

Homage to the Queen Mary and Long Beach

By Marilyn Litvak

Ghosts often haunt old British manor houses—so they say. But could tales of ghosts aboard a permanently docked cruise ship, turned hotel, in Long Beach, California, be true! With my daughter in tow, I decide to give the ship and the city a weekend inspection.

The Queen Mary is majestically tied up at Long Beach's Queensway Bay harbor side park. Three orange and black funnels, symbols of the Cunard line, tower over the ship's immense back and white superstructure. Downtown Long Beach's high rise buildings serve as a pleasing distant backdrop—modern, stark structures alternating with elegant 20's era art deco buildings. The vista softened by bobbing sailboat masts, crisscrossing boats, and rustling palm trees.

Arriving late on a Friday morning, we plan to make the most of our two-night stay. A bellman greets us curbside and directs us up several decks to the lobby. Our cabin won't be ready until later that afternoon. But no problem; the ship's staff is happy to store our bags. However, the ghosts will have to wait. The Downtown, clearly visible through the lobby's panoramic windows, is beckoning to us.

Armed with a complete schedule for the city's public transportation system, we descend to the ship's dock. Since Long Beach has a reputation for an excellent system of free (or low cost) buses and boats to get you around the city's many sights, we thought we'd try it out. Walking the short block and a half to the AquaBus pier, we pay a dollar and board the 30-passenger boat for the 20-minute trip to the Aquarium of the Pacific.

The water is placid as we pass through the opening to the harbor's inner channel. Kayaks glide by. Seagulls circle overhead. Guarding the channel's narrow entrance on our port side is a 50-foot, red-roofed, white lighthouse set at the highest point on the extensive park which surrounds the Aquarium. On our starboard is a larger, red and white lighthouse complex anchoring Shoreline Village with Parkers' Lighthouse Restaurant serving as a beacon for this well-regarded area of seaside shops and restaurants. We know then where we will be having lunch.

But first, a little time will be spent exploring the relatively new Aquarium, which focuses on the marine life of the Pacific. Housed in a handsome, easily navigable building, with both indoor and outdoor exhibits, there are well-orchestrated demonstrations and short informational films. However, a big draw is the outdoor Shark Lagoon. In addition to a huge tank with ten of the feared species, there are two shallow-water petting tanks. Yes, petting tanks! After some instruction, young and old are able to gently touch the smooth, velvety skin of the nurse and baby leopard sharks that lazily swim by.

Once again, boarding the on-time AquaBus, we head back down the channel towards Shoreline Village's yellow, blue, green, purple and white multicolored buildings with their rustic red and gray wood shake roofs. Lunch at Parkers' does not disappoint. The clam chowder is thick and

creamy; the clams tender. Eating outdoors with the warm sun and sea air enveloping us, we are reluctant to leave.

Fortunately, Shoreline Village's collection of shops makes for easy browsing. There is something for everyone from fine jewelry, clothing, and hats, to t-shirts and fudge. The only disappointment is the carousel. The beautifully carved antique wood horses are surrounded by noisy video games.

Rather than return by AquaBus back to the ship, we catch a waiting shuttle bus, the Purple Pine Avenue Link. Pine Avenue is the hub of the Long Beach Transit system and downtown Long Beach. And investigating Pine Avenue's Zagat-rated restaurants appeals to us.

Pine Avenue is a charming broad street with wide sidewalks lined with tables and chairs spilling out from bistros housed in art deco buildings. The variety of food offerings means there is a restaurant for everyone's culinary taste: up-scale Italian, California nouvelle, classic steakhouse, fresh seafood, Spanish Tapas, Mexican cantina, sushi, homemade Greek, and brewery pub grub. All are within an easy walk of one another.

Our 15-minute trip by Passport Shuttle C Bus returns us mid- afternoon to the Queen Mary. We'd successfully completed our first test of the Long Beach Transit Service.

Claiming our luggage, we are shown to our cabin. The beautifully, refurbished, first class cabin of this historical, elegant ocean liner lives up to our expectations. Rich, wood paneling cover the walls; elegant, light-colored blue damask spreads are on our double beds. The cabin's two portholes have a view of the Long Beach skyline with damask draperies matching the bed coverings; an art deco built-in bureau and night stand hold live plants creating a homey atmosphere; the bathroom is small, but functional.

The Queen Mary's Friday evening event, "Dining with the Spirits", needs to be booked several weeks in advance. Why? Because the event begins with dinner in the ship's award-winning restaurant, Sir Winston's, and is followed by a psychic-led tour of the ship's ghostly hotspots adding a certain element of mystery to your stay.

According to our guide, the ship's first-class swimming pool is one of the most prolific ghostly sites aboard the Queen Mary, but sightings have also been reported in cabins and hallways.

Although no ghost sighting occurs on our tour, we do enjoy our rack of lamb dinner at Sir Winston's set high in the ship's fantail with the twinkling lights of downtown Long Beach in the distant background and even manage to fall asleep despite the ghostly tales haunting us.

Saturday is our art-focused day as this is my daughter's professional area of interest. After a quick continental breakfast, we head once again for downtown Long Beach on trusty Passport Bus C. A change to the Tour D'art Bus brings us to the East Village Arts District. A special two-hour morning tour of the area's historical buildings is being sponsored by the Long Beach

Historical Society. A local resident and volunteer docent rewards us with insightful information about the area's graceful 20's buildings now housing galleries and cafes.

Hopping back on the Tour D'art Bus, our next stop is the Museum of Latin American Art. Housed in a somewhat non-descriptive part of town, the museum has an internationally recognized permanent collection, as well as, rotating exhibits of contemporary artists from the southern hemisphere. Frida Kahlo, Her Photos, is presently on display. The complex includes a Sculpture Garden and a unique restaurant, Viva, which serves spicy Latin American food.

Back on the Tour D'art Bus, but with a change to Passport Bus D, we arrive ultimately at our final art stop of the day.

The Long Beach Museum of Art complex situated on a bluff overlooking the ocean is comprised of a new pavilion with gallery space and several handsome Craftsman-style buildings housing a restaurant and administrative offices. Enjoying an excellent cup of tea, we look down from the terrace of Claire's, the museum's restaurant, at the beautiful, sandy 5 ½ mile south-facing beach. Claire Falkenstein's nearby water sculpture fascinates us. Children splash in the ocean; bikers and strollers share the meandering shoreline path. It's understandable why Long Beach has a reputation for possessing one of Southern California's most pleasant seashore climates.

Our trip back by bus to the Queen Mary is quick and easy for we are now experienced Passport Bus users.

So much so, that our final-night plan includes a return to the Pine Avenue area for dinner at L'Opera, a Zagat-rated Italian restaurant. The oh-so tender Scaloppine alla Piccata is perfectly cooked and the prompt and attentive service allows us to be punctual. For we have arranged tickets to hear the Long Beach Symphony at the nearby Performing Arts Center. The downtown area is brightly lit and populated making us feel secure with our choice of walking and using the bus, which runs until midnight, to return to the ship.

Next morning, we end our storybook stay on the Queen Mary with a Sunday Champagne Brunch in the ship's elegant, original first class dining room. The Grand Salon, decorated in etched glass and handsome wood paneling, lives up to all our expectations for atmosphere and quality of food.

Our only wish, if we'd had another day, was to have explored Long Beach's trendy Belmont Shores reached by the AquaLink. Maybe next year, but we won't plan it for April when the Long Beach Grand Prix occurs.