

# ***Mediterranean Cruise***

***March 2017***



***Bob and Molly Hillery***

*This was our first trip with Viking Ocean Cruises, although we have been on several Viking River Cruises over the past seven years and have always enjoyed them. In addition, this cruise would take us to two new countries in North Africa (Tunisia and Algeria), albeit for only short shore excursions in the two capital cities.*

*We were traveling with our friends Gord and Jay from Massachusetts who we had met on a river cruise in Vietnam and Cambodia. We obviously flew by different routes but met up in Rome three days ahead of the start of the cruise so we were able to do quite a bit of sight-seeing in that wonderful city. Molly and I had also chosen to extend our stay in Europe by having three days in Barcelona at the end of the cruise.*

*As we invariably do, we thoroughly enjoyed the time we spent in the five countries we visited. It was particularly nice to visit four new cities but we also relished the time spent in those cities that we had visited on several previous occasions.*

*On sailing from Rome we had one full day at sea before reaching our first stop of Valletta, Malta but even on this day we sailed close to Sicily and to the volcanic island of Stromboli and got close-up views of Mt Iddu which has been continuously erupting for two thousand years! For the most part the sailing was on calm seas although we had one very rough night as we sailed north from Algiers with strong winds blowing in from the Atlantic to the east.*

*We enjoyed the cruise, especially the shore excursions, but felt that Viking still has work to do to make their ocean cruises as top-notch as their river cruises. Apparently some aspects of cruising don't scale very well from a river boat of 200 passengers to an ocean liner with 1000.*

*The map below shows the route of our seven nights at sea.*





## ***Mediterranean Cruise, February—March 2017***

### **Wednesday February 22/Thursday February 23**

We left home about 8:30am and had a McDonald's breakfast before driving to the airport. After leaving our car at the Fast-Park lot, we arrived at check-in with almost 2 hours before flight time. It was then that we first learned that our first flight to Detroit was delayed by two hours, making our connection to Amsterdam a little tenuous. After a long discussion we left things as they were with a backup plan to leave Detroit on a later flight.

We watched the progress of the incoming flight and, after several changes in both directions, we learned that our flight to Detroit would now give us an hour for the Transatlantic connection – if things held! In fact, things got a little better and we now had over an hour in Detroit and almost two hours in Amsterdam (5 to 7am!). Even the last flight to Rome was 30 minutes early so we were at Rome airport by 8:30am.

Our bags arrived (always a nice surprise) and we soon got to the train for the center of Rome. From Termini it was a good 10 minute walk to the hotel – where we were told that they were overbooked and had moved us to another Best Western near the Colosseum. After a prolonged “discussion” we were taken by taxi to yet another Best Western on the other side of the station where we could check in immediately. We also confirmed that Jay and Gord would be moved to the same hotel and communicated with them by text when they landed about 1:30. All was well when they reached the hotel before 3pm.

We had a welcome drink and then rested until meeting again for dinner. We ate in the hotel for convenience, but it turned out to be quite good and reasonably priced. We retired about 9:30.

### **Friday February 24**

We both had a relatively good sleep and it was about 9am before we went down for breakfast. Jay and Gord were almost finished but we all met up again at 10 to start our day out. We had tickets for the Hop On/Hop Off bus which started just across the street from our hotel.



***Victor Emmanuel II Monument***

***Colosseum***



***Circus Maximus***



***Castell Sant'Angelo***



It was a little drizzly and cool on top of the bus but it had a roof so we didn't get wet. We stayed on the bus for about 1 ½ hours before getting off at the Trevi Fountain. Here we did the usual coin toss to assure a return visit to Rome and then found a café for a light lunch.



We then took the bus almost back to the hotel and visited the Basilica of Santa Maria dei Angeli which had been designed by Michelangelo but built primarily by another architect. It is a relatively simple cross-shape but has a huge high-domed vestibule as its entrance.



The whole church is built into the walls of the Diocletian baths. We spent about an hour in the church which includes a remarkable meridian time piece on which light shines at the equinox through a small hole high in the wall to fall on a copper line indicating the year and covering several centuries. [See inset opposite page]

The baths are enormous, are the largest of the Roman period and could accommodate over 3000 people at once. They originally covered an area of 32 acres. In addition to the baths, the complex contained libraries and a gymnasium and was clearly the center of attraction for the nobility of the time.

We returned to the hotel for a late afternoon drink having scouted out several likely restaurants in the local area for dinner tonight and tomorrow. We selected one that was not too far to walk from the hotel but it turned out to be very much a tourist venue; mediocre service and food, although the price was right. Hopefully we will select a little better tomorrow.



*In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Pope Clement XI ordered Bianchini to build the beautiful meridian of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Rome in 1702. Bianchini chose the structure given by Michelangelo in 1566 and took as a model the meridian of San Petronio in Bologna designed by Cassini. The meridian was then inaugurated on the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 1702. But because of the rehandling carried out by Vanvitelli in 1749, the meridian lost some of its importance as an astro-nomic observatory; a recent memorial tablet indicates that the meridian was used as a solar clock until 1846 when it was replaced by the Gianiculum cannon.*

*The system includes a double meridian constituted by two gnomons, a boreal one and an austral one. The austral gnomon originates from a hole positioned on the southern wall through which a sunbeam penetrates when it is on the superior meridian. The gnomonic hole is situated at the height of 20.30 meters; the size of the ellipse varies from 22 to 110 cm according to the meridian height of the sun; the accuracy of the measure at the moment of its transit depends on the clearness and the speed at which the dot moves; that is of about two seconds. The meridian line is materialized by a brass strip at center of which there is a thin line determining the real meridian; this meridian is 44 meters long, 38 of which are usable. From the boreal gnomon it was possible to observe the North star, but the hole was eliminated with Vanvitelli's restructuring. Naturally, the higher the gnomonic hole was situated, the more accurate were the observations and nearly all the great meridians were set up in churches since they were at that time the only buildings that could house such devices. Alongside the meridian there are some squares representing the constellations: they correspond to the points on a tangent line where the solar dot passes when the sun enters the respective sign of the Zodiac.*



## ***The Diocletian Baths***

**Saturday February 25**

We missed Gord and Jay at breakfast but we met at 10am as planned. I had lost our two day passes for the HOHO bus but was able to retrieve the booking on my phone and – with the help of very nice bus personnel – was able to get a replacement.

First we went to the Colosseum where we got off the bus and admired the enormous structure as well as the Triumphal





*The Colosseum and the Constantine Arch*



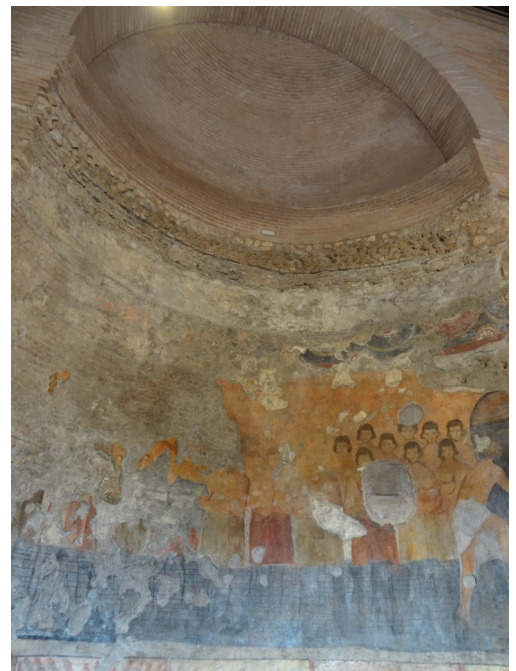
Arch of Constantine. We then started the process of getting into the Forum – our major destination for the day. After several mis-steps, we eventually found our way in with the correct tickets and started our 1 1/2 hour period in this most famous Rome attraction. Molly and I had been here several times but it was a first for Jay and Gord so we split up for the time inside so we could each “do our thing”.



*The  
Forum*







*Top Left: Olive, Fig Trees and Grape Vine replanted since Roman times.*

*Top Right: The Martyrs Oratory*

*Left and Right: The Temple of the Vestal Virgins*



*More of the Roman Forum*



Despite having been there many times, there is always something new (it is an ongoing archeological site) and it is always exciting to realize that we were walking on the same stones that the many Caesars walked – including the walk taken by Julius to his death and cremation.

There were a few spots of rain but in general it was mild and bright with occasional sunny spells so we were able to stroll the ancient streets in comfortable conditions and simply enjoy being there once again.

On leaving the Forum, we had lunch at an outdoor café just across the street and then walked to the *Victor Emmanuel*



monument (in a rain shower) to catch the bus again at the foot of the steps leading to the Capitoline Hill. (Left)



*The Spanish Steps and the Carnival Parade*





We took it just a couple of stops to a place near the top of the Spanish Steps where there were the usual huge crowds. This time, however, we were present for a parade on the street at the bottom of the steps and we had good views from our overlook point. We are not certain as to what the parade was about but as Lent starts this week we assumed that it was a religious parade, perhaps in honor of a Saint's Day. In any event the Medieval costumes, the horses and the drum corps made for a beautiful and lively spectacle.

We then had about a 20 minute walk to catch the bus back to Termini and our hotel, where we arrived close to 6pm. We planned to meet again at 7:30 to go to dinner.

One final note from our two-day tour on the bus: we were all very impressed with just how many churches, monuments, statues and beautiful buildings that we saw along the route. Obviously Rome (The Eternal City) has a lot of history and culture but we remarked that almost every (generally overlooked) piece of art would have attracted large crowds almost anywhere else in the world. Here, such items were "two a penny" and we felt privileged to be seeing them and being a part of the continuing history of this great city.

Tonight I made a reservation at a restaurant we had seen on our walk yesterday. Again, it was only a short walk from the hotel but was so much better than last night. The food and service were excellent; the price was higher (by about 2X) but the ambience and everything about the place made it so much more of an experience. Perhaps it wasn't the typical "Mom and Pop" restaurants that we have enjoyed so much on previous visits to Rome, but it was a very pleasant experience. It was after 10pm by the time we got back to the hotel.

### **Sunday February 26**

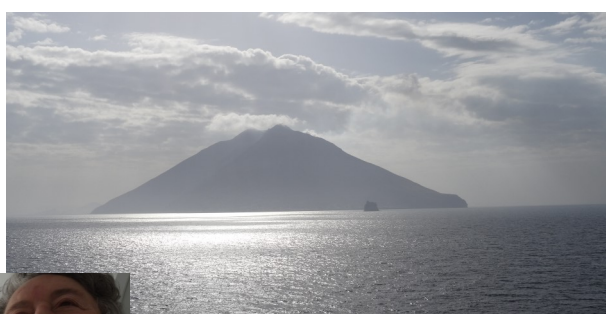
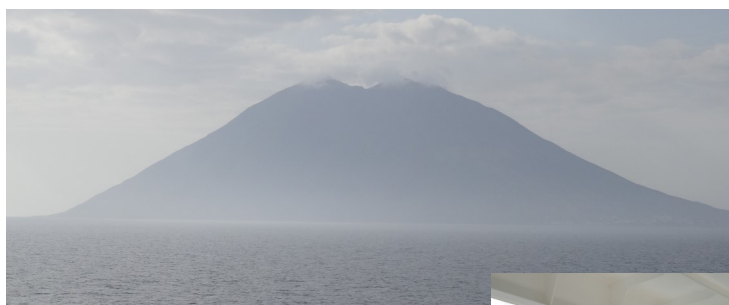
We had breakfast in the hotel and then I went for a two mile walk before we finished packing and checked out. Our shuttle picked us up a little before 12:30 and took us the 50 miles to the port of Civitavecchia. It was a very pleasant ride through some nice countryside although we had no idea that the port was so far from the city.

We arrived at the ship about 1:30 and the check-in procedure was very easy and fast. We were soon settled in our upgraded room and went to the buffet restaurant for a light lunch. After that I walked around the deck for an hour before our lifeboat drill at 5:15. We then relaxed and cleaned up before joining Jay and Gord for dinner at 7:45 in the main restaurant. We found the restaurant to be unusually noisy for a ship. The meal was generally good and the wine flowed freely.

### **Monday February 27**

We were up before nine and went to the main restaurant for breakfast and we were quite disappointed as both our meals were cold. We settled for toast. I went for a 4 mile walk around the deck (1 lap =  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile) and we met Jay and Gord for lunch soon after noon.

We relaxed throughout the afternoon but were also able to see Iddu, a 3000 feet high volcano on the island of Stromboli. It has reputedly been erupting continuously for 2000 years. As we approached the island of Sicily, we took a pilot on board to



***Mt Iddu***



guide the ship through the Straits of Messina. We didn't see much of Sicily as we sailed by. It was now dark and all we could see were lights from various coastal towns and the faint outline of some high mountain peaks. We had a good dinner in the main restaurant and retired about 10pm.



### **Tuesday February 28**

We had breakfast in the café on the seventh deck (much better than yesterday) and then got ready for our shore excursion in Malta.



***Fortified City of Valetta***





## Malta's capital before Valletta: Mdina

We had docked in one of two major harbors which surround the capital city of Valletta and had great views from the ship of this ancient stone fortress. Malta has a long and interesting history, dating back before the Romans came. In the late Middle Ages the island was given to the Knights Templar as they had outstayed their welcome in Rhodes after the Crusades. They were

not only given the island but were put in charge of its defense – a job they completed in fine fashion.

During the Second World War the island was besieged by the Germans and the inhabitants almost ran out of supplies. They somehow managed to thwart any direct invasion and for their bravery the whole island was given the George Cross. (The island was then a colony of Britain and remained so until 1964 when it gained its independence). Its strategic location in the Mediterranean Sea makes it key from a military standpoint but also as a stop on virtually all trade routes. Malta has very little in the way of native supplies and most of its needs are imported. However, in recent years a number of manufacturing and software companies started exporting but even now imports count for a majority of the business. The island is a full member of the European Union and has adopted the Euro as its currency.

*Malta, officially known as the Republic of Malta, is a Southern European island country consisting of an archipelago in the Mediterranean Sea. It lies 50 miles south of Italy, 176 miles east of Tunisia, and 207 miles north of Libya. The country covers just over 122 sq miles, with a population of just under 450,000, making it one of the world's smallest and most densely populated countries. The capital of Malta is Valletta, which at 0.3 sq miles is the smallest national capital in the European Union. Malta has one national language, which is Maltese, and English as an official language.*

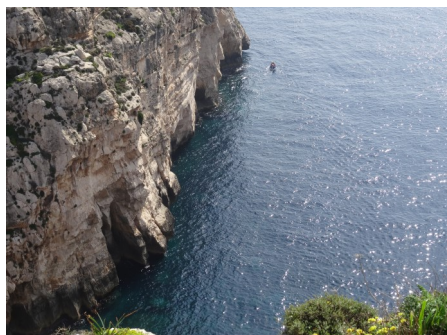
*Malta's location has historically given it great strategic importance as a naval base, and a succession of powers, including the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Moors, Normans, Sicilians, Spanish, Knights of St. John, French and British, have ruled the islands.*

*King George VI of the United Kingdom awarded the George Cross to Malta in 1942 for the country's bravery in the Second World War. The George Cross continues to appear on Malta's national flag. Under the Malta Independence Act, passed by the British Parliament in 1964, Malta gained independence from the United Kingdom as an independent sovereign Commonwealth realm, officially known from 1964 to 1974 as the State of Malta, with Elizabeth II as its head of state. The country became a republic in 1974, and although no longer a Commonwealth realm, remains a member state of the Commonwealth of Nations. Malta was admitted to the United Nations in 1964 and to the European Union in 2004; in 2008, it became part of the Eurozone.*

*Malta has a long Christian legacy and its Archdiocese of Malta is claimed to be an apostolic see because, according to Acts of the Apostles, St Paul was shipwrecked on "Melita", now widely taken to be Malta. Catholicism is the official religion in Malta.*

*Malta is a popular tourist destination with its warm climate, numerous recreational areas, and architectural and historical monuments, including three UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Ħal Saflieni Hypogeum, Valletta, and seven Megalithic Temples, which are some of the oldest free-standing structures in the world.*

The tour that we took was basically a drive from Valetta to several of the inland and sea overlook sites. The major stop was at the Blue Grottos which we could see clearly from our high vantage point.



## *The Blue Grottos*

We didn't go inside any of the buildings and we had very little free time; however, there were a number of photo opportunities and we got a good overview of the main island (there are six altogether, only three of which are inhabited. Having spent a week on Malta several years back, the paucity of stops and the complete absence of a visit to Old Town Valetta didn't bother us much but I feel it was a little too "sketchy" for those on a first (and only?) visit.

The guide was quite good and spoke excellent English. She not only pointed out the sights but also talked a lot about the history and culture of Malta, as well as anecdotes about herself. The weather was very cooperative and we had mostly sunny skies all day with a temperature over 60F.

After returning to the ship and having a light lunch, I walked into the Old Town (completely pedestrianized) for about an hour. Actually there was a lift from the shoreline to the top of the town, so most of my walking was downhill. There are some magnificent buildings and lots to see on the narrow streets – and I wish that I had taken my camera.

Tonight we attended the port lecture on Tunis (tomorrow's stop) and then we joined Gord and Jay for dinner at Manfredi's, one of two specialty restaurants onboard. The meal itself was fine but the service was not as good as we thought it should be – missed drinks, wrong vegetable, etc. When Jay and Gord talked to the manager, he almost immediately asked us to return on Wednesday. We said we would.

We finished the evening with an after-dinner drink in the lounge where an excellent trio played.

### **Wednesday March 1**

We woke up just as we were docking in Tunis on a beautiful sunny morning. Our tour didn't start until 10:45 so we had a leisurely breakfast before getting on the bus.

The tour took us from the port to the center of Tunis, which is a pleasant mixture of North African and French colonial. There are some wide boulevards, typical of Europe, but there are also areas of narrow streets. We visited one of the latter, Mdina, which is a souk with shops selling virtually everything. We were walked through a small section but we were able to see the



central mosque as well as the Casbah. I had always thought that the whole area was called the Casbah but – according to our guide – it is officially just a government building. I have since seen that it refers to the area around the citadel.





## *The Medina*







***The main square (now free of protestors) and the monument to Tunisia's Independence***

In the main square of the city, which is huge and surrounded by beautiful buildings, there was a protest taking place. Apparently this is an almost daily occurrence. This time it was the teachers who were complaining about both hours and pay (although the hours didn't sound that bad as relayed by our guide). It was interesting that several windows of the nearby Casbah were filled with government officials who, of course, were the object of the protest.



***Old harbor in Tunis with a distant view of Catholic Cathedral built in 20th Century but now deconsecrated***