

When we last wrote, we had left Cyprus and were crossing the Mediterranean towards Sicily and then to Rome.

On Saturday morning, we caught our first glimpse of Italy, only about ten miles away 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.



Cruising the Messina Strait

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 cables to Sici-

ly. These were built in 1957 but have been superseded by underwater cable and the pilons still stand – but now as a National Monument.



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.

When we got up on Sunday, 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 as well as the 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 in the 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.



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.



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 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 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 were not affected.

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.

Tuesday 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. 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.

There were 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 structures, 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.





Spanish Village Museum



Next was the Sagrada Familia, the cathedral designed by the turn of the 19th 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 progresses, 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.



Sagrada Familia

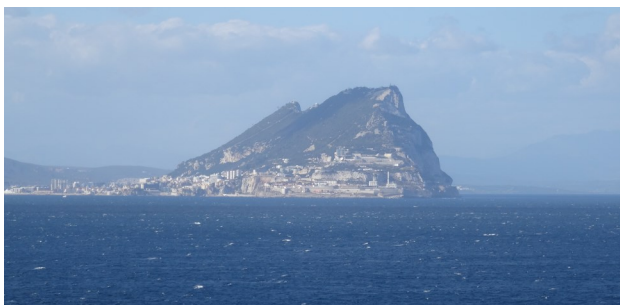


Our final stop was in the Plaza de Catalunya at the central point of the most famous street in Barcelona, La Rambla. This is a very wide avenue (as are many in the beautiful city) and has all the most famous stores as well as a central walkway with coffee shops, souvenir stands and markets. It is THE 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.



Wednesday 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 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 for our stop there on Thursday.

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.

Our tour today was similar to that we took in Barcelona in that we visited three areas of the city and were given about 45 minutes free time in each. The first was the magnificent Monastery of St Jerome with the attached church dedicated to St Michael. The church is very ornately decorated inside and out with hardly a square inch of surface without some form of adornment. Its other claim to fame is that it houses the tomb of Vasco de Gama, the first to circumnavigate the globe.

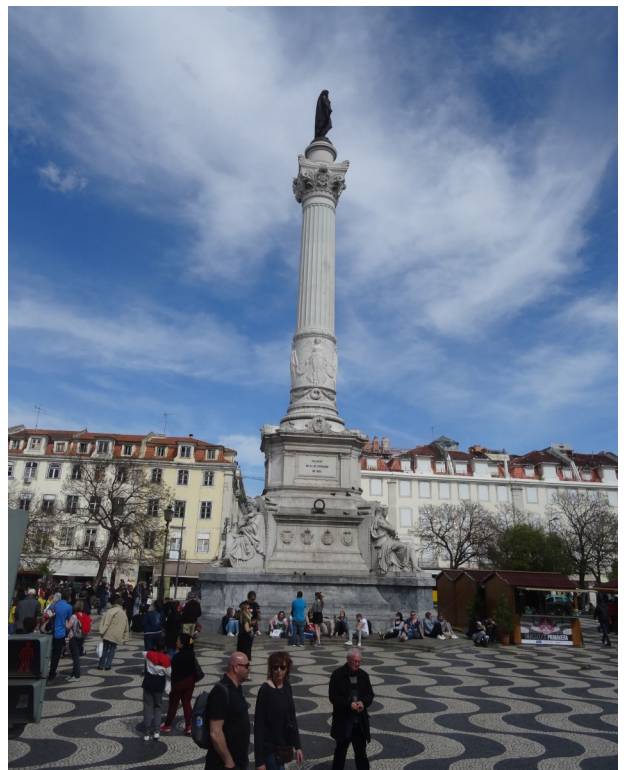




The achievements of Portuguese sailors was honored at our next stop, a huge statue on the river bank dedicated to the explorers from this country and erected on the 500th anniversary of the death of the Navigator Prince Henry, who died in 1460. He was the fourth son of the then King John and is considered the leader of the Portuguese exploration that led to the vast Empire.



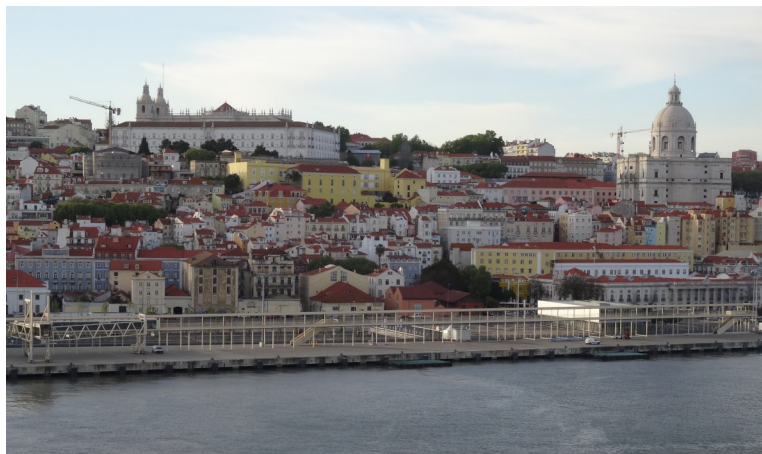
Our final stop was on the main shopping boulevard of Lisbon the Avenida de Liberdade, perhaps one of the finest in Europe and often compared with the Champs Elysees in Paris.



I recall being very impressed with this avenue on our first visit to Lisbon 20 years ago and the buildings that grace either side are equally impressive today. We were able to have a light lunch sitting outside on a street just off the avenue; once again, we had fantastic weather (sunny and bright, if still a little cool) and it was great to enjoy a meal in these surroundings.



We returned to the ship late afternoon and sailed around 7pm. It was still light at this time, so we were able to get some more great views of the city as we sailed towards the ocean – and two days of cruising before reaching our destination of Southampton.



Sailing from Lisbon towards the Atlantic Ocean.

We completed our fantastic cruise by sailing alongside the west coast of Portugal, Spain and France and across the Bay of Biscay before entering the English Channel, arriving at the home port of the QM2 early on Sunday morning, April 14.