Dubai to Southampton (2)

As with our first post on this trip, we are sending another text-only blog as internet on board is not sufficiently strong to send large documents (as are the blogs with pictures). I should also apologize for the mis-spelling of JordAn in my last writing—with thanks to my editor-in-chief who didn't proof BEFORE I sent it!

When we last wrote, we were about to dock in the port of Aqaba, Jordan, having sailed overnight between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Aqaba is in a very interesting location at the tip of the Gulf of Aqaba, which itself is an arm of the Red Sea. It is Jordan's only coastal town and is wedged in between Egypt, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Saudi border is only 20 miles south of the city and the Israeli resort of Eliat is right next door to Aqaba. The Egyptian resort of Sharm el Sheikh (very popular with the British) is only a few miles away. The Jordon River, which forms the boundary between Israel and Jordon, apparently enters the Red Sea here, having flowed south through the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. How the river climbs from the Dead Sea (the lowest point on earth) to sea level at Aqaba is an interesting phenomenon!

In addition to being a resort town in its own right (and having grown significantly since our last visit about 13 years ago), Aqaba is a major jumping off point for both Petra and Wadi Rum, both of which were on the ship's shore excursion list. Having visited both, we opted this time for the trip to Wadi Rum which was to include "a typical Bedouin lunch in a tent in the desert". We imagined sitting on a sandy floor and being treated to goat, sheep's eyes and hummus, so this was to be our "new thing"

The bus took us from the cruise ship port past the container port and the beautiful beaches nearer the Saudi border, and then into the city center. Here we saw lots of huge resort hotels and a good deal of ongoing construction of many more. We also stopped briefly at an archaeological site which has revealed some of the old city of Aqaba. As with the ancient city near Salalah in Oman, this area was close to the gulf and was a major trading center for several centuries BC and AD.

Jordan doesn't have much in the way of minerals or oil but does export a lot of potash and phosphates,

so the southern region of the country, around Aqaba, has some industry – and a lot of desert!

We drove out of the city and climbed through this desert, with mountain ranges of several thousand feet either side of the road, on our way to Wadi Rum. Those going to Petra continued about another hour north from the point where we turned east for our visit. Wadi (valley) Rum (presumably a river exists at some times of the year) is a vast area of flat, sand desert outlined by jagged mountain peaks and much smaller sandstone rock areas eroded into many different shapes by the wind.

We stopped at the Visitor Center to get some great views over the landscape (used in several films about Mars and the moon) which included a series of peaks called the Seven Pillars of Wisdom, allegedly named by Lawrence of Arabia. His legend continues here as a hero who helped the local tribes to fight the occupying Ottoman Empire – or, at least, to disrupt their trade route to the coast.




On our visit to Wadi Rum a number of years back, we had hired a jeep to take us well into the desert and to several sites where Lawrence of Arabia had lived while writing a book about his adventures here. We also on that visit passed a number of Bedouin tents (we were invited in one for tea) and we actually picked up a small boy on his way home from school and were quite alarmed when he was dropped off in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere. We were assured, however, that his family's compound was within walking distance from the track we were on.

On this visit, however, we strayed no further than a viewing platform at the Visitor Center and gazed

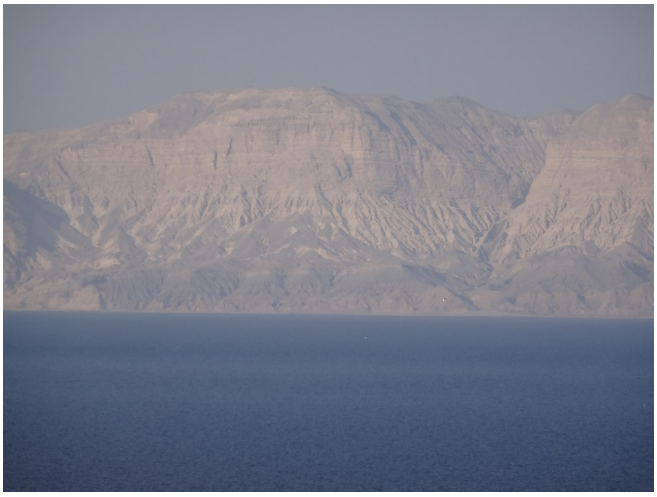
across the sand to the mountains probably between one and two miles away. Then we were driven to our lunch in the tent. It is difficult to contradict the “tent” statement but, rather than the 10 by 10 tents that are dotted throughout the region, this was an open marquee that was probably a hundred feet or more in length. We were actually in one of dozens of desert resorts (that have sprung up in very recent years) that offer accommodation and other facilities (camel, horse or jeep riding, for example) and encourage tourists to live “like a Bedouin” and spend their days exploring the Wadi. The accommodation tents that we saw a little away from our lunch tent where in fact tents (slightly bigger than 10x10) or adobe-type structures with various degrees of modern sleeping and bathing facilities. Some would call it an adventure, some would refer to “roughing it”; we would label it nice for someone else but us. On the other hand, if lonely areas and great night sky views are your thing, these resorts must fill a needed niche for a variety of clientele.

The lunch itself was a buffet of lots of vegetables, skewered meet (which we assume was goat), a chicken breast, hummus and pita breads. There was also a table of fresh fruit, tea, dates and cookies and, as a final item, a local kneaded some freshly baked (on a tandoor-type oven) onto your plate. We were sure that Health and Safety authorities – as well as many tourists – would have abhor this practice. Actually, the whole meal was quite good and seating was at wooden tables, rather than on floor mats as

we had envisioned.

Then it was back to the ship – with the inevitable stop for souvenir shopping – after a very superficial overview of Wadi Rum and of the country of Jordon. In fact, both of us commented that if this excursion were one's only visit to Jordon, a very different sense would be felt than the one we had after about two weeks in country. While a cruise ship stop can give a quick insight into a country, it can also present a somewhat distorted view, not by design, but simply because it is a snapshot taken at only one point. As an aside, we have been surprised at how many of our traveling companions have shunned even these snapshot visits and remained on board the ship. With so many days at sea, we would have thought that everyone would not only be antsy to get on terra firma but also would want to get some exposure to different cultures.

By the time we were up on Tuesday, we had almost reached the main channel of the Red Sea to the south (retracing our steps to Aqaba of two days earlier). We were passing Sharm el Sheikh again before doing a 180 degree turn to change course from southeast to northwest into the Gulf of Suez. By mid-morning we could see the distant shore of the Sinai Peninsula to our right and, later, the first glimpses of the mainland of Egypt to our left.



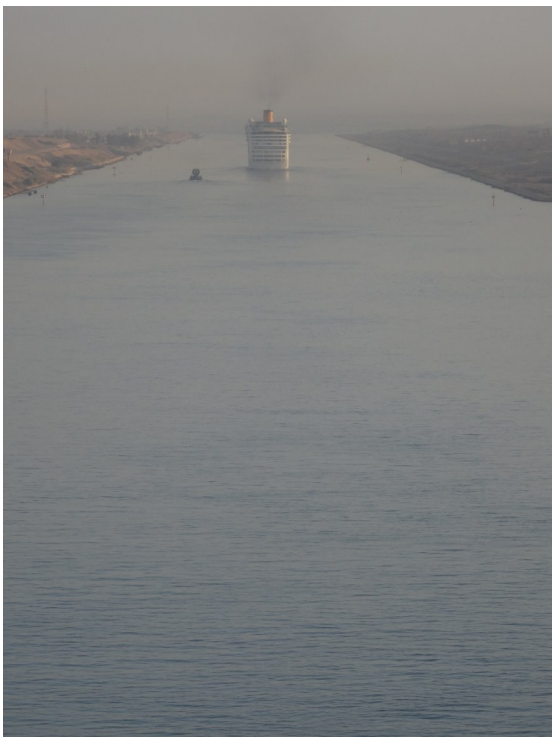
As we sailed north up the Gulf we were variously close to one shore or the other and rarely out of sight of land. Again, to my surprise, both coasts – particularly that on the Sinai, were quite mountainous, with ranges rising steeply from the shore to heights of perhaps 500 to 1500 feet. The hills were almost white in color, particularly when bathed in sunlight, which was the case most of the time. It was cool again to-day as it had been in the hills of Wadi Rum yesterday, with a stiff breeze making the air temperature in the low seventies feel a little chilly.

Two other items of interest on this stretch of water-way were the much-increased traffic (heading to or from the Canal) and the presence of dozens of oil rigs at sea, mostly near the Sinai coast. There were ships of all sizes to be seen on both sides of ours, not only

heading north or south but also tending to the oil platforms and, in a few cases, simply crossing between the two segments of Egypt. Together with the sight of land, these made for an interesting view (as opposed to the all-sea views of the past week) and my walk around the deck (7 miles today!) had a good deal to hold my attention.

Late Tuesday afternoon we attended a lecture on the history of the building of the Suez Canal and of its rather tumultuous history both before and after completion and found it interesting that there have been many periods of closure lasting from a few days to as long as 8 years; the latter following the 1967 Six Day War. Even today, apparently, there is considerable troop presence on the Sinai side which should be obvious as we pass. On the other hand, we were told to expect to see many beautiful areas throughout the day and, normally, a very tranquil scene.

We were up by 7am and had already been sailing the Suez Canal for over three hours, so we were in our convoy heading north as we ate breakfast. The terrain on both sides ("mainland" Egypt and the Sinai) was now essentially dead flat and mostly sand, with little in the way of obvious population.



The first change to the relatively narrow channel (although significantly wider than the Panama Canal) came as we entered first Little Bitter Lake and shortly afterwards, Big Bitter Lake. Both presumably had been fresh water lakes at one point and there were pockets of habitation along the edges of both bodies of water. The larger lake provided an anchoring point for ships that were waiting their turn to go either north or south. Apparently, if large convoys of 24 or more arrive at this lake, they are required to wait for their spot on the end of smaller convoys heading in their direction. This staging area, in addition to the one where we had spent the previous night, was necessary as the canal proper is not sufficiently wide to allow passing of larger vessels.

This situation is changing considerably, however, as more work is done on the canal and – as we were to see shortly – by the addition of another "lane" about 45 miles long to the north of the lakes. Near the town of Ismail (at the northern end of Big Bitter Lake), which is the site where the canal digging began in the late 1800s and is still the headquarters for the canal operation, the canal becomes a divided highway. To accommodate more traffic, the Egyptian Government with aid from other countries, proposed a totally new channel to run parallel to the old canal. The new channel would be for northbound vessels only and the southbound traffic would head down the original lane. As the commentator for the day pointed out, this was a massive undertaking in which millions (billions?) of tons of sand, silt and rock would have to be dug out – and put somewhere. As a result, the Sinai side now has "mountains" of material (as high as this 13 storey ship in places) along the canal side and, on the other side, a similar but slightly lower, island has been created. Between the two canal lanes are occasional channels and roads to facilitate cross-canal traffic of all kinds, from working vehicles to local vehicles wanting to get across the (now two lane) canal.

Work on both sides is ongoing and additional industrial sites and villages/towns are springing up and the whole region gives the impression of prosperity in contrast to what we hear about the rest of Egypt where the significant drop in tourism has created a corresponding fall in the economy.

The construction of this new 45 mile stretch of waterway was sufficiently completed within 12 months to open for traffic, in itself a major accomplishment. The projected cost was $8 Billion and many thought that it would never pay for itself; however at an average cost of $250,000 per vessel per crossing, revenues are significant on a yearly basis. Our ship paid $500,000 for today's voyage, which works out at approximately $200 per passenger, a not-insignificant percentage of the cost of the whole 20 days trip we were taking. I was surprised that only about 40 ships per day travel though the canal, a number that has changed a lot since the opening in the late 1800s – both up and down. Obviously, passenger shipping is far less these days and the tonnage of the commercial ships is much larger, but I would have thought a higher number of vessels would have made this journey each day. With the extra lane and another channel built more recently to bypass Port Said at the Mediterranean this will bring the capability to about 100 ships per day and will accommodate all but the very largest of the world's super tankers. The authorities predict annual revenues of over $13 Billion by 2023.

As we traveled north, the island between the two channels was such that we got only occasional glimpses of ships heading south – and then only of the larger ones. The largest we saw was a container ship headed to Singapore which we were told was about 200 feet longer than the QM2 (itself about 900 feet long) and could carry 20,000 containers!

All along the banks of the canal we saw segments of floating bridges which could be deployed and joined together to cross the canal and were designed for use in any military conflict. In fact, in the wars between Israel and Egypt, these pontoons were used by both sides and stand at the ready in larger numbers today. In addition, there were a number of ferry crossings for both vehicular and foot traffic, so access between the two pieces of Egypt is maintained. At one point there was a railway line than traveled east-west and spanned the canal on the largest swing bridge in the world. It was opened in 2001 but closed in 2014 when the channel that we were

now sailing was opened. Presumably it was felt not worth the effort to span another canal so the old bridge stands idle in an always-open position on the shore of the southbound lane.

Another forced closure was that of a 2 ½ mile long road bridge over the canal at a point north of the "divided highway" and under which we passed towards the end of our time here. The bridge was built with the aid of the Japanese Government and opened in 2001. Unfortunately, fear of terrorist attack forced its closure in 2013 and so far there is no plan for its re-opening. So this magnificent structure stands gloriously over the Suez Canal, ostensibly providing a fast an efficient route across northern Egypt but the only activity we saw as we passed under was a truck and a couple of safety inspectors. As far as we saw, there are no other crossings the entire length of the canal (about 100 miles) except for the ferries mentioned earlier.

Views along the Canal

About 4pm we reached Port Said, or to be more precise, the new stretch of canal that bypasses the city, seen in the distance to the west. The final several miles of our route before reaching the sea was lined with docks and massive container lifts for loading and unloading ships. Again, the building taking place here gave a sense of prosperity – although, admittedly, we didn't see a lot of actual activity.

So, after almost 12 hours we entered the Mediterranean Sea and completed our transit of the Suez Canal. It was a fascinating and interesting journey through an amazing feat of engineering. Now we headed almost due north to our next stop at the post of Limassol in southern Cyprus.

On Thursday, were up shortly after 6:30 today to get breakfast before our shore excursion. We had just arrived in Limassol, in southwestern Cyprus, and had booked a tour that would take us to the northern part of the island. Coincidentally, we had spent about 8 days in Cyprus almost exactly a year ago and had rented a car to visit many of the sights in the southern two thirds of the country. Since rental cars are not permitted to cross the border, we had taken a short walking tour of the northern half of the capital city of Nicosia. So, this shore excursion would take us into totally new territory, and we were looking forward to seeing what many consider the more beautiful part of Cyprus.

Since 1974, Cyprus has been a divided country with Greek Cypriots living in the southern two thirds of the country and Turkish Cypriots living in the north. Between the two is a "Buffer Zone" of perhaps a quarter mile width in most places and occupied by a United Nations military force. The reason for the separation, our tour guide informed us, has its roots in the days when Cyprus was part of the Ottoman Empire in the 1550s but which "came to a head" as recently as the post-World War 2 era, culminating in what is, in effect, two countries. The history and politics of Cyprus are, therefore, fascinating and complicated and we hoped to learn more as we took this excursion. More on this later.

We left the port at Limassol and drove through the western part of the city to join the main east-west motorway. We drove east and then north, across the Troodos Mountains, on a very scenic highway, until we reached the outskirts of Nicosia. Cyprus had had a very wet winter (for which the inhabitants were extremely grateful in an area where prolonged droughts have become the norm) so the countryside was green and lush on this sunny but cool morning.

Once at the buffer zone, we had to pass through two sets of customs and immigration checkpoints – one in the south and one in the north – as we crossed into the Turkish occupied area. We were fortunate that we were allowed to stay on the bus while our tour guide took all the passports to each authority for inspection. With several tour buses arriving simultaneously, this process took almost 30 minutes before we were able to continue our drive (and use our cameras again!) through north Nicosia.

As we have noticed on two previous visits, the first impression on crossing is that the Turkish area of the city is somewhat run down and appears dirtier than the other half to the south. On the other hand, the contrast did not seem as stark last year as on our first visit in 2006, and there even appeared to be some improvement over the last year. Indeed, there was a good deal of construction taking place, with high-rise apartments and office blocks of a more pleasing appearance than the older "Eastern European", concrete buildings.

As we left the city, the countryside soon became very beautiful as we crossed the central fertile valley (Metaoria) and headed toward the northern mountain range (Pentadaktylos). The valley was once the "bread basket" of the country, but since partition its produce is not available in the south and farming has significantly decreased. The mountain range ahead was not as high as that in the south (about 1000 vs up to 3000 meters), had far less vegetation, but had a number of very jagged peaks of mostly red rock. As we climbed to our first stop we had some magnificent views over the valley to the south and the Mediterranean Sea to the north, as well as the mountains themselves.

About two hours after leaving Limassol, we arrived at the picturesque mountain village of Bellapais. The narrow main street with attractive stone cottages on either side led us to a small central square with coffee shops on two corners, an inviting fresh fruit store on a third and – the reason for our visit – a magnificent Gothic monastery at the fourth. The abbey, with its church, refectory and inner courtyard, had been built at the time of the Byzantine period (13th century) and, although no longer a place of worship in this Muslim area of today, has been maintained in its original form. The church and refectory are still in amazingly good condition but many of the higher walls and towers around the courtyard are in partial ruin.

When originally built, the monastery was, of course, Roman Catholic (the Byzantine Empire being centered in Constantinople) but over the years was converted to the Orthodox form with an iconostasis and chandeliers typical of many we have seen in "Greek" Cyprus.

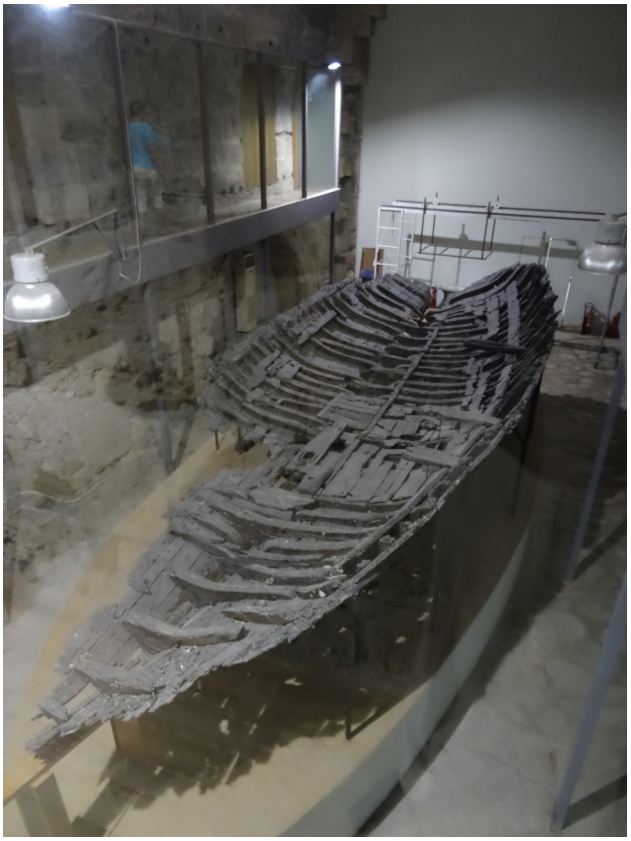
It is a fine example of Gothic architecture in a hilltop position overlooking the sea and it seemed fitting that it had not been converted to the much plainer form of a mosque.

Although our visit here was brief, we did have time for a Turkish coffee (which we both enjoy and drink quite frequently at home) sitting outside in the monastery gardens on what was now a warm and sunny day.

Bellapais

From Bellapais it was only a short drive to our next stop in the larger town of Kerynia, on the north coast of Cyprus. Until relatively recently the town had been a somewhat sleepy village but was the site of a stone-built castle built on the cliff top overlooking the sea – clearly an important strategic location. This huge building dates from the 16th century when the Venetians occupied Cyprus and was built over a previous fort built by the Crusaders over 200 years earlier. Within the castle is a 12th century chapel containing examples of Roman capitals (which we did not see) and an important shipwreck museum, to which we were able to pay a quick visit.

In the late 1990s, a local diver located an ancient ship on the ocean floor a couple of miles out to sea from this harbor. He made many visits to the site, convinced himself that it was a ship from the Roman period and, before disclosing its location, he insisted that a professional archeological team be brought in to perform dating studies and, eventually, to raise the remains. An American team did indeed confirm that the ship dated from about 300BC and was able to salvage a good-sized section of its hull as well as many items which it had been carrying when it was wrecked. The museum contains many of these items – from ballast to fine pottery – and covers the story of the salvage and identification process. The highlight, however, is the section of hull that has been "re-assembled" in its own glass-enclosed facility in the museum. It is a gray-colored wooden assembly which, despite 2000 years under water is in remarkably good condition and easily recognizable as a ship.



From the castle, we walked down steep stone steps to the very picturesque and busy harbor of the town where we once again sat outside to enjoy a sandwich and cold drink. Kyrenia has mushroomed from the village forty years ago to a flourishing tourist destination, particularly frequented by the British (hence chips served with every meal!) In fact, the whole of northern Cyprus is a popular tourist area for Europeans and the coastal towns of Kyrenia and Famagusta to the east were very popular with Americans especially, before partition and Turkish occupation.

As we said at the outset, the partition of Cyprus has roots that go back centuries, but the current situation is a direct result of issues of the second half of the last century. As with many present-day conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, the problem emanates from world war distribution of "spoils" by the major European powers. In the case of Cyprus, the country had been occupied by the British since the late 19th century (after periods of Byzantine, Venetian,

Ottoman and French control) and was a colony until the 1960s. Following various uprisings by the then united Turkish and Greek inhabitants, Cyprus gained its independence at that time. Unfortunately, that independence gave Turkey (which had always felt it should own Cyprus) an excuse, as our Greek-speaking guide told it, to exercise its “rights” and invade the island in 1974. Following periods of fighting, during which many Greek Cypriots fled to the south, interminable negotiations amongst interested powers, the United Nations drew a line across the country and installed a peace-keeping force that is still in place today. The Greek Cypriots still refer to the north as being occupied and only Turkey, of all the countries of the world, recognize the Turkish sector as a separate entity.

To complicate things even more, Cyprus (as one country) entered the European Union in 2004 but the EU does not recognize the Turkish occupied north as anything but a part of Cyprus. Even now, the Turkish Lire is used in the north, while the Greek-speaking south uses the Euro. Remarkably, Nicosia (a divided city) is the capital of the entire country and supposedly governs the entire island. It would appear, however, that there must be some form of de-facto government of the Turkish north as communication and travel across the border seems to be almost non-existent, at least for the majority of the population. How EU funds are collected and appropriated across this divide, not to mention how EU laws are enforced equitably, is beyond my capability to understand.

Despite all of this, at least according to our guide, animosity “on the ground” is minimal and she suggested that both sides wish some form of permanent agreement could be reached. As our excursion today indicated, tourism is a major industry on both sides and she greeted her northern counterparts as obvious friends. If only the politicians would get out of the way……..

Today (Friday) we sailed directly west about 25 miles south of the Greek Island of Crete. The weather had cooled considerably and the light breeze, together with overcast skies, kept the walking deck much less trafficked for my walk. We will sail west for the rest of the afternoon, before heading in a northwesterly direction towards Sicily, followed by a northerly run to Rome, where we will arrive on Sunday morning. In the noon update, the captain explained that a depression centered near Malta would cause an increase in wind and sea swell overnight – so our patches might be put into service at last. More to come.

Bob and Molly