

The Canal South of the Two Lakes

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 night, was necessary as the canal proper is not sufficiently wide to allow passing of larger vessels.



***Life on and around the
Bitter Lakes and (right) the start
Of the “Divided Highway***

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, a totally new channel was proposed 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 through 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 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 that traveled east-west and spanned the canal on the largest swing bridge in the world (right). 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,



The magnificent, unused road bridge



ostensibly providing a fast and 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.

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.



Port Said on the Northern Canal as we approach the Mediterranean

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 port of Limassol in southern Cyprus.

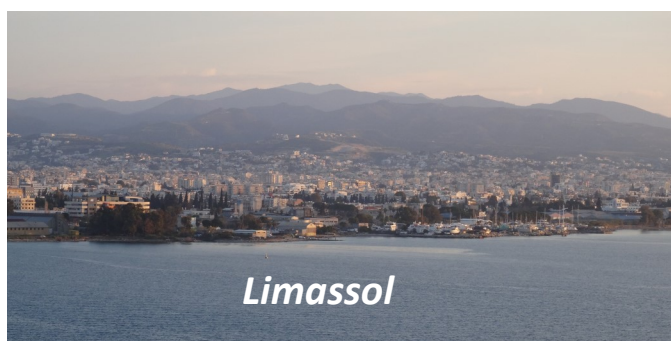
Dinner tonight was another of our "alternative dining" nights; this time an Italian Meal at La Piazza. Once again it was a very good meal with excellent service in pleasant surroundings.

Thursday April 4

We 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 third 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.

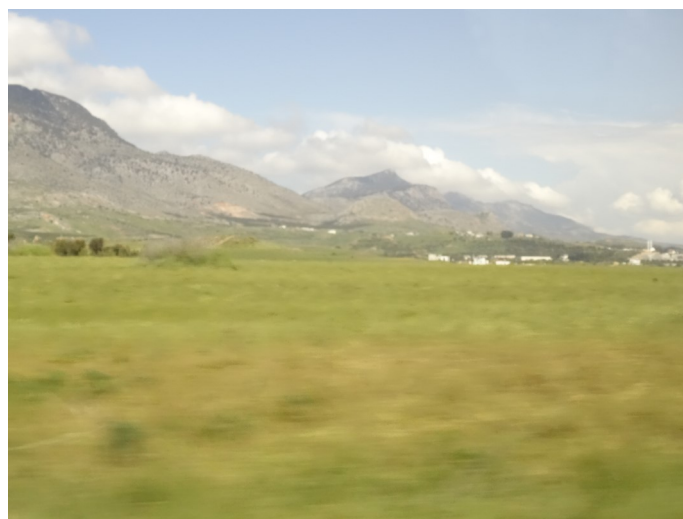


We left the port at Limassol (a modern cruise ship facility, as well as an important commercial and military installation) before 8:30 and drove through the western part of the city to join the main east-west motorway. We drove east and then north, across the Troodos Mountains, on a very scenic highway, 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 side 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



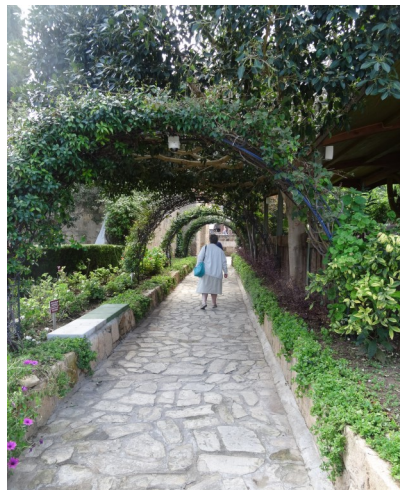
“Eastern European”, concrete buildings.

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 separation 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 to 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.



Bellapais

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.

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 re-



mains. 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.

2000 Year-Old Roman 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 of 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.



From Kyrenia we had another 2 ½ hours drive back to the ship, including two more stops at checkpoints at the “border”. We also drove through a heavy rain shower on the return, our first rain in two weeks, but the weather had improved again by the time we were “home” following a sunny – and very interesting – day in the north.

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 Lira 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.....

Friday April 5

We had sailed from Limassol at 6pm Thursday and awoke sailing 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 were to 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 would 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 patchers might be put into service at last.

We had another good evening meal in the main dining room and had some laughs with our neighbors at the next table. The wind and the swell picked up considerably – up to 40 knots overnight we were told – but the ship seemed to be very stable and we got a good night’s sleep.

Saturday April 6

It was overcast and still very windy when we woke up and the sea was still listed as “rough”. Again, motion on board was not at all uncomfortable and didn’t interfere with our breakfast. During my walk later in the morning, we caught our first glimpse of Italy, only about ten miles on our right. At 1;30, we picked up a pilot for the 45 minute sail through the Messina Strait between mainland Italy and Sicily, the narrowest section of which is only 1 ½ miles wide. We had good views of the city of Messina and its “sister city” on the mainland and saw lots of ferry boats crossing between the two.



***Strait
Of
Messina***





Apparently there have been plans drawn for a bridge between Sicily and mainland Italy which would be the longest span in the world. However, projected costs and political wrangling have so far kept the ferries working and there are currently no serious plans to build the bridge. There are on each bank at the narrowest point, identical steel pilons that once carried electricity wires to Sicily. These were built in 1957 but have been superseded by underwater cable and the pilons still stand – but now as a National Monument (left).

The boarding and disembarkation of the Pilot in the Messina Strait is done at “Full Speed”, as opposed to a normal transfer done while the two ships are traveling slowly.

This is fondly referred to as the “Ferrari Transfer”



After leaving the Strait, the waters became noticeably calmer and the wind (which had reached 40 knots overnight and 30 during the morning) changed to a gentle breeze as we headed northwest again, essentially paralleling the west coast of Italy on our way to Rome.

Once again, we had a great evening meal and a lengthy chat with our table neighbors.

Sunday April 7

When we woke we were already docked in Civitavecchia, the main port for Rome. It is a huge facility (from which we had sailed a couple of years ago on our first Viking ocean cruise) and there were several cruise ships and Mediterranean ferry ships in port. Our early morning tour had been postponed until the afternoon as today was the day of the Rome Marathon and it was felt that getting to and through Rome would be slow. So, it was a little after 1pm before we boarded our bus for our “Panorama of Rome” tour. It was labelled this as we were to spend much of the time on the bus and simply drive by as many of the sights as possible. Since we have visited Rome on several occasions, we felt that this would be an easy and pleasant way to get a quick refresher.

The drive from Civitavecchia to the center of Rome (50 miles or so) took almost 1 ½ hours but was a very pleasant drive through the lush, green, rolling hills on the western coast of Italy. We also saw a little of the town of Civitavecchia itself and were quite impressed with its many Roman and medieval buildings and busy port area.



Before starting our city tour, we made one stop at the Church of St Peter and Paul Outside the Walls. This is one of four properties of the Vatican remote from St Peter’s and is a very impressive building in its own right. Originally built in the 2nd Century AD, it was destroyed and re-built in the mid-1800s. The stop here was scheduled for 45 minutes – but 25 of

those were spent standing in line to get through the security checkpoint – so, after the necessary restroom break, we had time for only a very quick peek inside this huge church. It was a vast open area inside with four rows of columns, a beautiful ceiling and impressive altar apse. It is built on the site of St Paul's crucifixion and his tomb is in the crypt. Unfortunately, of course, we had no time to absorb the facility but inside and out we could see that it would be worth a much longer visit. We both commented that this is a downside of an organized tour and wished that we were traveling independently.



*St Peter and St
Paul
Outside the Walls*



Then it was into the city itself, entering through the southwestern section of the enormous Roman city walls. We knew that from here we would not be getting off the bus so we wondered exactly how much we would be able to see in less than a couple of hours on a heavily trafficked sunny Sunday afternoon. However, we were pleasantly surprised in that we saw at least a dozen of the major attractions of Rome – from the Circus Maximus to St Peter’s – and it was a well-narrated and very interesting afternoon. We missed the Colosseum because the remnants of the marathon crowd made it impossible to drive there, and of course we couldn’t see the narrow streets and alleyways around the Trevi Fountain, the Spanish Steps or the Pantheon, but most other famous spots we were able to see – if only at a distance and through bus windows crowded with heads.



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All too soon, we left the city for the drive back to the ship but were glad we had taken this particular tour – and vowed to return a for a more in-depth visit soon!

We sailed from Civitavecchia shortly after we embarked and, overnight, passed between Corsica and Sardinia before heading almost due west towards Barcelona.

Monday April 8

It was still bright as we sailed across the western Mediterranean towards Spain but the wind had increased overnight and the sea state was listed as slight. However, there was noticeable movement throughout the day and we felt that it was as “rough” as we have so far experienced. It was still calm enough for all decks to be open, so walking and other parts of our daily routine.

Mid-morning we attended the first of a series of lectures by Lt Col Graham Jones MBE, who at the height of his British Army career had been the music director for the Coldstream Guards in London, where he was responsible for all things musical at state and ceremonial occasions. He showed several short movies of some of his more memorable duties (Trooping of the Colour, Remembrance Sunday, the Queen Mother’s funeral as well as the state visit of President Obama) and I suspect that these images of pomp and military precision – together with patriotic music – brought tears to many British eyes on the ship. At the same time, this excellent speaker provided many anecdotes and examples of his work in a very amusing manner. We will certainly try to make his subsequent talks.

Tonight was our fifth formal night and this time we spent it in the Verandah restaurant, one of the “alternative” (ie expensive) dining experiences on Queen Mary 2. It the second time that we were in the Verandah Steakhouse and again it was an excellent meal.

Tuesday April 9

Today was our day in Barcelona and we were already docked as we ate breakfast. Our tour began at 9:30 and was billed as the Barcelona Loop. This meant a bus drive to three different locations in the city and about 45 minute free time at each. First was the “Spanish Village” – a reconstruction of homes from all the districts of Spain.

The Poble Espanyol (literally, Spanish town) is an open-air architectural museum in Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain. Built for the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition, the museum consists of 117 full-scale buildings, which recreate Spanish villages. It also contains a theater, restaurants, artisan workshops and a museum of contemporary art.

Our first thought was that it wouldn't be all that interesting but, as it turns out, it was well worth a much longer visit. The village – and it is definitely the size of many we have seen in Europe – was built for a world expo in the 1920s and was scheduled to be demolished after the fair was completed. However, it was such an attraction that it was decided to maintain it as an open-air museum and it has become a major tourist spot in Barcelona. How we missed it on our three previous visits escapes me.

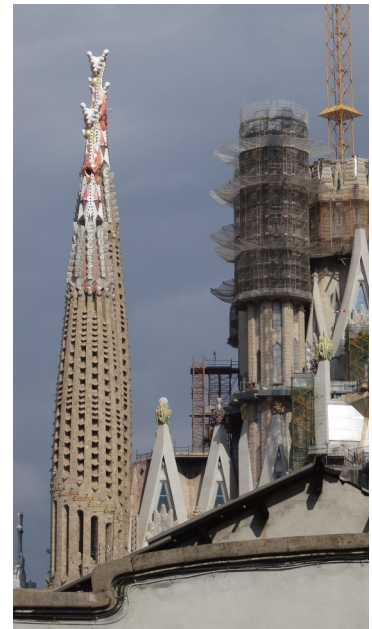
We saw perhaps a hundred buildings representing architecture across Spain and each was a faithful copy of an existing structure. So, there were simple homes, shops, churches, a huge tower and many more, all arranged around a large square and on either side of narrow streets. To add to the authenticity, the streets covered significantly different elevations so one got the feel of a real village – but with many different architectural styles. The signage was good and we found the whole experience fascinating and educational.





Next was the Sagrada Familia, the 100 year+ cathedral construction site designed by the early 20th century architect Gaudi, who has numerous buildings throughout Barcelona. This cathedral was begun over 100 years ago and construction has been ongoing – more or less steadily – ever since. It is now hoped that completion will occur in 2026 (the 100th anniversary of Gaudi's untimely death) but that will be a function of how well the fund-raising effort will be, as well as the intensity of work effort. We were told that it has now been consecrated (although how much use it gets wasn't clear) and is being funded now entirely by subscription and proceeds from visitor fees.





It is an iconic structure which, to an untrained eye, looks like a haphazard amalgamation of several sub-buildings of varying design, with the main frontage being of the more typical “free form” structure that is Gaudi. In addition to the unusual shapes, the building is decorated with all kinds of greenery (for example, a Christmas tree), vegetables and fruits and many colored areas in pastel shades. On our first visit here many years back, we actually went inside (the lines today were around the block) and many parts looked very much like any other cathedral – but many were as unusual as the outside. It is a unique structure indeed.

Our final stop was in the Plaza de Catalunya at the central point of the most famous street in Barcelona, La Rambla. This is a very wide avenue (as are many in the beautiful city) and has all the most famous stores as well as a central walkway with coffee shops, souvenir stands and markets. It is THE street where everyone walks – locals as well as tourists – a place to be seen and a great one for people-watching. We were able to grab a light lunch just off this avenue before boarding our bus back to the ship. As with our tour in Rome, we felt that they had done a good job of hitting the highlights in a short period of time.



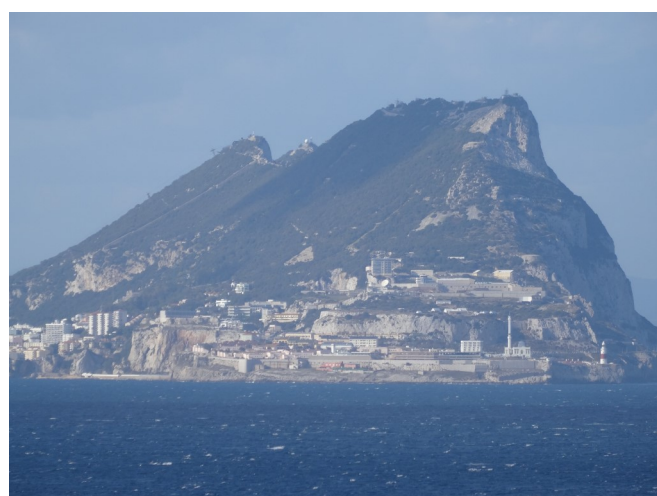
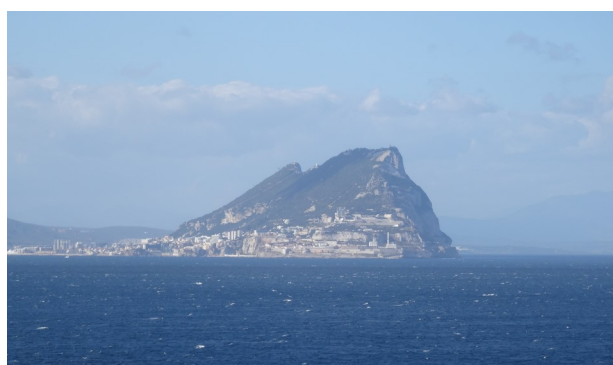


About 6pm we set sail for Lisbon, our final port of call before Southampton. Tomorrow evening we are scheduled to pass through the Strait of Gibraltar and are hopeful that it will still be light enough to see “the Rock”.

Wednesday April 10

Today was another day of sailing the Western Mediterranean. Although the seas had been calm overnight, the winds picked up during the morning and my walk was quite an adventure – struggling to make progress on one side of the ship and almost flying along the other. We attended two more lectures this afternoon; one in the series on architecture through the ages and the second by the music director (retired) of the Coldstream Guards. Both were very good.

We had been in sight of southern Spain (and snow-capped mountains) virtually all day and around 6pm we passed through the Straits of Gibraltar. We got a magnificent view of The Rock, particularly after we had passed by the country and were headed west towards the Atlantic. We also saw an area of Morocco on the southern side of the Straits.



As we then turned northward, we followed the west coast of Spain and sailed overnight to our final port of call, Lisbon. It was the “rockiest” night we have experienced so far on this cruise and we experienced some very strong headwinds, so much so that we were about an hour late getting into Lisbon.

Thursday April 11

The city and port of Lisbon are actually inland from the Atlantic Ocean, about 5 miles up the Rio Tejo, so the final portion before docking was very interesting with Lisbon and its sister city across the river. The river is spanned by a bridge very similar to the Golden Gate in San Francisco; in fact it is modeled after it. On a hill to the south, overlooking the river and the city of Lisbon is a Christ the Redeemer statue very similar to that in Rio de Janeiro. Recall, Brazil was a colony of Portugal until gaining independence in 1882.



LISBON

