

Malta, Malaga, Algeria, Europe, England

As you get this we should be winging our way back home with a new appreciation for the countries we have visited and renewed appreciation for the United States and all it is and represents. We are certainly more aware of the cultural, religious and economic challenges that all of the countries we visited face as well as the role of politics in all of this. And we assure you that all the foreigners we met were very aware of our politics thanks to the internet. No matter how poor or challenged a country appeared smart phones were ubiquitous. One other dominant factor recognized during the trip is how really large the oceans are. They cover over 70% of the earth's surface but that figure never meant much to us until we travelled over 35,000 nautical miles and, for much of the journey, rarely saw another ship. We will put together a separate Lessons Learned about the world cruise but suffice to say it was everything we hoped for ... and more. Our journey through the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic covered stops in Malta, Sardinia, Algeria, Spain, Portugal and finally, the United Kingdom. We were originally scheduled to visit Tunisia which would have included ancient Carthage and Tunis itself but this port call was cancelled about a week in advance due to political unrest and concerns dating back to December of last year when there were numerous demonstrations. The situation in Syria continues to stoke regional tensions so passing on Tunisia (although we did stop in Algeria) made sense. Viking handled the issue well and added a second day in Malta which turned out to be one of the highlights of the entire trip.

General

We figured that if any part of our sea adventure could challenge us, the Mediterranean Sea and/or the Atlantic Ocean would do the trick. Not so. In the entire journey only the second day of traversing the Tasman Sea presented any real challenges (16'+ seas.) The Bay of Biscayne in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Spain and France had seas of 8-10' but our stabilizers really make a difference. We had purchased prescription sea sickness patches before leaving home and Lorraine only used one at the very beginning of crossing the Pacific which turned out to be relatively calm. We provided a patch to another, more sensitive passenger who did get relief. We are not sure future voyages along the same route would not be more challenging.

We managed to keep our exercise routine up throughout the entire voyage with Lorraine really enjoying the yoga classes, Tai Chi, and other special routines. She is bringing home a lot of materiel for her quilting project which will now extend through the summer. She enjoyed her art classes and will look for some type of art program in New Hampshire. My routine of running resulted in a total of 86 miles on sea days. The total would have been greater but I did make the adjustment of running every other day to recoup and avoid a repeat of my earlier bout of dehydration. We both did experience a chest cough that seemed to linger but this turned out to be a ship-wide issue as twice we were put under active measures to reduce the spread of germs. This included mandatory hand washing before coming into the dining rooms and the buffet went from self-serve to full service. Interestingly, the criteria for implementing these measures was tracked by the medical team so that when over seven passengers

were sick at one time with gastrointestinal problems, the ship would quarantine them in their cabins for a day or two and rest of us would follow the procedures that we just covered.

The food certainly was a highlight during the entire trip. We only had hamburgers two times, pizza three times and a hotdog on one day, all by the pool. These were all lunch meals late in the afternoon after extra-long shore excursions. Otherwise, we ate in The Restaurant, The World Café (buffet), or in the specialty restaurants (The Chef's Table and Manfredi's). Entertainment continued at a rapid pace with new acts almost every night. We started with a comedian and magician named Neal Austin. At the age of 17 he performed for a member of the British Royal family which led to appearances at Buckingham Palace and on the Queen's personal yacht. His act was a combination of slight-of-hand and mind reading. Neal was followed by Adam Johnson, a classically trained pianist who studied at the Royal Northern College of Music. He played compositions related to the classical world of dance. A female trio called The Dots gave two performances, one a Sixties Show and the other called the Dots Do the Divas which we liked the most as it was more contemporary. The trio was followed by a performance of a special foursome (two men and two women) and a Viking-specific production called, The Sound of the Sixties. Note: Apparently, based on our demographics, a lot of the performing acts were asked to focus on this era. While good, the more recent hits were just as, if not more, popular. The show, nevertheless, was very good with the foursome singing solos at different points while they changed into different costumes. Very clever as the costumes changes were done very, very quickly. They sang a broad range of tunes and some of the classics from Motown and the Beach Boys were the best in the show. Our Cruise Director, Heather Clancy, also gave another performance which was very well done and featured her strong, mezzo-soprano voice. She really is very talented. Heather was followed by another singer, Jaqui Scott who proved to be one of the best entertainers on the trip. She played the lead in Evita, Cats, Miss Saigon, Les Miserables, and Jesus Christ Superstar on the London stage and is also an accomplished classical pianist. She was simply terrific singing "Don't Cry for me Argentina" from Evita as her last number. We next had a classical violinist named Nicola Loud who, at age 15, won the British TV competition for BBC Young Musician of the Year. She played classical to jazz and film to fiddling. Excellent! Our last entertainment was a second show from the Viking production group called The FABBA Four. This was a compilation of hits from the ABBA and The Beatles and was very, very well done.

Our onboard scholars (30 in number over the entire trip) did an excellent job addressing each of the countries we visited. They covered geography, history, culture and politics in depth. Very impressive to have these experts on the ship and they were readily available for extra roundtable or one-on-one discussions. This is a hallmark of Viking and makes a real difference when taking excursions. Without a basic understanding of a country's history, it is impossible to make sense of its present challenges.

Excursions

1. **Valetta (Malta, two days).** Malta is an island-state consisting of five islands of which three are the major islands of Malta, Gozo, and Comino. The largest island, Malta is only 17 miles long and nine miles wide or about the same size as St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands. The population is just over 432,000 while the population of the capital city of Valleta is about 6,500. The entry

into the port of Valetta reminded us of the entry into Muscat. Castles, forts, temples, 3-4 story buildings, all made of local sandstone, comprise the city.



Because of the geographic location of Malta, the Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, the Romans, and the Byzantines all impacted the country. Christianity came to Malta in 60 A.D. by St. Paul and the Arabs conquered the islands in 870 A.D. Until 1530 A.D. Malta was an extension of Sicily and later the Knights of Malta ruled the country for almost 250 years. Thus, the language, culture, architecture, and economy reflects all of these different influences. The streets were spotless and cars prevalent (very few motorcycles or scooters). On our first day in Malta we took an excursion called Malta's Capitals, Old and New. We drove an hour to the ancient capital of Mdina which was a fortress city built on the original sources of water. Mdina does not allow vehicles so we walked everywhere and admired the narrow, cobblestone streets with small cafes on the corners and small shops in side streets. Just a nice day walking with the occasional horse-drawn carriage coming by. The second half of the tour was of Valetta itself where we visited churches and several forts with terrific views of the harbor. That evening, as the ship was docked right in Valletta, we joined three other couples and walked down the harbor road to a recommended restaurant. Called the Harbor Club, the restaurant did not open until 7:00 PM so we just watched the local fishermen and sailboats come into the harbor. The restaurant staff was especially accommodating as we did not have reservations and we were a large party. We "schmoozed" them a bit and they set up a round table in the bar area and took very good care

of us. The restaurant building was originally an ice house so the interior had vaulted, white stucco walls and ceilings. We had a great meal!

On our second day we took the Megalithic Malta and the Museum of Archeology tour. We drove out to Hagar Qim, a UNESCO site where temples were discovered that date to the Megalithic period. To put this in perspective, the Great Wall of China was built in 214 B.C., the Acropolis in c. 600 B.C., Stonehenge in c. 2000 B.C., and the Great Pyramids in c. 2530 B.C. The temple we toured was built c. 3,600 B.C. Incredible. The site is being preserved and statuettes, pottery, and jewelry found in the temple are housed in the Museum of Archeology which we visited at the end of the tour. Overall, we were really impressed with Malta and would add it to our list of places for return visits.

2. **Cagliari (Sardinia, Italy).** Sardinia is the second largest island in the Mediterranean Sea and has a population of approximately 1.6 million people of which about 150,000 live in the capital city of Cagliari. Sardinia's history mirrors much of Malta's in terms of foreign nations conquering and occupying the island. While tourism is very important and the port area reflects this focus, a fifth of the island supports a very vigorous agricultural base. Citrus, olive trees, and vast vineyards dominate the landscape. Housing is generally very well maintained with a number of individual villas evident. Cars predominate with some motor scooters and sanitation is excellent. We took the included Panoramic Tour of Cagliari which started by the coast where we saw numerous salt flats. However, these flats are no longer used for salt production as, from 1993, flamingoes started wintering over in Sardinia. Presently, there are over 10,000 flamingoes who feast on the pink shrimp which inhabit the salt flats and thus produce the pink color in the birds.

We travelled to Old Town Cagliari to view a Roman Amphitheater, walk by the 14th Century Elephant Tower (there is a small elephant statue above the main gate), see the Tower of St. Pancras, and visit the gorgeous Cathedral of Santa Maria Del Castello. We have great photos of all of these sites and hope to share them with you. Following Malta is a tough challenge but Sardinia succeeded in also making our favorite return visit list. It is a beautiful, modern European country with very friendly people. Note: We lived in Italy in 1980-1984 but had not made it to Sardinia. We are glad we finally made the visit and I got to practice my Italian ... likely much to the amusement of the locals.

3. **Algiers (Algeria).** Algeria is a very large country, especially in terms of landmass and population with over 41.8 million inhabitants. It is the second largest Arab country after Egypt, is predominantly Sunni Muslim, and is a rich nation in terms of gas production (4th largest) and oil production (10th largest) but this wealth is not reflected in the welfare of its people. The history of Algeria is greatly influenced by the pre-colonial Ottoman past and later, especially the influence of 132 years of French rule which only ended in 1962. France considered Algeria to be a part of France and designated it a department. Thus, when the native Berber population and the French expatriates clashed in 1954, it was followed by the Algerian War which was marked by horrific attacks and reprisals by both sides. Over 700,000 Algerians were killed and over two million were displaced while over 900,000 Frenchmen left Algeria. The new Algerian

government introduced industrialization and tried economic reform but by 1970s Algeria was relying more and more on oil exports and suffered in the oil glut of the 1980s. Unfortunately, civil war broke out in 1992 and over 100,000 were killed before a ceasefire in 1997. From that year to the present (and especially post 2011) Algeria has struggled politically. We have gone into this discussion because it colors so much of what we saw in Algiers during our visit. No independent tours or individual visits were allowed and we were escorted everywhere by army and police units. The “cruise port” was simply a pier next to a large, empty warehouse. The crew of the Viking was not allowed to leave the ship. We took the included tour Impressions of Algiers and the first stop was to the 305’ high Martyrs Monument which recognizes the sacrifices of the Algerian heroes of the 1954-1962 War of Independence. It has three giant palm branches that come together at a point and each of the bases of the palms has a statue of a soldier from different periods of the conflict. Actually quite moving but then they put a number of antennas on the top (a la a cell tower). Imagine doing that to the Washington Monument in DC.

We then took a tour through downtown Algiers and noted the French architecture and the layout of the boulevards which were very reminiscent of those in Paris in the French Quarter. We saw the large Le Grand Poste built in 1920 and also viewed the Basilica of Notre Dame D’Afrique. The city was generally clean but we did not see a lot of women walking around. There were other tours to the Casbah, W.W. II sites, and the Royal Mausoleum of Mauretania. However, all of these tours were tightly controlled and we noted that all of the “extra” tour guides were essentially “on guard” throughout the Viking Sun’s visit. Our impression is that a major investment (\$100 million) needs to be made in a real cruise port and someone in the government needs to decide if they are protecting tourists or protecting themselves from tourists. Algiers could easily be a Valletta, Malta or a Cagliari, Sardinia and the local people would directly benefit from tourism. Absent that investment, we would add another day to our Mediterranean ports and skip Algiers.

4. **Murcia (Cartagena, Spain).** Spain is a founding member of NATO and a member of the European Union as of 1986 and is a country of 46.4 million. In 2005 and 2006 over one million immigrants came to Spain but figures for the last three years show approximately only 40,000 per year. The city of Murcia is 445,000 in population and was founded by the Moors in 825 A.D. and became a vassal kingdom under Ferdinand III of Castile in 1243 A.D. It became an autonomous region of Spain in 1982. While tourism is important to the city and the region, the area is best known for its agriculture and extensive farmlands began just outside of the city proper. We saw miles and miles of orange and lemon groves. We took a tour called Palm Trees and the Gardens of Elche which involved a one-hour bus ride north to the town of Elche.



The Gardens of Elche are essentially an example of a “huertas” or rectangular plots of land that contains large numbers of date palms. There are over 200,000-300,000 date palms in the area and the El Huerto del Cura that we visited features about 1,000 of them as well as numerous other botanical species that thrive in the Mediterranean climate. The date palms in Elche have been traced to the Phoenicians who introduced the palms over 2,500 years ago. The life expectancy of a date palm is between 200-300 years and the entire palm is used for food,

handicraft items, and for religious festivals (Palm Sunday). The star of the gardens was the Imperial Palm Tree named after Empress Elizabeth of Austria. While normally the children of a palm tree grow at the base, in this unique specimen, the children appeared from the trunk about 6' above ground and now form an seven-armed candelabra that weighs more than eight tons fed from the sap of the main trunk. It is over 165 years old. We took many pictures of simply a lovely, verdant garden. Other tours were offered to Cartagena to include a Segway tour and a trip to a silver mine but we chose to visit the city on our own and walked the many tree-lined streets. The weather at 65 degrees and sunny was perfect. We know that we could have easily spent more time in the Murcia region.

5. **Malaga (Granada, Spain).** Malaga is the largest city on the Costa del Sol and has approximately 570,000 inhabitants. It is well known as the birthplace of Pablo Picasso and there is a large museum in his name. With a full day in port, we opted for a tour called Spectacular Caves and Whitewashed Streets in the morning and a free-time tour of the city in the afternoon. The caves are located in the town of Nerja and were discovered by five local boys in 1959. Artifacts recovered in the cave date to 25,000 years ago and are displayed in a separate museum in Nerja. These included Stone Age hunters' paintings, utensils, and human and animal bones. We took an extensive tour of much of the 3.1 miles of caves open to the public (new areas discovered in 1960 and 1969 are still being explored) and used a smart phone system which described the caves and findings in detail as we walked down and up over 450 steps. The tour took about an hour and the size of the stalactites and stalagmites was impressive. In fact, the Guinness record for largest stalagmite, 96' high by 42' by 22' at the base resides in the Cataclysm Hall in the cave complex.

After exiting the caves, we took the bus to the world famous "Balcon de Europa (Balcony of Europe)" which is an historical viewpoint in the town of Nerja on the Costa del Sol. The view was spectacular. We made the one-hour trip back to Malaga and toured the city to include a Roman amphitheater and massive, limestone fortress called the Alcazaba de Malaga. Built with angled exterior walls to improve its defensive value, the fortress was built in two stages, Lower and Upper Precincts. There is a palace within the fortress that has been restored to show the main rooms, servants' quarters, gardens and pools. During our visit there was an exhibition of pottery and sculpture found in the fortress. We walked from the fortress to the local 16th Century Renaissance cathedral which occupies almost an entire city block. An imposing piece of architecture.



We continued to walk around the city side streets and then back to the port to catch the last shuttle to the ship. Note: if you miss the ship's posted "departure time," the ship sails and you are on your own. Really.

- 6. Porto (Portugal).** Portugal, like Spain, is a member of the European Union as of 1982 and a founding member of NATO in 1949. Its population is 10.3 million while Porto, the second largest city in Portugal, has a population of 238,000. A main feature of Porto is the Douro River which separates the city from its neighboring city of Vila Nova de Gaia. The city is very clean as is the riverfront area which is still used to move the city's most famous product, port wine, to the main commercial shipping terminal. The cruise terminal itself was dedicated in 2015 and is based on a design by a Portuguese architect. It looks like a coiled shell and is optimized for cruise ship traffic. Beautiful and functional. The city contains an Old Town section which blends nicely with more modern buildings. The most prominent feature is a very large Romanesque Cathedral with an elaborate facade. We chose The Best of Porto: Fado, Vistas and More tour which began with a boat ride up the Douro River. There was a heavy mist which lifted as we approached the first of six famous bridges over the river linking Porto and Vila Nova de Gaia. Three of the bridges are relatively new and large (one carries rail traffic), concrete structures while two others are much older and used for pedestrian and light vehicle traffic. One of the steel bridges no longer in use was designed by Gustave Eiffel of Paris fame. We really enjoyed the 45-minute cruise and as the sun shone more brightly the city's buildings really started to shine, many sheathed in mosaic tiles. From the boat landing point we walked into Vila Nova de Gaia to a local restaurant. There, we were treated to tapas (small bit-sized "meals"), both red and white wines and, of course, port wine. We listened to a performance of Fado (means "destiny" or "fate") music which is composed of very melancholic songs of lost love and accompanied by a mandolin and a classical guitar. After lunch, we took our bus to the city cathedral. Situated at the highest point in the city, the cathedral afforded us fantastic views of the city. Unfortunately, due to our sailing schedule, we only had a bit more than six hours in Porto and we could have stayed two days. Note: two passengers missed the sailing and had to fly to London to rejoin the ship.
- 7. Greenwich (London, United Kingdom).** Having lived outside of London in the late 1970s while in the military, we were delighted to return to the city. The United Kingdom (composed of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) has been a major ally of the United States and a founding member of NATO and joined the European Union in 1973. However, more recently the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union and the process of disengagement is ongoing and not without controversy. The United Kingdom has a population of over 65 million and London is a major city of 8.8 million inhabitants. It has had a large immigrant population and faces the same challenges as other nations in dealing with the more recent influx of refugees. Although the natural focus of our last days on the ship had to be packing and making arrangements for the transfers to Heathrow Airport for the flight back to Boston, Viking did offer tours on the first day after we landed in Greenwich which is on the River Thames. Greenwich itself is home to the Cutty Sark, a clipper ship preserved as a museum as well as the Greenwich Observatory where the world's longitude is measured from the prime meridian and Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) sets the global time standard. We chose the tour called Iconic London which gave us the chance to once again briefly see the Houses of Parliament, Big Ben, the Tower of London, Buckingham palace, Windsor Castle and Westminster Abbey. We could honestly not discern any differences in downtown London from when we lived in England and

that was actually comforting. There is, of course, growth outside the city proper but it was somehow reassuring to see London's iconic cultural and historic monuments unchanged.



Bruce and Lorraine with the “well-traveled” *Bow Times* at Westminster Abbey

Not sure how to close out this last trip report and, as noted above, we will do Lessons Learned for the brave souls who might undertake a similar journey. Certainly, the excursions have been among the trip highlights but we note again that we only took 65 of the more than 336 available during the trip and three destinations were cancelled due to weather or political climate. We did not take the multi-day cross country excursions in Cambodia/Thailand, China, India, or Egypt as either we did not want to miss the ports that overlapped with the excursions or we decided that we needed separate trips (China and Egypt) to really see what we wanted to see on a more realistic time schedule. The Viking Sun itself exceeded our expectations. The physical layout and amenities on the ship are terrific. In fact, we only used the pools three times and Lorraine went to the spa once. I never did the spa but thoroughly enjoyed the up-to-date gym. We found ourselves literally too busy to do everything the ship offered. We did make a special effort to attend the evening entertainment which numbered over 70 individual acts which often did two different shows during their stay onboard. The special “destination shows” produced by local citizens were uniformly great. There were also special dining events at the end of major trip segments where everyone dressed up in their souvenir clothing and jewelry (not required but often done). Our last special dinner was called the “Seven Culinary Wonders of the World” and different venues around the ship were used to highlight specific cuisines. Everyone had a great time. Over 120

days one can meet a lot of people and in the main, everyone was friendly, social, and having a wonderful voyage. There were a very few folks who seemed happiest complaining about some minor issue on an excursion or about a meal. These people were so few in number that they actually were very conspicuous on the ship and people simply did not spend time with them. On the other hand, we met well over 100 people, both couples and individual travelers, as a result of participating in Yoga, or doing the quilt project, or in the gym, or in Trivia, or at meals, etc. We have exchanged contact information with about 10 other couples to include four couples who live in New Hampshire or Maine and with whom we have plans to meet again this summer. Note: for the record we started with 870 passengers and 24 left the ship due to medical issues, family situations, or other special circumstances.

We hope these trip reports have given you some vicarious pleasure in travelling around the world. We would have loved to have had any of you share the experience with us in person. The "travel bug" has bitten us late in life and we are just blessed that we have our health and resources to pursue our dreams. Thanks for caring about us and your interest in the Viking World Cruise.