

I have always been fascinated by the sea. Growing up in coastal Florida, the beaches of the Atlantic Ocean were not far. As a young man I would spend hours looking out onto the Atlantic Ocean, first as a child playing in the sand, later as a lifeguard. I went to a college located on the Gulf of Mexico. Eventually I spent 24 years serving as a Surface Line Officer for the world's greatest navy. So, yes, I feel I have an attachment to the sea. That is one of the reasons I recently embarked on a cruise with Ruth to cross the Atlantic from Fort Lauderdale to Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

As a dedicated retiree, I am aware that there are people who spend a lot of their retirement, both in time and money cruising the world. We have a group of friends who go cruising once or twice a year and who share where and when they will be going on their next adventure. We prefer to cruise with people we know, counting on their expertise and contacts to recommend cruises that interest us. Although we do not necessarily do events together, it is nice to have familiar faces onboard a great big ship.

Although I have crossed all the Earth's major oceans, I have never gone all the way across the Atlantic from America to Europe. I have been far out into the Atlantic, but most of my nautical service was either in the Caribbean, Indian, and mainly the Pacific Oceans. Thus, when our friends mentioned there would be a Holland American Line cruise repositioning from the Caribbean Sea to Europe leaving from Fort Lauderdale in early April, we were interested. Adding to the attraction was that we had just had two friends relocate to Portugal, and they had been urging us to come visit. The cruise would allow us to cross the ocean by sea, travel down to visit our friends who wanted to show us their new home, and then fly back home to Houston.

This trans-Atlantic cruise would be different from all the other vacation cruises we had done; it would start with three days at sea, a stop for a quick visit to Bermuda then five continuous days just cruising across the Atlantic. Why subject yourself to so much time on a ship? Not everyone appreciates shipboard life. Samuel Johnson once commented "Being at sea is like being in jail with the additional chance of being drowned." I strongly disagree. I liked being underway in the Navy. There is old Navy adage 'a day underway is like a day of vacation'. And life on a cruise liner underway is WAY better than being on a naval warship. For one thing, I do not have stand watches. The food is vastly better, as are the living accommodations. The ship makes strenuous efforts to provide diversions from dawn until midnight. We did not need diversions. I can, and have, spent hours just looking at sea. My intent was to eat and drink well, do some reading and writing, get plenty of sleep, and be out of touch for a while. The mere idea of being able to step away from our oh-so-connected world was very attractive.

That was why we were up before dawn on a Sunday to catch an Uber to the airport for an early morning flight to Fort Lauderdale to embark on the Nieuw Statendam, an enormous Holland America cruise liner. The flight was unremarkable, about as good as flying can be these days, Unfortunately, the arrangements for getting us the one mile from the airport to the terminal broke down and it took over an hour to get to the ship. We arrived hot and tired, but to our relief found the boarding process to be easy. We found our stateroom and then headed up to the Lido deck 'market' where the famous cruise liner buffet was set up to receive the new guests. We guessed the buffet had been rebranded as a market following Covid.



Nieuw Statendam at the pier. The ICW at the 19th Street Bridge. Note the mega yachts.

Nieuw Statendam was built in 2018 and so was relatively modern. It is a typical cruise liner of the current era, being almost 1000 feet long and with over 2600 guests and more than a thousand crew. Nieuw Statendam with 13 decks above the waterline, it towered over us on the pier. Inside she has a rational design which makes it easy to get around with restaurants, bars, snack stands, clubs, spas, and other entertainments scattered around the volume of the ship. Our stateroom was comfortable with everything well laid out with a cozy veranda. The bed was comfortable; we tested it before our departure time. I could not resist getting up to watch our departure. Port Everglades, Ft Lauderdale's port, is designed for cruise ships with an inner harbor dredged out and numerous long quays for the massive cruise liners. Four of them got underway on that brilliant Sunday afternoon. The Intercoastal Waterway was thick with small pleasure craft. Some of them chose to come in the narrow entrance Port Everglades while the massive cruise ships were in the channel. Angry blasts of ship's whistles sounded. As we departed the familiar Floridian terrain, I could not help but notice the extremely large private yachts moored beneath the 19th Street Bridge.



The gang sitting around at Happy Hour



Ruth enjoying a book on our balcony.

That first night our group of friends gathered before the evening meal for a chance to enjoy cocktails and conversation. For the rest of the cruise, typically we would spend a pleasant half hour or together before getting up and sharing the excellent food at a three-course dinner. All of us did not join for cocktails or the evening meal every day, but some of us always did; it gave the day a bit of structure. Unlike previous cruises, there were many days where we could not share what we had done on our various shore excursions. All of us had been doing the same thing – hanging out on board. Days at sea were extremely pleasant if similar. It was much like the joke about the old loafer.

“What are you going to do today?”

“Nothing.”

“That’s what you did yesterday.”

“I didn’t finish.”

The ships on Caribbean cruises usually have many young families with lots children onboard. This emphatically not the case for a Trans-Atlantic cruise. I would estimate that half of the passengers were born before 1950. The ship’s passageways were filled with old people with canes, old people pushing walkers, people in wheelchairs, people in motorized scooters – they were everywhere. One of our friends, a woman my own age, left the Crows Nest, an observation space over the bow, with a comment that it looked like ‘game day at a retirement home.’ I must admit that being below the median age made me feel positively youthful. On the plus side, older cruisers are more comfortable to be around, and they almost always have great stories. Many of them are extraordinarily experienced cruisers with dozens of cruises behind them. I spoke with one man who mentioned he would be on this vessel for eight weeks! I met sweet little old ladies who have been to virtually every country which allows cruise ships. These people are often sophisticated and deeply knowledgeable about the world. They have literally been there.



What do you do on a transit? Read and relax. A hot tub king and his court

We had three relaxing days at sea before we arrived at our first stop: Bermuda. I was delighted to visit this little British territory located about 600 miles east of Virginia. Only about 21 square miles, the island is shaped like a fishhook, and is surrounded by spotty coral reefs. Entry into the main lagoon requires a long and narrow channel. We followed a Norwegian cruise ship even larger than Nieuw Statendam into the cruise terminal. Bermuda was hit hard by the Covid cruise ship hiatus as their economy depends heavily on tourism but things are starting to recover. We did our bit to boost that economy by taking a little tour and getting a few small souvenirs. Our tour was a visit to one of the local reefs in a glass bottom boat. The day was perfect for a boat ride: sunny and cool with little wind. Sure enough, we saw lots of coral and fish around a wreck on the reef. The fish were waiting for the boat to throw bread into the water – that brought lots of fish to the surface. Bermuda is a lovely little island with many low brightly colored houses. It is compact: the whole territory was visible from the Nieuw Statendam upper deck. We were there until 4 PM when we followed the Norwegian ship out to sea. It is not a good idea to traverse the long twisty channel after dark. We headed out onto the dark Atlantic for a five-day transit to Ireland.



After leaving Bermuda it got chilly. Note the different shades of blue in the sky.

I have mentioned that I like being at sea, especially when there is leisure time to enjoy it. Ashore, there are many intrusive things that separate you from the natural world; afloat you have time and space to notice things like the phases of the moon, the ripples of a breeze across the water, fluffy clouds, and how the sky can be two shades of blue in different places at the same time. You can also gaze upon the deep and think of nothing at all. I have been informed that is true if you are a man. On a typical day during the transit I would get up at first light, as I usually do, and go to where I knew I could find coffee. When breakfast was served, I would go there and have anything from fruit and a pastry to a full-up breakfast feast, depending on my mood. Ruth stayed behind to enjoy her bed. Until later when I would bring her a latte to start her day. Some days I would exercise, and then loosen up in the sauna and/or the hot tub. Ruth took advantage of the many spas and hairdressers and even found some bargains in the shops. Lunch was usually at the buffet, followed by a nap. We had lots of good sleep on the transit. There was plenty of time for writing and reading on our balcony. Weather at sea is usually very pleasant and this trip was not an exception, although the weather shifted from Bermuda's mild blue skies to the dank, gray North Atlantic, perfect for snuggling in a cozy stateroom. Days at sea are a luxurious way to do just as little as you want.



Ruth enjoying her nest



Ruth petting a dog in Cork near Titanic reenactors

We came at last to Cob, the port town next to Cork, Ireland. As we entered the port in the morning light, I was delighted to see a very pretty scene with picturesque houses positioned on a steep slope next to the water. A charming little church completed the picture. Ireland requires everyone on a ship to have their passports verified, whether they will leave the ship or not. Thus, all 3500 people on board (crew included) had to line up to get our passports stamped before anyone was allowed to leave. Our tour to the Jamison distillery did not leave until 1115 so this was not a problem. We rode around through the dark, congested streets of Cork. Yes, there is a lot of history in southern Ireland, but it wasn't particularly interesting history, even to a history buff like me. The town and weather were dank and somewhat depressing. What better way to lighten the mood than a tour of a distillery? Our tour did not start for an hour after we arrived, so we had time to get a nice lunch at the attached café and look at the various vintages made by the distillery. Some of them were obvious collectable offerings – no sane person pays over \$5,000 for a bottle of whiskey just to drink. Our tour of the distillery was excellent, combining history and the specific techniques of the art of making whisky. At the end, we got to sample some small amounts of their products, giving us a chance to smell and taste the various varieties of whiskey. Our tour bus had to scurry back to the ship to barely make our sailing time. As our group sat down to dinner, Nieuw Statendam made the passage to Guernsey Island.



Teaching kids to sail in the Guernsey tank. Happiness outside the Jamison's Distillery

Guernsey is an odd little place – a British island located just off the coast of France. Famous for its dairy cattle, the island is temperate and bright green. Because the port has no piers long enough for a ship the size of Nieuw Statendam, so we anchored offshore and shuttled in via the ship's tenders – smaller boats that hold a hundred passengers or so. We had no planned tours, so Ruth and I enjoyed a lunch in the buffet while the tenders slowly ferried most of the passengers to their various excursions. Once the crush of passengers headed ashore had diminished, I hopped aboard one of the tenders and went ashore myself for a ramble. St Peter Port Town is the largest town in Guernsey which is not to say it is very large. It is charming but rather limited. The day had turned sunny and fine as I walked out to Fort Cornhill, a very old little fort guarding the port. It was built by Crusaders and modified and updated repeatedly over the centuries, ending with a concrete pillbox built by the Germans in 1944. I was delighted to see a man-made pond where children were learning to sail prams, aided by adults who waded beside him. I enjoyed an ice cream cone with the famous Guernsey ice cream before riding the tender back to the ship. The ride back on the tender turned into a bit of drama as wakes caused the tender to slam into the side of the off-loading dock. A little old lady was just getting ready to step off the tender and the impact sent her tumbling down to the deck, fortunately uninjured. After a few minutes she was able to regain her feet and embark on the cruise ship. This highlighted for me the dangers of so many frankly elderly people getting off and on from the tenders to the ship.

Our next port call was Le Harve, France. Many people took the opportunity to visit the Normandy Beaches or take the long bus ride in for a tour of Paris. Not Ruth and me. We enjoyed a leisurely day on the ship, something we had perfected on the passage over. Even better, most of the passengers had debarked so we almost felt we had the ship to ourselves.

From Le Harve we travelled across the English Channel, awakening to the iconic white cliffs of Dover, which in fact are very impressive. Our tour would take us to the old city of Canterbury with a brief photo stop outside Dover Castle. It was obvious why this spot has been fortified for so many centuries. Dover is in a gap in the great white cliffs, which stretch away in the distance on both sides. The castle itself presents a dominating sight, glowering over the little port and the roads which wind up inland past the castle. Our trip through rural Kent gave us a glimpse of the beauty of pastoral England, culminating in Canterbury.

Canterbury itself is relatively small and charming. We walked from the bus park along a simply beautiful little river which had been carefully bounded by walkways. The cathedral is imposing – that's what cathedrals are supposed to be. Inside it was less ostentatious than many of the other similar religious structures we have visited. The interior walls often had stone memorials to people obviously paid for by admirers. They were usually doctors, pastors, or soldiers, with dates ranging from the Seventeenth Century to the Twentieth Century. There were quite a few memorials to men lost in the Great War. People tend to forget how hard that conflict hit Great Britain. We were impressed with the catacombs of the cathedral. A quiet, prayerful place, it was well lit by high windows.



Goofing by a statue across from the tea shop. A lovely, clear stream in Canterbury

After spending some time in the cathedral, we drifted through the streets of Canterbury. It is a genuinely charming little town although the weather was typically English: cool and misty. After a bit we retired to the upstairs of a classic English tea house where we sat with

some tea and a crumble watching the people wandered below us. The soft rain stopped before we had to take the long walk back to the bus park and the ride back to the ship for our final night aboard. We had packed our suitcases the day before so after dinner we dutifully put our luggage outside our door so the stewards could have it ready to offload when we docked the next morning at Rotterdam.

The next day was a long, hard one; after so many days of glorious indolence we were required to do something: get to our friend's home in central Portugal. We traveled first by ship, (crossing the channel), then bus to the airport, then walking (after a gate change to a distant terminal) then plane to Porto, then an Uber to the train station, and finally the train. I had expected the American version of a train, with big cars and high-speed travel. What we actually got was more like an elevated city trolley. It was crowded with no available seats. Our luggage was definitely out of place. We had 27 stops (Ruth counted) before we finally arrived at the end of the line where we had to change trains. Unfortunately, we had a two-hour layover before that train arrived. Ugh. Fortunately, there was a nice café there which served good wine and beer to ease our wait. We did not board our final train until almost 8:00 PM. The last leg was mercifully short, and we arrived at the little Mealhada train station just before dark. Bill and Debi were there to scoop us up and bring us to their lovely home where they fed us dinner. We retired soon after, tucked out from our journey.

Bill and Debi retired to Luso, Portugal, after an extensive search all over the world for the best place to retire. They got it right. Their four bedroom townhome is beautiful, decorated as it is by two artists. The kitchen has a balcony which overlooks a lovely two-level garden next to a steep little gully with small creek. Tall trees shield the back of the property ensuring long-term quiet and privacy. The residence exudes a feeling of calm bliss. We spent four nights there, relaxing and enjoying their community. They live near the beautiful Bussaco National Forest, which is cut through with walking trails, Debi and I had a lovely hike there one afternoon. Ruth and I had a lovely, low-key time with our friends, simply enjoying their lifestyle. We ate well, including going out to a few local restaurants for splendid meals. But one of the best meals we had was homemade. Ruth and Debi harvested some of the leeks from Debi's garden and Bill made simply delicious potato leek soup. The time with them slipped by pleasantly.



Stairs in the National Forest



A 150-year-old Tasmanian oak

Finally, our idyl came to an end. Ruth had had enough of trains, so we took an Uber down to Lisbon to catch our flight home. We were flying business class, so we had a much more comfortable ride home; we also took advantage of the lounges during our layovers in both Lisbon and Toronto which eased the strain of travel. Even though we did have the mini suites for the trans-Atlantic crossing, it was difficult for me to sleep on the flight. This became a problem as the entire trip was 26 hours from door to door. We were pretty darn tired by the time we got home at 0100 local.

This was our longest cruise, and, like the others, was different. We did many fewer 'things' and spent more time just relaxing and enjoying the ambiance. Cruising is a most enjoyable way to live, as evidenced by the large number of people we met who spent a lot of their time and money at sea. Since I spent almost three weeks eating and drinking too much and exercising too little, I was sure there would be a cost when I came back and weighed myself. I had lost two pounds. There is no justice.



Our group at our dinner table



Four friends atop Mt. Bussaco in Portugal