of Athena, the Amphitheatre of Herodes Atticus, The Theatre of Dionysus and the Propylaea.

At first sight, the Acropolis plateau seemed monstrously high and we wondered how we were going to get to the top.

Our coach parked up in a car park and we all trooped out to join the queue. We were quite surprised and very much relieved by the fact that the queue was well shaded by olive trees. Instead of steps (although there were a few) most of the pathway was a slope. That made slowly negotiating the heights much easier.



At the foot of the stepped pathway was an old guy playing a guitar under a shady tree – Led Zeppelin’s ‘Stairway to Heaven’! Very apt!!!

After about 25 minutes we reached the ticket office and we had to scan the tickets that our guide had given to us.



Then we joined another queue which this time was faster moving but still up a slope with many steps.

I was surprised to see toilets at this level, but I suppose as this is one of the world's most visited ancient attractions in the world, the fact that millions of people would have queued for long periods, so the authorities providing toilets was a fundamental requirement.

We were now seeing some of the ruins and walking further, we encountered a large flights of steps. There were hundreds of people moving up or down on the steps and we kept an eye on our guide who was holding a Marella flag so that we could keep our group together.



Once at the top of the steps - the Parthenon in all of its glory!



It was big but I thought maybe it would be bigger. It looked more crumbled than I imagined too, but it was not a complete disappointment, far from it – we were standing on the Acropolis hill overlooking Athens!

Our guide explained to us that there were very few straight lines in the architecture and the cleverness was that it had been designed as an optical illusion to make it look longer and higher. Maybe that was why I thought that it was physically smaller when I first saw it from the steps.

There was scaffolding around a lot of it as seemingly it's restoration was on-going and had been under renovation for many years. Apparently you could pass through the columns and walk around the temple floor but unfortunately not today.

An overbearing image in my mind was of the ancient Greeks walking around the temple and sitting in the amphitheatre (perhaps all wearing togas – but probably not!)



We walked around the site but due to time constraints and the sheer heat we didn't see very many of the other ruins and monuments.





I had always wanted to see the Parthenon and when we went to Zakynthos For a holiday in 2009, I wondered if we might hop over to Athens to see it.

But it never happened.

The views over the city of Athens were jaw-dropping. They seemed to extend right up to the mountains about 15 miles away



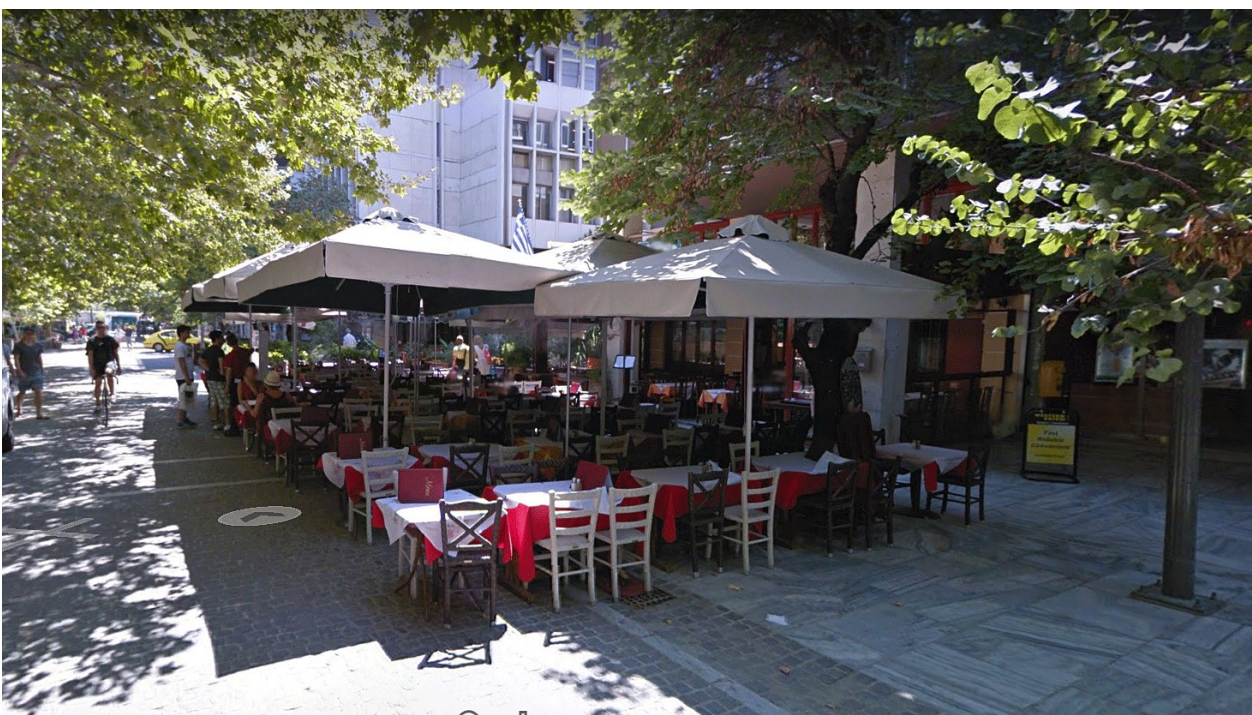
Athens was a very heavily populated area. There was so much of it that you could see from the Acropolis



Our time was up at the Acropolis so we walked down the hill and this time continued down a long straight road in the fierce heat.. We passed a band of Greek musicians playing folk tunes under a shady tree. I dropped a €5.00 note into their collection box,



We continued walking for what must have been nearly half a mile along the road which had olive trees on either side beneath the Acropolis. Eventually the town of Placca came into view and I spied a restaurant with tables under shady parasols. We made straight for that and sat down





We had been given 40 minutes before we had to return to the coach and after our cold beers we had to walk to the end of the street to the main road where our coach was waiting. We pulled away into the heavy traffic but I managed to get a final glimpse of the Parthenon



The coach took us on a trip around Athens which was unbelievably slow. We were shown the very first Olympic stadium where all the Olympic torches' pre-Olympic Games world tours start from but we only caught a fleeting glance of it.



We also passed another church with its blue domes.

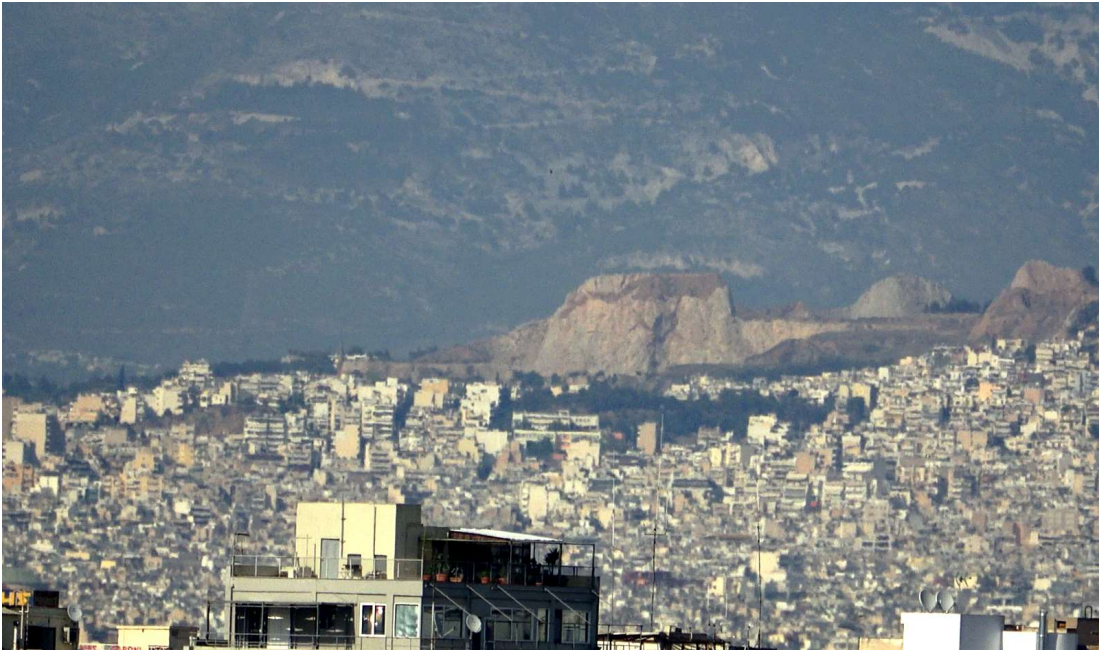


Once back on the ship at around 1:30 we looked for Keith but again he was probably somewhere in the mass of sunbeds. We returned to our cabin taking some lunch from the Snack Shack with us.

At 5:00 the Explorer pulled out of Piraeus.



As we left port I fancied that I could make out the Acropolis far in the background, but couldn't be certain. I took some footage and zoomed in maximum magnification. I would have to look more carefully at home on my big screens.



Once out at sea we both pondered the fact that we only had one more day on this fantastic ship and we would need to start packing for home soon.

We met Keith in the Mediterranean bar at 7:30. I'd booked a table for Tapas in the at 8:00.

Tonight I chose the steak skewer.



After dinner we headed off to the Broadway Showlounge to watch 'Zuma' a Latin American dance show performed by the Showteam and backed by The Collective.



Thursday June 29 – Argostoli, Kefalonia

Our last day on Explorer so we'll be flying back home from Corfu tomorrow.

As we woke and walked onto our balcony we were just passing to the west of Zakynthos. I scanned the coast on this very hazy morning to see if I could make out Shipwreck Beach which we visited back in 2009. I wasn't sure I could see it but I took footage at maximum zoom anyway in case we were within visual range. I'd check when we got home.



We weren't scheduled to dock at Argostoli in Kefalonia until 11:00 so we had a long leisurely breakfast and another look around the Broadway shops after.

Around 10:30 we were closing in on Argostoli and travelling up the channel dividing the two parts of the island. We started packing away our stuff for our homeward trip.

This port of call was going to be much quieter and smaller than all of the other ports we'd visited. This afternoon we would be taken by coach to Makris Yialos Beach for maybe a swim and certainly for a rest as our two weeks around the Adriatic, Ionian and Aegean seas had been very busy.

As we entered into the port we passed the little round lighthouse that I'd seen when doing my research. The original Saint Theodoroi lighthouse was destroyed in 1953 when a devastating earthquake hit the other islands and the mainland. It was rebuilt in 1962 and is now a fully automated and current lighthouse warning local shipping of dangerous rocky obstacles in the sea.



We met up with Keith who was also coming, in the Broadway Showlounge at 11:50 ready to transfer onto the coach taking us to the beach.

Upon our arrival we had to walk down a steep hill to get onto the sands. It looked a lovely beach, but it seemed very crowded. We walked up and down several times looking for a double sun bed and parasol configuration and an extra sun bed as we knew Keith loves to lay out in the sun.



It took a good 15 minutes before we found one – and then Keith had disappeared!

Gillie started to sort out our things and get organised and she asked one of the beach attendants for another sun bed to be placed next to us. While all this was happening I went off to look for Keith.

I must have walked up and down the beach 5 times and also looked in the bar twice before I heard a shout from the bar. “Kev”!!!

I turned and saw Keith sitting at a table with his glass of wine. How on earth did I miss him?



All was well and I explained we had a sun bed for him, so we walked back to Gillie and settled in for the rest of the afternoon.

It was very hot, Gillie had a swim and I went for a paddle with her afterwards. We made sure that our bodies were well covered from the sun.

We stayed on our sun beds for the rest of the time we were allowed.



At 3:45 we thought we should pack up and make our way back to the coach rendezvous point as we didn't want to be late. We walked back up the very steep hill to the top road and congregated with others in our group to wait for our bus.

10 minutes passed, 15 minutes... no coach. People were starting to complain. If you were told to be back at the rendezvous for the coach, then you would expect it to be there or if it wasn't you might have to wait a couple of minutes.

18 minutes and still no coach!

We surmised that the coach driver had gone off to attend to another pickup which we all thought was disgraceful and disrespectful.

After several coaches passing us by coach number 3 turned up. Quizzing our guide as to why he was so late she pretended she did not understand. I showed her my watch and said assertively "late – why?" she responded "Traffic" - Yuh – that was certainly an excuse!!! Tempers started to get frayed!

Back on the ship I left feedback on the Navigator app to show my displeasure.

It was an interesting sail out as Explorer had to back away from the dock and turn 270 degrees to face the open sea. There was a tug in attendance in case we for some reason got stuck. But we certainly didn't need any help.



More packing and then a shower. Our cases had to be outside our cabin door by 2:00am so that they could be taken off the ship and placed in holding area for us to collect and hand to the bus driver to store in the hold of the coach.

Tonight as it was our last night we had booked Surf and Turf again. This time Keith joined us.



It certainly did not disappoint. I had the Butcher's Choice which comprised of a fillet steak, a short beef rib and a lamb lollipop. It had lots of trimmings including a peppercorn sauce and gluten-free onion rings.

No show tonight so we went back to our cabin to finish packing for our early egress tomorrow. We had to vacate by 8:00am.

Okay, lights out, but a quick poignant look out on the balcony into the dark before settling down for our last night's sleep.

Friday June 30 – Kerkyra, Corfu

Happy Birthday Dad!

Those were my thoughts as I watched the sun creep slowly above the mountains over in Albania. My Dad would have been 100 years old today if he had still been alive.

I wonder what he would have thought of me being on a cruise ship about to dock in Corfu! For me it was a very poignant moment.



Back to reality though, we had the last of the hand luggage to pack this morning and vacate our cabin by 8:00am. Our large cases of course had been removed from outside our door in the early hours and we would find them again on the quay. Then we would take them to our coach and let the coach driver stow them in the coach's hold.

But we had not yet docked in Kerkyra and I was watching and filming from our balcony with my coffee.

It was a most beautiful morning, slightly misty with a cloudless sky. The sun was now up and although there was a faint hum coming from the cabin's air conditioning which you could hardly hear, the prominent sounds were the waves sloshing along the side of Explorer as we slowly approached the port.

Although it was the final few hours of our holiday, going into port one last time still had many interesting things to see. Mount Pantokratoras standing like a pointed sentinel to our north and looking sublime in the early morning light...



...and the Russian made hydrofoil ferry whisked by us again on its way to Albania....



...in front of us, the MSC Musica had already berthed and the tall mast sailing cruise ship Windstar once more, was in front of us moving into dock.



We passed a very small and curious rock in the bay, and it reminded me Dorset's Durdle Door with it's hole although much much smaller. But it looked natural as there was grass growing on it. I considered that this tiny island might be very dangerous to shipping. I'm sure though that it would be prominently depicted on the charts and the cruise ship pilots would know all about the hazard.



Our ship started to turn and revealed a grand view of the old fortress which we climbed back in 2017.



Bang on 8:00 we took one last look around the cabin, said our silent goodbyes and closed the cabin door for the last time. We headed up to the Market Place for one breakfast taking our orange hand luggage cases with us. Afterwards we had coffee in the Coffee Port where we met up with Keith and then it was time to disembark.

We located and picked up our cases from the dock, handed them to the coach driver to stow and then we left the huge hulk of Explorer which had been our home for the last 15 days.

We passed some new excited inmates already arriving and dragging their cases to the ship for their imminent embarkation and we remembered how we had felt when it had been our turn two weeks ago.

It took about 20 minutes to get to Corfu airport on the coach and as we pulled up we could see a queue waiting to get into the terminal. But it wasn't too bad and I thanked our lucky stars that it was not the length of queues we'd recently read about.

Getting off the bus, we grabbed our cases and duly took our place in an orderly fashion resigned to the fact that it would take some time. At least we were in the shade and protected from the mid morning's hot burning sun.

It took about 15 minutes before we entered the terminal only to find a long snake-like queue of forlorn-looking people waiting to check in for their flight home.



But at least we were in the queue and it was moving.

After about 40 minutes we were checked in and we put our big cases on the conveyer to be sent to our aircraft. We walked through to security and were checked.

All of a sudden panic!!!

In the confusion of having bags checked and x-rayed, belts having to be removed and electrical items having to be put into separate trays, then walking through the security arch, Keith suddenly exclaimed that his iPad had gone missing.

We both checked back on the x-ray machine leaving Gillie to remove our belongings from the tray so that we wouldn't clog the system. I informed the security officer who didn't seem to know what to do and started to panic myself.

All of a sudden Gillie found the iPad. Both Gillie's and Keith's have redish covers and Keith's iPad had just got mixed up with a tray containing our things.

Panic over. Phew!

We were now through to airside where there were restaurants and shops and we chose some seats on which to 'camp' while we were waiting for our flight. We had about an hour and a quarter to wait although of course the plane takes on passengers up to a half hour before take off.

I was closely monitoring our aircraft on its incoming flight from Gatwick using the Flight Radar 24 app. I could see it was just a few minutes away before it landed so I moved to a window with my camera to take footage of the landing. It was about 7 minutes later than its scheduled landing time – and here it was!



Once our flight was boarding at the gate we queued up again. We'd paid a little bit extra to chose where we would be sitting so we knew our seats, but there was always the doubt that our hand luggage could not be stored close to our seats in the overhead lockers.

We walked out onto the apron and boarded a bus that took us all of 50 yards to the steps of the plane.



We took our seats and strapped on our seatbelts ready for take off. We were delayed by about 30 minutes as the plane had lost its take off time slot, but soon we pushed back and trundled down to the end of the runway.

As we turned I could see a group of hotels. This was probably where the airport webcam was which I had monitored on the internet for the previous 6 Friday mornings before our cruise when I had watched our Titan Airways A320 land.



The Airbus' engines ramped up and we were thrust back in our seats as we rolled down the runway and into the air.



Great views of the old fortress again as we banked to the left.



As I filmed, we flew straight over Explorer and the other ships in port, but these were hidden from my view by the aircraft's engine. I would have loved to have got a last shot of Explorer.

On the way back I was able to keep tabs on our position using my iPhone. I hoped very much that I was not being charged for the honour! I'd find out in a few weeks I suppose.

As we made our way up the Adriatic at 35,000 feet I could see lots of the Dalmation islands down below. At one point we flew close to Hvar where we had anchored just off the port and we could see the minor island next to Hvar which we had taken a boat trip around.



We landed back at Gatwick at 2:40 where the sky was grey and rain was certain. I was already missing the blue skies of where we had travelled. We passed through passport control where Keith's passport wouldn't let him through the gate. He was helped by one of the officers and was finally through. Travelling through airports is always very stressful and things often seem to go wrong.



At least there was no problem picking up the car. I was handed back my keys and we thanked the Maple Manor parking attendant. I unlocked the car and went to open the boot.

But the boot would not open!

I tried repeatedly by no deal. I had a similar situation a few months back and I presume the problem had been caused by leaving and not using the car for two weeks.

Somehow we managed to get all the cases and Keith loaded into the back of the car through the side doors.

And so we made our way back home getting held up for a time on the M25

We dropped Keith off at his new abode in Reading and arrived back at Thatcham around 5:00.

The cruise had been a real success and was one of the best ones we had yet been on. Yes there had been a few cutbacks, even more cutbacks than we had experienced on Discovery 2 in the Caribbean, but a cruise is only as good as you want make it.

We'd seen some wonderful sights in ports, had wonderful weather, had some wonderful food and drink and seen some inspiring musicians. We'd been comfortable and also had a fair amount of exercise improving Gillie's back. We'd also had plenty of down-time to relax and rest..

We'd had a wonderful time.

I really hope that Keith had enjoyed the cruise as well.

We opened our front door picking up all the mail on the floor. We noted how the grass had grown and that our fig tree had gone into overdrive.

After the suitcases were in I opened the first envelope only to find a bloody parking fine from Tesco's!!!!