

2002 MALTA TO MARSEILLES

Saturday, October 19, 2002. Met Mary in the business class lounge at Hartsfield and at 8:45 we took off for London. It's the first real trip I have been on since Australia last February!

All went well until the middle of the night when I woke in big time pain. I walked around a bit. Even lay down in the corridor and did some back exercises and finally got back to sleep again.

Sunday, October 20. Landed at Gatwick at Terminal A and found Air Malta left from Terminal B, a long long walk, involving shuttle buses, When we got to Air Malta I couldn't find my baggage checks but they finally said I could identify my bag at the gate, which, with the help of a gate attendant was done. At last we boarded. Air Malta has a token business class, a separate section using the same seats they have for coach but only two passengers to a row. The seats were very cramped and the lunch they served looked much better than it tasted. Had a beautiful view of the snow capped Alps as we flew south.

Tauck Tours met us at Valetta and took us to the Phoenicia Hotel. We had a welcome cocktail party to meet the group of 54 and then went to dinner. This was a disaster for while our order was taken first we had to wait an hour for it until everyone else who got there later was served. I finally left and went to bed!

Monday, October 21. There are actually three small islands here in the middle of the Mediterranean that form the Republic of Malta. They have a long history that goes back to the late Neolithic age. Their strategic location has made them a target for every power trying to dominate the Mediterranean since the Phoenicians in the 8th century BC. The Maltese language is Semitic based with romance overtones. It is related to the Syrian and Iraqi languages.

Our guided tour took us around the main settlement on the southern part of the main island while the guide talked of the Roman, Norman, and Arab occupation before 1530 when the Knights of St John left Rhodes to settle here. They fortified the island against the inroads of pirates. The island is rocky limestone and it is hard to imagine that it was mostly agrarian then, since today it is so built up and as dry as a desert. A fault line divides the island and the British built forts along this 'Victorian line' to protect themselves from the pirates who marauded the northern part of the island

The town of Mosta was established in 1600. Malta was 100% catholic at the time. We toured the Mosta Church, which is circular, and looks like the Pantheon in Rome. During the Second World War a bomb pierced the dome but did not explode so it is considered a miracle.

Then a stop was made at the tiny medieval town of Mdina. We rode horse cabs from the town of Rabat up to Mdina since the buses cannot enter the town. The church here was baroque and we toured it admiring the elaborate inlaid marble grave markers that formed the floor. The apse of the church dates from 1690. There were paintings on the life of St Paul, who was shipwrecked here. The paintings of the Madonna are 400 years old. Then we walked to the city walls for the view over the island.

At last it was back to the hotel for lunch but I was in such pain I could not even consider the walking tour of Valetta for the afternoon. Mary arranged for a day room at no cost (the room hadn't been made up, but I couldn't have cared less) and I slept until 5:00 when we were transferred to the Grand harbor and our yacht Le Ponant. Le Ponant is owned by the Iles de Ponant Co and can carry 60 passengers and a French crew of 40 who are all very friendly and pleasant. When we booked we were the last people to do so and were assigned the last cabin but enough people apparently didn't show and so we were shown to a cabin almost amidships away from the noisy engines. It is compact but comfortable (nothing will ever be as compact as the cabin Mary and I shared on the Yangtze River). We had welcome cocktails and a lovely French dinner before we sailed at night under a full moon with all three of our sails pulling and the Hallelujah Chorus playing in the background. We are bound for Sicily 90 miles away.

Tuesday, October 22. Woke as we were pulling into Agrigento harbor. I wasn't sure I could even stand up but managed to pull myself together with some pain pills and soon was in a bus headed for the museum in this town. Agrigento has the second richest collection of Greek artifacts in the world after Athens.

It is difficult to view a museum as a group and while Pepe did a great job of pointing out the highlights, I sought out the places to sit and was glad when we got out of doors and I could use my hiking sticks.

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Originally there were 5 temples that lined the sacred way. Only 3 remain and only 1 of these is in restored condition. The uppermost one is the Temple to Juno. Then, after some ruins of Byzantine tombs, was the almost perfect temple of Concordia, which reminds one of the Parthenon although it never was so heavily embellished. Lowest along the path were a few columns all that remained of the temple to Hercules. They were re-erected by an Englishman, Alexander Hardcastle, on a site that reminded me of a very small Didyma. Pepe told us that the soft sandstone in the temples had survived because they had been stuccoed.

I was hurting pretty bad by the end of the walk and glad to get back to the ship. Skipped the movie but did attend the lecture by Ray on the Mediterranean followed by one on Sicily by Peter. (We have two tour leaders for the group). The Mafia started out on Sicily selling water and to this day is thought of as taking care of people. On Sicily everyone is considered Mafia and everyone takes care of everyone else.

After the lecture I retreated to bed and Mary arranged for dinner in our room. It really worries me that I cannot seem to do much of this trip.

Wednesday, October 23. After lunch we docked in Messina and then were bused a half an hour up to the little town of Taormino, which clings, to a hillside overlooking Mt Etna. Peter led us uphill to our meeting point, an old stone arch, and then down the long street of shops and buildings pointing out the remnants of buildings with medieval relics. The town was heavily bombed in WW 2 so much was destroyed. I lagged further and further behind and at last gave out and Mary and I sat in picturesque IX Piazza in the Wunderbar where 'Dick and Liz' used to hang out and had a coke. There was time for shopping but we headed back to the ship. As usual, my timing was bad. Two days later Etna started erupting and putting on a show.

Tonight the Captain's dinner with a champagne reception and everyone in their best bib and tucker. One of the people on the trip had looked so familiar and at last Mary figured out it was Hope Sieck Gilliams who had been a year behind me at Swarthmore.

Thursday, October 24. I finally seem to be getting the pain under control. For a while I was afraid I would have to go home.

We anchored off Lipari the largest of the Aeolian Islands. This small Archipelago is all volcanic and so small none of the big cruise ships can come here. We went ashore by zodiac and just as we got to shore were drenched by a heavy rainstorm as the buses arrived. We took a circle tour of the island and then were given the option of walking around or returning to the ship. I came back but Mary stayed. I was so sleepy. Had lunch and took a nap.

After lunch continued on to Stromboli. This island is an active volcano achieving fame when Ingrid Bergman did a film here and had an affair with her director Roberto Rossellini. 350 people actually live on Stromboli. I saw the island when I first came to Europe by ship with my grandmother in 1954. While I watched, it set off a black plume that Mary managed to catch on camera but after that the clouds settled in and we never had such a good view again. The captain took us around to the other side of the island and we waited for the Technicolor eruptions but, while we saw the scarlet glow as it started to get dark, it was a long time before two red plumes went up.

I am starting to feel much better and at least have the pain under control so am enjoying the trip a great deal more.

Friday, October 25, 2002. We docked at Salerno and boarded buses for a ride on the Amalfi Drive. This spectacular twisting coastal drive could almost be called the 'Oh my God' road as the bus made the turns and slipped by cars and buses trying to go the other way! After that we made a stop at the Villa Rufolo with its great view of the sea. It was here in the garden that Wagner got his inspiration for Parsifal.

Then we went to Paestum, the remains of a Greek city with its temples and remnants of the Roman city, which followed but did not survive as well. The small museum at the site was interesting, containing among other things a sarcophagus with a painted boy diving, very different from the other tombs I have seen.

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Saturday, October 26. Ponza. This tiny island is a great place for Rome's elite to have villas. We anchored and zodiaced ashore. Peter led us on a hike to a Roman built tunnel through which we were supposed to walk to the other side of the island to see the view. But the tunnel was closed. We caught the local bus to the top of the island and back. The driver spoke no English but he really entered into the spirit of the thing, stopping for some Kodak moments and trying his best to be a tour director. It was all great fun. I'm sure the locals on the bus wondered what was going on

This afternoon we get the bad news that Corsica has been canceled because of bad weather so we are going to Elba instead.

Sunday, October 27. Elba. This turned out to be a happy surprise. We came into Porto Ferrayo and were taken by bus to Napoleon's summer villa from which he could see the harbor and get the latest news from France. He was only here for 10 months before he escaped and returned to France for his second campaign, which ended at Waterloo. 1100 of his soldiers joined him in his exile. His sister, Pauline, sold her jewelry to buy the house. The house was a villa with two apartments, each with a bedroom and receiving room. Across the back was an 'Egyptian room' commemorating his Egyptian campaign.

Then our guide took us to one of the other beautiful harbors, Porto Azzuro, where there was a wonderful artisans shop selling all manner of gemstones and jewelry.

We then went to a site with a spectacular view. The Villa Romano della Grotta was built in the first century AD and even had a heated pool for exotic fish. Recently someone had planned to build a villa but he found the remains of the Roman villa and the government appropriated the property as an historical site

Back on the ship the storm finally caught up with us and we started to rock and roll. It was decided that the dining room (which was all the way forward on the vessel) would not be very comfortable, so dinner was served in the lounge: ham, salmon or cheese sandwiches, followed by bananas and then some delicious pastries. The pastry chef is really great. A lot of the passengers did not look as though they wanted anything to eat.

Monday, October 28. And so we came to Nice. About a quarter of our number are leaving but the rest of us are doing the five-day extension into Provence. We were taken to downtown Nice where a huge flea market was taking place and were told what we might do here. Here I found a huge difference between Tauck and Travcoa. Ray mentioned somewhat in passing that there was a Matisse Museum in Town. Travcoa would have taken us there. Tauck seems much more inclined to leave us to our own devices. We had lunch with Hope and Carol. I had Salade Nicoise, which had lettuce in it although my purist daughter, Mary, had been taught there was no lettuce in a true Salade Nicoise.

Then Carol and Hope wanted to ride the train around the ramparts but it was a long walk down the boulevard beside the sea to where it started so Mary and I went back into the town and walked around. Deciding to have some ice cream we entered a cafe and I tripped over a threshold and did a swan dive into another table. Very embarrassing, but at least no one was hurt, just my ego. The ice cream servings were enormous.

At last we were taken to The Grand Hotel in Monaco. What a pleasure to have a full sized room complete with bathtub! Tauck advertises a la carte dining, but the hotel interprets this to mean anything on the table d'hote menu. We walked around after dinner but did not gamble at the casino.

Tuesday, October 29. We went to St Paul de Vence, a lovely little town complete with medieval wall and narrow little streets (one so small it was really only a flight of stairs). We walked through the town to a point on the rampart where we could look into the cemetery. Then returned to the bus browsing the many shops and souvenir shops along the way. This tour gives a lot of time for shopping. While there are some nice looking souvenir items, everything in France is quite expensive compared to the United States.

We were taken to the Grand Roi Rene Hotel in Aix-en-Provence. Good King Rene was born in 1409. He held many titles including Count of Provence. He was a major force during the Renaissance. He is said to have ridden with Jeanne d'Arc on her crusade to Orleans.

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We were taken on a walking tour through lovely Aix to see the 17th century buildings and the much older remnants of the Roman city. There was a medieval Tower on the main square. The cathedral of Saint Savior had an interesting 8-sided baptismal font and a piece of the original Roman Road displayed near it.

The walk proved difficult over cobblestones. I was using my hiking sticks and on the way back to the hotel, I slipped, bending one of the sticks and coming to rest with my upper lip on a marble doorsill. It started to swell immediately so I shall look like a Ubangi! Fortunately nothing was broken except the stick.

Wednesday, October 30. First stop Les Baux, where an impressive ruined citadel sits atop a hill. The climb looked strenuous (my poor stroller is showing lot of wear and tear, as is my body) so I elected to stay on the bus. Fabrice, the bus driver, brought the bags to the Hotel Jules Cesar, a Relais and Chateaux property that was at one time a convent. Then he told me I could only have five minutes to grab a bite to eat because he could not park the bus for long. Across the street I spied the 'Golden Arches' and I dashed into the McDonalds (and so did Fabrice) before we headed back to Les Baux to pick up the group. Drove to Avignon where only four arches remain of the famous Pont d'Avignon and then we went to the Palace of the Popes. This fourteenth century building is magnificent but full of steps. I was up to it but my stroller was not (or I should say, Mary got tired carrying the stroller) so we didn't make it all the way through. There were some frescos in one room. After a century, the Popes returned to Rome.

Then we continued on to Chateauneuf de Pape. This is a section of the Rhone Valley. They only use the following grapes: Corenache, Syra, Claret, Picpoul, Terret noir, Mourvedre, Cincault, Muscardin, Canoise, all grapes with Spanish or African heritage. The tasting was in an old cave under the ruined chateau. I have never been to a tasting like the one they gave us.

All of us crowded into a room under the chateau, standing, with stemmed glasses were allowed to taste 3 wines. The first was white and tasted of apples. Then we had the more conventional Chateauneuf de Pape which I am familiar with. And lastly, we were invited to try a newly developed wine. This was followed by folk dancing to entertain us during our buffet dinner of Provence specialties. It was a dark climb back out of the cellar to reach the bus to conclude a fun evening.

Thursday, October 31. Walking tour of Arles. We started at the handsome Romanesque cathedral. The carvings around the door depicted the good people who came to church and the bad people who ended up elsewhere. Then we came to the square with The Cafe de Nuit. Van Gogh painted this during his 'yellow' period (although it was not yellow at the time). The present owners of the Cafe now have it painted yellow and have named it the Van Gogh Cafe. Many of the impressionist painters came to Provence for its famed colors.

We were shown a lovely old cloister and the Roman Amphitheater before being released to shop and have lunch. Mary and I went back to the Van Gogh Café where I had a delicious vegetable soup for lunch. Mary had a Mistral salad, named for a French poet and provincial patriot who won the Nobel Prize.

In the afternoon we were taken to the Pont de Gard, a magnificent Roman aqueduct spanning the River Gard used to bring water to Nimes. It is the third most visited edifice in France after Versailles and the Eiffel Tower. The aqueduct is on three levels. While the Romans were great engineers they could not build arches high enough to support the aqueduct on one level so the two lower levels were built to support the third.

The farewell dinner was at the hotel. After cocktails in the lobby, we ate with Jacques and Frances Crampon.

Friday, November 1, 2002. We rose at 4:00 AM for the bus transfer to the Marseille airport. In Paris they had a wheelchair for me, which was just as well, for it was a long walk out to the street. Here we were parked for a half hour while they tried to get us a wheelchair shuttle to the other terminal. We finally rebelled at 'just five more minutes' and I gave up the chair and using my stroller walked to the other terminal so that we would have some time to enjoy the business class lounge.

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The trip from Paris was relatively uneventful although I started to hurt about 3/4 of the way into the flight. Just before landing the plane dropped a significant number of feet. I asked one of the pilots what happened and he said they had been told to get to 31000 feet immediately!

Cleared immigration and customs and rechecked my bag to baggage claim as you do at Hartsfield. Then I assisted Mary with her transfer. By the time I got to baggage claim there was no sign of my bag although the limo driver and I spent quite a bit of time looking before reporting it to Delta. How could they lose a bag in the airport?

At 12:30 AM the next morning they called me to say the bag had been found and they were delivering it to me. I told them not to ring the bell, just leave it on the doorstep and there it was when I finally got up!

While the trip has been interesting, I feel like it is my last tour. I had not realized how strenuous it was going to be and, when you live with a pinched nerve, how much pain I would be in. I believe that when I travel in the future it should be on an independent tour with my own car and driver.