

Dubai to Southampton



A Voyage through the Suez Canal

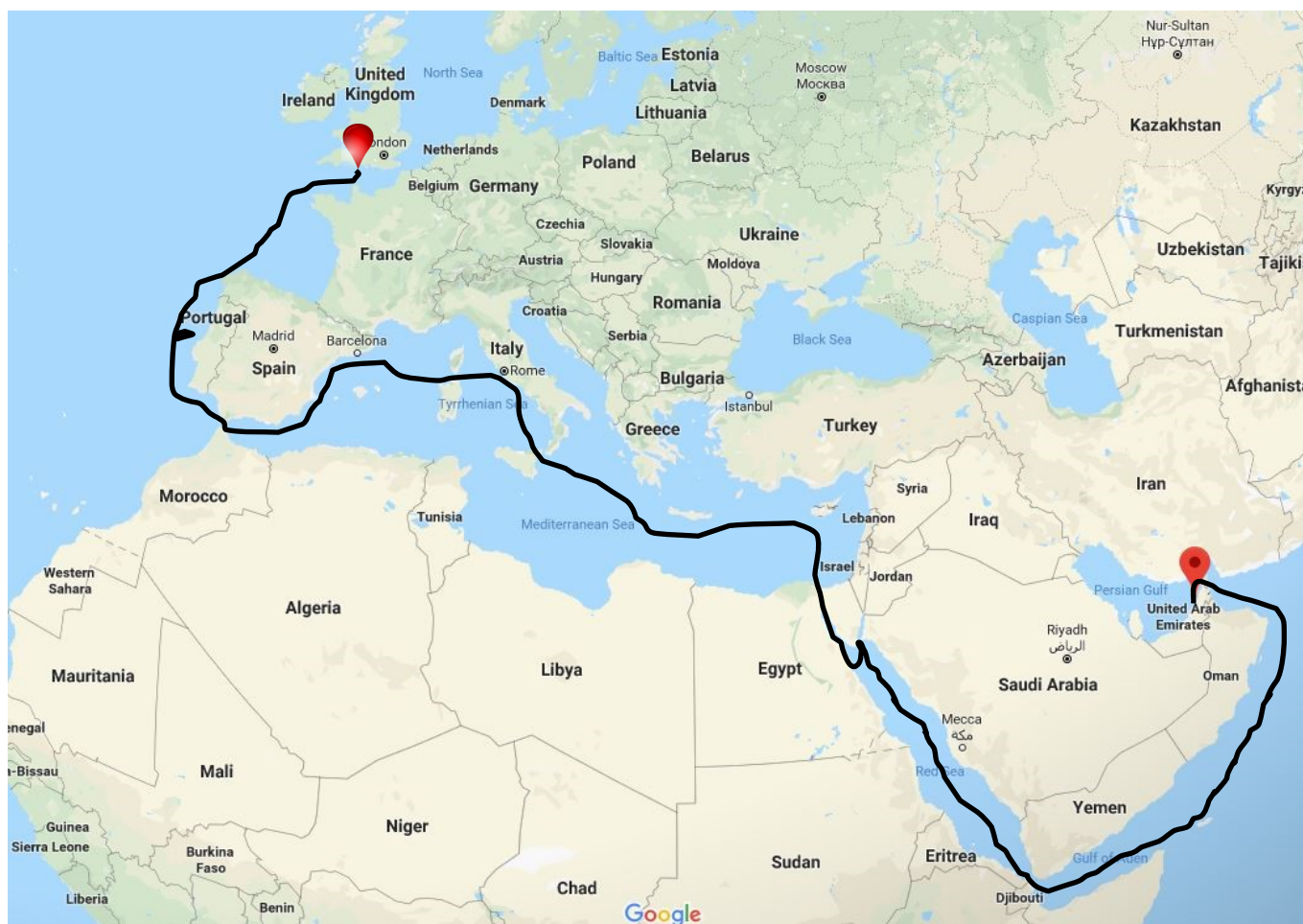
..... and so much more

March-April 2019

Bob and Molly Hillery

We had decided on this cruise, not so much for its ports of call (there were only six in the 20 day journey), but for the part of the world through which it would pass—including sailing the Suez Canal. We also knew from a previous Transatlantic voyage that the Queen Mary was a beautiful liner and provided excellent cuisine and service. We were a little concerned about so many “at sea” days but also knew that there would be activities on board that would help fill our days when we tired of sitting on our stateroom balcony! It is perhaps a reflection of our “slowing down” as the years go by that we would contemplate a twenty-day cruise with so few stops—a program that we would not have entertained only a few years back.

The itinerary took us from the United Arab Emirates, on the Persian Gulf, into the Indian Ocean and then between Saudi Arabia and northeast Africa towards the Mediterranean Sea and finally via the Atlantic Ocean and the English Channel to Southampton. Only one stop—that in Oman—would introduce us to a new country but the thought of sailing in close proximity to so many African and Middle eastern countries was sufficient to whet our appetite. And, of course, there was the added excitement of the passage through the Suez Canal. And, as we have said many times, we have never been anywhere that we felt unworthy of a second visit, so the other ports of call would certainly provide us with some new adventures.



Our route from Asia via Africa to Europe; cruising on the Queen Mary 2

We started the vacation with a couple of days in Dubai, to overcome any jet lag and to ensure we got to the ship on time, and concluded with five days at one of our favorite English inns in the beautiful county of Devon. It seemed like a perfect itinerary.

Dubai to Southampton, March-April 2019

Thursday March 21/Friday March 22

We left home around 2:30, had a quick coffee at Starbucks and then drove to the airport. There was heavy traffic on I-75 and even on the alternative I-471 when we took it, but we still managed to get the rental car returned and checked in for our flights with sufficient time for a drink in the Lounge.

Our overnight flight to Paris went very quickly (we both slept for several hours) and we arrived at CDG about 30 minutes ahead of schedule. With a five-hour layover, we didn't need this extra time but we were able to have breakfast and a nap in the Air France Lounge. Our 1:30pm (now Friday) from Paris left on time and we had a very good meal on the Air France flight to Dubai. After the meal we were both so tired that we immediately fell asleep and (at least for my part) thought we would sleep until touchdown. However, we were both quite wide awake for the final 2 hours of the flight.

Our route took us across eastern France, over the Alps, across Austria and to Romania (where I saw the Danube quite clearly) before we fell asleep. Thus, we missed the flight over northern Turkey and Iraq but were awake again as we crossed a small portion of Iran before flying south along the Persian Gulf (Saudi Arabia to our right) and into Dubai.



It was quite cloudy on the descent so we caught only occasional glimpses of the brightly lit city on our approach but arrived on time around 12:30am (now Saturday). We got through Immigration rather easily and our bags arrived in a timely manner. We were then able to get a little local cash and find a taxi to take us to the JW Marriott in the Central Business District of Dubai.

We checked in to our (upgraded) suite on the 62nd floor, unpacked, took a shower and slowly got ready for bed, finally getting to sleep about 2am.

Saturday March 23

We woke up around 9:30 after a good rest and made our way to the Concierge Lounge for breakfast. We were also able to get a good look at our location and from our room we could see the city (with the world's tallest tower, the famous Burg Al Arab Jumeirah hotel and hundreds of other skyscrapers) as well as the seafront of the Persian Gulf and the outline of the Palms Islands. It was relatively cloudy so our views were not perfect but we certainly got an excellent perspective on this ultra-modern city from our perch on the 62nd floor, in what was, incidentally, the world's second tallest hotel!



We decided to have a rather lazy day after finishing breakfast around 10:30, so we took the hotel shuttle bus to the Dubai Mall, supposedly the largest in the world – this town seems to like superlatives! Indeed, the mall is huge and we perhaps covered a tenth of it during our four hours there. We walked past a giant aquarium (with its walk-through tunnel) which was over two storeys high and had a very large collection of fish.



Outside the mall (at the opposite end to the main entrance) is the Dubai Fountain, which again claims some fame as largest or most spectacular, etc. We saw the 1pm "performance" which was indeed spectacular both in size and the configurations that the hundreds of fountain heads produced. One can only imagine how it looks when illuminated at night.



The shopping mall itself has four floors and about every store you could imagine from all over the world. The entrance is flanked by Cartier and Tiffany (as opposed to Sears and JC Penney!) and the ground floor has every other high-end jeweler, exclusive watch and men's and ladies' apparel shops which never seem to be very busy but perhaps turn a profit with just a couple of sales a day. Other floors have somewhat less expensive and exclusive stores but almost every one was recognizable from either the UK or USA. Huge sections of the broad hallways were dedicated to cafes, restaurants, ice cream parlors – and coffee shops (there are six Starbucks within the mall). We chose a new name to us (but supposedly founded in Italy in 1870) for our drink and a very light lunch and then slowly sauntered back to the shuttle bus and thence to the hotel. We were back in time for afternoon tea (!) with its freshly made “dainty” sandwiches and enough other snacks to make a meal. The only disappointment for Molly was that she missed the scones and clotted cream until we were leaving; wait until tomorrow!

By 5pm we were ready for a short sleep and then got ready for dinner in the hotel. The Marriott boasts fifteen dining places of almost every ethnicity but we had difficulty in getting our first choices for the remaining two nights of our stay. However, we were able to get in at the Thai restaurant for tonight so this evening's experience should be good. Indeed, it was an authentic Thai experience with great food and excellent service. We finished the evening with coffee in the lounge.

Sunday March 24

Today was our day to ride the Hop On/Hop Off bus around the city of Dubai. There are about six route options and we chose probably the two most popular – the Red Route that takes in the older part of Dubai (old is a relative term here as the area was completely desert until 100 years ago) and the Blue Route that took us along the Persian Gulf coast where many of the more luxurious homes and hotels are situated. Both were fascinating, particularly with respect to the continuing construction and the ever-changing landscape of each area.

We were told that there is indeed a “Grand Plan” for Dubai, put forward by the past three rulers, for a “sustainable region” that is a financial center as well as a retail tourist destination – all this to offset the oil revenues (which built everything in the first place) which are now anticipated to run out in 2040. This was an interesting projection since the last time we were here when oil reserves were expected to peter out in 2020. The overall plan is NOT to build the biggest, tallest and grandest – but this just seems to come along as an integral part.

“Sustainable” is perhaps best exemplified in the fact that over 98% of the water comes from desalination of the Persian Gulf – thus accounting not only for the support of millions of people but also the many green and beautifully landscaped areas in this sandy desert. The UAE is also transitioning from an almost 100% gas-generated electricity supply (in 2010) to both nuclear and solar, as well as other sustainable forms of generation. Again, seeing the city at night, in particular, suggests that this is an enormous task – but not beyond the imagination and commitment of this rich region.

It is difficult to capture the highlights of a one-day bus tour but the overwhelming picture is of prosperity and an architecture that is innovative and BIG. This contrasts with the somewhat old-fashioned wooden ferry boats that are constantly

taking passengers across the Dubai Canal in the older part of town and, of course, the alleyways of the souks. We got off the bus for a drink near the Old Souk and strolled through narrow streets (successfully warding off the store keepers) until we emerged near the canal – and conveniently near the next bus stop.



“Old” Dubai

This being a Muslim country, there are also hundreds of mosques, many of them very beautiful with their sandstone construction and tall minarets. The fact that the UAE is a Moslem state and follows Sharia Law explicitly does not, however, describe the multi-cultural nature of the country. Foreigners (“Ex-pats”) are welcomed and indeed are perhaps a majority – but can stay only a few years before having to return home. There are other restrictions of ownership, etc but the main driver for the influx are the free trade zones, tax incentives and the abundance of jobs. This makes for a rich cosmopolitan mix which shows in language, skin color and dress. The local “Emirati” typically wear traditional dress but this is complemented by just about any other form of attire imaginable.



On the Gulf coast are the exclusive hotels, of which the **Burg El Arab** is the most well-known and iconic in Dubai, and the endless resort and entertainment centers – including an indoor ski slope! The beaches are very popular of course and the waters of the Gulf are always warm – appealing even on a day like today in March where the temperature and humidity were draining on Ohioans.

So, we experienced a good sampling of this amazing city and arrived back at our hotel exhausted, despite having spent most of the day sitting on a bus, trying to get the “perfect” photos (but failing) and admiring everything about this busy,



World's Tallest Tower

modern and extremely clean city.



The unusual Architecture of modern Dubai



The Dubai Frame (500 x 350 feet) is created out of glass, steel, aluminum, and reinforced concrete. It is positioned in such a way that representative landmarks of modern Dubai can be seen on one side, while from the other side, visitors can also view older parts of the city.

Tonight, we ate at the Prime 68 (68th floor) steakhouse in the hotel. This was not our first, or even second choice (others were full), but it turned out to be another excellent meal and had the added advantage of superb views over the city lit up at night. It was a very nice way to end our two days in Dubai.

Monday March 25

Today was the day we packed and checked out to begin our 20-day cruise to Southampton. We left the hotel by taxi about 1pm and it was only a fifteen-minute ride to the cruise terminal where we boarded the Queen Mary 2. The process was reasonably efficient, and we were able to get a light lunch before the suitcases arrived at our door. Then we had the obligatory safety drill before unpacking everything in our room.

The air-conditioning in the cabin seemed a little weak so we reported the situation which resulted in a four hour wait before the technician arrived. He checked the room unit and something outside the cabin before concluding that something else, somewhere on the ship, needed to be checked and it would be “three hours” before it was “fully fixed”.

In the meantime, we had our first dinner on board – after sampling the champagne in the cabin, courtesy of Cunard. The meal was very good, and we had a chat with a couple at the next table who were from Liverpool but now spend several months per year in Australia – when they are not cruising on the QM2.



The first segment of our cruise



Tuesday March 26

We both had a good night's sleep and had breakfast around 8:30. At 10am we had a "Piracy Practice" to prepare us for the next four days of sailing alongside several countries where acts of piracy have been experienced over the past several years. The protocol to be followed in the event of a possible encroachment is to sit in an inside corridor and leave stateroom drapes closed with lights off. In addition, the outer decks will be off limits. In fact, the latter is to be enforced from dusk until dawn for the four nights that we are in the potentially dangerous waters. So, no midnight strolls for the next few nights!



In the late morning and again at 3pm we attended lectures by on-board experts. The first, on the influence of Arabs and Islam from the 7th to the 20th centuries, was very good and we intend to take in others in the series by the same speaker. The afternoon lecture – on the maritime importance of the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean – had a lot of interesting information but was a little less coherent.

In between the lectures we squeezed in some lunch and I took a 3 ½ mile walk on the track around Deck 7 – 3 laps equal 1.1 miles. The temperature was in the seventies and the breeze created by the movement of the ship made the walk very pleasant. There is virtually no wind and the seas were almost calm as we entered the Gulf of Oman. Overnight we had left

the Persian Gulf, through the Straits of Hormuz; this was also through calm seas so no need for our sea-sickness patches so far! To complete our daytime activities, we enjoyed afternoon tea in the traditional English style.

Tonight is the first of several "Gala Nights" on this cruise so we dressed formally in tuxedo and evening dress, rather than the slightly less formal jacket (for men) – tie optional – on every other night. Almost everyone in the dining room wore formal dress and only the occasional suit was seen. Certainly, all the women were in their finery. It was a very pleasant evening.



Wednesday March 27

Overnight, we had left the waters of the UAE and were now following the coast of Oman in a southwesterly direction. We were generally only about 25 miles from the shore but couldn't see land.

We got up about 8am after another calm night at sea, both from the standpoint of the ocean waves and piracy activity. We had breakfast on a warm and sunny day (about 80F) and I went for a 4 ½ mile walk around Deck 7. There were about four lookout posts around this deck with sailors standing next to water guns and spending most of the time staring through their binoculars. Clearly, they take the potential for piracy very seriously – which we found an encouraging sign.



At 1:30 we went to see the show in the Planetarium, which was interesting but not overly exciting. The 4pm lecture, however, was very good. This was the second in a series on Arabs and the Muslim World (we attended the first one yesterday) and covered the 20th century in the Middle East, beginning with the "carving up of the spoils" of World War 1 by the French and British. The states thus formed, with no particular regard to religion, culture or history, have basically stayed intact with the additional post WW2 addition of Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. The speaker described the various factions that now exist within each country boundary and, when viewed from this angle, it is not difficult to see why the region is a continuing source of conflict. Perhaps, also, it is a little ironic that the Middle East is home to virtually

all the remaining monarchies where the ruler has supreme power as opposed to being more of a ceremonial head of state – as are all remaining monarchies in Europe. Remaining lectures in this series will cover Egypt, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and one other part of the region which I have forgotten – but will certainly attend the talk!

Again, we had a very good dinner on board before retiring around 10:30, with the thought of our first shore excursion tomorrow.

Thursday March 28

We were docked by the time we went to breakfast this morning about 8am. We had passed the city of Salalah, Oman on our starboard side and were now in its newly developed port (formerly Port Roysut) some ten miles out of town. Salalah (sounds like a Fifties singing group) is at the southwesterly tip of the Sultanate of Oman, near the border with Yemen, and several hundred miles from the capital of Muscat. It is the second largest city in the country, was its capital at one time, and has a population of less than one million. The whole country is sparsely populated, being slightly larger than Italy but with a population of 2 ¼ millions. The area around Salalah, stretching along the coast to Yemen, is unique to the Arabian Peninsula in that it has a monsoon season and hence is relatively fertile. At this time of year, it is not at its greenest but many of the main streets are beautifully landscaped and we saw a number of farming areas where tropical crops (mainly banana) were growing.

Tourism is relatively new to the country and essentially confined to Muscat and, more recently, the area around Salalah, where a number of resorts are being built along the coast. We were told, however, that the country is not interested in mass tourism at this time and will be well regulated. We were also told not to expect too much from our local guide – although he turned out to be a useful source of information and extremely friendly. His English was excellent.

We drove by bus from the port (site of the construction of a huge gas pipeline, reflecting the country's continuing oil wealth) and skirted the city to our first stop, a green oasis at the foot of a mountain range (2 thousand feet??) where a natural spring (the Spring of Razat) creates a pleasant stream below a large cave in the hillside. Other than that, it didn't have anything of more significance – simply a nice place to visit in what is otherwise arid desert.



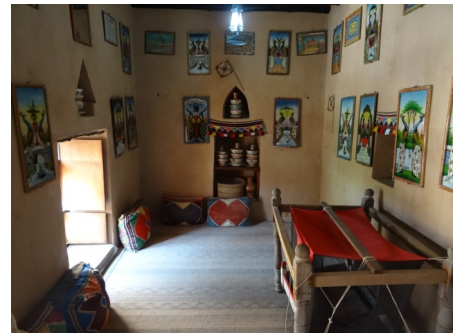
Driving in Oman
Sand, camels and
Huge homes—with not much of a garden!



Our first stop; an oasis in the desert

...except for all the roundabouts on the roads!

A few miles further on we stopped at a 200 year-old fort (Taqah Castle) built at a strategic location overlooking the Arabian Sea. In fact, there were two castles, one perched on the hillside and presumably the more important, and the smaller one we visited in the more populated area.



Taqah Castle



We were able to stroll through the small rooms surrounding a small inner courtyard and climb to an upper level but not, unfortunately, to the top of the walls. The English signage was well written and informative and depicted military life at the fort when Salalah and the surrounding region was home to the Sultan. If I understand things correctly, Salalah was the capital city until the present Sultan came to power in the 1970s – by overthrowing his father! The son is revered in Oman and stands in direct contrast to his father who was, by all accounts, a tyrannical dictator.



On our drive we passed the summer palace (left) of the previous and current ruler and where the younger was a virtual prisoner until the coup. The school where he was educated sits right across the street from the palace (neither of which we could enter) although both appear to have been given recent renovation and the outer walls are a beautiful cream sandstone.

After the fort, we drove to the ancient city – and the reason why Salalah became such an important location. There has been human habitation here for many millennia, but a stone-built city has existed since about 5000 BC. It was a major trading port until the first few centuries AD based upon a single commodity – frankincense. Apparently, the climate for growing good frankincense is restricted to only a few places on earth and, of course, the best product is grown right here in southwest Oman. Consequently, at its zenith, Salalah was the point at which spices and animals from the east (as far as China) and food and other riches from Egypt and further north were brought to be traded for the local product. A glance at the map easily shows just what a major crossroads this city is between Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia.



At the old city, which has been under archaeological excavation on and off for 100 years, and with a major Italian team still working, we first viewed a short video about its history and then were free to walk amongst the ruins and parts which had been partially reconstructed. The city sits a hill overlooking the Arabian Sea and, with its defensive walls, must have presented traders with an impressive sight as they approached from all points of the compass. The only entrance from the sea led directly into the main market where goods were exchanged and, presumably, where fresh supplies for the return journey were procured.



As the demand for frankincense decreased, so did the need for this trading center and it appears that Salalah became less important as a world hub. It still maintained its strategic position, of course, and presumably was involved in regional conflicts even before the major battles fought in this region in both World Wars. In fact, as the lecturer on board pointed out, the entire coastal region of the Arabian Peninsula was portioned to European countries after World War 1, much of it to Britain. The English influence is as strong here as in the UAE and perhaps even more so. Even the country that dominates the peninsula (Saudi Arabia – a country born as recently as 1932) was formed by the Allies, and its relationship with Britain continues to be very strong.

Our final stop was at the souk where we could wander through the incense-filled streets and make any necessary purchases. For reasons that escape me, we passed by all the incense, perfumes and pashminas and returned to the bus empty-handed. I can only assume that the 85F temperature and high humidity contributed to our failure to support the local economy.



We also saw one of many large tents that we had seen throughout the drive. Our guide explained that these were wedding tents and that weddings could last for several days and would be attended by up to several thousand guests! Interestingly, these tents were filled with men only (NO women) and each pays a small amount to attend presumably to defray costs and provide a nice gift for the couple. Exactly what the women, including the bride, are doing while the men are feasting was not clear. Surely it can't take days to get ready?

In addition to the four stops we made, other shore excursions here in Salalah made visits to the site of Job's tomb and the supposed place where the Queen of Sheba came (and stayed?) when getting her frankincense. Either my bad planning or poor understanding of the tour itineraries (which I suspect had a good deal of "flexibility") caused us to miss these, so obviously we must return!

We drove back through the city to the port and were given a little more information on the social aspects of this country. As with the UAE, the oil wealth is “passed down” to the population in the form of free education and health care and, in Oman, a government grant of land to all males as they reach the age of 23. I got the impression that taxes for most are virtually unknown but how the oil magnates’ wealth is partially redistributed was not clear. Perhaps the government itself is a major owner of wells. Perhaps it is simply a manifestation of the Muslim creed to be charitable. Whatever the method, it is providing the population with a high standard of living – but begs the question as to what will happen when the oil ultimately dries up.

Back on board, we were in time for a very late lunch and then a much-needed nap! Five hours, mostly outdoors, in this heat and humidity takes its toll on all but the locals.

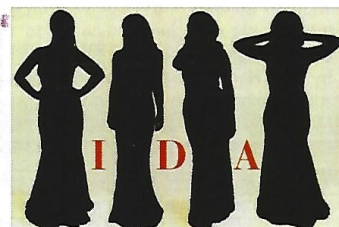
After dinner tonight we did something that we have never done on a cruise before by attending the 10:30 show in one of the theaters on board. A four-soprano group, backed by a 10-piece band, sang popular and operatic pieces in a tribute to the “Royalty” of both genres. Hence, there was a very good mix of songs ranging from operatic arias to Dolly Parton. We both enjoyed it and managed to stay awake throughout.

Tonight's Featured Entertainment. Ida, PopOpera.

Opera and Pop as you've never heard it before - a glamorous and sultry collection of operatic arias and chart-topping hits. Be prepared to be surprised and dazzled. With the Royal Court Theatre Orchestra, under the musical direction of Jeff Hughes. Presented by your Entertainment Director, Catherine Kennedy.

At 8.45pm & 10.30pm

📍 Royal Court Theatre, Decks 2 & 3, Stairway B



We sailed from Salalah at 4pm and were soon under the dusk to dawn indoor curfew as we sailed from Oman, along the coast of Yemen and through the Gulf of Aden. Of course, we didn't see any of this as a result of the security measures but the captain mentioned as we left Salalah that through the Gulf of Aden we would be sailing in close convoy with other ships. Whether this was necessary for security or merely as a result of the very busy sea lanes through the Gulf was not clear. Perhaps some of both.

Friday March 29

Today was the first of three days at sea as we sailed between the Arabian Peninsula and northeast Africa and on to the Red Sea and our next port of call at Aqaba, Jordan. During the noon broadcast from the bridge, the captain said that we were still in convoy with a Russian ship providing the military “escort” at this time.



***Three Days of Cruising through the
Gulf of Aden and in the Red Sea***

We attended another lecture, this time on Egypt, Ancient and Modern, which was another interesting and informative talk. One of the more surprising facts (to me) was that for 2200 years after the last Dynasty of Ancient Egypt, the country was either ruled by or occupied by a foreign power. The Greeks, Romans (who brought Christianity-still practiced by 10% of the country), Byzantines, Ottomans and Turks all took a turn before about a century of British rule. That ended abruptly in 1952 with the arrival of Nasser and his presidency and led to the expulsion of the British from Egypt and, following the Suez Crisis of 1956-7, control of the Suez Canal to Egypt. I remember the fear of a large scale war was daily news in Britain at the time but the crisis ended with Britain's withdrawal and the fall of the prime minister. A fact I had forgotten (or perhaps never knew) that the lecturer mentioned was that this crisis threatened the normally good Anglo-USA relations, as The United States were prepared to use force to bring about the end.

General Sir Simon Mayall KBE CB.
'Behind the Lines (Part Three): The Making of the Modern Middle East.'

At 10.00am

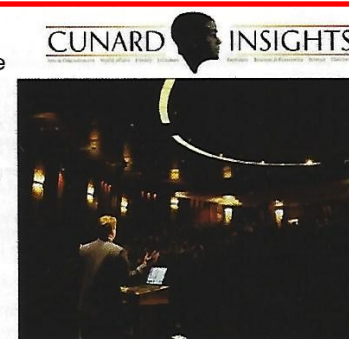
John Laverick.
'Spending Lottery Millions.'

At 3.00pm

Dr. Alan Dowty.
'Ancient and Modern Egypt.'

At 4.00pm

☛ Illuminations, Deck 3, Stairway B



Tonight, we had our first "Alternative Dining" experience in the Verandah restaurant. It's difficult to rationalize the extra charge (dining in the "free" restaurant has been very good) but it made for a pleasant change in a more intimate setting.

Saturday March 30

Today was another day at sea. We had entered the Red Sea overnight and were now traveling in a northwesterly direction towards the Gulf of Aqaba. We were now out of the "Special Security" zone and most of the day we were sailing between the Yemen, on our starboard side, and Eritrea. It was another hot and mostly sunny day with just a little more wind and slightly higher seas – but still not sufficient to create any real motion on the ship and we haven't yet applied our first sea-sickness patch.

We attended another lecture, this time on Israel through the ages, with a good deal of discussion about the British Mandate following World War 2 and the subsequent granting of a State of Israel for the first time in 2000 years. This required chopping up the former Transjordan into Israel, present-day Jordan and Palestine – hence prompting over 60 years of conflict of one degree or another and two subsequent wars in which Israel took even more territory than had been allotted in 1948. The next lecture in this series is scheduled to discuss this troubled period.

We also managed to go to afternoon tea and I took a 12 lap walk around the track on Deck 7. Finally, tonight was our second formal dinner so we needed to don the tux and long dress once again. We spent 45 minutes in one of the lounges listening to a Dixieland Jazz Band before enjoying another excellent dinner.

Sunday March 31

It was a little overcast this morning and there was a much stiffer breeze, although the sea swell was still low. Overnight we had passed Jeddah (close to Mecca) on our starboard side and were now sailing between Saudi Arabia and Egypt, having left Yemen on the east side and Eritrea and Sudan on the west. We were now well along the Red Sea on our way to the southern tip of Jordan for our shore excursion tomorrow.

Our day on board included the final lecture in the series on the Middle East, this one covering the Israel-Palestine conflict. I am afraid the speaker, while suggesting that the grounds for a negotiated settlement are still available, didn't see a conclusion in the near future! He did, however, see benefit to what he called "under the table" collaboration between Egypt and Israel on the Sinai issue, which doesn't get much press.

Tonight we had another of the "Alternative Dining" features on board; this time it was an excellent Indian meal with which we had a rather good Indian Sauvignon Blanc!

Monday April 1

When we awoke this morning we were just docking 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 Eilat 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 Jordan River, which forms the boundary between Israel and Jordan, 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 15 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 ar-



archaeological site which has revealed some of the old city of Aqaba. As with the ancient city near Salalah in Oman, Eyla 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 smooth 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

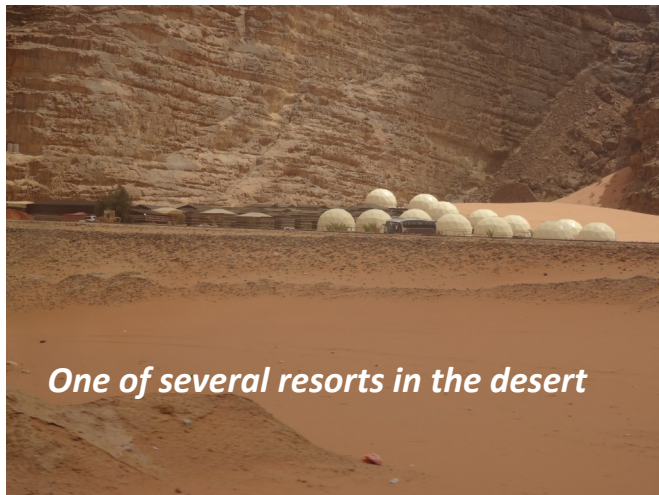


school and were quite alarmed when he was dropped off in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere. We were assured, however, that his family's compound was within walking distance from the track we were on.

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 ten 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.



One of several resorts in the desert

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 were in fact tents (slightly bigger than 10x10) or adobe-type structures with various degrees of modern sleeping and bathing facilities.



ties. 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.



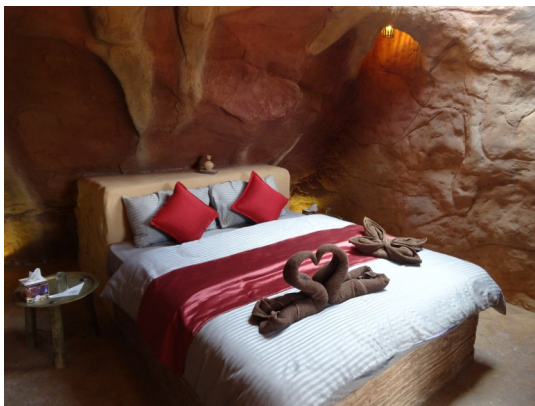
The lunch itself was a buffet of lots of vegetables, skewered meat (which we assume was goat), a chicken breast, hummus and pita breads. There was also a table of fresh fruit, tea, dates and cookies and, as a final item, a local

kneaded some dough to prepare freshly baked (on a tandoor-type oven) for your plate. We were sure that Health and Safety authorities – as well as many tourists – would have abhorred this practice. Actually, the whole meal was quite good and seating was at wooden tables, rather than on floor mats as we had envisioned.

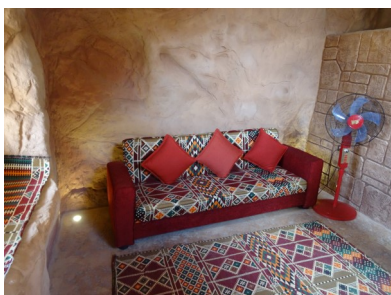


Then it was back to the ship – with the inevitable stop for souvenir shopping – after a very superficial overview of Wadi Rum and

of the country of Jordan. In fact, both of us commented that if this excursion were one's only visit to Jordan, 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.



*Desert Camp
Accommodation
.... And your daily*

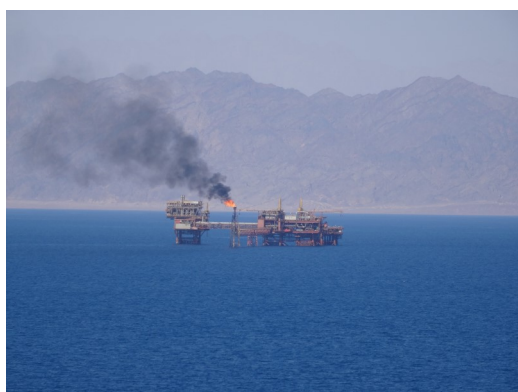


Tonight was another good meal in the main dining room where we are always amazed at how 1000 people are served an excellent, hot meal with lots of options in the space of about 1 ½ hours. Some so-called better class ground-based restaurants could learn something!



Tuesday April 2

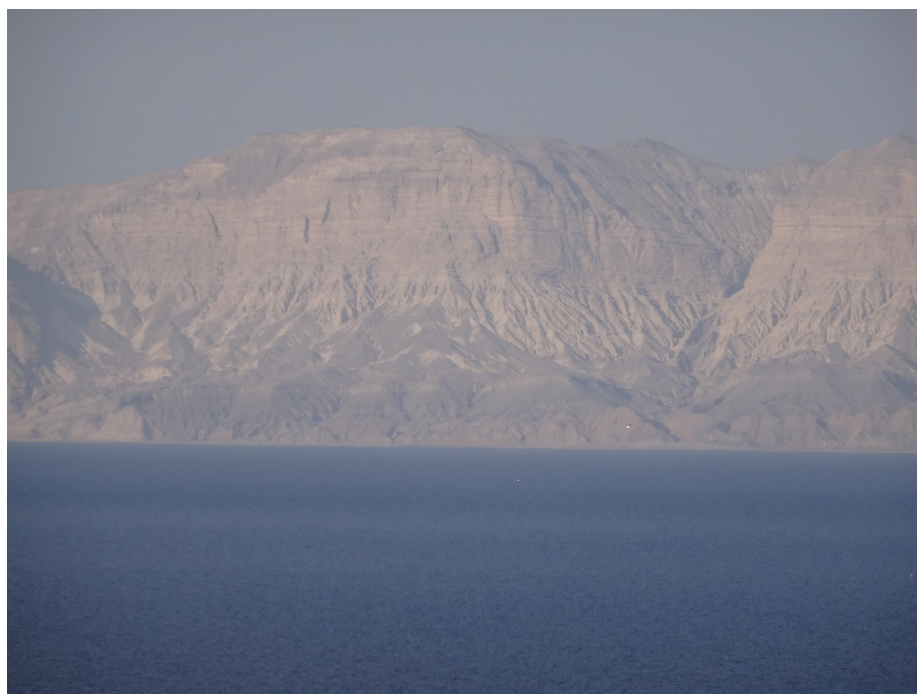
We had sailed from Aqaba after 11 last evening and by the time we were up and about this morning we had almost reached the main channel of the Red Sea to the south (retracing our steps to Aqaba of two days earlier). We were passing Sharm el Sheikh again before doing a 180 degree turn to change course 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.



Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula

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 1000 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 today 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 waterway were the much-increased traffic (heading to or from the Canal) and the presence of dozens of oil rigs at sea, mostly nearer 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.

The Suez Canal is a sea-level waterway in Egypt, connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea through the Isthmus of Suez. Constructed by the Suez Canal Company between 1859 and 1869, it was officially opened on 17 November 1869.

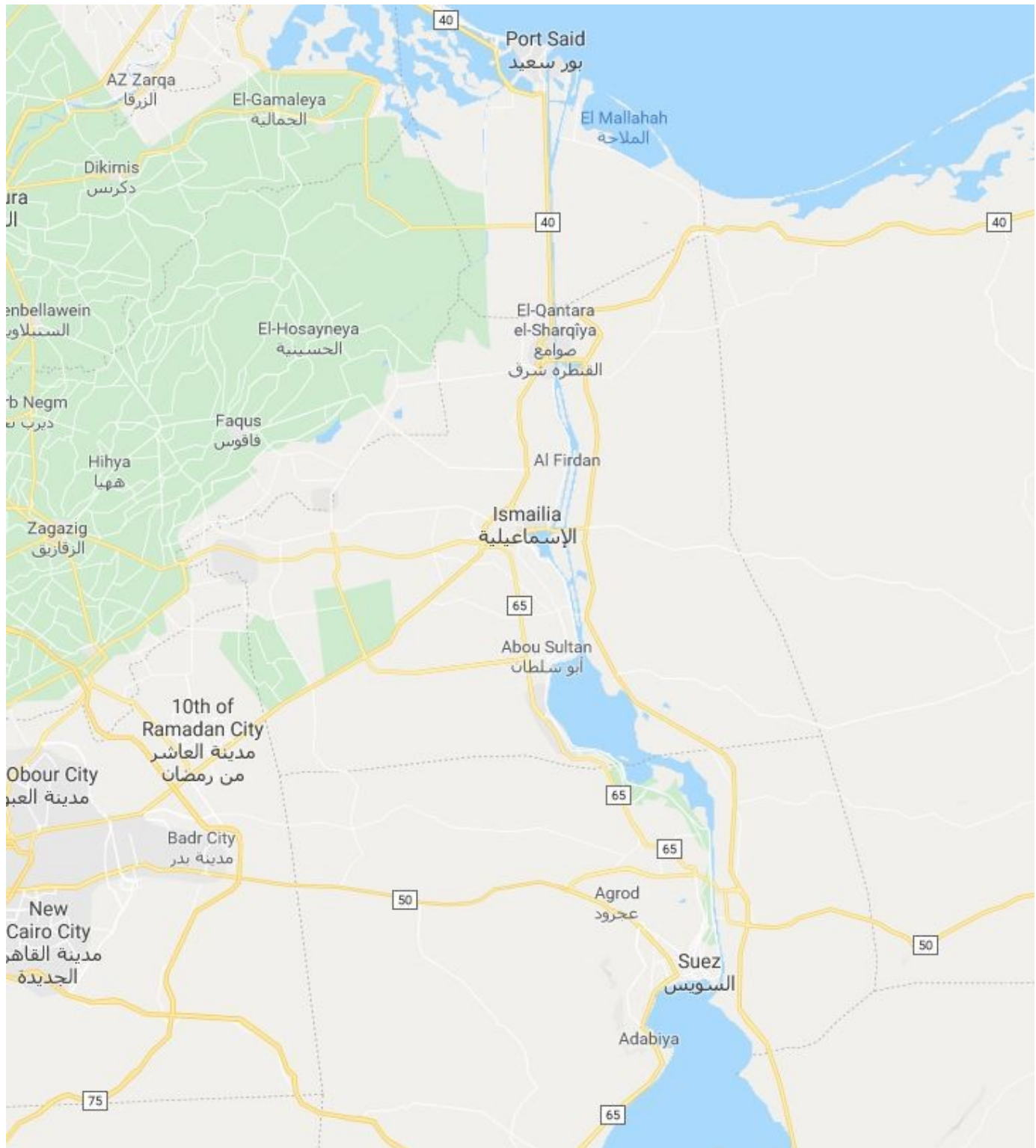
The canal offers watercraft a more direct route between the North Atlantic and northern Indian Oceans via the Mediterranean and Red Seas, thus avoiding the South Atlantic and southern Indian Oceans and thereby reducing the journey distance from the Arabian Sea to, for example, London by approximately 8,900 kilometres (5,500 mi). It extends from the northern terminus of Port Said to the southern terminus of Port Tewfik at the city of Suez. Its length is 193.30 km (120.11 mi), including its northern and southern access channels. In 2012, 17,225 vessels traversed the canal (an average of 47 per day).

The original canal was a single-lane waterway with passing locations in the Ballah Bypass and the Great Bitter Lake. It contains no system, with seawater flowing freely through it. In general, the canal north of the Bitter Lakes flows north in winter and south in summer. South of the lakes, the current changes with the tide at Suez

The Canal was owned by the United Kingdom and France until 1956 when Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized it, an event which led to the Suez Crisis. The canal is owned and maintained by the Suez Canal Authority (SCA) of Egypt. Under the Convention of Constantinople, it may be used "in time of war as in time of peace, by every vessel of commerce or of war, without distinction of flag".

In August 2014, construction was launched to expand and widen the Ballah Bypass for 35 km (22 mi) to speed the canal's transit time. The expansion was planned to double the capacity of the Suez Canal from 49 to 97 ships a day. At a cost of \$8.4 billion, this project was funded with interest-bearing investment certificates issued exclusively to Egyptian entities and individuals. The "New Suez Canal", as the expansion was dubbed, was opened with great fanfare in a ceremony on 6 August 2015.

On 24 February 2016, the Suez Canal Authority officially opened the new side channel. This side channel, located at the northern side of the east extension of the Suez Canal, serves the East Terminal for berthing and unberthing vessels from the terminal.



The Suez Canal

At the noon report, the captain announced that we would dock tonight at Port Suez around 8pm and be given our position in the convoy for the Canal, in exchange for the fee for the passage, which I assume is a sizeable amount for such a large vessel. He hoped that we would start our 10-12 hour passage of the Suez Canal around 5am tomorrow, so we should be awake for most of that journey; obviously a highlight of the trip.

Late this afternoon we attended a lecture on 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.



Tonight was our third gala night so we donned our formal wear, enjoyed a pre-dinner drink listening to a harpist in one of the many lounges and then had another very good meal.

Wednesday April 3

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

