



Thomson Spirit

Our Adriatic Cruise 2017



...with Gillie, Kev, Keith, Gill and Martin

Dubrovnik, Croatia
Valletta, Malta
Messina, Sicily
Taranto, Italy
Igoumenitsa, Greece
Kotor, Montenegro
Trieste, Italy
Venice, Italy,
Rijeka, Croatia
Hvar, Croatia
Bar Montenegro

Day 1 – 14 Sep 2017 – Pre-positioning and flying out to Dubrovnik

Well after waiting 15 months since booking our cruise the day finally came for Gillie and I to set off in the car for Gatwick airport. We had been well organised and had a good uneventful journey down to the Courtyard Marriott hotel near the South Terminal.

Stopping at the entrance I wasn't pleased to see a sign saying overnight parking would be £25! Apparently, as the receptionist told us, this was clearly displayed on the website, although when I looked after we'd checked in, the notice was hidden quite deeply down within the webpage levels.



The Courtyard Marriott - £25 overnight parking charge!

Hmm!

Anyway, the receptionist kindly made enquiries and reduced the fee to £12.50! Not quite so bad! After a fish and chip dinner and forward a few hours to 1:45 am, it was time to get up from the few hours restless sleep we'd had and get to the North Terminal to meet up with Martin, Gill and Keith, our lifelong friends.

Martin and Keith are my fellow musicians in our Rock and Soul band ' Uptown Traffic' (<http://www.uptown-traffic.com> if you are interested) and Keith's musical career goes back to the late 1960s and the time he shared the stage playing drums with Jimi Hendrix! (but that's another story I will write about one day!!!)

All seemed to be going according to plan and we were thankfully allocated the cabins on the ship we'd booked and paid for (unlike last time) as we checked in with the TUI check-in girls Although my phone app told me that our aircraft would not be a Dreamliner, it turned out that it actually was much to my delight.



G-TUIC waiting at the gate for us in the dark

We boarded and we were getting settled until a problem arose with the aircraft. Apparently some of air-brake spoilers on the wings were not working.

Ulp! Did this mean we would have to change aircraft when one became available?



Ambulance in attendance

We sat on the hot plane with no air conditioning for over an hour while engineers had a ferkle around under the wing to try to repair the fault. We finally got the okay from the Captain that all was now fixed but unfortunately we still could not take off yet as medics had come aboard to attend to a passenger who had become unwell with angina and needed to be taken to hospital in an ambulance.

It just had to happen didn't it!!

We felt for him and his family as he had probably spent a lot of money on this cruise and like us was looking forward to it. Of course his bags and those of his family would need to be removed from the hold before we could start our journey.

So far we were 70 minutes delayed. At one point some passengers were a little disturbed to see a fire engine complete with blue flashing lights park next to our aircraft, and whispers of "what's going on" could be heard.



Now a fire engine in attendance as the air brakes were tested on the wings

But after a while the fire engine and its crew moved off and was nothing to do with our problem.

After another delay to wait for a take-off slot, our TUI Dreamliner G-TUIC pushed back and lifted off the runway at 08.05 for its 2 hour flight to Dubrovnik in Croatia.



Push-back at last – we're finally on our way



Our Dreamliner takes off from Gatwick

The morning sunshine rekindled spirits as we climbed out of Gatwick and out above Brighton and the English Channel on a bright September morning.

The two-hour flight was uneventful but offered good views of the mountains of The Alps poking their pinnacles above a fascinating moonscape of white cloud.



Over France

The cloud dissipated revealing the mountainous crags of Croatia below and very soon as we swooped down in the clean airspace, to the sight of the Franje-Tutman suspension bridge standing guard above The Thomson Spirit herself!



The Thomson Spirit waiting for us at Port Gruz in Dubrovnik



The huge AIDAblu cruiser moored in behind dwarfing The Spirit in front

It was a very exciting sight and we were very lucky that we flew over the Spirit as we lined up to land at Cilipi's runway.



A good landing - and those repaired spoilers thankfully worked!

Welcomed to Dubrovnik!

After passport and immigration checks, our transfer was prompt and we were advised to sit on the left side of the coach. We were not disappointed by the stunning views over the sea and bordering coastline.

Very beautiful and unexpected.



Our first look at the Adriatic from the ground

Registration at the port was equally impressively fast and efficient and we were soon walking up the gangplank of the ship. We had registered our debit cards as the ship works with a cashless principle so that all you need is your boarding card and any purchases you make with it are linked back and charged to your bank card.

So we had finally made it to the ship.



The Thomson Spirit from the main road



On the Promenade deck

Weather was hot and sunny and as we had eaten breakfast back at Gatwick at 4.00am, salads and a cold beer for lunch were very welcoming. After lunch we found our cases had arrived outside our cabin. We didn't need to wait for them on the carousel back at Cilipi airport as they were being directly delivered. We spent the next hour organising ourselves before finally laying on the bed to doze for an hour after what had already been a long day.

Unpacking and organizing our cabin 202 was done quickly and there was lots of drawers and wardrobes. Cases went under the bed. I was very glad to have brought along my 4-gang plug board for our iPhone and iPad chargers as there was only one European type power socket that could be used. Using a European to British adapter it wasn't easy to plug into the socket as it was so very close to the surface of the dressing table and the cable from the plug board was squashed. But with a little determination I managed to get it all snugly plugged in.

It was late afternoon when I appeared on deck to take in the magnificent panorama of Dubrovnik's Port Gruz. Taking lots of shots and footage of the Franje-Tudman bridge and the other massive cruise ships and the port itself. I finally started to relax.



The Fanje-Tudman suspension bridge

Lifeboat muster was at 18:30 and saw each and every one of us sporting chunky bright orange polystyrene life belts and feeling a little foolish and self-conscious - still, it was a very necessary exercise in case of an emergency. Hopefully it was enough to drill the knowledge of where and how we would best survive an abandonment of the ship - and hopefully never to be required!

Back at our room a letter had been delivered under the door inviting us to join the Captain at his table for dinner the following evening. Much as we were surprised and very honoured, we'd already booked for Siroccos a la carte restaurant for our celebratory meal to mark our 40th wedding anniversary.

We met up with the others in the Raffles bar for a pre-dinner cocktail after dumping our life belts back into our wardrobe. Then down to the Compass Rose restaurant for dinner to find a huge queue and a forty minute wait for a table! Oh dear! Hopefully other nights would not be so frustrating!

But food was very good with 4 courses offered, typically we chose pate and toast and either Beef Stroganoff or thick pork chops for mains.

A sail-away party had been promised but never happened, probably either due lack of interest or sheer tiredness of the day. Maybe better next week!!!



Leaving Dubrovnik at 23:00hrs

Oh well, a busy day and a day at sea tomorrow but we are now nocturnally on our way to Malta!

Day 2 – 15 Sep 2017 – Day at Sea

After the sail out from Dubrovnik last night at 11:00 (which was an hour later than usual for some reason) we were exceptionally tired after the long day we'd just had.

Admiring all the lights as we left the harbour and then retiring to our forward facing cabin near the bow of the ship on the Promenade deck, we felt the full force of the ship's persistent judder as the engines ramped up. We had detected a slight vibration whilst stationary in Dubrovnik's Port Gruz and thought it was not quite as bad as the noticeable judder on our cruise on The Spirit's sister ship, the Thomson Celebration.

B-b-but m-m-my g-g-goodness!!!

We had spent a wonderful fortnight on The Celebration in the Caribbean in 2015 and got used to her judder after a while. But here on the Spirit, it was quite bone-shaking when laying on the bed. Regardless of its annoyance though we dropped off quickly and slept through until 9:30.

The judder itself is probably caused by unbalanced rotation of mechanical elements like the engines or generators or the ship's propellers. There was a definitive resonance in the vibration which reached a climax then gradually slowed and stopped before recursively climaxing again. This to me indicated several ageing problems and maybe one of the reasons that The Spirit would soon be retiring from the TUI fleet.

But this morning in clear blue skies off the coast of southern Italy and on the way to Malta, the judder became something much less noticeable to us.



The Thomson Spirit at sea on her way to Malta

Getting up 'late' and having a late breakfast in the al fresco Lido restaurant at the stern of the ship, this morning, meant that I had missed the presentation by Destination Services about all of the TUI excursions happening this week.

Gill did make it along and came back with a few suggestions about what we might do in some of the ports we would visit this week.

Luckily I had done some research too beforehand and had put this up on my holiday website, so I had some ideas as well.

Gillie and I found Keith Martin and Gill on sun-beds along the promenade deck, so a 'conflab' exchanged our ideas.

Igoumenitsa in Greece would be one of our ports of call but I knew it was nothing but a ferry terminal and a town without soul and character. So some excursion would definitely be required.

Gill had picked out a fantastic trip to the Meteo Monastries set on Pinnacle's of rock inland of Igoumenitsa and one of these featured in the James Bond film 'You Only Live Twice'.

In the film, access to the monastery nearly a thousand feet up was exclusively via a wicker basket on a winch. The trip would have certainly been one I would have loved to do, but 'featured' a two and a half hour coach trip each way and would cost £66.00 each.

So once this was understood and considered it was soon dismissed as a waste of much of the day despite the allure of the fascination of the trip.

Something much more benign was required. So we contemplated a trip to Parga, a beauty spot and beach just up the coast from Igoumenitsa. At £29 each for a do-it-yourself type of day, Martin and Keith could stretch out on the beach for the sun they craved, while the two Gills and myself explored the town's ambience.



The promise of Parga!

With that positive decision happily made by everyone, next Tuesday's excursion was duly booked.

Now we had a good look around the ship, finding the layout very similar to the Thomson Celebration, so really, we already knew our way around.



Dough Art in the Lido



Horizons Bar at the top of the ship



The Compass Rose Restaurant



The pool outside the Lido

I had the Wine Tasting session booked this afternoon at 3 pm and was looking forward to it.

When I got there I sat next to a guy who through conversation eventually revealed he was the son-in-law of the poor man who had been taken off of the plane yesterday due to sudden illness.

Apparently after his visit to hospital he was discharged and he and his wife were on a later flight and joined them he ship late yesterday evening. Perhaps this was why our ship never left port an hour later than usual.

This good news was slightly dulled by the fact that the man's wife herself became ill once she came on board and as the ship sailed from Dubrovnik, she was on a drip in the ship's hospital!

After a lazy rest of the day, we got ready for our special meal at Siroccos a-la-carte restaurant. We'd booked the last table.



Soaking up the Adriatic sun

It was Captain's night so there was a certain 'regimented-ness' about our fellow cruisers who were dressed in their best frocks, tuxes and bow ties. Horizons bar at the top of the ship was less crowded than Raffles, so we went to Horizons and saw a fantastic sunset behind Sicily as we passed by the island bearing the silhouette of Mount Etna



Sicily at sunset

We felt quite cool in our smart casuals as we walked thru the Compass Rose restaurant to get to Siroccos.

Each of us paid a £20 supplement for anything up to a 6 course. The food was extremely good with surf and turf, lobster and crepe Suzette on the menu.

The evening was finished off watching the new show team do their Moulin Rouge show and then we went and danced to BandJob in The High Spirits nightclub. Bandjob was a collection of many of the musos (including staff!) currently on board.

1:30am to bed.... oh goodness, we need to be up at 6 to watch us sail into Valletta!!!!

Day 3 – 16 Sep 2017 – Valletta, Malta



Early morning Malta

Up and out on deck at 6:45 this morning to watch a thin ochre strip of land slowly materialise into the beautiful sandstone city of Valletta bathed in gold morning sunshine.

It was already hot with a cloudless blue backdrop of sea and sky. But there was a certain unexpected humidity in the air which imposed a clammy feel to body and clothes.

We edged closer to land and began to focus upon the details of Malta's capital city with its inspiring spires, its tall towers and its romantic domes.



The unmistakable Valletta skyline



Sail in past the old fort

The harbour drew us in and the pilot boat acted as our guide through the narrow sea entrance to Valletta.



Pinton Wharf

Once inside, our ship made a 180 degree turn to face the harbour entrance and the rope teams working on the bow deck threw the guide ropes for the Maltese dock men to catch and secure. To our amusement one nearly hit one of the Maltese minions below on the head because he wasn't paying attention!



The Spirit turned on a sixpence!

Winches then pulled the ship sideways to snuggle up to dock at Pinton Wharf.

Welcome to Valletta - a most beautiful ochre vista full of history and intrigue.

Back to our cabin and we quickly showered and then wandered aft for smoked salmon and scrambled eggs in the Lido.

We went ashore just before 10.00am and the heat was already 32 degrees!

We were immediately approached by the open top bus tour teams anxiously canvassing their bus tours around the island which actually included a free harbour boat trip.

We took a leaflet and walked on while giving it some consideration. A two hour hop-on-hop-off trip around Valletta and the southern part of the island for ten euros each. Well it's seemed like a good idea and good value so when we came to the bus stop, we 'hopped on' and found some seats on the top deck.

The bus set off in the hot morning sun and headed over to the south of the city. It didn't take very long to realise what a rickety old double-decker it was! We were also being roasted in the heat, the seats were uncomfortable and the roads were very bumpy which jolted every bone in our bodies.



The hop-on-get-shaken-hop-off bus!

To add insult to injury, my issued ear-buds wouldn't work so I could not hear the recorded tour guide when I plugged them in.

The tour first took us to the other side of Valletta to look around the Marina



Views of the Marina



Senglea marina where all of the expensive yachts moor up

But we were heading in the wrong direction (south) as it would have been better to go around the main streets of old town Valletta first rather than after a bumpy 2 hour ride. But we were now regretfully locked into and committed to the tour.

We stopped off at a little fishing village on the south if the island called Marsaxlokk. Very pretty with lots of rainbow coloured boats and lots of market stalls.



Marsaxlokk Cathedral

I bought a new baseball cap as I had forgotten to bring mine and very glad I did buy a new one as the temperature was now at a blistering 38 degrees! We found shelter in a shady bar tent and ordered cooling beers and iced waters.



Relaxing in a harbourside bar

We stayed there for a while with the understanding that the next bus to hop on was in either 30 minutes time or another in an hour. We opted to stay for the hour and have another beer as we were comfortably relaxed watching the people go by and the coloured boats silently bobbing along the long quay.



Rainbow coloured boats



Marsaxlokk Harbour

I'd told our gang all I had heard about Valletta, especially the gun salute at 4pm from the gun battery every afternoon high up over the harbour's ramparts.

Everyone was intrigued and enthusiastic about getting back to Valletta to watch the spectacle. But we'd need to be in place by 3.30 for a good view.

Walking back to the bus stop after our hour's respite from the sun, the girls had stopped to look at trinkets and fridge magnets at some of the stalls. We guys had walked on just as the bus came around the corner!

I ran back to muster the girls and although they reacted with a smidgen of detectable haste, too late - the bus moved off!

So we waited for the next one that arrived within 20 minutes - but it was a bus from a different company, so not our bus!

Our next bus didn't arrive for another 20 minutes and we were really cheesed off waiting for it! We were wasting away our day waiting for busses and we had turned red in the sun despite copious amounts of Factor 30.

Eventually we alighted onto the dreadful double-decker and went back into the fierce heat for what would be another hour and a bit. My concern was that time was running out fast to do what we should have been doing - exploring the beautiful city of Valletta instead of shifting aimlessly through Maltese countryside.

To further our frustrations when we got back into Valletta at the first stop, we were ordered off and told to change buses! Once we had, there was another 20 minute wait before we moved off! Valletta hop-on-hop-off is not a recommendation I can give!

Eventually we reached our stop and got off looking at our watches. It was 3pm so our only option now was to head straight for the gun battery if we wanted to watch the firing of the canon. Going into the centre of Valletta was no longer possible as we had to be back on the Spirit by five o'clock.



Upper Barrakka Gardens in Valletta

It was about a ten minute walk uphill to the fort and cold drinks were called for at the end of it. But once we had arrived and looked over the gun battery's balcony, the view over the harbour was absolutely stupendous!!!



View from the Gun Battery overlooking Valletta Harbour

It was consolation for the faux-pas we had made earlier by boarding the hop-on bus which, if it had traveled round the loop in the opposite direction, would have been of some use to us as there were several good stopping points around the city to visit. Going all round the island seemed unnecessary.

Standing under the arches of the fort's cloisters, overlooking the gun battery, is one of the finest and amazing views I have ever experienced.

We watched as the gunner in uniform loaded up gun number six (he also loaded gun 5 too which was probably his backup plan!) and stood to attention by the gun as he watched the last few seconds tick away.



Maltese Fusilier

We guys steadied ourselves for the bang with all cameras rolling and the girls stuck fingers in ears!

There was a shout of "Fire"!

The gunner tugged the firing cord and for a split second,... nothing happened!!!!

Was it a mis-fire?

He quickly turned to face his gun again and did something with his hand on the top of the canon and.... BLAM!!!



The 4pm canon

The echo of the blast ricocheted from every corner of the harbour in amazing stereo and a long finger of yellow flame and white smoke rocketed from the front of the canon for more than fifty feet!!!

Wow!

Applause was instantaneous and it was suddenly all over.

After a few more photographs from our high aspect we descended in the newly constructed stainless steel lift down to street level some 350 feet below.



The Thomson Spirit docked at Pinton Wharf



The old hospital at Senglea across the harbour



The new elevator to the gun battery and museum

Back to the ship for a long cool shower and up on deck for the regal sail out from Valletta harbour and into the blue void beyond.



Time to get back to the ship

We were ready to steer a course for our next port of call.... Messina in Sicily.

The sail-out in the warm golden afternoon sunshine was superb! We passed the gun battery where we had been standing high up on the old fort earlier on.



Sailout past the bell tower



The gun battery



Glowing gold



Evening domes and spires

Goodbye Valletta, I would dearly love to visit you again.

Tomorrow was going to be a very important filming day for me and I was determined to do whatever it took to make it go to plan!

Nice curry in the Compass Rose restaurant with our now regular waiter 'Dino' and then on to watch the Show team sing Pop Classics in the Broadway Show lounge.

Retiring straight afterwards we found a towel-art dog laying on the bed wearing my sunglasses!!! Obviously a little present from our cabin maids Sasha and Khrysty!



The Dog

Day 4 – 17 Sep 2017 – Messina and Taormina, Sicily

Into Sicily 8am sharp on another bright and sunny morning.



Sail in to Messina

As we approached we saw several ferries docked ready to take passengers over to the Italian mainland and beyond.



Sicilian ferries

Straining our eyes, Keith and I could just make out one of the two 800ft power pylons carrying electricity from the mainland across the Messina Strait, the very tip of the boot of Italy being just a few miles across the divide.



800ft high power pylon

Nearing the port we were looking at the many different churches and places of worship, some with very impressive facades.



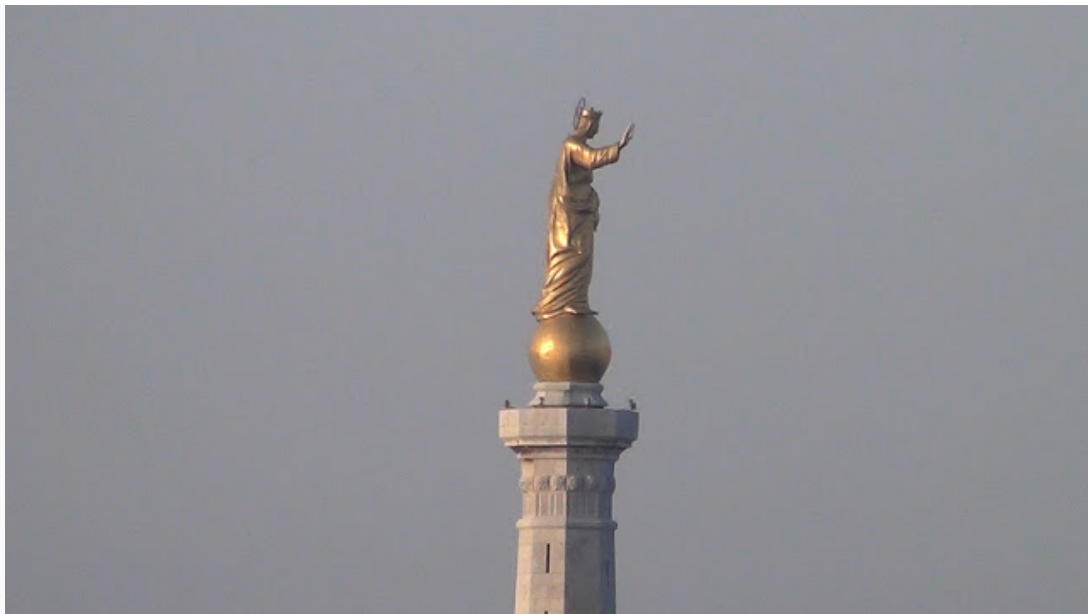
The church of Christ the King of Montalto – a prominent feature of Messina

We watched the docking procedure from our usual perch at the front of the Promenade deck, just outside our cabin window.

The wind which had been quite brisk on the harbour approach had died completely now and we sailed into the inner harbour past a tall pillar with a golden statue on the prominence of the inner harbour wall.



Madonnina del Porto Statue Port of Messina



Vos et Ipsam Civitatem Benedicimus

This morning we had booked an excursion to Taormina - a pretty town to the south, high up on a thousand foot cliff overlooking the sea and nestling in the shadow of the

mighty Mount Etna.

We boarded a smart coach and found our seats. Our young Sicilian tour guide welcomed us aboard and we were soon on our way.

The route took us south along the coastal Autostrada through a multitude of tunnels bored through the offending fingers of cliff that we're in the way.

More tunnels. Some of them very long, often restricted our views across the channel between Messina and the coastal towns of Italy opposite

But we were soon leaving the Autostrada and heading up to the mountains. Our guide gave more than enough historical references to his listeners who were starting to doze off because of the timbre of his voice!



Twisting roads up to Taormina

The coach twisted and turned riding the bridges and flyovers in a spaghetti-junction of roads up to the town. It parked up and we used the elevator from the coach park to ascend to the 7th floor which was actually the natural street level.

For a while we followed our guide but then abandoned him as everything was so slow. We asked him for our tickets to the Taormina amphitheatre which was all part and parcel of the excursion.

We walked thru the ancient walled gate through an arch and found the main square.



Arch gate of Taormina

We peered over the wall to gawp at the sudden drop to the sea below. What a view!



The view from the square

From here we also had a great view of Mount Etna - its conical top incessantly puffing a cloud of volcanic gases. It was only a few weeks ago when there was an eruption that had caught a BBC documentary film crew by surprise and showered them with red hot rocks. Some of them were hurt.



Mount Etna

Mount Etna was much more imposing when seeing it with your own eyes than seeing it on the webcam. It was gargantuan and filled your field of view completely, despite being nearly 30 miles away. At over 11,500 feet, it is the most biggest, highest and most powerful volcano in Europe!

We took many shots and lots of footage!

We walked up through the narrow streets of Taormina stopping to look in various shops and colourful stalls selling all sorts of wares. A lot of it souvenir tat but one or two interesting articles that caught the eye.



Narrow streets of Taormina

We also found the square which had the webcam overlooking it and we had people-watched many times using our computers back in England in the days before our cruise. We spotted the webcam high up on the church tower.



Clock tower in the piazza



Webcam on the clock tower



View from the webcam on the clock tower

Turning right and walking another 200 meters found the entrance to the amphitheatre. It too was huge! An authentic Greek theatre which was now used as a place of performance for plays, exhibitions and concerts, the proceeds of which fund the upkeep of this historical jewel.



View looking up at the amphitheatre

Climbing right up to the top back row I found the spot to take what would be one of the definitive photographs of this cruise holiday.



The amphitheatre and Mount Etna in the background

And WHAT a view with the outlay of the ruins below against the backdrop of a thousand feet fall and the complete vista of Mount Etna beyond!



Gillie and Kev- the cruise celebrates our 40th wedding anniversary

After we had spent quite a while gazing at the stunning view, our attention was called to look over the back wall to witness the reciprocal view. Although not as dramatic as the forward panorama, it too was stunning!



Looking north towards Messina from the back of the amphitheatre

The land dropped sharply away down to the Lido and beach below and the view was completed by 5 miles of luscious foliage and coastline to the north. There were cable cars going down to the beach – oh if only we had more time here!



Grotto Azzurra

To the west looking up another thousand feet or so - a whole village was balanced precariously on the sheer precipice.



The heights at Piazza San Antonio

Sicily surely had many wonderful sights I could never had imagined. We stopped off at a friendly bar for cool beers and some nibbles before heading back down through the narrow streets once again to meet our other excursion-eers and the coach.

The ride back to the port of Messina took about 40 minutes. Our guide recounted numerous vaguely interesting facts which soothed us to slumber!

Once back in port, we found we still had a couple of free hours and we'd heard about the Messina Cathedral and its famous animated clock, which at 12 midday (although we'd missed it) came to life with its moving statues and icons.



The animated clock tower of the Cathedral of Messina

We walked a few hundred meters to to find the Catherdral and when we saw the clock tower we could imagine the spectacle while listening to all the bells ringing out.

A bar with shady canopies was just on the side of the plaza so we made for a free table there to enjoy a glass of wine.

We were suddenly surprised by the company of our two cabin maids Sasha and Khrysty who were enjoying their free time off. They'd come for an ice cream and internet access at their favorite Messina bar.

After another drink and a good chat and banter with the very friendly young owner of the bar, it was time to say our goodbyes and return to our waiting ship.

Sail out was at 5pm and we congregated on deck to watch our harbour egress.



The Marina

A very welcome cool shower, a change into fresh clothes and a rendezvous with our gang in the Raffles bar.

A solo guitarist was playing in Raffles and although we knew he was very good, our 40 years experience as working musicians inwardly told us that he had not read his audience and he was playing the wrong style of music for the current audience in attendance. As a consequence his polished performance was mostly ignored. But we applauded and it prompted others to also clap to show some appreciation.

While standing in the queue for a table in the Compass Rose restaurant tonight we wondered whether we might say a few words of encouragement to our soloist to try and help. But the idea was abandoned the moment it was assured that Dino our usual waiter had seen us and had our usual table waiting.

During dinner I noticed that the ship was lurching now and again. The sea had become choppy as we had entered the Bay of Naples in the dark.

It got slightly worse as the evening went on.

Back in our cabin a towel-art frog was on the bed waiting for us! It had manic looking stuck-on eyes which looked a bit creepy!



The Frog

Once all lights were out in our cabin, we stood at our front facing window and noticed the sea had got much rougher with waves slapping the side of the ship.

We laid down and were gently rocked to sleep!

Taranto, Italy tomorrow!

Day 5 – 18 Sep 2017 – Taranto, Italy

Taranto today! Ta-Da!!!

I've only been to Italy once back in 1981.

Last night's choppy seas gave way to another bright sunny morning. So far we've been very lucky with very limited swell.



Taranto from a distance – and it didn't look too promising!

We heard on the news that there had been a massive storm over Rumania (not too far away) that had killed 8 people. I felt very sorry for their families and hope we would not run into the dregs of it - especially while we were at sea.

I was rather surprised (and disappointed) that Taranto's port was so industrial with a multitude of anchored tanker ships in the inner harbour waiting for work and so many chimneys busily spouting smoke.



Taranto's ugly oil refinery

As the port was actually governed by the Italian military, no one was allowed to walk in the port when ashore.

So the local government had arranged for free shuttle buses into and back from the city for Thomson passengers.

We jumped ship and set off in one of the shuttle buses for a 10 minute journey into town arriving at our drop off and pickup point - the Aragonese Castle on the sea front next to the seaward entrance to the lagoon behind the town.



Arrival at Taranto's Aragonese Castle

We seemed to be ushered into the castle straight from the bus and it seemed that we were being processed to make a mandatory regimented visit. That's certainly not for us!



Castle and tankers

We successfully avoided what seemed to be a compulsory video presentation and followed in the steps of the official Thomson guide girl (who's party we were not with!)

After a look around the castle and exploring it's lower veranda below the veteran swing bridge, we managed our escape.



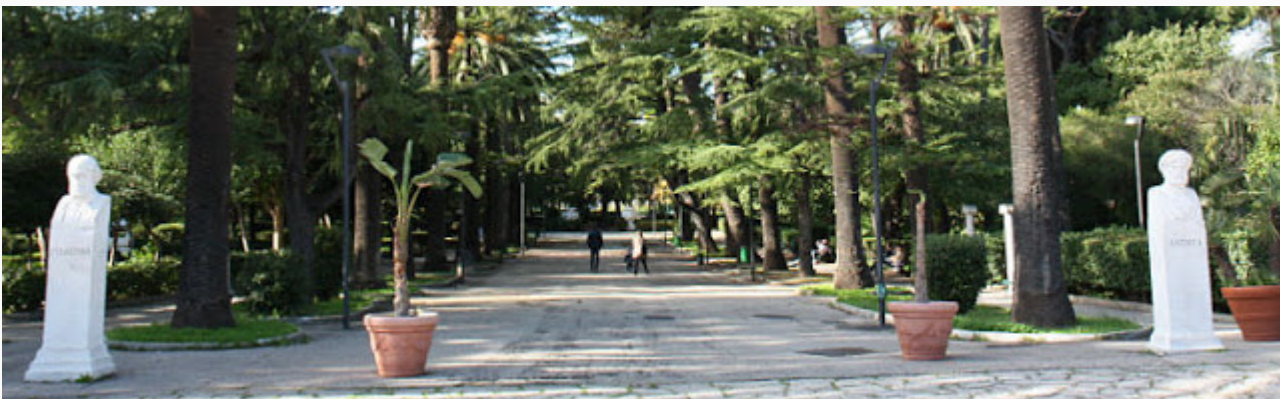
The Swing Bridge

Walking along the Promenade of the new town we looked for a bar to have coffee. As we couldn't find one, we turned inland into the town itself.



Gillie puts a fellow cruiser straight!

We were still searching 15 minutes later for a nice bar with outside tables and it took a while to find what seemed to be the only one Taranto today. After cappuccinos all round and email check on the free Wi-Fi, we set off for the Park just a few minutes walk away.



The Park in Taranto

Well we found the Park and it was spacious and shady enough, but it was in dire need of love and attention. Paved areas were crumbling and a dried up swimming pool looked like it had 100 years of plant growth in the bottom because there were even trees growing through the bottom's ceramic tiled layer.

A few people were milling around, kids kicking a ball and the same lycra-clad-jogger past us several times. He resembled one of the crew!

We found two enclosures - one housing a number of ducks and swan living by a disgusting algae-filled smelly pond



Yuk!

The other hosted a family of peacocks in a small pen. So sad!
We also saw some old decommissioned Italian warships moored in the lagoon behind the town and could clearly look over them from the park due to their close proximity.



Decommissioned warships in the lagoon?

Looking at our watches it was 1 o'clock and clearly we'd had enough of Taranto. We started walking back to the bus stop.

When we got there we realised there was a narrow lane snaking its way through the old part of the town on the other side of the road. That was more like it!



Back streets of Taranto

We started to bumble our way along the lane looking at the shops until a number of restaurants came into view in a small square. Hunger pangs were starting so we seated ourselves.



Kev (me) waiting for his lunch

Fifteen minutes later having been ignored, we walked out and sat at a second.

After another 15 minute wait with no acknowledgement, we walked out of that restaurant too and headed for the Bus stop. Lunch would now be back on board!

An uncomfortable ride back to the ship standing in a cramped bus like well packed-in sardines.

Sail out from Taranto (our least favourite port on this cruise so far) was at 18:00hrs.



Sections of wind turbines laid out on the quay waiting for shipment

We waited for our ship to move out while watching and listening to various workings of machines in the port; pneumatic drills, a pile driver; various heavy lorries, tug boat engines etc and also contended with the site of copious amounts of black smoke emanating from the many candy striped chimneys on the west side of the port. In the port itself, laid out in neat rows were pre-fabricated components of wind turbines waiting to be loaded onto a cargo ship.

Finally we were on the move in the golden evening sunlight.



Taranto – a lovely old city next to an industrial port and oil refinery

We watched the pilot boat skim around to keep pace with us. The pilot who guiding us after carrying out his skillful duty of piloting our ship, deftly jumped back onto his boat to a round of applause by the watching cruisers!

Another lovely sunset tonight which I didn't think Taranto deserved!



Sunset over the Italian coast.

Drinks in Raffles at 7:30pm. Mart had told me about a particular cocktail mix of vermouth, tonic and gin, so I asked for one from the roving bar steward.

You'd think I'd asked for her for the impossible!

Apparently because it was gin AND vermouth it was classed as two separate drinks, so needed two AI cards to cover it. Yet in some of our ship cocktails there were 3 or even 4 different types of alcohol!

I sent her away for a G&T and the moment she brought it back I ordered a vermouth from her and then mixed it myself!

Dinner was once again in the excellent Compass Rose restaurant although queuing for a table seemed to have become the norm.

To certain extent we had managed to shortcut long waits as we had our Head Waiter Dino always looking out for us. Our table for No 5 was always ready!!! Good man!!!

This evening we had the great pleasure of being entertained by Adrian the Maitre d' and his singing waiters.



Elvis, Adrian. 'The Scottish drummer and the Singing Waiters in the Compass Rose Restaurant

After dinner we congregated in the Broadway Show lounge to watch a very funny comic and after his show, it was the turn of the crew to entertain us with their own show. Our wine waiter Ray being one of them.



The performing crew take a bow

Igoumenitsa tomorrow!

Day 6 – 19 Sep 2017 – Igoumenitsa and Parga, Greece

We were in Igoumenitsa harbour an hour early today and despite being on deck just after 07:00am I nearly missed the docking. I had missed the sail in too which was disappointing especially as Keith had been up since 5.00am and had watched us pass by some small Greek islands - possibly Paxos and Antipaxos.

But despite all I had heard and read about Igoumenitsa being a soul-less ferry port, it was actually a lovely harbour with a partially concealed entrance revealing the southern part of the island of Corfu in the background.



The Ferry Port at Igoumenitsa



A ferry leaves for Paxos

The sun was shining brightly and there was a warm wind as we headed ashore down the walkway to find the coach waiting to take us to Parga for the day.



On our way to Parga on the coach

The coach (1 of 4 doing Parga today for TUI) took 35 minutes to reach this very beautiful coastal town with its lovely beach guarded by small islets just a few hundred meters across the water.

On leaving the coach, our big crowd followed one of the TUI guides down to the Promenade which opened up on the right to a cluster of colourful buildings nestling on the hillside. This view reminded me of the type of picture used by a jigsaw puzzle because of its colours and intricacies.



Beautiful Parga

There were small islets just off the beach which protected this lovely little harbour. It looked like one was permanently inhabited.



The islet across from the beach at Parga – picture from the webcam

Keith and Mart wanted to lay on the beach (which is not really my thing).



Mart on the beach

I went with Gillie and Gill to look round the shops - my video camera being salvation from the mind numbing experiences of our girls looking at items for sale for ages before walking off without buying them.

At least I could get some good footage of this lovely place for the holiday film I would make back home!



Parga shops

We chose a bar on the Promenade for coffee and it had good Wi-Fi so I could upload my latest blog entry. We noticed an ancient castle ruin up on the cliff next to the town and made a note to have a look later.



The ancient castle up on the cliffs at Parga

Setting off for the shops we found tiny narrow lanes hosting a plethora of local retailers selling their wares. It was buzzing with tourists looking around and had an appealing atmosphere. I bought matching tee-shirts for my two new grandsons.

I suppose the girls spent an hour mulling over various items while I explored the lanes at a faster pace.

The lane's paths turned into slopes and then steps which became steeper. I got to the top end and found the entrance to the castle.

The girls finally made their way to the top as well, and the three of us entered the castle thru a stone arch.

Inside was a lovely bar restaurant and we sat outside under shady trees with waters and beers with a fantastic view over the town.



Relaxing in the bar overlooking Parga

We sat there with our drinks and chatting for nearly 2 hours.



Another view of the islet – this time from the cliffs



Overlooking Parga – the beach can be seen far left

Walking around the corner, I found a cliff top path with a view across the water to Corfu town possibly 10 miles away.



Southern Corfu across the Adriatic taken with the handy-cam at full zoom

Later on our ship would travel up the narrow channel between Corfu and Albania passing the quiet coastal resort of Kalamí where we had our Corfu break back in May.

As we would be leaving port early tonight, I was looking forward to passing by Kalamí just as we had seen other cruise ships do from the resort when we were there.

All too soon it was time to meet the other guys and find the coach to take us back to port.

We spent the remainder of the day resting but rendezvoused on deck at the front of the ship for our sail out.

The exciting idea was to take footage and photos as we passed the island of Corfu

We were especially looking forward to seeing the old castle again - this time from the sea and pass Kalamí where we stayed in the north of the island. We would watch huge cruise ships sail up the narrow channel between Corfu and Albania from the port of Kerkyra (Corfu town) and pass within just a mile from our apart-hotel and we would imagine we were on them. Well this would be an opportunity to would make that dream come true.

5:00 pm came and went, 5:30 - then at 5:40 an announcement that there were two coach excursions that were late returning to the ship and so we wouldn't be sailing out until 6:00pm.

At 6:00 came another announcement that the the excursion-eers had returned and that paperwork was being generated for our exit from port.

Meanwhile as we waited there was the most beautiful sunset over Corfu.



Sunset over Corfu as we left Igoumenitsa

At 6:20pm, 80minutes late our ship moved out. Light was fading fast and I knew it was going to be too dark to be able to view our previous holiday location.

When we passed Kerkyra it was almost dark, but I did just make our lights of the castle on its double hump which we had visited one day on our spring holiday. No chance of seeing our little harbour of Kalami to the north though. It would be completely dark by the time we reached this point at the northern tip of the island.



The castle at Kerkyra (Corfu Town) silhouetted against Mount Pantokratoras

Our evening commenced in Raffles as usual followed by dinner in the Compass Rose restaurant. The Show Team put on Songs from the Shows which unfortunately I thought was awful, disjointed, cheesy and from this musicians point of view - musically boring.

I now understand what Simon Cowell means by 'very cruise ship'. The show team have done a lot better than this. However, our girls liked it!

Kotor tomorrow and I can't wait!!!

Day 7 – 20 Sep 2017 – Kotor, Montenegro

We had discussed the sail-in to Kotor during our cruise and I had known for many months that it would be something very special . We all definitely wanted to see it.

Last night after our sail out from Igoumenitsa and our transit past Corfu in the dark and after we had gone to see the show, Gillie had her nightly final look out from our front facing cabin window and received something of a shock! She called me to come and look.

There was a massive electrical storm in progress - the likes of which I had never seen in the 63 years of my life. It seemed to be raging over the mainland to our east and manifested itself as a huge angry bubble-shaped monster spitting sheets of light, flashes and lances of thunderbolts at the sea right over..... Montenegro where we were headed!!!

It's ferocious energy was jaw-dropping and incessant - flashes every quarter-second illuminating the clouds that tried to contain it.

Being so very far off there was no noise, but I hoped that whichever town it was over, everyone would be safe there.

We continued to watch the storm for some time and were very late to bed.

I was woken from a dream this morning by a sound that seemed vaguely familiar and very far away. I ignored it as a spectre in my imagination.

That noise again! This time I opened my eyes to look at the phone and find the time; 06:45; I then dragged myself out of bed. Gillie was still asleep.

Looking out the window through the nets I could see the mountains were very close and Gill (explanation... Gillie is my wife, Gill is Martin's wife - 2 Gills on this trip!) was standing on the front deck just outside. She had banged on our window to make sure we were awake to watch our magnificent entry into Kotor.

As sail in was unexpectedly an hour early this morning it had already begun and we were already in the first chamber of the 3 Kotor lagoons.

I dressed hurriedly and woke Gillie then grabbed my video camera and sped out onto deck to join Gill.



Kotor – first view – ominous clouds?

The sky was thick with menacing dark clouds, waves of which were tumbling down the mountain peaks like a tsunami.



Clouds falling down the mountains as we sail into Kotor's first chamber

We watched our ship's progress with sheer fascination. After a while the sun won the battle with the clouds and revealed its watery presence. Instantly like turning on a light switch, the fjord illuminated releasing itself in an explosion of colour from the gloom.



The sun suddenly appears!

The Spirit continued its transit through the lagoons and was skillfully steered through a narrow constriction and into the second chamber causing the little red and white ferries that had been previously darting left and right across the 400 meter divide, to stop and give respect and right of way to our leviathan.



Ferries waiting for us to pass

Later, an even more narrow constriction was negotiated into the 3rd lagoon and immediately after looking to starboard, a mysterious rectangular concrete cave could be seen. My first thoughts were that it was a U-Boat pen left over from WW2 as I thought it was the right size and the right shape to hide a U-Boat. I would probably never know what it really was, but upon doing some research on-line later, I discovered it WAS a derelict WW2 Nazi U-Boat pen!!!



Derelict U-Boat pen

My intrigue in the phenomenon waned as blue skies were developing above us, and we were to turn our last corner which would finally reveal the hidden treasure of the sight of Kotor town nestling at the end of the fjord in the shadow of the mountains.



First site of the town of Kotor at the foot of the steep mountain range

Along the way we were counting the many church towers among the red roofed buildings that littered the flanks of the fjord. The church towers themselves added a fairytale presence to the living dream of approaching Kotor.



Churches on the banks



Montenegrin red roofs and churches

High over the town you could see a tower high up and only reached by climbing a steep zig-zagging pathway. Above this and even higher and reached by the same ongoing path, was a medieval fort. Unbelievably there was a restaurant next to it!



The zig-zag pathway up the mountain to the shrine and the fort higher above

Today we would be tendered to shore by the Spirit's 4 tender boats. We had received our instructions on where, when and how this was to be organized.

After a short wait in the Broadway Show Lounge, our ticket numbers were called and we exited the Spirit as usual on deck 2, but this time down some temporary steps hung from the lifeboat davits.

We deftly strode the gap between the two craft while concerned hands were offered and assisted those of meeker confidence to assure our safety.

Then with a clatter of engines powering up, the tender boat left the Mothership and headed on the short 10 minute ride to the pier.

Looking back across the water we could see our ship anchored in the bay.



The Spirit rests in the bay at Kotor

Ashore, we were at once targeted by waiting tour guides desperate for our custom.

A hop-on-hop-off bus was offered....

NO THANKS!!!!



Onto the quay at Kotor from our tender boat

Then taxi drivers brandishing a3 coloured laminated pictures cajoled us to provide them with business.

One taxi man followed alongside me explaining in a Montenegrin accent where he could take us and for how much. But when I said there were 5 of us, he gesticulated helplessly to his 4 seater taxi, it sort of shot him down and he accepted the defeat.

We were wary anyway about making compulsive decisions as we had learned a lesson last Saturday in Malta! So we decided to go for coffee and chew the cud. But the taxi drivers mate suddenly appeared saying he had a six seater wagon and could take us. He tapped at his laminate showing us again where we would be taken.

He was a young 30 something Montenegrin with black stubble. He was polite but assertive and had a definite likeable quality about him. He said 10 euros each to take us to see the sights of Kotor.

It was hard to say no so we took the risk. We climbed aboard his 6 seater Volkswagen people carrier and off we went.

At first he seemed quite tense and gave us his rehearsed spiel about Kotor. But after we started asking him about himself and his family, he seemed to suddenly relax.

He first took us to a viewpoint overlooking the whole of Kotor and its fjord. From here we had the most spectacular view of The Thomson Spirit in its beautiful surroundings.. This presented the photo opportunity I had hoped for.



'The' view of the holiday

We could also see the walled fort even higher above us.

Next our driver expertly weaved his way through heavy traffic using his short cuts to take us further up the fjord to a pretty lagoon-side lido called Perast.



Perast – an unexpected pleasure

There were restaurants and hotels here with a fishing boat atmosphere and across the calm waters were Kotor's unique and characteristic small flat islets



One of the islets - Sveti Džorđe - a cemetery, off limits to visitors



The other islet, Our Lady of the Rocks Roman Catholic Church with its sky blue dome

Goran our driver had arranged for us to visit the church by going over in his friend's boat for 3 Euros each.



Sasha's boat

Soon we had skimmed across to the islet and were looking around. We spent a good 20 minutes there and Sasha the boatman delivered us safely back to the banks of the fjord where we had coffee in one of the lovely bars.

Goran drove us back along the roads along the waterside banks back to Kotor town and dropped us off. He had done a splendid job so we gave him 15 euros each when he had asked for just 10.

Back in Kotor we entered through the walls into the old town to find a whole community of restaurants and shops filled with hundreds of visitors eating, drinking and buying souvenirs.



Gillie surveys the old town

We sat down in one of the restaurants and ordered some tapas-like appetizers (cured ham, cheese and olives) and 2 pizzas which we all shared.



Time for lunch – dum de dum di dum dum!

A quick look round, the climbing of just a few of the steps leading to the fort over 1200 feet up and beyond, to say we'd attempted it, and the feeling of slight disappointment not to go further up - we had run out of time.



Stairway to the fort

It was then time to head back to the tender boat and re-board the ship after a wonderful day out.



Sailing back on the tenderboat to our waiting ship

On board we watched our highly anticipated sail out through the lagoons of Kotor. Unfortunately there was quite a rough and cold wind so not many saw it through completely but it was a truly magnificent experience none-the-less.



We begin our sail out



The late sun illuminating the rocks

We had our usual pre-dinner drinks and then dinner in The Compass Rose followed by a Blues Brothers show performed by the Show Team in the Broadway Show-lounge. Much much better tonight!!!

We all seemed to be quite tired as our cruise has been very active so far.

Our ship had just 48 miles to clear before very early morning docking back in Dubrovnik.

Day 8 – 21 Sep 2017 – Dubrovnik, Croatia

Back to Dubrovnik and docking at well before the 5am - scheduled time.

On waking and looking through the cabin window, I could see the weather was fine and sunny.



Port Gruz – same ships in port as last week

Today we had decided to ride the cable car up to the top of Mount Srd and also walk the walls of Dubrovnik's old city.

We had picked up info that there were to be 5 cruise ships in Dubrovnik today from the Cruise Mapper website and also that the queues at the cable car station get pretty long as the days go on. With this equation it wasn't too difficult to work out that an early start was essential.

We jumped ship having our boarding cards scanned to be counted ashore and looked for the bus station outside Dubrovnik port.

The taxi-touts were waiting of course and tried to insist we took a trip with them and it would save us money - but no cable car trip included. We had a hard job to dismiss them despite saying "NO THANKYOU" several times.

I had the bus route planned - No 8 - to drop us right outside the cable car station - but Martin insisted we should take route No 1 as he'd been told "No 8 went all around the houses".

We got our tickets which were 24 Kuna each - about £3 and waited for a No 1 bus which turned up already full to bursting. Somehow we prised ourselves on and hung on for dear life as the driver jolted us amid other passengers crushed into your very face, all the way to Pine Gate - no where near the cable car station! A 12 minute walk all uphill was then necessary just as the No 8 bus stopped in front of us right outside the cable car station!!!

Once at the cable car station we bought our return tickets for 180 Kuna about £18.00 each.

We joined a short queue which the Queue Marshal split into appropriate maximum numbers as it got nearer to the gate.

For a moment it looked like we were going to be that last ones on the cable car in our set - but no! The barrier came down right in front of us so we would be first onto the very next cable car. We could choose the very best position to watch and film our ascent!

Brilliant!!!

The car rose slowly from the station and instantly gave us a stunning view over Dubrovnik. As we rose higher and higher over the town, the view opened up and we could see into the city walls with myriads of people walking along the precocious tops.



Cable car to Mount Srd above Dubrovnik



Only 2 cars on this system

The ride took about 3 minutes to get us to the top and once there - what a wonderful vista!!!



View looking towards the port



View in the opposite direction towards montenegro

The deep blue sea was sparkling like diamonds and the city below with its orange roofs made a dramatic contrast. Out to sea we spotted the cruise ship MSC Sinfonia who would be docking at Dubrovnik Port Gruz right in front of our Thomson Spirit today at 12:00.



The MSC Sinfonia on her way into Dubrovnik

On the top of the mountain stood a tall antenna looking something like a rocket. Out of action and virtually destroyed, it was a tragic reminder of the war over Dubrovnik in the 1990s with the break up of Yugoslavia. Testament of that was all of the shell damaged buildings next to it. It must have been a horrifying time for the people of Dubrovnik back then.



War-torn antenna – this is now a monument which is lit up in different colours at night-time

But today of course there is a peace in Croatia - and it was certainly peaceful at the top of the mountain in the warm Adriatic sun looking at the beautiful view below.

We stayed for quite a while looking at the panoramas in different directions and watching the Simfonia slowly slipping by making her way into port.

We found a very nice posh cafe/bar at the top and enjoyed Cappuccinos, but the cakes were far too tempting!!! We 'caved'!



Delightful Croatian chocolate and walnut cake

Descending on the cable car back to ground level, we headed for the old walled town.



Approaching the end of our cable car ride

Walking into the heart of the old city through the walled entrance, the place was amassd with diners already eating early lunch in the packed restaurants.

We carefully climbed down steep stone steps which seemed to go on forever in the shady narrow lanes.



Areful as you go – it's a long way down with many steps!

At the bottom, walking into the Main Street, even more people were milling around. It seemed that when in Dubrovnik, the old town is the place you go to!



The entrance to access and explore the high walls themselves was quite difficult to find, but once we did, we were quite shocked by the 150 Kuna charge (£18.00) each. We'd heard it was a lot less expensive. We pooled our remaining Kuna and had just enough for the 5 tickets we needed.

We suspected that when a lot of cruise ships visited Dubrovnik, the admission price increased. Examining the tariff board, we could see possible evidence of price hikes by the way variable amounts could be slotted into the price holders, similar to the way supermarkets display their prices.

Up we went!

At once ascending the steps, the interior of the old town opened up and we were above a sea of orange and red terracotta roofs. More steps took us higher - then higher still.



View from the first part of the walls

Looking down from the heady heights made me hold on and tread deliberately and slowly. These treacherous top pathways became very narrow with low walls on either side providing minimal protection from falling. But most people took these pathways and the ever increasing heights easily in their stride.



Then higher still!



View from the opposite side

We came across a bar! Unbelievable!

Gillie and I shared a drink while Martin and Keith ascended the top turret - there were far too many people already up there for me and this was confirmed by Keith when we caught up with him.

Moving on round we started to descend steps bringing us to a lower level on the eastern side and looked down on the bikini clad rocks by the sea. A couple of 'tomb-stoners' were making exhibitions of themselves much to the amusement of wall-walkers craning their necks and simultaneously blocking everyone else's passage.

We came across yet another bar further and all stopped for cool beers this time. We grinned at all the Japanese tourists walking round with their selfie-sticks practising their smiles before their phone cameras committed their image into pixels.

A very pleasant hour was spent there and we returned to ground level by less challenging steps.

At street level again, crowds had polarised around their tour guides who were rounding up their flocks to chivvy them back on their applicable boat-bound coaches.

Our own egress was by service bus again and we squeezed ourselves onto the cattle-wagon. Again we were jerked and jostled all the way back to base.



Coaches and service busses around the walls of Dubrovnik

After our pre-drinks and 4 course dinner, we went to join in with (or rather watch) the deck party and we sailed out of Dubrovnik in the dark for the second time to start the second week of our cruise called Venetian Vistas. Day at sea again tomorrow



Keith watches our sail out from Port Gruz

Day 9 – 22 Sep 2017 – At Sea

A bright, sunny but somewhat chilly morning greeted us when we stepped out on deck and headed down to the Lido for breakfast.



We were well on our way to Trieste situated on the northern Italian coast, and would dock there tomorrow.

There was news that our trip to Venice on Sunday and our trip to Rijeka on Monday had been swapped and we would be going to Venice on Monday. This was because of a protest in Venice this Saturday and Sunday about cruise ships entering the port of Venice and their powerful wave wakes destroying the banks of the canals.

So someone had thought carefully about this and considered the possibilities of Thomson passengers becoming involved. Very wise me-thinks!

Also the weather looked pretty gruesome in Venice for Sunday, but Monday held Venetian promise of sunshine! Swapping was probably a very good decision!

Looking to 'starboard' (east - you get to know names this when you have been aboard for a little while!) while walking on deck, we were passing various islands of the Dalmatian Archipelago chain belonging to Croatia. Hvar, where we will visit next Tuesday, being one of them.



Passing through the Dalmation archipeligo



Somewhere over there is Hvar!

The day was pretty uneventful really as there were no landfall activities and everyone was a captive ship passenger.

After breakfast we went to the Destination Services presentation to find out about this week's new excursions. We chose and booked one of the boat trips going from Hvar.

I then went backstage of the Broadway Show lounge with the Show Team to find out how they put on their shows. Dylan and Helen showed us around the dressing rooms, stage and control room.



WeThe Broadway Showlounge

During the afternoon, Keith and I went wine tasting - same wines, same wine waiters and same jokes as last week! Never-the-less we still spent a good hour drinking wines!

Tonight is Captain's Gala Night and everybody is invited to go along.

Its a formal occasion and the idea is to wear your best bib and tucker while the ladies wear their posh frocks.

Dining is in 2 sittings tonight and Martin and Gill had arranged for us not to attend the Captain's party, but still to go into the Compass Rose second sitting for dinner, regardless of not having or wearing formal dress.

Gillie was stressed as she said she wouldn't feel comfortable being under-dressed and Keith had strong feelings about only attending a formal occasion if he was properly dressed.

To sort this, I booked Siroccos again for just the three of us tonight. I know that Martin and Gill will have a good time with other formally dressed passengers - simply on Mart's big personality.



Suave Siroccos

Dinner (6 courses - 8 if you include appetizers and sorbets) was sheer delight. Keith bought a lovely bottle of Rioja which he and I shared. I had Lobster Thermidor for the very first time and enjoyed every mouthful.

We went to see the show in the Broadway Show Lounge after wards (West End Pops) which was very good.

We were told by Ted the Cruise Director that we need to take passports with us into Trieste tomorrow and if we had cruised with Thomson before which we had – twice, then by registering with reception before tomorrow, we will be invited to a special event during next week. I thought about this and it was probably a drive to get people to book their next cruise!

Trieste tomorrow - bring it on!!!!

Day 10 – 23 Sep 2017 – Trieste, Italy

We were in earlier than planned this morning and when I got out on deck at 7:15am we were just about to tie up. The sun was rising over the backdrop of hills behind Trieste casting a shadow of the Spirit over the far end of the port.



The port of Trieste in the early morning sun

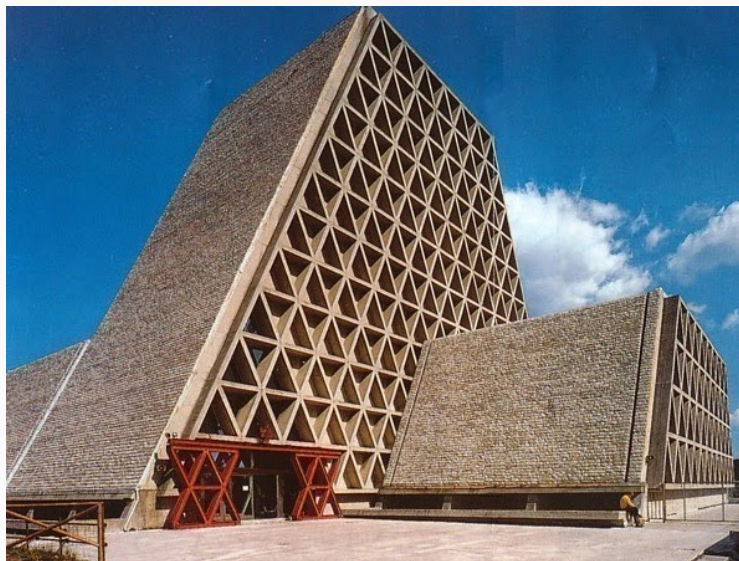
I may miss sail out tonight as well as it has been put back to 8:00pm and that's when Dino our head waiter expects us at our table at the Compass Rose

Weather bright, sunny but a bit chilly again. I expect it will warm up later.

From our vantage point on deck at the front of the ship we scanned around looking for interesting features. There was a mysterious truncated pyramid on the hills to the west of Trieste. We could not make out what it was but Keith, looking through his powerful binoculars saw it had a cross on the top. It turned out to be a war memorial.



Mysterious artifact high on the hills above Trieste



The Sanctuary of Monte Grisa di Trieste – in honour of those killed during wartime

We breakfasted and were off the ship (with passports as instructed) around 9.45 for a look around the city. There was plenty of activity already. It was a Saturday morning and everyone was out going about their weekend business.

The ship docked almost ON Trieste's main square - The Piazza de Unita d'Italia, and the ship's bow almost hung over the port's main road! A closer dock to town there couldn't be!



Our ship docked almost ON the quay at Trieste!

Lots of large smart classical buildings in Trieste adorned by numerous statues and we could see many interesting places to visit.



Statues like this decorate many of the buildings in Unity of Italy Square

Our first visit was the main Piazza where an exposition on Geophysical Scientific Research was taking place.



Girls marking the way across the road to the OGS Explorer ship docked in port as one of the exhibits

There was a research ship the OGS Explorer docked next to the Spirit which exposition attendees could visit.

It was a shame really as the many tents hid the main buildings around the Piazza and its beautiful fountain.



We had seen Trieste's piazza on the webcam and noted that various concerts and exhibitions were held the regularly.



A picture from the webcam showing Unity Square on a day when there were no exhibitions or concerts.

We walked up between the tents and out the back of the Piazza heading north towards the Grande Canal about a quarter of a mile away. The canal was the shortest one I'd ever seen at about 600 meters and then it came to a sudden end! Really quirky!!!!



The short canal at Trieste

We found a table in a canal side bar and settled for morning coffee which was our usual ritual. We people watched for a while and tried to use the Wi-Fi which was useless!



Canal-side where we sat in a bar

We set off again heading for the amphitheatre and the castle. It was to be a long trudge uphill!

We found the very back of the amphitheatre so it was not a good view, but we decided to make a better effort to see it from the front on our way back.

We were a bit uncertain of the way to go to get to the castle, when a sprightly Italiano who spoke good English offered his help. He was a great character and the sort you really enjoy talking to.

He had a very loud boomy voice and completely drowned the narratives of the passing tour guides coming down from the castle much to our amusement. He was pleasantly rotund and in his eighties.

Telling us part of his life story - he'd been married for 57 years, he finally indicated the best way to get to the castle was up an adjacent flight of steps to the left.

Thanking him, taking our leave and laughing at his comment about how he enjoyed talking to British people which he sometimes followed around to improve his own English, we waived him off and started to tackle our steep ascent.

Mart's knee was giving him trouble today despite wearing a knee support, so he struggled a bit, but was adamant he would make it. He'd brought a shooting stick on holiday with him for additional aid while getting around.

The steps were steep and there were many flights of them. The castle sat in the middle of the city on a hill about 500 feet up.

Some of us were puffing and panting (some of us weren't!) and all of a sudden we heard a voice shout "Come on English - don't give up now"!!!

It was our recent acquaintance laughing at the top of the last flight of steps we had yet to conquer!

But how on earth....????

"How did you get up there?" we gasped trying to sustain our climbing inertia.

"I came up on my scooter" he laughed.

That made us all crack up! Very funny and the highlight of my day.

Each of us shook his hand and waived him off for the second time wondering if he'd jump out on us again. But no, he sped off on his blue scooter laughing his head off!!! Brilliant!



A really nice old man – but who was he?

We arrived at the castle terraces. At this point Mart decided not to go any further so Gill stayed with him - they would make their own way back to town, while Gillie Keith and I each paid our €2 (with senior citizens discount included) to explore the castle and walk its walls.



Trieste castle

The views over the city were of course spectacular and we took lots of pictures and footage of the ancient fort which had seen many battles through its existence.



Views over the harbour

While up in the heights we heard and watched the bells tolling in the bell tower



Bells started to toll all over the city, but we never found out why

After the castle we looked inside the Cattedrale di San Giusto close by.



Cattedrale di San Giusto

Inside was astonishingly beautiful. Above the altar was a mural of the Madonna painted in what looked like colours containing a gold fleck. The result was a sparkling effect that shimmered as you moved around the building.



The decorative roof over the altar

Looking back down the aisle, there was a huge and beautiful round window casting the morning light onto the mural.



Of note was the scent from a hundred candles burning in the knave, the bouquet, the warmth and the light of these promoted a strong feeling of safety and refuge.



The amphitheatre

We walked downhill afterwards and found the front of the amphitheatre where we took more shots, then back to the Piazza to find a bar for a cool drink and maybe some lunch.

Sitting down at a table under a wide sunshade, I gave a nudge to Gillie to look at the plate of food an elderly woman was eating at an opposite table. It was a hista of cold meats (prosciutto and bresoli) and cheeses (mozerella and parmesan) piled high on a wooden board with a basket of crusty bread next to it. It looked delicious but I was wary of what it might cost. Back home I think it would have been around £30



Hams and cheeses Hista

But the waiter said twelve Euros! There was so much on the plate that it was obviously a sharing platter and looked great value!!! Hastily we ordered as it had made us feel hungry!

It was delicious - simplicity itself - delicious!!
Meanwhile from the menu, Keith ordered a curry!

We ambled our way back to the port and bought our fifth fridge magnet of the cruise. Wandering onto the wharf we admired an older ship looking like the Royal Yacht Britannia. This smaller sized ship had been meticulously restored in its shiny navy blue and cream livery.



NOT the Royal Yacht Britannia!

Then back to our ship. We had to go through tight security and also show our passports. Although a pain, it was very reassuring to know that our ship was a safe haven. I had noticed a military presence when leaving the ship this morning with a number of soldiers carrying machine guns.

We spent a pleasant hour on deck with our sun-beds and watched a wedding reception taking place on one of the keys half a mile away. We could clearly hear a live performance in progress and looking through binoculars we could watch the celebrations taking place.

Usual pre-dinner drinks and dinner in the Compass Rose restaurant before taking our seats with a drink in the Broadway Show Lounge for the Music Award Show

I was really looking forward to the show!

Sitting over on stage right in our chairs I was aware of a crowd of loud cruisers sitting behind us. They were shouting, laughing, taking selfies knocking drinks over and having their own party.

It was hard but I ignored it.

During the show this rowdy family did not stop and much to the annoyance of many people sitting nearby, got louder while the Show team carried on regardless. Such bad manners.

I watched as several people left the Show lounge at different points of the show and this may have been because of the inconsiderable rabble behind us. I'm sure it was.

In the end even I gave up and walked out 'thanking' the stupid noisy women who seemed to be fairly intoxicated as I went by, for their inexcusable ignorance. I just said "Thank You Very Much" and left.

Walking back to my cabin, a guy asked if it had been me who had addressed the drunken rabble before I walked out.

I confirmed - yes, it was me.

He said "WELL DONE!!! - they certainly needed to be told didn't they - and if you hadn't spoken up, then I certainly would have!!!")

I went to bed still quite annoyed. But in the morning I would be writing to the Cruise Director Ted James about inconsiderate people talking loudly during the shows. Their sheer rudeness, inconsideration for those around them and total disrespect to the performers was beyond belief.

Day 11 – 24th Sep 2017 – Rijeka, Croatia

Again, we had already docked this morning as I appeared on a very wet deck at 06:50. Our Captain likes to be early so it seems!

It was surprisingly warm for such a dark and dismal day. We'd had heavy rain as predicted on our short trip from Trieste and during the night we'd watched another electrical storm at 4:00am far off in the general direction we were traveling.

Now, dark grey cushions of thunderous clouds rolled over Rijeka like the end of the earth was nigh. Crack'!!! A lightning bolt shot from sky to sea as I watched then... a loud sub-acoustic boom of thunder which could be felt, rolled around the landscape and echoed into infinity. No rain yet but I could see from where I was standing on the Port side that it would not be long before water deluged the firmament.



Grim skies over Rijeka

While considering the grim possibility of being totally rained off today I turned the corner round the front on the ship on the Promenade deck to stand in my usual morning vantage point and was suddenly awestruck by a sudden appearance and its sheer size. My head craned to the perpendicular looking upwards - it must have been a good 400 feet high and bright blue in colour. It dwarfed the Spirit and then I realised we were docked in a container port along-side a massive, massive, MASSIVE blue crane.



Monster cranes in the gloom

Being a little wary of the wet deck I moved further starboard side to view hundreds upon hundreds of rusty looking containers stacked six or seven high like enormous lego bricks.



Rijeka is a vast container port

One of the travelling cranes was in action cradling a container it had selected and was moving it probably onto a hidden lorry at ground level. Looking carefully through the zoom of my camera everything seemed to be robotic as there were no workers in the cabs of the moving container cranes.

Probably all computer controlled. Hope they haven't got Windows 10!!!!



A crane loads containers onto a lorry below

The scene was menacingly industrial and certainly not a port of call you would want to be docked at on a late summer holiday cruise. What were Thomson playing at? Oh well, it was probably a cheap option!

The dark clouds (it was now raining hard) did little to improve a feeling of despair around the container port and just for a moment I thought the big sign by one of the buildings read 'Abandon hope all ye that enter here'!

Nice place!

Keith came wandering up the deck towards me from the ship's aft in full winter regalia (except for his shorts) wearing his worried face.

We looked around to survey the port as we did every morning to find the interesting and the bizarre. A greyer morning scene of a cityscape I had never seen but not a lot doing, except maybe that was a feather falling from a great height whirling and spinning like a dropped sycamore seed. I guess some seagull must have perched on the top of that crane up there to preen itself.

We moved quickly on in case the seagull sent us a more unexpected present!

Keith had been up long before me and had been looking confusedly at a huge container ship docked behind us. As well as containers stocked inside its massive hull, they were also stacked 6 high on deck. Another crane similar to the goliath we were docked next to, was delicately placing the final container boxes on deck like the beak of a bird feeding its young.

Curiously, as Keith had noticed, there were a number of men dressed in bright yellow overalls and safety helmets dotted around the containers at different levels and caught in the scaffold supports like flies in a spiders web - except when Keith used his binoculars the men were actually manikins without faces.

Was I dreaming all this?

When 4 girls dressed in national costume started dancing to 3 musicians on accordion, guitar and the double bass dressed in striped teeshirts like French onion sellers, playing Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White underneath rain protecting plastic sheets on the dock below the ship.... I started doubt my own sanity.



Croatian welcoming committee

Even the Beatles could surely have not imagined anything quite so psychedelic for their Sergeant Pepper album: dark thunderous skies, frightening automaton machinery, lurking anonymous dummies and.... Christ!!! down below they were now dancing The Lambada!!!!

What the hell did chef put in that apple strudel last night???? I thought it tasted funny.

Gillie my wife cracked the mirror of this crazy alter-reality when she came on deck to ask what time were we meeting for breakfast.

It was still early and so I sat and penned the note I had vowed to send to Ted James the Cruise Director on the ship, about last night's altercation with the group of selfish drunken people who had talked all the way through the Show team's latest offering. I was still annoyed but somehow it had become somewhat less of a mission.

After I had stormed out of the Broadway Lounge indicating my displeasure at the rudeness sitting a row behind, the father had a go at Martin after I left. Mart soon put him in his place!

What people would never guess about 'our Mart', is that as well as being an electrician who used to work at a nuclear bomb factory; as well as being a superstar (you ask him, he'll tell you!), a vocalist and front-man of my band Uptown Traffic (www.uptown-traffic.com); as well as being a black belt in Jiu Jitsu; as well as being the most confident and friendly person I have known for nearly 40 years and is like a big brother to me; that Mart is also a Magistrate!!!!

I kid you not!!!!

I dropped off my note to reception to start the clock ticking for some remedial action from Thomson Ted. I hoped very much he would see my point of view.

Breakfast came and went with the backdrop of the giant 'Maersk Effingly' container ship docked behind us (still don't know why those manikins are there) and the rain fell in sheets and buckets!

More thunder and lightning. Yes folks - this is your Captain Speaking from the Bridge - we hope you will enjoy your day in Rijeka and now see if you can identify this voice for a free bottle of wine (cue Gary Lineker). I wanted to go back to bed but Gillie wanted to read in the Explorers Lounge.

No seats, okay let's try the games room, yes let's get seated.... and listen to.... pensioners playing Ludo???? Oh for Gods sake - PLEASE can we fast-forward to tomorrow???

We met with Martin and Gill - Gill hadn't been too well and had gone to see Doc in sick bay.

We decided that we would brave the streets of Rijeka later when the rain stopped – but it didn't stop - so we braved the streets of Rijeka anyway.

They laid on a bus for us and it dropped us off on some street. I had no waterproof jacket so I was just dressed in a rugby shirt and jeans. Looking down, I still had my damn sanders on!

The others however were smugly 'done up' in cagoules with drawstring hoods. I started laughing to myself as they looked like four out of the seven dwarfs in the Disney cartoon. I started humming 'Hi Ho Hi Ho' but of course they couldn't hear it because of their hoods.

I was getting rather wet and as one of us had enthusiastically insisted we look round the open-air flower market, I was getting wetter!

Luckily we passed a stall round the corner selling umbrellas for 50Kuna.

No Kuna?

Wot none of us????

Okay let's try Euros – Euros? Yes? Result!

5.5 Euros bought me a big black umbrella. I was saved (still wet, but saved).

We found the main drag and the place where the webcam had beamed its pictures to us on my holiday website (www.kevs-hols.co.uk).



Rijeka on a GOOD day!

We spotted the cafe we'd seen on there with its sunshades but these were all leaking water over miserable looking faces of Spirit cruisers and staff who had braved the inclement weather of Rijeka before us.



View of Rijeka's promenade seen from the webcam

Okay let's have a coffee inside. At least it'll be dry and warm. We'd heard and carefully researched that Kuna is the official currency in Croatia but were absolutely assured that restaurants, cafes and bars DO accept Euros.

We went inside shook off the umbrella, de-hooded the four dwarfs and sat down to dry off. Nice place!

The waiter came over.

"Oh hello there, do you take Euros?"

"Nohh!!!!"

"Oh crap!"

The young waiter told me I could get some Euros changed into Kuna just across the street.

So I went out in the rain again and crossed the road to look for the money exchange.

I found it quite quickly. Handing over €40 I got back Kuna at whatever rate was current. Asking if I got a good rate (well I didn't know) she smiled sweetly and gave me the slow thumbs down!!!!

Hmmm! Welcome to Rijeka.

Finishing our hot chocolates which were more like hot chocolate blancmanges we went out in the rain AGAIN - brolly up and walked back to port passing by just a few mattresses strung out on the dock for homeless people sleeping rough. Although a sad sight, we felt quite a vulnerability.

Finally safely back on ship in time for lunch at 4.15pm and a big brandy in Raffles bar to warm and console us. Gillie then slept for a couple of hours while I updated my blog.

We set sail at 5.30pm and we were finally on our way to Venice and hopefully better weather.

After pre-din drinks and dinner in the Compass Rose we took our seats in the Broadway Show lounge right next to the side of the stage.

No Show team tonight but there is a new comedian on board called Alan Roberts. Hopefully the people making all the noise last night will have learned their lesson and have more respect!!!!

As for Rijeka on a wet and rainy day? Well.... you can shuv it!!!!

Roll on Venice!

Day 12 – 25th Sep 2017 – Venice, Italy

Only a few days left of our fabulous cruise.

But today was going to be one of the highlights because we would visit Venice.

The alarm went off at 6.00 and dragging myself out of warm bed and quickly getting dressed, I joined Gill on deck in the breaking dawn. There was just enough light to make out the main island of Venice.



First sights of Venice before the dawn

Some of the towers and domes were lit and some were only just discernible in the lamplight.

We had already entered into Venice's outer harbour from the northwest corner of the Adriatic and as usual we were well ahead of schedule.

There was a cold wind howling around the Spirit's Promenade deck and it had been raining again. But as we grew closer to our Venetian port , the wind suddenly dropped and the sky looked as if it might be clearing.

Already there were dozens of boats scuttling frenetically in every direction all around us. Each one having its own set of white lights and red and green navigation beacons.

Keith joined us saying he'd been watching from the back of the ship's Lido restaurant.



Santa Maria del Rosario Dome

I could now make out the tall pointed bell tower at Piazza San Marco and the Santa Maria del Rosario Dome at the water's edge. Our ship was moving slowly and the sky was getting lighter. It had a pinky-blue tinge and it held the promise of a lovely sunny day.

A tug boat was maneuvering around just off our port bow and then seemed to drift right in front of us seriously hindering our passage. It got very close - so close in fact that I thought we were going to hit it broadside. I called a warning to Gill to hold on.

But actually it was a clever choreograph so that the tug boat could capture ropes thrown to it and then tow us into Port Venice without our own engines running. This is what now happens to every visiting cruise ship.

The improving light and closer proximity now allowed more detail to be seen of this beautiful and romantic city featuring tall towers, spectacular spires and pompous domes.

Passing by Piazza San Marco and could see The Basilica and shortly afterwards the entrance to the Grand Canal. We continued slowly along the larger Guidecca Canal en-route to Venice's cruise ship port.



Dogi's Palace

There were 4 other large cruise ships predicted to be in port today but we only saw one - Star Breeze - which was smaller than the Spirit and was docked outside the actual cruise port

I could see the famous causeway carrying the road and railway over to the Italian mainland, and in the distance to the west, the landscape's main features were unfortunately very industrial - the chimneys of an oil refinery.

The sun was up now and we started to turn into the large and very modern port to berth. We normally make do with a gangplank walkway to get to shore, but here there were huge contraptions something like the air-bridges at airports that nuzzle up to aircraft doors providing access to your plane. These were similar but much much bigger

Gillie and Mart were now on deck with us to survey the scene and after a little while we all went for an early breakfast in the Lido.



Typical Venice waterfront as seen from our ship

Food in the Lido was always very good, very comprehensive, and very well organised. It is a huge buffet where after receiving a squirt of anti-bacterial gel on your hands from a crew watch-keeper on 'squirt-duty', you pick up and load up your tray with anything you fancied.

There is a great array of fruit, complete cooked breakfast usuals like bacon, sausages, black pudding and eggs, then cereals, breads, pastries, cheeses and hams, smoked salmon and mackerel and a station where the chef will make you your custom omelette.

Tea and coffee are on tap and a tray of fresh juices are always kept stocked up. There are gluten-free and vegetarian options and you can choose to eat at tables inside or on deck. Busy waiters fuss over you and immediately collect your trays and plates – these guys are always smiling and share an amusing greeting with you!

Once we'd had 'adequate sufficiency' we set off to explore Venice.

Now I must admit to being a little underwhelmed with our plans today to discover Venice. Being my first time I was anxious to see the main sights as we only had a day here. But instead of catching one of the water busses straight to the centre at St Marks Square, we had agreed to walk all the way. Gill and Mart had been here before so they told us they 'knew the ropes'.

I went with it!!!

Although Mart has usually a good sense of direction, he does have the reputation of just following his nose and sometimes - like yesterday's wet and dreary walk back to the ship at Rijeka, we end up walking past smelly Grundons down messy and dark backstreets behind derelict buildings!

I hoped for better today!!!

After we had proceeded through the cruise terminal (passports at the ready but not needed on the way out) we found ourselves walking along the side of a busy dual carriageway and car parking lot heading for the train station! I was very relieved when we turned a corner which revealed the beginning of the Grand Canal!!!

Walking over a large footbridge and stopping in the middle to take in the sights from this vantage, we could see dozens of boats of all shapes and sizes all frantically avoiding each other to get to their ultimate destinations.



Entrance to the Grand Canal

It looked like sheer chaos - yet there was a perceivable rhythm to it all which was hard to define. It was rush hour and people were on their way to places of work.

Over the bridge, we entered what I had always imagined the streets of Venice would look like.



Shady narrow lanes and café's



Back street canals

These were dark narrow passages which went off in random directions between old and haphazard buildings of grubby pastel shades 'elbowing' each other as they jostled for the space to exist. There were washing lines, telephone and power cables strewn and coiled, there were the start of interesting shops - and then a shaft of sunlight would spotlight on a small bridge crossing over one of the narrow canals.

It had the most unique beauty.

We would walk a few yards and then be arrested by unusual sights or by something in a shop window.

Of note were the Venetian masks - some of which looked very creepy! They were made of papier-mâché and expertly painted by hand with glossy paints.



Masks as used by the rich and famous to hide their promiscuity in the old days



Very interesting shop

We entered one shop to see and watch how these were made and even tried some on. The proprietor was very kind and took great pride to show us his great collection of masks for sale - each one around €30 or more - and I could tell he was quite anxious for us to buy one. Unfortunately we couldn't but we spent a very enjoyable 15 minutes or so in his shop.

We walked on following signs for 'San Marco' and 'Rialto Bridge' which were hand painted on the walls and overhangs.

More shops - many of them selling similar things but always interesting.

Our girls were in their pleasure zone!

More narrow streets and dark corners, another bridge or two and boats and more boats which were motoring up these narrow canals with just inches to spare on either side.

There was the equivalent boat version of a refuse lorry collecting waste for recycling.

And then there were the Gondolas. They were extremely ornate with gilded seats and fittings and velvet cushions. Most of them charged €100 for twenty minutes, seated six and you were NOT allowed to sing 'Just One Cornetto'!



The famous Venice Gondolas

Thoughts turned to coffee (or cioccolatte) and we found a small bar with a couple of outside tables in an enclosed courtyard.

The very friendly young waitress spoke very good English and we were soon sipping our hot drinks. An Italian brioche would have been nice but breakfast had only been an hour and a half earlier.

I had heard that Venice was expensive and that it is its intent to rip off tourists (more about that later!) as much as possible, but the cost of our chocolates and cappuccinos were very reasonable and very very nice too.

It seems that Venetian proprietors are very protective of their toilets! You have to be a qualified customer to use them and there was an electric lock on this one that the girl who served us pressed a button to allow us in.

Also further into the centre there would be purpose built toilet establishments which charged you €1.50 to have a wee!!! It was 'big business' (if you'll excuse the pun!)

We wandered along passing more bridges and canals and through medieval squares and piazzas. The number of people was escalating and so were the food prices.



More canals

There was a gathering of tourists - hundreds of them - congregating like bees to honey - and they were all draped over the sides of the Rialto bridge taking selfies!

The Rialto bridge is one of Venice's famous tourist spots crossing over the Grand Canal. It has a series of arches but recently there has been remedial work carried out on it and at the same time each and every one of the arches had been turned into a shop. Now you cannot look through the arches. It reminded me of the London lockups beneath the old viaducts. I suppose the shops now pay for maintenance to the Rialto Bridge.



Rialto Bridge



View of Rialto Bridge from the webcam



View from Rialto Bridge

We made it to Piazza San Marco and witnessed the thousands of people standing gawping at the Bell Tower, the Basilica and Dogi's Palace - or were they gawping at the infinite queues??? To visit inside one of these revered landmarks you might wait for a good 3 hours.



The tower in piazza San Marco (St Mark's Square)

We waded through the human sea to the water's edge and looked up and down the Grand Canal. I suppose we stayed about 20 minutes admiring the beautiful classical buildings then we decided to find somewhere for a Venetian lunch on the pathways back to the ship.



The Basilica



The famous waterfront view from St Mark's Square

We stopped off in a Trattoria and enjoyed our own choice of lovely pasta dishes. Martin ordered a large beer despite me trying to discretely tip him off it would cost him €11!!!

Too late!!!

The beer arrived in a huge one litre glass much to Martins surprise!!! I don't think he finished it.

We ambled back along streets trying to retrace our original route- most of the time very successfully.

We made it back to the start of the Grand Canal where our journey commenced and finding an hour on our hands we stopped at a canal side bar for another beer or glass of wine. I had a Limoncello!



Bars and restaurants along the Grand Canal

Martin and Gill had been 'spot on' to direct us to walk into the centre of Venice and I urge anyone going to try it as well. It was great entertainment and we had some great sights to see!

Great call guys!!!

After walking back to port along the dual carriageway we endured an extra security check before embarking.

We were ready for the 6.00pm sail out and the decks were for once crowded with Spirit passengers.

The sail out in the sunset was nothing short of sensational. We could now see clearly all the waterside buildings on both sides of the Guidecca Canal. There was a definite blue aura in the air and with the golden sun behind us it was a photographers delight.



The sail out of Venice from The Thomson Spirit



Such wonderful scenery

With the towers and domes casting long shadows across the city-scape, people in boats and on the banks waving at our beautiful old ship and the knowledge that we were sailing out of one of the worlds most beautiful places, we stood on the Promenade deck in awe at the indescribable changing vista.

Once we had passed St Marks Square we moved over to the starboard side of the ship to look back at the other side of Venice.

The sun was very low in the sky and soon it would set. Just as the sun moved behind a tower I snapped a great picture.



Sunset over Venice



Venetian skyline at sunset

While out on deck we heard the sad story from an acquaintance that they had only just made it back to the ship because the water taxi they had booked and paid €40 for never turned up.

They were contacted by the Spirit crew to ask where they were. To get back to the ship they had to hire another water taxi costing them a further €90. A rip off!!!

The wind was becoming rough on deck when we had reached the centre of the lagoon so I took one last look at Venice and vowed to return one day before I went inside.

We met at seven thirty in Raffles for pre dinner drinks and then went for dinner just before 8pm.

Curry on the menu tonight - a lamb madras!

All our gang enjoy a good curry and have become chilli tolerant, meaning - we like it hot!!!! We asked Dino our usual waiter if we could have some extra chilli flakes to sprinkle on our curry and it was immediately forthcoming. Nothing is too much trouble for these guys and they are a credit to their profession and to Thomson.

While we were enjoying the augmented spice in our dinner, Keith suddenly started to cough uncontrollably and rushed out of the Compass Rose restaurant. He'd had a small accident when sprinkling on his chilli flakes and too many had spilled over his lamb.

Our thoughts were that he had overdone the chilli.

We carried on with our meal for a short time and then I went to phone from reception to check on him.

No answer, so I went below to find his cabin.

It took a while as cabin 563 was actually on the same lower deck as many of the cabin numbers beginning at 401, so I was initially on the wrong deck below.

I was getting pretty close on the correct deck and turned a corner to find Keith talking to his cabin maid.

I was relieved.

As we walked back to the dining room together, Keith explained that he had a piece of lamb stuck in his windpipe and he was choking. Luckily in his cabin he managed to dislodge it and he could breathe properly again. We never realised.

Drama over and we went to the Broadway show lounge to watch the show team present Piano Man - a series of songs which featured piano parts. It was very good, and I was very pleased to hear Ted James our Cruise Director again ask for respect and consideration to the performers and others watching, by observing common theatre etiquette and not talking during the performance.

After the show, it was a rerun of the Crew Show which of course we stayed to watch and give support to all the boys and girls who give their time for free to entertain us. Everyone gave them warm deserved applause, not for just their performances tonight but probably also for all of the wonderful service and help which they willingly give.



The crew's reprised performance

Hvar in Croatia tomorrow

Day 13 – 26th Sep 2017 – Hvar Island, Croatia

I made sure that I was out on deck early enough this morning to watch our approach into Hvar - a long island just off the Croatian coast and this would be our penultimate port on our cruise. Previously I had turned on the cabin TV and tuned to the ship's forward looking webcam to assess where we were and I had seen land lurking in the distance on-screen.

On deck, there was a cloudless blue sky and we were about 5 miles from port. Bit of a strong wind but I found a lea on the Promenade deck's front walkway and the sun was warming me up. As usual I was taking copious amounts of footage with my handycam.

We were right in the middle of the Dalmatian islands and there were several of them on the horizons and around the ship. Very reminiscent of the Caribbean I thought.

Glinting in the sunlight about a mile ahead of us was the cruiser Star Breeze. She must have followed us out of Port Venice and caught up to overtake us in the early hours. I wondered if she would go to Hvar with us today so it seemed I was correct!



The Star Breeze heads for Hvar just in front of us

We had booked an excursion to take us by boat around the Paklini Islands today, and we had a good amount of time before we embarked on the boat, so no rush.

These islands had the unique feature of being shaped like pieces of a jigsaw and were sculpted by the winds and currents of the eastern Adriatic. They were frugally inhabited.



The jigsaw of the archipeligo

The Spirit docked in Hvar bay about a mile off-shore. Today we were to be tendered over. There was a ticket queuing system in operation in the Broadway Show Lounge, but of course as we were on a TUI run excursion, we had priority access to the tender boat.

Descending to Deck 2 and then individually being scanned out by a crew member with a hand scanner, we cautiously made our way down the temporary davit steps scaffolded outside the boat and onto our waiting taxi to shore.

It was very cramped but I suppose if this tender boat was used in an abandonment of ship, no one would bother to complain!

Thankfully the ride was quick and the pretty harbour of Hvar came into view.

Beautiful!



Hvar's harbour

We docked and as our excursion boat was running a bit late we had a little bit of time to have a quick look around Hvar's stone square. It was ancient but of course restaurants and shops were melded with the original architecture.

A tall stone bell tower stood proudly at the end of the concourse.



The cobbled stone square



View of the square from the harbour

We finally boarded our little boat and found some seats upstairs. There were some sun-beds so Mart (he who has a bad knee at the moment) 'bagged' one of these in the sunshine much to his delight.



Our little boat

Keith was forward downstairs busy with his handy-cam while Gill, Gillie and I took bench seats on the side of the upper deck under a shady awning.

We set off and headed for the archipelago passing the Spirit and Star Breeze that were anchored in the bay. What a superb sight they both were painted pure white; the Spirit sporting her characteristic light blue funnel.



Thomson Spirit anchored in the bay

On board our pleasure boat, a tour guide started his commentary with a Slavic accent. What he was telling us was quite interesting but his monotonic voice made you switch off after a while!

Although it was a nice boat ride, the views we had of the Paklini islands were very much all the same - rocky beaches and low scrub and trees only with an occasional building. I think the tour was a bit drawn out.

After about an hour we docked at a small marina. Apparently this was a playground for 'the young jet set' as we were told, and there was the evidence of expensive yachts and cruisers moored up to support this fact.

Going ashore we walked over the island to a beach on the other side and found a nice shady bar - 'Toto's' - for a cool drink and a spot of lunch.



Toto's bar and restaurant

Gillie and I shared a plate of freshly fried calamari (squid in a light crispy batter) and washed it down with a glass of refreshingly cool white wine.

We only had a couple of hours ashore and soon we were walking back to meet the boat - which was late again!!!

I thought we were going straight back to Hvar town, but our boat crew insisted on taking us around the remainder of the archipelago for another hour!



Continuing our tour around the archipelago

My eyes were starting to get heavy and I was wrestling with my consciousness, but the guy sitting next to me really had hit the land of slumber and I was a bit concerned that the rocking of the boat was going to toss him backwards overboard!

We passed back alongside the Spirit, the tender boats already busy returning landlubbers to the ship and then we slowly docked back in Hvar harbour.

We had about 50 minutes before the last tenderboat pulled out, which was just enough time to look round some stalls and buy the obligatory fridge magnet..

Our return trip on the ship's tenderboat was again crowded and cramped, but soon we were back on board the Spirit and in Raffles bar.

We agreed to meet back there after sail-out at 7:30 for pre-diner drinks.



Sunset over the Adriatic

Sailout was a bit of a non-event as we were already at sea of course, but I did grab a great sunset shot on my iPhone.

There was a letter pushed under our cabin door. It was from Ted James our Cruise Director. In his letter he agreed with me that sometimes people need to be reminded about 'theatre etiquette' and that he had amended his pre-show announcement asking for consideration for other people and respect for the performers, and that if people wanted to talk then there were other areas on the ship which were more appropriate. Good! I felt somewhat vindicated!



The Show team's final performance before transferring to the Thomson Dream

The show team put on a great Motown show at 10:30pm and we had really good seats by the side of the stage. After their performance, Alan Roberts the comedian, presented his second performance - this time slightly more risqué

Every night Gillie and I would go back to the Lido restaurant to grab our night-time drinks. We seemed to be considered as regulars by the waitresses and Barnes who even knew our names and what we would order!

Our last day tomorrow and we visit the port of Bar in Montenegro. I am not too sure whether this little port will be of any interest, as there are few pictures of it on Google images.

Day 14 – 27th Sep 2017 – Bar and Stari Bar, Montenegro

It quite surprised me that Gillie was up and dressed this morning and I was only just awake! So she beat me on deck. Normally she would join Keith, Gill and myself after her shower.

When I stepped out the door onto the Promenade deck I was surprised by the sight of the stunning landscape of Bar's Montenegrin mountains.

They were enormous with some clouds kissing the top of them and the town of Bar shaded from the early morning sun.

We had already docked and a large dirty Chinese tanker was docked at 90 degrees to our side. Port Adria at Bar was an industrial port but not quite as industrialized as Rijeka had been two days ago.



Thomson Spirit docked at Port Adria at Bar

Despite initial thoughts, we could see from the ship that Bar had a charm of its own.

We could see some small naval ships docked in the port with us and we watched a Jadrolinija ferry arrive and snuggle up to the dock across the harbour.



An early morning Jadrolinija ferry arrives from Ancona, Italy

Attention also turned to a mysterious golden domed building about half a mile inland.



Mysterious golden dome

The plan was to get the courtesy bus into town and then get taxis to the mountain village of Stari Bar which was about 5 kilometers inland. Keith and I thought we could just see it from the ship.

TUI guides chaperoned us to the bus stop as we were prohibited from walking into or out of the port ourselves.

We soon found the Bar taxi rank when the bus dropped us off and discovered the fare one way was €5. Being the 5 of us we needed 2 taxis to take us to Stari Bar.



The ancient Montenegrin Town fo Stari Bar

Gillie and I jumped into the first and off we sped. The driver dropped us at the Stari Bar bus station just as we saw Keith, Martin and Gill go sailing by up a steep hill.



A walk up through the town

Damn, we would have to now search for them to meet up.

We paid the driver and climbed a steep cobbled street hoping that maybe the others were either on their way down or at least keeping a lookout for us.

The climb up the hill was challenging but at the same time interesting as we could check out a few bars and shops on our ascent. We passed a bar where the towns old men were gathered to chat and smoke. We could also see the substantial ancient ruins of a fort which was obviously the main tourist attraction of Stari Bar.

We caught sight of Mart at the top of the hill waving to us. He was standing with Keith and Gill.

Good!

On reaching the top and pausing momentarily to get our breaths back, we made our way to the ticket office and paid our €2 each to enter the remains.



Entrance to the old fort

We discovered that it had been seriously damaged by an recent earthquake in 1979 and we could see this as we walked around its high walls and cobbled pathways. From the top we has great views back over the town and surrounding countryside. The mountains with their contrasting coloured layers of strata towered over us providing the most dramatic backdrop.

We could also see back over the port from the very top of the fort and spot The Spirit docked.



A stop for a superb lunch with very welcoming hosts

We had a really nice lunch of crispy chicken and a Greek salad on the way back down the town from the fort and were accompanied by several cats who sat hoping for tidbits under our table.

We bought our last fridge magnet and then got taxis back to Bar. Martin and Gill went back to the ship while Keith, Gillie and I stayed on to try and find the mysterious golden domed building we'd seen from the ship.

We walked along a palm tree lined promenade on Bars coastline then saw a glint through the trees.



Orthodox Church of Saint Jovan Vladimi

We changed direction and headed into town crossing over a main road. We saw the highly decorative building from a closer distance. It had a bright blue metallic roof and two towers. There were 4 other smaller golden domes round the central larger one and crosses adorned the facade. So it wasn't a Mosque

We approached with just a little trepidation but as we got nearer realised quickly that it was the most beautiful Greek Orthodox Church or maybe even a Cathedral.

We looked inside this very modern place of worship and marveled at the wondrous paintings and murals that completely covered all the walls and ceilings..



The Knave



The Dome

The predominant colour was like a Wedgewood blue and many of the paintings showed men with long beards. There were a few unfinished murals where a few roughly sketched lines indicated to somebody how the finished mural would look.

We looked around for quite some time noting the texture of the finished pictures at base level. Obviously everything was hand painted but closer inspection described the brush marks and painting techniques that must have been used.

The three of us left the church and walked back along the prom.



The Marina and Promenade at Port Adria

We found a bar for a cool drink. We also used the free WiFi to do our online catch-up and we pondered over the fact that this was our last day and we would be heading home early tomorrow.

It was a good sail out tonight and I was joined on deck by the others in a brisk wind. As we pulled out of Bar so the mountains looked more dramatic than ever. Some wispy clouds were touching the top of the highest peaks joining earth to sky.



Wonderous scenery for our sail out of Port Adria

Sunset at just after 6:30 was one of the best we'd seen marking the last one of our Adriatic cruise.



As the sun sinks for the last time over the Adriatic, thoughts turn to going home.

We met up with Gill and Martin in Raffles at 7:15pm for pre dinner drinks (a little earlier than usual) and then went to dinner in The Compass Rose for the last time. Dino and Budi were tending to our every need as usual but this time we felt that we would like to sat a big 'thank you' to them.

It was known from the start that on Thomson cruises that all tips are included unlike some other cruise companies that expect you to pay £10 to £20 per day to the crew that help you enjoy your holiday. But we felt that to give something to our waiters, wine waiters and housekeeping staff would be a nice gesture.

We planned to give them all something from all of us and so we put some money in an envelope for Dino, Martin and Gill did the same for Budi and Keith tipped Jay our wine waiter for the first week.

We had a photograph taken with them so that we could remember them all properly.

After saying our goodbyes we headed this time, not to the Broadway Showl lounge where the Show Team were presenting their Moulin Rouge show as we'd seen this last week, but up to Horizons to watch the trio who we had not seen since boarding the ship two weeks ago.

In Horizons there was a nice relaxed and darkened atmosphere - just the type that I liked and the trio were already playing. We found some seats but Keith felt it all was a bit tame for him so he left to go and watch the Show Team.

We drank our drinks and had a listen but we had to agree with Keith that the trio, although having a good sound, were not what we would call 'rock'n'roll' - a bit too cheesy playing songs by The Seekers, and Tony Christie etc.

We left and headed for High Spirits just in time to hear the superb Strum Jam play Bohemian Rhapsody. It was absolutely fantastic! Great carefully crafted vocals with 5 part harmony and a guitarist who was extremely good.

Now they WERE 'rock'n'roll' so we stayed to hear the end of their set.



Strum jam – very fine musicians!

Once the disco took over it was time to leave! We true musicians believe that there is very little skill in putting on recorded music I'm afraid, despite the fact that other people love it and it gets them going. For us, its live music and live shows and live vocals every time! That's what we like!

Oh well, back to our cabin to finish the packing and secure our suitcases to leave them outside our door by 1:00am. They would be taken during the early hours into bonded storage and we would not be seeing them again until we got back to Gatwick tomorrow. I am sure this is the best way as it speeds up the process of getting us home no end - we don't need to check in or do a bag drop!

Gillie set her alarm for 05:45am so that it would give us a couple of hours to wake up, pack our hand luggage, say bye-bye to our housekeepers Sasha and Khrystie, get some breakfast and prepare for our journey from Cilipi airport near Dubrovnik back to Gatwick.

The Spirit had only about 70 kilometres to sail to get back to Dubrovnik and she would enter Port Gruz and dock in the night while we slept.

Day 15 – 28th Sep 2017 – Flying back to Gatwick

"Gillie, what time did you set your phone alarm to?"

"5:45 so that we'll be up for 6:00"

"Well it went off at 6:45 and now it's 7:00 and we have to be down on the dock for the coach at 7:45!"

Panic!!!

Only 45 minutes to get showered, dressed, finish packing, check the room, weight the hand luggage and have breakfast before we have to be ready for the coach to take us back to Cilipi airport and our flight back to Gatwick!!!

We shifted into an unheard of gear and somehow we made it!

At the airport I spied our Show Team waiting for their flight. The 'Swing Team' as they were known were standing in during our time on the Spirit for the original Show Team who were having time off. But the Swing Team had done an absolutely superb job. Each and every one of them!



The Swing Team on their way to meet the Thomson Dream

They were flying out today to join the Thomson Dream at Corfu to give the Dream's resident Show Team a break for their holiday.

Our Dreamliner arrived at Dubrovnik approximately 10 minutes later than scheduled bringing in a new batch of excited Spirit cruisers, but it made up the time to allow us to board for our scheduled take off at 10:50.

There would be a total of 6 TUI flights back to the UK today - Gatwick, Manchester, Birmingham, Doncaster, and Glasgow - not all of them Dreamliners so we were lucky.



TUI's G-TUID lands to take us back to England

Keith was in his usual 'I don't want to go home' mode and I think Mart's knee was giving him quite a bit of gyp too.

Gillie, Gill, Keith and I got into the queue when instructed to do so by the announcement for our flight.

Mart said he'd sit and wait until the queue was moving.....

Thoughts turned to memories and reflections of the past two weeks.



Sailing into Malta.



Standing at the back of the amphitheatre at Taormina looking at Mount Etna



Sitting at the castle with a beer overlooking Parga.



Looking down on that fabulous view at Kotor.



The cable car ride at Dubrovnik.



Our big plate of hams and cheese in Trieste.



The sail out of Venice.



Our boat ride at Hvar.



Watching the sun sets over the Adriatic

These had been my own highlights, but of course there were plenty more including all the lovely food and drinks, the wine tasting, the top class entertainment and all the people we met, especially those who looked after and took great care of us.



Budi - our waiter in the Compass Rose Restaurant

They were all very special people. A big **THANKYOU** to them all!!!!

It was a shame that we could not honour our invitation to the Captains table on our first night at sea, but it was the very fact we WERE asked that we will remember on our forthcoming 40th wedding anniversary next week.

Any down-sides I ask myself?

Well, I didn't enjoy the ship's persistent judder, and with my long legs, I would have liked extra legroom on the Dreamliner flights as despite the Thomson blurb, Dreamliner standard seats are as cramped as any other budget airline, but that's about all.

The Spirit is an old ship and her days with TUI are numbered. She will most likely join a new cruise company somewhere else in the world and be renamed. It would be nice to think that she will be reincarnated and continue her worldly sea journeys.



The Thomson Spirit – now an old lady!

Yes, we'd all had a wonderful time and felt that we had our money's worth. We booked at our local Thomson shop just a couple of days after this cruise became available (that was in April 2016) and we paid around £2,000 each, but got a £750 Early Bird discount on the total booking for the 5 of us and we all got a free All Inclusive drinks package.

Gillie and I had outside deluxe cabins on the Promenade deck right at the front of the ship facing forward (and this time we got the cabin we had actually booked - not like on our last cruise on the Celebration!) so we were just a few feet away from being on deck first thing every morning.

Gillie and I spent around £300 on anything else between us while on board, which included 3 TUI excursions for us, 2 meals each in Siroccos totaling £80, use of the safe for two weeks £25, 3 days of ship WiFi £25, 2 sessions of wine tasting £16, and the odd drink not on the AI scheme.

One last thing to note, the WiFi worked okay when you were in Explorers and in the Lido - most other places on ship there was no connection possible - but... after buying '3 days' of WiFi and thinking it would time out on our 4th day, it didn't!!! It seems that 3 days gives you 72 hours of use providing you switch it off immediately after you finish your current browsing/email session, and I still had over £15 of WiFi credit left when I disembarked for the last time in Dubrovnik to come home.

.....The queue for the aircraft was now moving and we were ushered onto busses to take us to the aircraft. Off we went - without Mart!

We boarded the aircraft and took our seats. Still no Mart!

A couple of other busses drew up and spilled passengers onto the apron and they boarded our Boeing 787-8 too.

No sign of Mart!

Gill began to get concerned. Had he sat there for too long and the gate had closed? Had he had further problems with his knee? He had no cash or card on him, so if he were to be left behind he'd have a difficult job getting back to the UK.

All the busses had now emptied and driven off.

Finally one last bus drew up bringing a few stragglers to the aircraft.

Last one off the bus - was Mart! Phew!!!

The flight home was about 2hours 10minutes but baggage reclaim was very slow and confused many as cases from our flight were on 2 different carousels.

We called Maple Manor parking to bring our cars round to Car Park 5 and my Vauxhall Insignia turned up just as we entered the car park so we were soon on our way home.

My overall conclusion....

The Spirit may not have been the most glamorous ship, but the itinerary, the ports (well mostly!), the service, the people and the atmosphere on board, 'made' it a very glamorous cruise and one I would go on again tomorrow!!!!



Left to right - Gillie, Kev, Keith, Budi, Dino, Gill and Martin

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