

Heave Ho!

By Marilyn Litvak

My daughter and I are once again shoving off on an ocean cruise. Only this time, the ship will be infinitely larger, the number of days cruising infinitely shorter, and the price much less than our adventure two years ago aboard a luxury tall ship.

This time we are sailing on Holland America Line's MS Oosterdam bound from Vancouver, British Columbia, to San Francisco on what is known as a repositioning cruise. Such a 3-day adventure takes place in the fall for many ships that have been cruising in the Alaska area during the summer. (Abbreviated repositioning cruises are also a possibility in the spring for that same reason.)

The Oosterdam is a relatively new ship built in 2003. Categorized as a Vista-class ship by HAL, it is large, but not huge. That is, the ship has 11 decks, weighs about 82,000 tons, and can carry approximately 1900 passengers plus a crew of 800. The cabins (both inside and outside) are quite spacious with twin or king beds, full couch, desk, tv, good closet space, and a reasonable size bathroom—some even have bathtubs. Although we did not have a veranda, as we wanted a cabin close to the waterline for stability reasons, we did have a large picture window for viewing distant scenery, lots of wave action, and all sorts of critters flying by.

We discovered most of the passengers aboard were not on for the short-cruise experience, but rather were heading south on the ship along the California coast and Mexico to enjoy the thrill of traveling through the Panama Canal, cruising amidst the Caribbean islands, and ultimately arriving in Florida—some 20 days after departing Vancouver.

We board the ship at Vancouver's centrally located Canada Place Pier on a Sunday afternoon around 1pm. Although two other ships are in port, the embarkation process is relatively simple as the facility is well staffed and our passports are current.

Our cabin is ready for occupancy and, as we only have carry-on luggage, we are ready to enjoy a leisurely lunch in the ship's casual Lido Restaurant which is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The restaurant is aft on one of the top decks of the ship; our cabin is forward on the ship's lowest deck so we have lots to explore on our way to and from lunch.

The elevator nearest our cabin quickly whisks us up 9 decks to the Lido Deck where we discover a wonderful spa and salon area with all the exercise equipment you could imagine and a small exercise pool. As we proceed aft, we pass through a larger pool area with retractable roof surrounded by chaise lounges convenient to a hamburger grill. We note this would be a nice place to relax on our full-day at sea.

The large Lido Restaurant is self-service with an array of food options from deli-sandwiches to gourmet Italian dishes—all centered in the middle of the deck surrounded by tables and chairs with beautiful ocean views.

We choose a table with a nice view out over the bay toward famous Whistler Mountain. Immediately, a service person comes over to ask about our choice of beverage and to put down new place settings. We feel comfortable leaving our purses and heading off to make our food choices.

Around 3 o'clock after a leisurely lunch and making some new acquaintances, we head back to our cabin to get ready for the lifeboat drill that is to occur at 3:30pm. Armed with life vests which are stowed in our cabin, we proceed to Deck 4 and our assigned lifeboat station. There we meet the other passengers who will be with us if there is an emergency requiring us to vacate the ship. After various instructional information from the ship's personnel, we are free to enjoy the rest of the afternoon and to view our departure from Vancouver Island.

This happens promptly at 4:45pm as the giant ropes tethering the ship to the pier are reeled up and the ship is pulled out to the center of Vancouver's Bay. We are now underway. As the ship sails by Stanley Park, we can see on the distant shore the cannon which goes off each evening at 9pm and which we could hear so distinctly from our Vancouver hotel.

Vancouver Harbor is absolutely beautiful—filled with islands, surrounded by mountains. We are leaving British Columbia with many pleasant memories. But looking forward to our voyage south to the good old USA.

That evening we enjoy a cocktail reception in the scenic Crow's Nest lounge, catch a glimpse of the historic Blood Red lunar eclipse, and enjoy a tasty dinner in the ship's elegant 2-story Vista Dining Room.

Next morning, we enjoy buffet breakfast in the Lido Restaurant before arriving at the mouth of the Columbia River. We then head up to Deck 11, the Observation Deck, for a full viewing of our progress up the mighty river as Lewis and Clark might have.

We sail some 10 miles upriver to dock in Astoria, Oregon, where we disembark for a full afternoon of touring Lewis and Clark's Fort Clatsop, the Columbia River Maritime Museum, and the highest point in Astoria. Here the Astoria Column is located and there are beautiful views of the Cascade Mountains in the distance. We aren't disappointed with any of our sightseeing stops; we only wish we'd had more time to explore them. Astoria is a charming Victorian-era town.

All this is followed by another relaxing night dining in the Vista Restaurant and an evening enjoying a performance by pianist Elliot Finkel in the ship's 3-story, top notch performing venue, the Vista Lounge.

There are any number of entertainment choices: small intimate classical music performances, B.B. King's Blues Club, a full casino. You name it; it's aboard this ship. But, it doesn't hurt that Finkel played Gershwin selections—my favorite.

Our next day is a full-day at sea as we head south to San Francisco. And with it comes a wide range of scheduled activities. Serious lectures about the San Andreas Fault by a geologist, classes on using the new Windows 10, fitness seminars, floral arranging, bridge playing. We are busy the whole day; forget about relaxing pool-side with a book.

On our final evening, we decide to dine (for a slight surcharge) in the ship's smaller, more intimate Pinnacle Grill. Delicious!

Then with next morning arriving all too soon, we find ourselves disembarking the Oosterdam in San Francisco at 10:30am just as planned.

ALL ASHORE!

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