

A SHORT CRUISE IN THE CARIBBEAN

November 22 to December 7, 2022

SOUTHERN FLORIDA – MIAMI TO KEY WEST

We had enjoyed a TripaDeal visit to China in 2019, which we thought was organised pretty well and was very good value. Accordingly, before Covid struck, we had booked two further trips with TripaDeal. Both were duly cancelled, but we chose to take credit notes for later use.

One of the cancelled trips was to Mexico and a Caribbean cruise. Mexico was still not possible after restrictions eased, but the most similar tour was to parts of southern Florida and a cruise of 'highlights' of the Caribbean that would visit places we had never seen, as well as a couple of places we would be glad to see again.

Thus, for our first overseas trip since Covid struck, on 22 November we were picked up by an Omnicar limo and checked in with United Airlines for our flights to the USA. There were fairly long queues, but once near the desks we were picked up by friendly staff who correctly guessed that we would have trouble with the wholly electronic check-in process. We carried on our luggage, as planned, and in any event we would have had to retrieve checked-in bags on our transit stop at Houston. This first leg was a long flight, well over 15 hours, and we faced an awkward transfer and lots of security checks before taking the internal flight to Fort Lauderdale, Florida.



TripaDeal had assured us that we would be shuttled to our Miami hotel but no such transport was visible as we emerged from the terminal, along with the 15 or so other Australians on the tour. I showed the TripaDeal logo to a likely-looking minivan driver, but he simply shrugged. However, it then emerged that communications had been garbled and he was indeed driving one of a small fleet of vans that would take us to Miami, about 50 kilometres to the south.

We were taken to the Even Hotel, in the Miami airport precinct. This was an acceptable but typically nondescript airport hotel. The large room included a set of exercise equipment that we didn't use.

The next morning we were taken for a tour of Miami, starting with South Point Park Pier at the southern end of Ocean Drive on Miami Beach. We took a look over a misty Intracoastal Waterway, near where it meets the sea through a major pass. We walked a stretch of Ocean Drive to see part of the Art Deco District and the Versace Mansion, and were then taken to the large Bayside Marina and Marketplace. This has access to Biscayne Bay and the sea, and is close to the tower blocks of downtown Miami. I think the idea was to get us shopping, and we sauntered the multiple shops and stalls selling colourful 'stuff'.





The next destination was the Everglades National Park, but on the way we were dropped off at a typical large suburban shopping centre where we had to find our own lunch. We picked up some basic lunch packs at the main supermarket and ate them in the car park.



The Everglades National Park is a vast area of swampy territory that occupies most of southern Florida.

We had always wanted to visit the park and take a ride in one of the aircraft-propeller-driven 'airboats', which are used for travelling over the grassy and



swampy channels of the wetlands.

At the Gator Park centre we enjoyed our first sight of an immense American V8 engine driving an aircraft propeller on a tower at the stern of the flat-bottomed craft, with the driver – stopping at intervals to describe the scene – sitting up there next to it.

During our ride we did indeed see an alligator and a handful of pretty birds, and



enjoyed a good talk and demonstration afterwards by one of the park rangers. He was a genuine wildlife expert with whom Norma spent some time before we were hurried back onto the bus and a return drive to the hotel.



The next day-trip was a 160-mile bus ride down the extraordinary line of roads that were built to link multiple small islands ranging south from Miami to the island of Key West, the southernmost point of the USA. We had long looked forward to taking that ride, and to revisiting Key West, where we anchored for a while when voyaging in the yacht.

Unfortunately, the route through the keys was not as picturesque or interesting as we had anticipated. Many stretches looked like a maritime version of an outer suburban city road, with marinas instead of car yards, interspersed with drab dwellings. The majority of boats were designed for fishing in the expansive but shallow waters of Biscayne Bay.



We were particularly impressed by a large runabout with no fewer than four 300 horsepower outboard engines. The fishermen were clearly keen to get there and back as quickly as possible. There were admittedly some scenic stretches and posh marinas along the road, and the big bridges between the islands were impressive examples of difficult road-building.



In Key West the bus had to park a fair way away from the centre, which we came to understand when we saw the packed traffic down town. The group had a guide, and we stayed with the group until we came to his first main stop, a big local pub called (inevitably!) Sloppy Joe's. As usual for us we broke away at this stage to do our own explorations.

These took us first down to the waterfront precinct, which although substantially rebuilt since we were here many years ago, was attractive. Touristy, of course, but we could look over to Wisteria Island where we had first anchored before moving over to a town marina, free for us as a foreign yacht.



We sat under a tree and ate conch fritters, watching flocks of chickens and cockerels wandering around. We learnt that chickens were once used in the now illegal sport of cockfighting. Many of these birds escaped or released when cockfighting became illegal, and they are now known as Key West 'gypsy chickens'. It didn't take long for the population of chickens to explode, and nowadays when they get to be too many they are caught and transferred to farms and free-range private ownership.



We wandered up towards the centre of the old town, having a look at the Truman Little White House where the then president used as his formal dwelling during the winter. Several other presidents, including Eisenhower, Kennedy, Carter and Clinton used the place as a holiday home and for meeting foreign leaders in times of crisis.



The whole old town is now 100% tourism, far from the quirky little settlement that was so intriguing for Ernest Hemingway and his contemporaries. It was particularly busy this day, because it was a holiday, the American Thanksgiving. Powerful sports cars roamed the little streets.

It was much too hot to walk far, but we had to, because the bus was parked nowhere near the centre. One lady in our Australian

group collapsed from dehydration on the way and was attended by ambulance medics.

It was a long drive back to the hotel, only stopping – a bit too late! – to watch the sunset.

By this time we had become well aware of how mediocre the food in the small hotel restaurant was, not to speak of its price. (There was no local alternative.) Served by friendly and helpful Cuban waitresses, for this last dinner at the hotel we each had a frittata and a couple of beers. This cost USD \$94.97, which included a local tax, service charge (but not the recognised tip) and other minor additions. The dollar exchange rate meant that we paid about \$170 Australian for a meal that was not worth one-third of that by Sydney standards.

Before taking the bus drive up to Fort Lauderdale and the cruise ship base, we were first taken for a walk around the Little Havana district, just west of downtown Miami. The Cuban influence is very obvious in this part of Florida, and West Indian music was blasting from every shopfront. Further up the motorway we were halted for an hour in a massive queue following an obviously very serious multi-vehicle crash and fire.



We finally boarded the ship on Friday 25th, after a lot of waiting around because we could not board until the early afternoon.

Boarding was quite well organised, as boarding times had been allocated. However, despite being on our published itinerary, there was no time to revisit the attractive centre of Fort Lauderdale, where we had moored our boat in the river for two weeks.

The cabin – sorry, stateroom – was perfectly acceptable, with a balcony, but with freezing air conditioning until we turned it down – which became an everyday practice. We had an acceptable buffet lunch in the self-service café/restaurant and then watched from high on an upper deck as we moved away from the Royal Caribbean cruise ship base on the ICW. We sailed out through the same long channel to the sea we had used in Cera in 1984.



We dined that night in the main dining room, which served pretty good meals presented by polite and attentive staff. It was necessary to share a table with three other couples who, inevitably, were American. They were interested in us for a while as folk of an exotic species – most of them conceded poor knowledge of world geography – but Americana was the focus for conversation.

This was entirely understandable, but what became fascinating for us was their eating habits. Over many years we have travelled extensively throughout the United States by both land and water, and have made many friends in the country. But we have never come close to the subsection of the population that enjoys cruise liners – and the ‘free’ food. Overweight body shape was normal, and morbid obesity very common. At this first dinner, a businessman enjoyed his first course so much that he ordered another the same, and we waited while he ate it. He then had a big steak for his main course, and enjoyed that too – so he had

another duplicate. Which, again, we watched him eat. Exactly the same happened for the third course. We avoided him later, but are sure that this practice was normal for him and probably many others in the ship.

Afterwards, we took a walk around the ship’s multitude of bars and performance spaces, and watched the band encouraging ballroom dancing by passengers at the base of the Centrum. But it was too noisy and air-conditioned cold for us.

We were at sea all the next day, mostly sitting out in protected parts of the sun decks. I suppose we are a bit precious about this, but the boat paperwork did say that it was not possible to reserve lounge chairs by tying pool towels to them. Despite a threat that pool attendants would remove towels if they were left that way, we never saw it happen. Lounge chairs round both the open and covered pools were often unavailable from soon after breakfast.

But it was far too noisy for us anyway round the main pool, with blaring pop music all day except when the World Cup football was being shown on the massive screen. We did usually find somewhere good and quiet for lounging and reading, and sitting out on our own balcony was also a pleasant place to watch the sea go by. And for much of that day Cuba was clearly to be seen as we slipped down its north-east coast. The whole of the following day was also at sea, in perfect conditions – gentle trade winds under blue skies and puffy cumulus.

LABADEE, HAITI



Early the next morning we moored alongside the huge jetty at Labadee, Haiti. It was no secret that Haiti is in a state of chaos, with riots in the streets, shortages of food and water and a cholera outbreak. The reason we could visit in a cruise ship is that Royal Caribbean has leased a whole peninsula on the north-west corner of the country, named it Labadee, built its own wharf in an attractive bay, and made it a sort of artificial playground, an ersatz Haiti. Visitors cannot enter the ‘real’ Haiti.



I took a walk up to a viewing place and had a long private talk with a young local security man. He was very worried about the political situation and prospects: ‘no president, no government, food becoming hard to find’, and the future for his family. The Labadee/Royal Caribbean deal is at least offering job opportunities and we hoped the company was doing as much as possible to help the nation recover.

There are several nice little beaches around the small peninsula and many other attractions: a long fast zip line (at \$90 US a go!), beach cabanas, beach lounge chairs, boats and canoes to be rented, and rides in motorboats. All such activities were chargeable at



Caribbean’s exorbitant rates, so we simply walked around the complex and then sat on the sand.



One section was interesting, though: the people from the local villages were allowed to set up their stalls in an artisans’ village and marketplace. We knew from reports that the vendors could be very pushy, but we are used to cope easily with that sort of thing, and they were basically friendly and easy-going local people with some lovely art to sell. One elderly artisan saw Norma was hobbling a bit, and came out offering a beautiful carved walking stick. Haitian artefacts we already knew to be exceptionally good and, indeed, we already have a beautiful Haitian carving in our lounge room that we bought in our voyaging days.

SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO



The next leg was an overnight sail to San Juan, the 500-year-old capital of Puerto Rico, the second nation in this trip that was new to us. It turned out to be a fascinating place with an amazing history. Its port, now including cruise and commercial ships, is based on a large but well-protected bay entered between headlands capped by formidable old forts. Our wharf was directly off the Old Town, a restored colonial section of what is a big city. Way down to our right we could see the multiple skyscrapers of modern San Juan.

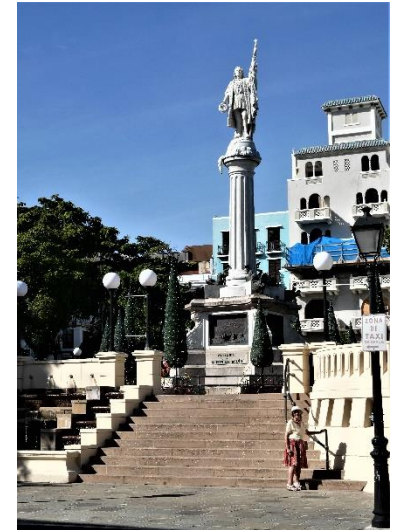


We had already decided the old town would be our centre for exploration. Having to explore a place in one day only was a new experience for us, and one we found tiring and rather frustrating. In this case we only arrived in the early afternoon, which was another limitation. There were expensive guided tours available from the ship, but we thought we could do what we wanted independently by foot alone.

What is now Puerto Rico was originally populated by peaceful Taino Indians. Its large and well-protected harbour was discovered in 1493 by Christopher Columbus, who named the settlement after St John the Baptist. It became an obvious destination for ships riding the trade winds from Europe, as a first good harbour after a voyage of one or two months.

Colonists under Juan Ponce de Leon took over the port and displaced the Indian population as he started the building of an impregnable system of defence against local and international forces. They became rich through mining the island's gold and putting the local Indians and imported slaves to work the growing sugar industry. But its very success made Puerto Rico ('Rich Port') a target for attack, first by the British under Sir Francis Drake, then the Dutch and the British again.

These all failed, but in 1897 the USA sent in troops involved in the Spanish-American war and took over the island. Puerto Ricans became American citizens in 1917. The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico is now an unincorporated territory of the United States, and the heavy American influence is obvious everywhere. In the poorer areas we did see some protest murals and tee-shirts calling for full independence. Some hope, we thought.



We started our walk at Plaza de Colon near the ship, and from there we made our way up to the sprawling Castillo San Cristobal, a relatively late element in the city's defence system. It is the biggest European fortification in the Americas. There are moats, ramps and tunnels linking parade grounds and fortifications enclosing casemates and living quarters. It's all been beautifully restored and maintained by the US National Park Service, and is a superb place to wander around and read the many explanatory panels and reconstructed dormitories and armouries.



From there we took a walkway along the city wall, which fringes and overlooks the old city to one side, and the sea on the other side to the north. Between the wall and the sea are settlements which as best appear to be informal, colourful shantytowns. On a grassy ridge we saw an enormous iguana basking in the sun, before moving into bushes when he saw us with a camera.



At the western extremity of the wall lies the other great fort, El Morro, fundamentally very similar to its younger counterpart but much more impressive due its location. At the western end of the old town a wide greensward rises gently to the fort's dominant buildings, with a pedestrian-only path of about 400 metres taking visitors to the entry portal. In the heat, Norma decided to sit and watch me take the walk and explore the fort.

It was built to protect San Juan Bay's deep harbour from attack by sea. We had easily appreciated this on our approach to the harbour by ocean liner, and it must have been a fearsome sight for the weary crew of a square rigger.

The fort itself is much of the same layout as San Cristobal, but is bigger, rising to six levels and with spectacular views of the sea, the city and the harbour. There is marvellous engineering to be admired, including massive cisterns storing a year's supply of rain water. Three flags fly, summarising its history: four centuries under the red and white banner of imperial Spain, Puerto Rico's star, and the American Stars and Stripes.



We walked back down to the harbour through the narrow streets of the old town, winding our way through the myriad cars trying to grind their way through the traffic. When the buildings could be seen at all, many were of the lovely old Spanish style. The 1532 white cathedral of San Juan is a fine sight, but we could not see its late-Gothic style interior, rare in the New World, because it was shut.

That was enough for the day, and once at sea we chose to eat in the self-service buffet that presented quite good breakfasts and, we trusted, evening meals. Also, we could sit by ourselves and watch the sea through the windows. The evening selection was supposed to be "special Chinese", but it was absolutely dreadful. We hoped for better later. We went to bed with indigestion and worryingly sore throats.

PHILIPSBURG, ST MAARTEN

Overnight we sailed to Philipsburg, the capital of Dutch St Maarten, an island discovered by Columbus in 1493. We shared its main harbour with two other cruise ships, both a good deal larger than ours. There were lots of shops selling duty-free goods on the quayside, but nothing much else of interest for us to see.



We had already decided that we would take a taxi to Marigot, the main town in the French sector of the island. St Maarten has been governed since 1648 by two countries – the Netherlands and France – and is said to be the home of 120 different nationalities speaking over 80 languages. When the early agreements between the countries were made, the settlers agreed that the island should be free of levies on imported goods, which explains its permanent duty-free status and tourist popularity.



We walked through the crowds to the taxi base, and took a ride up into the French sector, with only a small stone reading '*Bienvenue Partie Francaise*' to mark the border. From our prior reading Marigot looked more interesting and laid back than Dutch Philipsburg, and that was so. There was dense traffic all the way, a feature of travelling around these little islands of the Caribbean that we were already getting used to. We walked around the waterfront in steamy heat and were pleased to come across a line-up of open-air local cafes. We relaxed in the shade and got stuck into cold beer before lunching on good mahi-mahi and coconut salad.

After the taxi ride back to the ship, we found that tied to the other side of the wharf was another Royal Caribbean liner far larger than ours, blocking out the sun. All we could see from our room was a surreal expanse of glassed windows and balconies, and all we could



hear was their music (and ours, of course). Talk about dissonance! We spent the latter part of the afternoon reading on deck, on the other side of the ship with a view of the green and watery surroundings adjacent to the main harbour.



While there, our ship was refuelled by barge, with diesel probably supplied by a tanker moored in the harbour. The harbour was quite open to the sea, but there was little wind. The weather conditions continued to be brilliant, and the trade winds were not too persistent or strong.

For dinner in the main restaurant we shared the table with two pleasant Australian ladies in the TripaDeal group and two couples, Israeli and American, all good company.

BASSETTERRE, ST KITTS AND NEVIS/ANGUILLA

It was another overnight (but short) cruise to Basseterre, 'low land' in French, and a popular name for other harbours in the Caribbean. It is the capital of the twin islands of St Kitts and Nevis, where we lay: still near the northern end of the Lesser Antilles chain of islands. The larger island was named St Christopher in 1493 by Columbus after himself, because he liked the look of it, but it became a cosier St Kitts following British settlement. The British coloniser Sir Thomas Warner settled here with his family, and came to an understanding with French settlers about who 'owned' what parts and how to fight off the Spanish. The group of islands was established as an independent state in association with Great Britain, and gained full independence in 1983.

We docked alongside another big jetty and walked past queues of passengers waiting for their excursion buses. We made it to the rather shambolic taxi base, where we found the boss man and asked to be taken round the island with a visit to its main site of interest, the Brimstone Hill Fortress. He shouted to a young man, who turned out to be his nephew, to take us on a 'private tour', quoting a price about one-third of the ship's listed excursion.

This suited us very well, and the young man was soon exercising his developing skills in tourist commentary. The first stop, after battling typically heavy and shambolic traffic in the town and outskirts, was at the Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park, along the southern coast to the west.



The fort is an outstanding and massive construction, designed by British army engineers and largely built by African slaves. It is perched at the top of a 200-metre hill overlooking the sea, which was a commanding situation for spotting and defending from the French, who for a short time in 1782 did occupy the battlements. They were returned to the British under the Treaty of Versailles. Following extensive rehabilitation it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1999.



The partially restored ruins of officers' quarters, a magazine, stores, bastions, and a parade ground are scattered around the hilltop, on the crest of which sits the magnificent Citadel. It is reached by a long and steep ramp, with high-pitched stairs that do nothing to assist in the tough struggle up. There are of course breathtaking views of the landscape and sea from the top, with cannon mounted where the views are the clearest. There is a museum in the partly reconstructed fortress buildings. The site was one of the most memorable of the trip.



We then continued our clockwise rounding of the island, first passing through Old Road Town, where Sir Thomas Warner first settled. We walked round an old sugar processing plant. There were several more stops at beaches, rocky shores and tourist souvenir sites – one of which featured the 'monkey men' we had seen briefly elsewhere. They carry baby monkeys, and charge for photographs. We were not impressed.

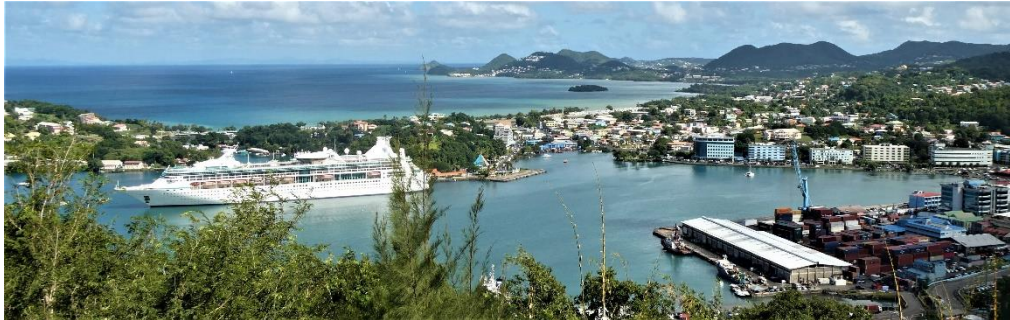
The villages were in good condition compared to many we had seen so far in the Caribbean, but the traffic was still horrendous. Our young driver was too optimistic in taking the minivan through a narrow gap, and we had to stop for a few minutes while negotiations regarding some scrapes were undertaken.

Down along a peninsula at the south-east of the island we saw some very attractive new developments and fine houses, which explained the prevalence of Mercedes, Audis and Porsches we came across. There was clearly a fair bit of American and other foreign money coming in.

We dined in the self-serve café, good food this time, and where we could as usual choose a two-seat table by the windows. By this time it was apparent we both had a cold (at least), and we did not want to spread it around.

CASTRIES, ST LUCIA

The next leg was a comparatively long one. Overnight, we sailed about 250 nautical miles south past Antigua, Guadeloupe and Martinique to the island of St Lucia, leaving the Leeward Islands for the Windwards. We arrived in the early morning of 1 December, and watched the process of docking at a new tourist and cruise-ship facility, Pointe Seraphine, with a small airport right behind it



St Lucia is one of the most beautiful and spectacular islands in the Caribbean, as we remembered from our visit in the yacht many years ago. Through the 17th and 18th centuries the French and British would-be colonisers battled for dominance, but following the Napoleonic wars it was recognised as a British dependency. It was granted full self-government in 1967 and in 1979 became an independent state in the



Commonwealth. Interesting factoid: St Lucia is named after Saint Lucy of Syracuse, and is the only sovereign state in the world to be named after a human woman.

The town of Castries is not much to see, having been reconstructed several times following violent fires. Before going ashore, from the ship we watched long winding lines of tourists booked on the ship's excursions waiting for their large buses – which, we established during the day, could not possibly have visited some of the places we did. We saw very few big buses during the day.

We again negotiated a tour of the island by taxi. Now well used to the taxi system, we asked the boss man to arrange the excursion we wanted, and he joined us up with a small group to be taken by minivan, again called a 'private tour', at a reasonable sum. The plan was to drive down the western side of the island to Soufriere (near the famous Pitons) and back, with various diversions to special sights of interest. This time the van was full, but the company was good (with one exception), the driver competent and knowledgeable, and the value (for time and mileage) excellent. By this time we were very conscious of the US dollars we were spending and the exchange rate.

The road down towards Soufriere was extremely tortuous, with very tight hairpins, and the good driver's task was made no easier by the onset of drizzling rain and typically heavy traffic. He did his best to describe various points of interest, but his difficulties were confounded by the constant stream of questions and opinions shot at him by a rather obnoxious German man sitting next to him, in the front passenger seat. For example, along the sides of many rural roads lay the remains of myriad dead vehicles, from trucks to motorcycles, rusting away in the tropical heat and humidity. The German expressed his opinion that such a state of affairs would never be allowed in his country, where the wrecks are compacted into cubes by machines and the steel reconstituted to build new cars. He asked the driver several times, 'why couldn't that be done here?'



We stopped at a few roadside stalls, where we did enjoy excellent bananas and were shown samples of the very wide variety of other fruits grown on the island.

Approaching Soufriere we deviated up a narrow road into a volcanic region, best known by the pyramidal Pitons. We walked into a glade with a warm waterfall and pool. Our German friend was not impressed. "We have better waterfalls in Germany", he said.



Norma ('*de old lady*') and I were befriended by a Bob Marley look-alike, which was a bit of fun. Nearby were some volcanic sulphur pools, discovered in 1784 and reputed to be therapeutic. The younger ones in the group went off to walk there, but we stayed put.

We took a stop up behind Soufriere, from where there was a splendid view of the Pitons. On our sailing adventures we had sailed south along this coast, and admired the stupendous twin volcanic peaks from the sea.



On our way back up the coast to Castries we took several deviations into little fishing villages, with the road winding between rather ramshackle settlements. It didn't strike us as a very happy place.

What we did enjoy was a visit to one of the especially favourite anchorages of our cruising days, Marigot Bay.

At that time there were no other protected anchorages along the St Lucia coast, so it was popular with the cruising fleet. There were up to 60 yachts sharing the little bay with us when we were there, overlooked by a classic little Caribbean village.

On this visit we saw just a handful of cruising yachts. A massive marina has since our time been built north of Castries, big enough to take world-girdling megayachts of power and sail, and we imagined that most smaller yachts would also be staying there these days (at a considerable cost, we guessed). We had our picture taken overlooking Marigot Bay – nostalgic indeed.

We returned tired to the ship after our seven-hour tour.

ST JOHN'S, ANTIGUA

The next and final leg of our cruise before returning to the USA was an overnight passage to St John's, the capital of Antigua. Columbus took sight of the island in 1493, but the first permanent settlement was by the English in 1632. British it then remained, despite several skirmishes with French and Spanish forces.

Once again we sought out a taxi, telling the manager exactly what we wanted: a drive to English Harbour (the other side of the island), where we would stay for lunch, and a ride back. He called a cab with those instructions.

English Harbour was our destination in December 1989 following a three-week passage from the Canary Islands in the Atlantic trade winds. It was a wonderful harbour at which to arrive after so long at sea, and we have always had happy memories of our time there. English Harbour became the main British naval base in the Caribbean, serving admirals Nelson, Hood and Rodney. The dockyard itself is named after Nelson, who was stationed here in the 1780s as C-in-C of the Leeward Islands squadron. It was abandoned in 1889, but in the early 20th century was partially rehabilitated by an English family who bought the place and set it up as a refuge and repair centre for yachties. Great pillars still stand in front of what is now an up-market hotel, once as supports for vast shipyard roofs.





The precinct is now a National Park and a major centre for yachting and boating in the Caribbean. There is a fee to enter, and it's not touted as a tourist destination. But the complex has been beautifully restored and partly reconstructed, with refitted sail lofts where the old lofts had been, refurbished engineering works and so on.

When we sailed there, some of the bigger yachts were tied up round the main dockyard centre. We among others anchored out. There were no marinas in the current sense of the word. Now, there are countless very posh marinas all around the harbour, and moorings were laid where we had dropped anchor for a while in Ordnance Bay.



We loved our revisit and had an excellent light lunch at one of the good restaurants in the complex. Our driver was waiting for us as we emerged from the park and drove us back to St John's. In the old days we had taken the bus over to St John's several times, enjoying the sight of lines of cheerfully coloured wooden dwellings on the way. They're nearly all gone now, and replaced by featureless cement houses with big gaps between them. Smiling Antiguan ladies are not so prominent on the roadside as they were.



We remembered that the cathedral in St John's had a beautiful wooden interior, and we asked our driver to drop us off there. We would walk back down through the town to the boat. Inevitably, the cathedral was shut, but we could see the ship the other side of the market. As usual, the market area was thrumming, with milling pedestrians avoiding multiple parked and moving traffic. We were walking down the road trying to find a way to cross a deep culvert and get to the footpath. Norma took a jump, which was a bad idea, as her leg went down into the culvert and she ended up flat out on the pavement.



We were helped by a lovely local lady (Eulalie) and shepherded back to the ship. Norma sustained no major damage, but she was spectacularly bruised, cracked a rib, and a cut in her leg later became infected.

Fortunately in a way, the next two days we were at sea, and Norma could rest. Neither of us was feeling that great, with a persistent cough. We mostly sat out in quieter parts of the deck, reading and watching the sea, quite turbulent at times in a strong trade wind.



BACK HOME

On the 5th of November we arrived quite early at Fort Lauderdale and soon afterwards were efficiently signed off the ship in groups. Our own small group of Australians on the TripaDeal tour commandeered a minivan to take us to the airport, where we already knew we were going to have to wait a long time to board an aircraft. After Norma and I found some seats in the terminal and settled down to wait, it occurred to us that while TripaDeal had booked flights for us, we had not been checked into the aircraft. There were no airline desks to be seen. As soon as our flight came up on the noticeboard I went to the gate for our flight and made enquiries. Yes, they had been wondering where we were, and no arrangements had been made for us. We managed to get two seats together, but most of our group were allocated single seats on their last-minute check-in.

We flew back via Houston and Los Angeles, a series of long and tiring flights. The LA-Sydney leg of 15 hours was wholly at night, with the plane kept depressingly dark, so it was unsociable to even use the reading light. And both of us were feeling worse by then.

But in Sydney we were picked up as arranged and were happy to be home. We tested positive to Covid-19 on the second test, despite both of us having had all four vaccination injections. (Norma had almost certainly caught Covid in the early days of the pandemic, but it was not diagnosed at the time). We suspect that on the ship we caught the very newly emerging American variant of the virus. We sat it out to recover OK, with some continuing minor symptoms as is common, and Norma's leg cut took a long time to heal.

So, it was a trip of mixed experiences, good and bad, but some of our Caribbean visits had been very evocative. It was not a tour we had chosen first up, but that was cancelled and the Caribbean cruise was a replacement on offer. We have resolved not to take another cruise of this mass-market nature, but are nevertheless booked on a luxury cruise in a small ship to Scandinavia in the northern summer, to which we are much looking forward.

