

## Returning from Europe

By George Suther

The 27<sup>th</sup> of September marked the conclusion of the latest cruise for Patty and me. This was our eighteenth cruise, with eleven of them on Princess. Our departure was from Copenhagen, Denmark and we arrived in New York 17 days later on the Royal Princess.

Our first stop was in Krisiansand, Norway. Patty did the research and found a nice little fishing village about 25 kilometers southwest of town that is accessible by using the local bus system. So, we got off the ship in the morning, walked to the local bus station, bought round-trip tickets on the Number 40 bus, and waited for it to depart. The bus route is through parts of the main town and then through the country on to the town of Hollen. We walked around town, seeing lots of lovely houses. The coast in this area is rocky, so some of the houses backed right up to big, big rocks. Many of them had nice grass yards that, I suspect, will soon be covered with snow. We made our way back to the bus stop to catch the Number 40 for its return to the port. Kristiansand has



one of its main shopping streets blocked off to traffic, so we ambled down that street, looking for deals and finding none. So it was back to the ship for a wonderful dinner and show, and our first evening with Kory (more later).

The next two days were at sea, as we sailed toward Iceland. Usually we like sea days and we spend a lot of time out on our balcony watching the world go by and reading. Not so this time. This was September and we were crossing the North Sea. Temperatures were in the fifties and there was wind making it a little uncomfortable outside. We had to be content to stay inside. There was still a lot of reading – I finished three books and was about half way through another by the time we got off the ship.

Our next stop was in Reykjavik, Iceland. Here we used the local Hop-On Hop-Off bus to tour the city. There is a bus stop right at the cruise port, so finding it was easy. After riding through the main part of the city, we hopped off at The Pearl, pictured at right. This is a dome-shaped glass building supported by six hot-water tanks. Inside there is a revolving restaurant and an observation platform, and a man-made geyser in the basement that shoots water up about three stories. We skipped the restaurant, hopped on the bus and proceeded to a local shopping center hoping to find some lunch. After the required search for deals, we found a Domino's Pizza place and each had a personal-sized pizza for about 500 Icelandic Kroners, or about 6 bucks. After getting turned around in the shopping center, it was something of an accomplishment to find the correct exit and the way back to the HOHO bus and the return ride to the cruise port. Another fine dinner and show, and another evening with Kory finished the day.



Two more days returning across the North Sea and we found ourselves in Greenock, Scotland. This is the port city serving Glasgow, but we didn't go into the big city. We walked around Greenock in the morning, finding lots or really old buildings, and a shopping place that had free wi-fi. I was surprised at how few campaign signs we saw – we were here one day before the referendum on whether Scotland would remain in or leave the United Kingdom. I expected to see signs all over the place, but they seem to be a lot more subdued than we are here. We found out later that they voted to stay a part of the U.K.

That afternoon, we took a tour to the lakefront town of Luss and Loch Lomond. The first part of the tour was through the lowlands, and was quite scenic. Our guide, Stanley, was full of local legends and stories – he talked non-stop all the way to the lake. Once in Luss, we were free to walk around and take pictures, and to visit the local church, which was built around 1875. The church is surrounded by graves, several of which have hogback grave covers. (I had to look this up – they are above ground monuments with curved ridges and curved sides, like houses for the dead.) The village itself dates back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Today there is a kilt maker and a bagpipe works, but mostly just a collection of picturesque homes (see picture).



The return ride back to Greenock was through the Scottish highlands. We stopped for pictures at a place called “Rest and be Thankful”, which is the highest point on the old military road through the highlands constructed in the 1740s. Apparently, when you reached this point, it was all downhill from here. This tour was one of those organized by the ship. Good thing it was, because we were about a half-hour later than scheduled returning to the port. They did wait for us, but it was a rush to get to dinner, the show, and another night with Kory.

The next day, we were in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Our morning tour went to the County Antrim and The Glens, an area of outstanding natural beauty. There are nine glens that radiate from the Antrim Plateau to the coast. We stopped at Glenariff, which means valley of the ploughman, for coffee and a scone. The morning was overcast, so the views were not what they could have been, but it was a very pleasant place to spend some time.

For the afternoon, we took a shuttle bus from the port into the city. We had been to Belfast on another trans-Atlantic cruise in 2004, and one of the places we had visited was the Crown Bar originally built in 1826, and refurbished in 1885. It features polychromatic tiles on the exterior and a red granite bar with a heated footrest underneath. Back in 2004, we had stopped here to spend the last of our British money and had met some locals, one of them had even bought us a beer. On this visit, we showed the barmaid a picture of us with this generous fellow, and she recognized Melvin and said that he still frequents the bar, but he was not there this day. Amazing that this place is still there, and that Melvin is still a customer. Maybe we'll see him next time. The shuttle bus took us back to the ship for yet another fine dinner, show and night with Kory.



The next day, the third day in a row to be on land, we were in Cobh, the port city for Cork, Republic of Ireland. We had been here before, as well, and had already been to the Blarney Castle and the city of Cork, so this morning we stayed in Cobh, walked around town, and found Kelly's Bar with its free wi-fi. This was important because getting email on the ship could be expensive and very slow. The town is marked by narrow streets and colorful buildings, and as the last port of call for RMS Titanic before it set out across the Atlantic in 1912. The original office of the White Star Lines is still there and today it is a museum of Titanic memorabilia.



The afternoon tour went to Charlesfort and Kinsale, a little south of Cobh. Charlesfort is a big stone fort built on a



bluff overlooking Summer Cove on Kinsale Harbor. It was built to protect the area from attack from the sea in the 1670s. Unfortunately all of the cannon faced the water, as might seem natural. When it was finally attacked in 1690, it wasn't from the water, but from a higher hill inland from the fort. It fell quickly and is now a tourist attraction. Kinsale was once a haven for sea travelers and traders. Today it is a cosmopolitan and charming village known as Ireland's Gourmet Capital. Like other places, the streets are narrow and the buildings are colorful. It is a very popular anchorage for the boating fraternity in the summer – in 2006 a census recorded that British nationals made up just 9% of the town's population.



The Atlantic crossing was next on our itinerary. This was scheduled for three days with the next port being St. Johns, Newfoundland. The weather was not too bad – it was cool and windy, so balcony time was minimal. The Captain was very good at giving a position report and current weather at noon each day. In one of these reports, he said that the ocean swells were recorded at 6 meters, or about 19 feet. Our ship had stabilizers, wing-like surfaces that extended about 20 feet out from the sides of the ship that pretty much prevented the side-to-side rolling motion of the ship. It was a very stable ride across the Atlantic. We did not see one single iceberg.

Approaching Canada, the Captain reported winds at St. Johns were up to 50 miles per hour, which would mean a dangerous entry to the harbor. The Captain also reported that the harbor master had officially closed the harbor, meaning that we would not be going to St. Johns after all, and we would have another day at sea. Because of this development, we would be getting to our next port, Halifax, Nova Scotia, at 7:00 PM on Wednesday instead of 7:00 AM Thursday. Many people disembarked for a night on the town. We did not, opting instead to have another fine dinner, a show, and another night with Kory.

Next morning, we found the Halifax HO-HO, toured the city and learned a lot about the city and the harbor from the guide. Because we had another tour scheduled for the afternoon, we didn't hop off, just rode around the route and looked at stuff. The afternoon tour was to Peggy's Cove, 43 kilometers southwest of Halifax. This is an old lobster village, which has turned into a tourist attraction. It is the home of Peggy's Point Lighthouse, built in 1868. Our guide provided a talk about lobsters, including debunking the notion that they make noise when dropped into boiling water – the hiss that is heard is simply steam escaping from their shells. The tour bus got us back to the ship in time for the last formal night, one of my favorite things (NOT). We did have another fine dinner, saw what is called a production show, and spent the rest of the night with Kory.



The next day was the last on the ship, so packing was the main activity. These large cruise ships feature many places for gathering with other passengers and enjoying some music. One place on the Royal Princess is called Crooners, a kind of piano bar, with Kory Simon playing the piano for a couple of hours each evening. We grew to enjoy Kory's playing and singing, and would go there each evening. He played requests and also hosted a few musical games, so we kept going back. By the end of the cruise, we and a bunch of other regulars felt like we knew



him. He had a very clean act and was a pretty good singer, and I don't think he played the same song twice during the entire cruise. It was just fun to be there.

We awoke the next morning alongside the cruise terminal in New York, after 17 days and lots of miles. We enjoy these trans-Atlantic cruises, having done four already. We'll probably do another someday.

