

Expedition on National Geographic Quest – October 2019

Ruth and I have gone on several cruises in the past, so now we are on a list, apparently a lot of lists, that mail us tempting cruise packages. It is fun to look at these potential trips to (occasionally) tempting places. I always put them out for Ruth to look at, too. One day she saw something that intrigued her from Sigma Xi, the scientific organization she is a member of. The cruise was on Lindblad Expeditions, associated with National Geographic. This trip was on one of National Geographic's ships, the Quest, a 238 foot long ocean going 'expedition ship'. She would be traveling up the Columbia and Snake Rivers from Portland, Oregon to Lewiston, Idaho. There would only be about 100 passengers, and better yet, most of them would be scientists! Ruth was very excited about the chance to geek out with fellow Sigma Xi members. She also liked the fact that there would be no passports, no long ocean transits, and no little kids. Ruth likes kids, mind you, but not on an expedition. The expedition, not a 'cruise' we were told, but an 'expedition' featured educational lectures and tours. The ship did not have a casino, a band stand, or even TVs in the staterooms. It sounded like an adventure we would enjoy, so we signed up.

Adding to the attractiveness of the trip was the starting point – Portland. Our good friend David Romanusky and Kathie live there. They agreed to pick us up at the airport, share a lunch, and then drop us at the meeting point at a nearby hotel. Our flight was reasonably comfortable, except for the early departure which had us getting up way early. We exchanged the clinging humidity of a Houston morning for a perfect fall Oregon afternoon. The four of us enjoyed a delightful meal at the City Grill atop a hotel in downtown Portland, lingering over the meal until it was time for us to report to the expedition rendezvous.



David and Kathie picked us up at the airport



Quest, moored in Portland

Our luggage was delivered to the ship while we schmoozed with our fellow passengers until it was time to go aboard the Quest. The first view was promising; Quest is a proper small ship, berthed in a river but clearly a sea-going vessel. We had no trouble finding our way around her as she was no giant ocean liner. Our stateroom was small but comfortable and it was but a short distance to the main lounge located beneath the ship's bridge. After the obligatory abandon ship drill, which consisted of meeting in the lounge and donning huge orange life vests, we were underway. In this case it meant going under bridges; the Willamette River cuts through the center of Portland and there are a lot of bridges to go through and under.

While the ship navigated down river, we shared cocktails and chatted companionably with the expedition leaders and guests. All the guests and most of the leaders were a homogenous bunch; mostly older, the oldest explorer was ninety-two, adventurous, and willing to get more education. They did represent a wide spectrum of employment. There were scientists of various disciplines, college professors, physicians, pilots, and veterinarians. Surprisingly, there was not one person who would even admit to being in the legal profession. Ha. I, of course, was very interested in the navigation of the vessel through the narrow Willamette River and watched from the foredeck during our passage out to the Columbia River, until it was time for dinner.

Meals on the ship had a standard routine. We ate in the dining area right aft. Breakfast and lunch on board were buffets which offered a variety of food that was both healthy and delicious, not an easy thing to do. They had a signup menu for dinner with a changing menu. Although they did offer deserts there was nothing like the continuous feasts and countless goodies offered on cruise liners. This suited us just fine. The food fare was local, fresh and we even got Wellness Shots in the morning. A paleo or keto eater could dine very nicely.

After dinner there was a stimulating lecture offered on the Columbia River Basin. However, it had been a long day and Ruth and I retired for the first of a series of comfortable night sleeps.



Some of the bridges of Portland



A group shot of the Sigma Xi passengers on the beach

The next morning we awoke moored in Astoria, Oregon. Our morning bus excursion took us to Cape Disappointment, site of the infamous Columbia Bar which has wrecked so many ships. (The bus driver wore a hat exclaiming, 'Disappointment Awaits'.) On the way our expedition historian pointed out the locations where the Lewis and Clark expedition had traversed and camped and complained bitterly about the relentless rains and cold – "as wet as water could make us". {Ruth wants me to note that Sacagawea, one of the guides for Lewis and Clark had a baby in tow at this time.} This was a recurring theme for the expedition, and one that I enjoyed - the stories of that famous voyage of exploration. The highlight for me was the trip to Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center located next to the Cape Disappointment lighthouse. I am a big fan of museums and this was a good one, covering a subject that interested me. It was a clear autumn day and the views of the Pacific were spectacular. The curator assured me that most of the time the shallow mouth of the river kicked up the surf over the bar making the passage most difficult. The Center was set back a distance and was at least a hundred feet above the

sea. Even so, he told us that on many days the spray from the thunderous surf completely covers the building.

After lunch on the ship, we were off for our second excursion, the Columbia River Maritime Museum and a visit to the Astoria Column. I loved this museum, too, as it highlighted the long history of boats and ships in this region. The museum had full sized boats, partial sections of larger fishing craft, and models of ships including a number of naval warships. Video loops showed heavy weather segments including how pilots get on and off the ships in high seas. Great stuff for an old navy guy. The Astoria column is an architectural oddity. It was erected a century ago by local boosters for no other reason than to celebrate the area. Located on high ground about 10 miles from the ocean, it offers a spectacular view for anyone willing to climb it's 164 steps; and it's a great place to throw off a little balsa glider, too.



Astoria column on a brilliant fall day



Astoria and the mouth of the Columbia in the distance

The ship transitioned up the Columbia while we slept. Shortly after first light we began transit of the Bonneville Locks, the first of eight locks we would transit on our trip. The locks make the rivers navigable. We passed many grain and timber barges on our transit. The dams also decimated the salmon runs. Although there are still many fish that are able to return to their spawning places to mate, swimming up the fish ladders that parallel the locks, their numbers are dramatically reduced from before the arrival of industrial fishing and changes to the rivers. Again, I was fascinated by the nautical expertise that goes into the efficient operation of these gateways that effortlessly raise our ship up to 100 feet at a time.



Approaching the Bonneville Lock



Captain Paul and 1st Mate Tim in the lock

The Quest was, by design, just narrow enough to pass through the locks. The wind had increased dramatically overnight. Still, Captain Paul and his small crew made the entrance and exit from the lock without any drama. I watched the huge doors and the back of the lock close behind us and then lift Quest up to the next level while enjoying an omelet in the dining room.

Later that morning we anchored outside the Cascade locks. We were to anchor out the rest of the cruise until our final day as mooring spaces for a vessel our size are both rare and expensive on the rivers. I took advantage of a chance to kayak on a placid stretch of the river. At this point the locks have made the mighty Snake River into a series of lakes. We paddled down an arm of the Snake for about an hour which provided me all the workout I cared to do that morning. While I paddled, Ruth went on a rather boring nature walk. We were lucky that all of the other educational lectures turned out to be both educational and interesting.

The Hood River Valley is one of the most beautiful, pastoral places I have ever visited. Lush rolling hills are covered by orchards and pastures with Mt. Hood looming magnificently in the distance. We took two-lane roads past charming farm houses and quaint little villages. The entire area gives an aura of peace and fertility. The orchard where we ate obviously had a good business with tourists and events such as weddings. We dined on long tables under a covered area. The buses were thoughtfully positioned to provide a bit of a wind break and there were heaters provided as it was a bit brisk. I reveled in the first cool weather I had enjoyed in seven months. After a fine meal of local salmon we had a chance to wander around the orchard, admiring the pears ready for harvesting.

After that fine meal Ruth and I visited the Western Antique Aeroplane and antique car museum. We got a ride in a Model T Ford, and wandered around an extensive collection of restored small aircraft and vintage cars. Then it was a ride back to the ship for dinner.



Mount Hood looming over the orchard



Full moon rising as we transit the Columbia

Saturday we spent cruising up the Columbia. River cruising is different than ocean cruising as there are constant diversions. Not only is the navigation a constant concern, there are lots of other vessels of all sizes moving up and down stream as well as the unrolling panorama of the river banks. I spent hours up on the bridge with Chief Mate Tim. The Quest's bridge was modern – very different from those I spent so much time on when I was in the Navy. Tim and I discussed the new technologies and shared a few sea stories as we motored tranquilly up the river. Could I have conned the good ship Quest up the river? I think so. The controls were not that different but I am sure I could have done so under instruction. Would I have **liked** to have done it? Actually..... yeah, I would have. I still miss it.

The next morning we awoke at anchor at the entrance to the Palouse River (pronounced pa loose). During the night we had passed through several locks and were now in the Snake River. We would spend the day here doing expeditions in small craft. Our first adventure was to explore the Palouse River in our zodiacs, with special attention to the geologic formations as pointed out by Dr. Duncan Foley. This region was subject to monumental floods at the end of the last ice age and Duncan pointed out many features which showed the incredible amount of water released, the equivalent of a Great Lake, when their ice dams broke. These floods happened not once but repeatedly.



Zodiacs, full of passengers off to an excursion



Duncan & I looking at rock swallow nests

Before returning to the Quest for lunch we made a side excursion to Palouse Falls. The bus took us upstream to where the river emerged from a gap in the rocks to plunge dramatically 180 feet down into a pool before winding its way down to the Snake River.

The next morning we arrived at our final mooring spot at the confluence of the Snake and Clearwater Rivers in Lewiston, Idaho. We would be taking jet boats up the spectacular Hell's Canyon. The 50 mile trip would take all day. The jet boats were able to come right to the dock where Quest was moored. They are called 'jet boats' because they are powered by pump jets. I guess it is better to call them jet boats than pump boats. Each boat is about 30 feet long and can handle about 30 passengers. Ruth and I sat near the front so I could talk to the operator.

Off we went, the three 380 horsepower engines giving a high speed ride. The Snake River from here is no lake. It is only navigable by jet boats to manage the rapids and hidden rocks that could tear a conventional prop to pieces. Lewiston was quickly left behind as the canyon steepened. Soon there was only a narrow road on the right bank with fewer and fewer houses spaced out. The river goes up quite a bit in the spring and the homes were well up from the river. Finally, the road ended at a garage. The family that lived on the ranch on the left bank would row over to get their car to drive out. Although they had a way out over the mountains on the other side, crossing the river in their little red row boat was much easier.

The further up the river we went the higher the cliffs and faster the current. The ride was thrilling and the terrain amazing. Now the few vacation houses we saw on the banks could only be reached by boat and had no utilities of any kind. Even so, our guide assured us that the land was expensive. Building anything up here was even more so. We stopped from time to time on the upper canyon to view a small cluster of rare Big Horn Sheep, subsisting on the rugged slopes.

After a couple of hours we pulled into a dock and a beautiful little site run by the Idaho state park system. Beyond this point all boats had to stop and get a permit to proceed. Volunteers man the little house in about as remote a place as you could find, staying for a month at a time. After a quick tour of the little museum there we re-embarked and headed back down the river to our designated lunch spot downriver.



One of the jet boats, with spray awnings



The steep gorges of Hell's Canyon

Our lunch was provided at a ranch/orchard on the left bank, accessible by a road over the mountains... in summer. The spot was idyllic. A large old house next to an orchard was tucked back from the river.

Closer in there was a more recent log cabin and a set of metal outbuildings where we were served lunch. The day was bright, cool, and perfect. Our group wandered around the area, some looking at the mule deer and wild turkeys which seemed unconcerned about our presence. Others of us just relaxed and took in the view of this green oasis with the river cutting through the severe hills.



Ruth at rest



The Snake River at our lunch stop

Our trip up Hell's Canyon took almost all day. That evening, the evening lecture was a talk by a Nez Pierce spokesman. He was really very good; he told old Nez Pierce stories, played a native drum and flute and sang. Not that he was too serious, at one point while singing a typical "Hey ya oh yea, oh yea" he shifted slipped in a verse "Hey ya, I love Oreos". Not only was he instructional, he was entertaining with several sly jokes. Ruth loved it.

The next morning we had a long journey, to make our flight connections out of Spokane, which is only 50 miles from the Canadian border to Phoenix, and then home. Lewiston is pretty far off the beaten flight path and so we had to ride for two hours to their small regional airport. The bus had a guide who explained the regional geography. We were passes through fertile farm lands. The rich loess soil and local climate are perfect for growing wheat and similar crops. Even though they grow two crops a year, we were at a time when the fields were bare. And what fields they were. Almost every acre of the rolling hills were put to use. Every few miles farmhouses would be identified by the trees, carefully irrigated, surrounding the farmhouse and outbuildings. Almost all the other land was put to use for crops. The rounded terrain was different from the enormous fields of corn in the Great Plains. These farms tended to be family owned and operated. Somehow you could tell. The small towns we passed through were quintessential American farm towns.

Spokane is a charming little airport with a serious flaw – it doesn't have many flights out that connect to flights to Houston. We finally got home long after midnight. Since the trams at Houston Intercontinental were closed at that hour we had a long hike to our car. Still, it was good to be home after a lovely expedition.