

Black Sea Cruise - 2014

Pre-cruise:

We don't leave home until October 31st, 2014.

The week before the day we'd leave, Friday, October 31st, 2014, was spent getting ready: tending to last minute details like purchases of trip needs, appointments, phone calls, laundry, household chores, etc. Oh, and packing, my last task, scheduled for me by me on Thursday, October 30th. Ginnie had typically started packing several days earlier.

Friday, October 31st, 2014: Leaving for Rome

Well, Friday got here at last. The plane didn't leave until after 1:00 PM. So we had time for more last minute sorting and packing and consolidation of our multitudes of stuff, stuff we will need on a seventeen day voyage at sea. Finally we were underway at about 11:00 AM. and drove off to where we'd leave our car parked while we were away, the Airport Inn, which doubles as an airport parking lot. The desk clerk, a cheerful Pakistani lady, we discovered was named something like Phar. She wore many hats and besides tending to the desk, also doubled as the parking lot attendant and also as the shuttle driver, meaning we had much contact with Phar before arriving at the airport. So, naturally we teased her about her name: "You've come far, Phar, from a far land..." She laughed and happily asked us where we were going which led to more puns and laughs.

The airport ordeal wasn't too hard and TSA was a relative breeze rather than the usual gale.

Lunch was taken at Max and Erma's in the terminal (yum!) and soon we were in the air, on the first leg of our journey, bound for Philadelphia. Along the way, in the plane, one of my hearing aid batteries died and as soon as we landed and disembarked, I reloaded it with a spare one from my key chain. Then we trudged off from Terminal F to Terminal A, miles away, and settled in for a drink at a noisy pub near our gate to rest and relax...

Then I had a panic attack, a real big one. I couldn't find my iPad! Stricken, I thought about trudging back to the place, miles away, where I had stopped to reload my battery, then thought to stop at a help desk. They called Terminal F (miles away) and asked if an iPad had been generously found and handed over to the desk there. "No." It seemed hopeless and I needed the device too much to just walk away, iPadless. So I looked in a shop there, thinking I might buy another one, quick. No dice, no iPads, they had none but did say that they thought there was a vending machine (honest, a vending

machine) that would or could sell me one. Sure enough, there it was and, sure enough, I bought one. Whew, I had an iPad.

Then I returned to the pub to brew over a brew and confess my full perfidiousness to Ginnie. It was a sad day in Mudville then. But at least I had an iPad, albeit a mini, for use on the cruise for email and for this blog...

So we next boarded the plane and sat jammed into the back in steerage, eating airplane "food" and sipping plastic cups of cheap Italian (boxed) table wine, and flew, seven and a half hours, all night from about 6:30 PM. (in Philadelphia) until 7:30 AM (in Rome) the next morning.

Customs and immigration in Rome were typically tedious but not too much so and we eventually found ourselves out in the terminal lobby looking for Bob. Bob was really not Bob, he was really our limousine driver, working for Bob's Limos in Rome. And, by golly there he was, holding a sign that read "BOB'S LIMOS - Spargur, V". Imagine flying into Rome and finding there a guy holding a sign up with your name on it... And your beloved, understanding wife's initial on it too...

He drove us on to our place for the night (even if it was technically late morning, it seemed like it was VERY late to us after a night on a plane with no sleep. It was the Tenuta Del'Argento near the port city of Civitavecchia. It was WONDERFUL! Out on a hill top with views of the sea and the cruise ships berthed there, surrounded by green fields, trees, and horses, it was idyllic, one of Ginnie's best discoveries. The staff was all very friendly and nice and we found ourselves hating to leave when the time came...

The time came the next morning when we were gathered together by the Inn's driver and shuttled off to the pier, right up to the building where the cruise line was processing new arrivals. No muss, no fuss. Beautiful and relaxing, it took more of the edge off of the distress of losing the iPad the day before

Now, it's Sunday afternoon and we're now in our stateroom, unpacking. We ate lunch on the ship in its dining room and will meet our dining companions tonight for dinner. Ship leaves this evening and tomorrow we're heading off to the south, down the Italian coast.

Later.

Dinner was nice. We're at a table for eight, in the back with a window on the sea from the ship's stern. Four people either missed the boat, ate elsewhere on the ship or fasted, however. So our only other dining "companions" were two Chinese ladies who sat at the other end of the table and ignored us. Oh, well...

Monday, November 3rd, 2014: Naples

We got up early, at 6:00 AM, with a wakeup call, for first port of the cruise and our first excursion, a comprehensive tour of the area. By day's end we were both almost sleep walking with fatigue...

After a quick breakfast in the buffet line (something we normally hate) we made it to the ship's lounge to wait for our tour to begin. Then off we went, outside, where we met Luca, our guide for the whole day. With him leading, we were driven into Naples and on, past Mt. Vesuvius to Pompeii, the famous doomed city of antiquity, destroyed by an eruption of the equally famous volcano in 79 AD. It was fascinating to see, having been excavated during the past two hundred years. Most of the city has been exhumed but some areas are still buried under tons of hardened volcanic ash.



The S. S. Ocean Princess

We walked down very well preserved avenues, past long gone doorways, fountains, homes, shops, stables and other such evidence of human existence. It is perhaps one of the most important archeological sites in all the world, since it holds an outstanding snapshot of Roman life from nearly two thousand years ago. The tour was strenuous, requiring that we walk over irregular cobblestones while listening to our guide's fine narration, broadcast to us by a radio system. This both helped us hear him (me especially, of course) but also insured we weren't separated from the group and lost deep in the huge area of ruins.



Ginnie in Pompeii

One highlight were samples of plaster castings made of cavities formed long ago when bodies of victims, buried in the ash, had decomposed leaving an empty space behind.

When filled in with plaster by archeologists, a recreation of their bodies was formed. These were highly detailed, revealing not only their bodies and facial expressions but also folds in their clothing and even the straps on their sandals. Their distress, however, was obvious and very sad...

Lunch was taken in Sorrento and was quite good. When it was over, our guide led us down a LONG stairway, down the hilly Sorrento landscape, to the edge of the bay (far) below where we boarded a ferry that took us to our next destination, the famous island of Capri.

The island, when we got there, was beautiful, and HILLY... We rode a long funicular up to the heights above, rising from the harbor below. Then we were led into the city at the top and then through it, eventually reaching a spectacular vantage point with a dramatic view of the sea below, the hills above and the costly villas in between.



The view from the Isle of Capri

When it was over we returned to the harbor and were ferried across the bay, back to Naples, almost exactly to where our ship was berthed and disembarked.

Wanting to skip a formal night in the dining room that evening, we instead next headed to a specialty restaurant where we had a fine Italian meal.

The next day we'd be further south.

Tuesday, November 4th, 2014: Sicily and Messina

We were up again early but not quite as early as the day before. We even had time for breakfast in the main dining room instead of the hated, crowded buffet. Then it was on to our tour led by Giovanna, a pretty and ultra petite little Sicilian girl. She was quite nice and, although her English was heavily accented, she spoke very slowly and we understood her fairly well.

First up was the hilltop city of Taormina (actually EVERY city seemed to be on a hilltop in Sicily! But I digress...) where we were led by Giovanna through the town as she described what we were seeing over a radio transmitter to receivers we all wore. The views were great and the town was very picturesque.



Mt. Etna

Next we were driven to another well known Italian volcano: Mt. Etna, the only currently active volcano in Europe. Climbing higher and higher, we reached some craters or vent holes that were created during the last eruption, not long ago. On the shore it had been pleasantly warm but up high on Mt. Etna it was very cool, cold even, at this high elevation. We saw no smoking lava flows but there was much evidence of previous, repeated volcanic activity in the area.

Then we had lunch up there and were afterwards bused back to the ship. The whole excursion lasted eight hours from start to finish including bus travel.

Wednesday, November 5th, 2014: Malta

On this day the ship docked in Malta. We had no excursion planned so, after tending to some computer details in the morning, we disembarked and made our way out of the dock area (berthing a number of big cruise ships in addition to ours).

Right outside the gate were a number of taxi drivers and tour companies. We bought tickets with the first tour bus line who caught our eye. It was a company that had two bus routes, both originating there at the ship, which you could hop on or off of as you saw fit. We rode one route out to a medieval fortress city called Mdina (that's the correct spelling, Mdina) where we disembarked and soon after found a place for lunch where we split a pizza. Then we boarded the next tour bus to pass our way and rode back to the ship in an hour long ride.

Malta was an interesting place if a hot one.

Tomorrow we have a sea day.

Thursday, November 6th, 2014: 1st Sea Day

Finally! A day at sea with no early wake ups and no strenuous, hot excursions. Not that we don't like to get off the ship and tour somewhere, but we had had three tiring days in a row as soon as we had boarded the ship while still being very jet lagged... Today we planned to ease into shipboard life a bit and just relax.

So, we were up again at 7:00 AM. Our days of sleeping late into the morning, tired though we may profess to be, seem to be past us... <SIGH> It's still not lunchtime as I write this, and we have already been awake for almost four hours! Plus the wind has

kicked up so much that the seas are very rough, making the ship roll and pitch a lot. They hope to find calmer seas once we enter the Adriatic which, lying snugly between Italy and the Balkans, is more protected, but in the meantime it has been a struggle to walk down the halls or anywhere, actually. Eating and sleeping are still about the same, however, as has been wine drinking, fortunately...

Breakfast was good, as usual, although the constant effort not to eat too much is wearying; we made do by splitting one order of bacon: six pieces in all! Ginnie wants to attend a trivia contest at 11:15 AM, then we'll have lunch where we will try not to eat too much again. Later we're attending a wine tasting, again trying not to drink too much, and, of course, we'll eat dinner tonight at six PM and once more try not to eat too much. Life on a ship is tough, very tough. When you cruise, be afraid, very afraid...

One happy note must be added. Our lunch companions today were two other couples, one from Perth, Australia, and another from Chicago. We had a fun time bantering with them all when, out of the blue, the Chicago couple announced that they had been married only the week before and were, in fact, celebrating their honeymoon! So, after we had congratulated them, the dining room's staff suddenly appeared with a cake and gathered around to sing "Happy Honeymoon to You!" It was really nice and the happy, lucky (slightly red faced) couple shared the cake with us all.

One thing about a cruise is that you just never get enough to eat, just always too much...

Tomorrow, we will arrive in Dubrovnik, Croatia, a beautiful, walled medieval city filled with white stone buildings, perched on the sea.

Friday, November 7th, 2014: Dubrovnik, Croatia

We woke up a bit later than usual which surprised me. Now we're in Dubrovnik.

We took a shuttle to the old town after breakfast but sadly it was raining and in time, after a stroll, some pictures and a cup of coffee under the umbrellas of a sidewalk cafe, we returned to the ship. We had seen this beautiful city once before but still felt a sad feeling of deprivation, missing out on touring it again due to the inclement weather. Maybe we'll get another chance later...

Saturday, November 8th 2014: Venice, Italy, Day I

We arrived in Venice around noontime today. We sailed into the lagoon and I watched from our balcony as the ship then slowly rolled to the southwest past the Venetian archipelago and then headed around to the northwestern corner of the island group where we were berthed soon after. Along the way we had views of the Doge's Palace,

San Marco's Square and the nearby Grand Canal that bisects Venice from North to South.

Once docked we readied ourselves and then disembarked. The cruise line had set us up with costly shuttle tickets that could enable us to be ferried to and from San Marco's where we could then purchase vaporetto tickets but we opted to do something else instead and declined them. There was an unmanned overhead tram that was available to take us to the Piazza Di Roma for a tiny fraction of the cost where we could also purchase vaporetto tickets. This is what we did and soon after we found ourselves riding a vaporetto, a large water bus, down the Grand Canal, headed to the Rialto Bridge. It was hectic and crowded but it was also fun and exciting to figure out and use the local transportation... Along the way we saw evidence of flooding, typical in Venice at this time of year, from the high waters of the Venetian Lagoon. In places there could even be seen sea weed on the sidewalks and many people wore inexpensive boots to protect their footwear.



Venice: The Rialto Bridge On the Grand Canal

At the Rialto we jumped off of our vaporetto and, needing resuscitation, headed to our favorite Venetian eating establishment, Il Trattoria Di La Madonna, located in a side street off of the canal. Ordering a bottle of good Italian Chardonnay and then some pasta (clams for Ginnie, black ink squid for me), we settled in and relaxed and ate. Sitting next to us were two young Chinese girls, one from Hong Kong and one from Taiwan, and we befriended them, talking about them and us and our travels. It was a delight.

Next we headed to San Marco's on foot, wending our way through the crowds until we arrived at this most famous plaza in all of Venice. There we heard cheers and whoops and found that a large group was celebrating their recent graduation from college. Many were strutting around, hugging friends and relatives, wearing their graduation mortar boards. Some also wore wreaths of laurel leaves.

After that excitement, we boarded a vaporetto at San Marco's and rode back up the Grand Canal, retracing most of our steps to the ship. We got back to where the Ocean Princess was moored, tired and weary, and soon were back aboard a little before six PM, just in time for dinner on board. Still being a bit full from the large lunch we'd had in town, we just ate a few appetizers and salads for dinner.

Now we are back in our stateroom, in for the night. Tomorrow we'll venture back out.

Sunday, November 9th 2014: Venice, Italy, Day II

Today we returned to Venice. Our plans changed throughout the morning as we got ready but finally we decided to go to the adjacent island group of Burano (famous for its lace and its quaint fishing village look) as opposed to other possibilities like visiting the other island group called Murano (famous for high quality glass blowing and its crowded dingy look) or going to the Doge's Palace (the Doge was the chief honcho in Venice in days of yore). So we got ourselves together and left the ship in mid morning and headed out...

Unfortunately, after a lot of travail, trying to figure out which vaporetto landing we needed to wait in, we learned that due to the flooding, the line we wanted wasn't running that day, or so it seemed---we were never quite sure. Frustrated, we finally gave up and took another line towards San Marco's Square with the idea now of going to the nearby Doge's Palace, only to realize that, as it was running late, we'd not likely have time to do that either! So, we just stayed on the vaporetto to the end of its line which was the island of Lido where we had stayed twice before, just for old time's sake. There we found a really nice place for a late lunch. When in doubt or distress, eat.

Returning to the ship at about 5:30 PM, we relaxed a while and heading down, late, to the dining room which was observing open seating on this first night of our second back-to-back cruise. There we were seated with three other couples, one from California (Martine and Simon), one from Munich (Mike and Nina) and one more from northern England (John and Jill). It proved to be a volatile combination and there was much interesting conversation throughout the meal, in addition to good food and drink.

Now we're back in our room for the night. Tomorrow it's a sea day.

Monday, November 10th 2014: 2nd Sea Day

So far, so good: nice, easy and relaxing. Ginnie is attending a port lecture and I am attending to my laundry, a week's worth of it... <UGH>

We're heading further east and have slipped into the next time zone, now seven hours ahead of our home in Dayton. Therefore while it's 2:30 AM in Dayton it's 9:30 AM here.

Later.

The day was slow and easy. Ginnie met a with a group to play bridge and I tinkered with the iPad and this blog. When late afternoon arrived we sat outside, on our balcony, and sipped wine from one of two bottles we had bought on Lido, near Venice; it was definitely a "life is good" moment: sailing on the Adriatic after two days in Venice, Italy,

while the sea rolled past us, sipping fine Pinot Grigio... Afterwards we headed down for dinner and to meet our new dining companions: Emily and Michelle; Josh and John; and Becky and Alex. The food was fine and our new companions seemed fine too. Life is good.

Tomorrow we arrive at the Greek Island of Corfu.

Tuesday, November 11th 2014: Corfu

We arrived in Corfu at seven AM; I'll have more to say later.

Later.

Well, we've been into this wonderful city, located near Albania, for a brief stroll and lunch, and are now back on the ship, preparing to head further east; we're due to arrive in Istanbul in two mornings.

Meanwhile, Corfu was very nice, very charming. We first walked to the port terminal where they offered free WIFI which we took advantage of to do more than just quickly exchange email, as we normally do on the ship's expensive satellite system when at sea. I even surfed a few favorite sites...

Then we left the port terminal and found a local bus that would take us to the town center for a mere €1.50 and rode on in. Once in town we strolled around, taking pictures of the twisting, narrow, rolling streets, past many souvenir shops, boutiques, restaurants and pubs, all lettered unintelligibly (to me) in Greek with the Cyrillic alphabet---of course, experienced travelers know what a place business is by merely looking at it. E.g., when they have tables clustered outside, you know it's a restaurant; when you see t-shirts, refrigerator magnets and rubber Greek swords hanging outside, you know it's a souvenir (i.e., junk) shop; and when it's displaying finer stuff (jewelry, scarves, handbags, perfume, etc.) you know it's a finer place than a souvenir stand (but probably not much finer...); etc. It's that simple, and so, not to worry, you don't really have to be able to read Greek! Fear not, newbie travelers...

We walked through a good bit of the small retail area, taking pictures and video and gawking, and then found a place for a nice Greek lunch: souvlaki for Ginnie and grilled calamari (almost a giant squid) and fries for me; it was great, washed down with a half liter carafe of nice Greek white wine.

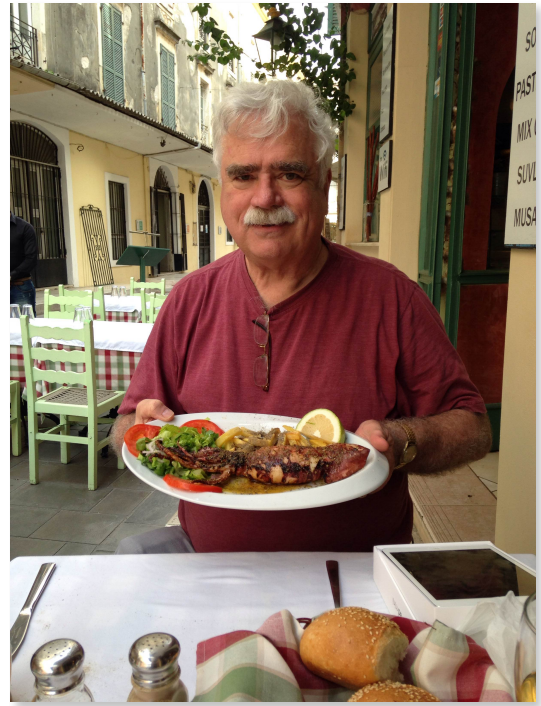
Then it was back to the bus stop for a short ride back to the ship where it's now early afternoon. Tonight we have one of those irritating formal nights (neckties and jackets

are mandatory for men, women usually wear long dresses) and tomorrow we'll relax to our third full sea day. Life is good!

Still later.

At 5:30 PM we attended a "Captain's Reception" that offered free cocktails, music and a chance to meet the captain, who then introduced his top staff to the crowd. It was nice and a chance to mingle a little. This is cruise ship SOP before a formal night in the dining room...

Then it was time to head to the dining room for our formal meal, wearing our lavishly appointed outfits of a long skirt for Ginnie and a blue blazer and a blue tie for me. Otherwise it was the same as always: good food and drink and a lot of fun banter with our new dining companions. The two girls sitting next to us, Michelle and Emily, are now our officially adopted daughters, at least for the duration of the cruise. Tomorrow, on our next sea day, we're to join them for trivia and form a big, formidable team.



Dick vs. the giant squid.

Wednesday, November 12th 2014: 3rd Sea Day

Not much to say, yet. We're mostly taking it easy today, reading and eating. We did play and win a round of trivia up in the lounge with 19 answers right out of 20. We had as team members a Texas couple we'd befriended and the two girls from our evening dining table. There were three or four teams with the same score but I answered the tie breaker correctly (In what year was the movie "Casablanca" released? Answer: 1942), and we won. Our magnificent prize was a lanyard to hang around our necks and hold our passenger cards... Ginnie wants to play again and maybe win a water bottle... Life is still good, with or without that coveted water bottle.

Still to come, the big event of the day: dinner!

But wait, before dinner were appetizers... Smoked salmon, capers, kalamata olives, toast tips, cheese cubes, etc., all free in one of the lounges for the cost of admission. We went there, had some drinks, ate some of the above and then met an interesting English couple who just happened to sit with us. I struck up a conversation with the man and got to talking about both WWI and WWII and the English sacrifices. It was disturbing and moving all at the same time.

Then it was down to dinner and trying not to overeat and losing, as we do each night.

Tomorrow it's Istanbul.

Thursday, November 13th 2014: Istanbul

This day was spent in Istanbul, a fascinating, big place and a clean relatively modern one it seemed. The city straddles one (the Bosphorus) of the two consecutive straits that connect the Mediterranean Sea with the Black Sea (the other is called the Dardanelles) and that separate Europe from Asia. Parts of Turkey therefore lies in both continents

Our excursion didn't start until later in the morning as the ship didn't arrive until about nine AM. Our guide for the day was a funny guy named something like Yaouse, which he told us to forget and to just call him Curly for his curly hair. Soon we were out in the town or rather city, on our bus, wending our way through the capital of Turkey and what was once the seat of power for the huge Ottoman Empire.

First up was Topkapi, once the Ottoman sultan's huge palatial estate, covering more area than even the Forbidden City in Beijing. Today it houses the nation's most important treasures and is a vast museum.

After touring the sultan's quarters, his harem rooms, his wives' quarters, etc.; we later saw the treasury where were kept the numerous jewel encrusted items made for the sultans over the centuries. These included the lavish dagger and enormous diamond (think doorknob) that were the objects of an elaborate theft planned and executed by the character played by Peter Ustinov in the movie of the same name: "Topkapi". Another building housed sacred relics like Muhammed's footprint, a lock of hair, a few strands from his beard, etc.; plus saint's arms, possessions, etc.; and things associated with the Kaaba and the Grand Mosque in Mecca. In short, it was the same kind of stuff that stirs the blood of Christians when it's oriented around their icons, the only difference being that these were things sacred to Muslims.

In time we were led outside and walked a fairly long distance to the Blue Mosque, an enormous structure and beautiful place of Muslim prayer, which we could visit provided we respected their rules of decorum. Consequently, we all had to remove our shoes and carry them in with us. Women were required to wear head scarves and keep their arms covered, and no one could enter while wearing shorts, male or female; nor could very short skirts be worn by either women or Scots. It seemed silly but then I recalled restrictions of our own when going to church: no hats for men, everyone dresses up, etc., and just respected their wishes.

After that and after lunch, for which we were bused to a hotel a few miles away, we returned for the next event, a trip to Hagia Sophia, a former Orthodox Christian Cathedral from the pre-Ottoman days. It was interesting and a bit surprising to see the



Ginnie's selfie in the Church.

many images of Christ, Mary and the cross in a church in the capital of this now heavily Islamic country. The visit was marred a little by scaffolding erected inside but that's the price a preservation...

Next was a visit to a rug making place so that they could attempt to entice us into buying an expensive rug and that was to be followed by a two hour visit to the Grand Bazaar. Feeling tired from all of the day's walking and not wanting to spend two hours in a flea market, however, we opted out of the Bazaar. Our guide, Curly, graciously led us to where we could find a convenient shuttle bus that could take us immediately back to the ship just before sunset. Dinner that night was quiet and good as half of our table missed dining with us and were still out and about.

Tomorrow we head up the northwest coast of the Black Sea.

Friday, November 14th, 2014: Nessebar/Burgas, Bulgaria

On this day we were to land in or near Nessebar, Bulgaria on the Black Sea, but, as they say about the best laid plans of mice and men, things don't always work out like you had expected... The weather is bad, not horrid, not even terrible, just November-bad: grey, overcast and windy. The result was that the ship, briefly anchored this morning near Nessebar, whose waters were too shallow to for us to berth, would have required that we use the ship's tenders to reach land. The tenders double as life boats and are used whenever we have to be shuttled in from the ship by water, rather than normally, when the big ship is able to berth and allow us to just disembark on a gangplank onto a pier. The winds, kicked up by the bad weather, made it impossible to use the tenders in the resulting choppy seas. So, our resourceful captain finessed things and we did an impromptu landing at the nearby port of Burgas instead. They even arranged for an impromptu shuttle bus service as well as arranging for the land excursions to originate from Burgas instead of from Nessebar. I am sure that this was a headache for his staff but they pulled it off in short order.

Not wanting to miss an opportunity to visit Bulgaria (and to be able to say we'd done so) we went ashore at about noontime, found and rode a shuttle bus out of the port area, and walked into town. By chance we found what may have been the best restaurant in town. If not, it could have fooled us! It was the Rose where we, of course, enjoyed some good white wine, appetizers (a long octopus tentacle [yum!] and parsley salad for

me, eggplant dish for Ginnie) and entrees consisting of the local blue fish and vegetables. All were terrific.

After eating and drinking, we enjoyed ourselves with some people-watching and web surfing a bit with the restaurant's free WIFI (even in Bulgaria!) while bantering some with our waiter, Georg. The only glitch was in getting Georg's credit card reader to honor any of our cards, even the seldom used debit card! So, I went outside, found an ATM next door and got us enough cash to handle all that vast expense.

Then it was back to the ship where we're now relaxing and digesting. Life is still good

Tomorrow we hit Romania! Who'd a-thunk we'd ever see either Bulgaria or Romania?

Saturday, November 15th, 2014: Constanta, Romania

If it's Saturday, it must be Romania...

Our tour continues. We arrived at Constanta in the early morning, just about sunrise. When Ginnie and I dragged ourselves up and out for breakfast, it was about 8:00 AM. From the standpoint of the cruise line, the port is really a place to line up buses and take people out for long excursions into the countryside.

We contemplated a tour of the country's capital, Bucharest, but decided against it when we found that getting there involved a three hour bus ride each way, meaning more than half the day, six hours, would have been spent wedged into a bus, watching the farms and fields roll by. So, we decided to do what we'd done the day before in Burgas, Bulgaria, and just go into the port city to look around, take pictures and, of course, eat lunch.

Getting into town required a walk, a long one, of a mile or more to the gates of the port facility, where, acting on the suggestion of fellow cruise passengers we met along the way, we found a bus stop and bought tickets to take us into town. "Three stops," the guy said at the grungy, graffiti covered kiosk where we bought our tickets for about a buck apiece, "three stops to town center." So we rode in, counted thee stops and quickly realized that this wasn't town center at the third stop; somehow we'd overshot it. Staying on the bus, we went on through a depressing, beat up looking city, past empty houses, trashy sidewalks, dingy buildings, concrete apartment buildings, and slummy neighborhoods before getting off where an kindly elderly man (about our age) offered to show us where to ride on to a shopping mall by taking another bus.

However, I was concerned about going further. If it was that easy to miss the town center, it might have been as easy or even easier to miss the mall, and get hopelessly lost. So I talked Ginnie out of going on and instead we returned to where we had just disembarked from the outgoing bus, where we had to wait about fifteen cold minutes in

grey November weather for the return bus to take us back. Here an equally kind young man observed us (me) scratching my head over the useless map I'd acquired in the port's terminal and helped and advised us on how to get back. He explained that we had ridden the bus so far out that the our present location was off the map, well to the west. Soon after, he left, and then our bus finally did arrive and off we went, back towards town.



Costanta, Romania Street Scene

The map concentrated on the immediate area near the port facilities, making it almost useless on the bus as we rode on, away from there; but once back at the original bus stop, I began to piece it all out and found a way to walk to what on the map appeared to be a good restaurant: Pizzacos, where we'd get a late lunch. So we made our way there on foot. Once there, it did look nice and snazzy, but, alas, the food wasn't as good as the ambience seemed to promise although it was edible. However, with our ubiquitous bottle of wine, it all seemed pretty OK once all had been consumed (aside from the many smokers sitting near us, stinking up the place).

After that we duplicated the long walk back to the ship where we're now safely resting. Ginnie is currently doing laundry and I am blogging. Tomorrow is our last full day at sea during which we'll leave the Black Sea and pass back through the straits that divide Turkey and link the Black Sea to the Mediterranean: the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. The day after, November 17th, will see us arrive in Kusadasi, Turkey in the Asian half of the country on its Mediterranean coast.

Sunday, November 16th, 2014: 4th Sea Day

This our fourth and last full day at sea. The two big events of the day happened just after sunrise and then later, just before sunset, as we made our way back to the Mediterranean Sea from the Black Sea.

First came the ship's passage through the Bosphorus Strait that not only divides Turkey but also divides Istanbul and separates Asia from Europe. As we traversed it, we made our way through, past notable sights such as the Blue Mosque, Topkapi and the Hagia

Sophia Cathedral as well as under wide suspension bridges that connect Asia and Europe together, all memorable, all beautiful. Then after entering the Marmara Sea, a wide body of water lying between the two parts of Turkey, we later approached and passed through the second strait, the Dardanelles, entering the Mediterranean as the sun set, hours later. Along the way we saw such sights as a memorial to the British, Australian and New Zealand war dead of Gallipoli, a devastating battle of the First World War.



Gallipoli Battle Monument

Tomorrow we dock in Kusadasi, Turkey, site of Ephesus.

Monday, November 17th, 2014: Kusadasi, Turkey

Today it was Kusadasi on the Asian Mediterranean coast of Turkey. It's adjacent to the ruined city of Ephesus which, two thousand years ago, was the second largest city in the world and the eastern trading center for Rome. The city declined as Rome declined, until it was devastated by a serious earthquake around 200 AD. Also, as the coastline changed, its access to the sea was lost and ended the utility of Ephesus as a sea port, so it died away, forgotten and buried, until excavated in more recent times. Today it's a huge tourist attraction, reminiscent of Pompeii, and holds one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World: the Temple of Artemis.



Kusadasi Street Scene

However, having seen Ephesus before, we contented ourselves with just walking into Kusadasi instead. It's a modern, tourist friendly city: clean, vital and attractive. To be sure, it had its share of annoying vendors, trying to sell you their wares like carnival barkers, but we shrugged them off and explored until we settled on a place for a Turkish style Mediterranean meal of chicken shish kebabs, fries, rice, salad and white wine, all

very good. Three adorable calico stray cats (white and brown) sat around us, begging (successfully) for handouts as we ate and people-watched from our table in this sidewalk cafe-like restaurant... Then we trudged back to the ship, although before getting safely aboard Ginnie was waylaid by a cashmere shop, where she was enticed by a nice scarf, while I went on back ahead of her.

Tomorrow it's Santorini, a city built high atop the crescent shaped remnants of the cone of a dormant volcano that is thought to have violently exploded just before recorded history, about 3600 years ago, and may be the source of the legend of Atlantis. Today the island's crescent shape and high walls overlook a gorgeous lagoon that beautifully displays the cruise ships berthed inside, making them look like toy boats floating in a bathtub.

Tuesday, November 18th, 2014: Santorini

Today it's Santorini, a Greek island with a Latin name meaning Saint Irene.

We were up early with a wakeup call at 6:30 AM. After breakfast at 7:00 in the dining room, we headed to the lounge to wait for our tour group to be summoned.

Santorini is a beautiful place and an unusual one, being the remnants of an exploded volcano. Once a cone, it is now a crescent after having been shattered in a violent eruption thought to have occurred about 3600 years ago. Accordingly, the walls of the island, especially in the lagoon within the crescent, are mostly vertical walls composed of layer upon layer of volcanic igneous rock. The habitable areas are mostly on the rim of the crescent. Therefore there is no port area suitable for a large cruise ship and we were accordingly ferried to shore from the ship, anchored out in the lagoon, riding in smaller boats called tenders. So, when called, our tour group filed off and down to disembark through a door in the ship's hull and board a tender, bound for the shore, which we reached about twenty minutes or more later.

Once ashore we found our bus and guide, an Italian girl named Thera, who has lived on Santorini for some twenty years---seeing it again makes us understand what keeps her here, Santorini is gorgeous... Soon after, we were off, heading to the picturesque town of Oia (pronounced Oh--EE---ah) which Thera led us through to several incredibly scenic viewpoints.

The buildings were uniformly stuccoed and painted white to help ward off the summer heat. Doors and windows were usually either red or blue. Flower boxes and flowering trees decorated many small courtyards. Streets meandered between buildings up and down hillsides with ramps and stairways assisting their transit. Views were to be found everywhere but some were beyond breathtaking when met...

In the accompanying picture note that the blue domed structures are Greek Orthodox Churches. The blue of the sea, the sky and the domes, doors and various accessories, combined with the white painted buildings was all in perfect harmony with the dark browns and dark grays of the rocks. This place is easy on the eye!



Typical Santorini View

We lingered a while after walking all the way out to a final viewpoint for more, upon more photo-ops, then headed back to a cafe near our parked bus where we had a cup of strong Greek coffee. We had about an hour and a half in all here in Oia...

Then we boarded our bus for our next stop, the island's winery, Santo, where we were treated to free tastes and cheese cubes and olives. Then we went to our final destination, the town of Fira which, lying atop the heights of the old volcano as it does, also sports a funicular that would later take us back down to sea level.

Wanting an authentic Greek lunch, however, we delayed our funicular ride for about two hours by finding and eating in the only open restaurant we could find (this was the off season and most of the island was closed up). We shared a plate of cold appetizers and another of grilled mixed seafood and, as usual, ordered too much!

Lunch over, we descended to the sea via the funicular and found a waiting tender, bound for the ship. Soon after, we were back aboard, relaxing and sipping wine on our balcony as the ship departed around 4:00 PM.

Our next and final stop before disembarking for good will be Volos.

Wednesday, November 19th, 2014: Volos, Greece

Today it's the island of Volos which will be our final destination before departing the ship for home on Thursday.

Since this is our last day on the ship and we're departing tomorrow, our first order of business, after breakfast, was packing. First Ginnie packed and then I did (the room is

too small for both of us to pack at once without risking divorce court). This evening we'll set the bags out in the hall to be picked up by the ship's muscular baggage handlers and deposited in the port terminal for us to retrieve after disembarking tomorrow.

Then, later, we made one last port visit, riding a free shuttle into town from the ship. The sunny morning weather had given way to rain about the time we had boarded the



Volos Marina and City

shuttle but we gamely went on and emerged in the busy city center about fifteen minutes later in the midst of a developing drizzle. Soon we found a nearby restaurant and had our last port meal and last Greek lunch, too much as usual... The waiter barely spoke any English so, when we couldn't clearly ask him what to expect, we had to judge things by what we were familiar with and in so doing again underestimated the size of portions.

Now we're back aboard the ship. All that remains is dinner and saying goodbye to the good people who have waited on us for the last three weeks.

Tomorrow the ship arrives in Athens where we will disembark and then fly to Rome.

Thursday, November 20th, 2014: Rome, Again

The ship arrived in Athens this morning about 6:00 AM., a little too late for us to disembark early and start an all day trek through airports and airplanes to home. So, we decided to break up the return journey into two days. First day, today, we are to fly to Rome. There we will spend the night outside the airport and tomorrow we return to the airport to fly to the USA and home.

Amazingly, the above all worked. It's Thursday evening and here we are, checked into and relaxing in the Gold Tulip Hotel near Rome's big airport. Tomorrow we take the hotel's shuttle and resume the trek... Therefore tomorrow will be the end of this long journey.

Friday, November 21st, 2014: Home At Last

What a long and wearying day this was... It started out OK: nice Italian hotel breakfast, easy check out, caught hotel shuttle promptly at 8:00 AM, short ride to airport where we got out of the shuttle at Terminal 1. No problems until the last when we found we were to depart from Terminal 5, not Terminal 1, and that generated extra stress as we had to walk past Terminals 1, 2 and 3 to find a shuttle bus that would take us to Terminal 5... The steady drip, drip, drip of stress begins. The shuttle came, got us and off we went lugging heavy luggage even more than we'd expected.

Next stress item (besides walking past guys carrying machine guns) was their security... God, was it ever strict! Everything pulled out, shoes off, iPad out, CPAP out, belt off, pockets emptied, etc., etc., etc. FINALLY, it was over and then we went on and found the airlines desks where we checked in and got our boarding passes. Thinking the very worst was over, we started to relax and eventually boarded our big plane, taking two seats together. Soon after we were in the air at about noontime in Rome. The flight was to be a long one but the winds worked in our favor and instead of the promised ten hours, the flight was "only" nine and a half hours...

One drab meal, a few drinks, a drab snack, two or three movies and lots of games of solitaire on the iPad later, we landed in Philadelphia. There we encountered major stress event number two, an ordeal of immigration, customs and, worse, another lengthy session through TSA. It was hot in there and tempers were flaring all around before it was mercifully over. Then we had to take a shuttle bus to our connecting flight's terminal, miles away, for a stress capper. When we got there an hour and a half had passed AFTER we had landed from Rome.

Lastly, we found our gate, one of the last and most distant ones in the terminal, of course, and just sat and shook a while. In time we relaxed and eventually boarded our last plane of the day and are now winging our way to Dayton.

Later.

We landed in Dayton around 7:30 PM, got the luggage, then the car and drove home, stopping at Ruby Tuesdays for some dinner along the way. Then it was on to the house and our cats. We're home at last after twenty one days abroad.