

*This contribution comes from Past Honorary Shantyman Tony Davis who last entertained us with shanties at the Sea Pie Supper in 2004 and now continues to do so with these memories of his introduction to modern cruising.*

## **Cruising - A Little Bit Further Than "Down The River"!**

Well, after serving about a decade as a "Shantyman to the Southampton Master Mariners" I now have to "come out" as they say and admit it.....I've now had my first experience of cruising in a "big ship"!

I did sail to Norway as shantyman in a 72 foot ketch of the Ocean Youth Club - some of you may have seen the television programme, "Spinners Under Sail" - and I had the privilege of sailing/shantying on the lovely, ill-fated "Maria Asumpta" several times. Beryl, my wonderful wife, has even more "sea time" than me, having served for several years as a mate on the ketch "Francis Drake" of the Ocean Youth Club. However, now, in my seventh decade, our daughter decided that my wife and I should experience the delights of being "spoilt" on board of a floating hotel, and what an experience it was!

We joined her in Southampton - catching a first glimpse of this huge "block of flats" as it appeared, driving along the dock road from the motorway. Well, we see some big ships back home in the Mersey, but the first sight of Royal Caribbean's "Navigator of the Seas" was something mind blowing! The dockside preliminaries were both efficient and courteous, with no unnecessary fuss or officiousness and my scooter and I were carried aboard with apparent ease.

Finding cabin 6300 presented no difficulties and although we knew my daughter had ensured "disabled" facilities, we were surprised and delighted at the spacious, well-appointed sight which greeted us. Especially pleasing - and surprising! - was the wide, easily accessible balcony outside of our sliding glass windows - somewhere to spend lots of time on a summer cruise I imagine... and of course, the "wet room" bathroom!

Our cabin steward - or "attendant" as RCI call him - was a delightful Jamaican called Patrick who tuned in to my renditions of Jamaican songs with apparent amusement - and stopped me after a couple of bars of one song with the information that it was a "naughty" song.... Something the late Cliff Hall of The Spinners had kept from us "white-ies"!

Patrick delighted us nightly by leaving "towel sculptures" in the cabin, a feature which I am told is increasingly found on cruise ships. First there was a little lamb - a fairly obvious starting point. Next, a bat, hanging from the cabin's centre light and using a coat hanger as a wing stiffener, but the piece de resistance was a wonderful elephant with my wife's sunglasses perched on its trunk! I just wonder how many different possibilities occur on a long cruise!

The cruise itinerary would be mouth watering to those who had been shore bound all their lives, and although I had visited all three of the countries which our eight day "taster" encompassed, the cruise itself and the shipboard facilities were enough to satisfy my blasé soul! As for my wife, the relief from cooking, ironing and waiting on me hand and foot must have been something very special. "First Stop" was Stavanger in the beautiful Norwegian fiord and the mooring point for our huge ship appeared to be smack in the middle of the town! We had decided to forgo the shore visits as the itineraries lasted for several hours and all involved a fair degree of mobility, - we had really come for a rest! Anyway, the views from the ship were interesting and beautiful in themselves, with the very picturesque houses and hotels along the quayside and the countryside in the background.

Next stop was Denmark and I was excited to see on the quayside what appeared to be a New Orleans type Marching Band which I expected to be playing "South Rampart Street Parade" or some such traditional Jazz march. Guess what we heard? Yes, "Wonderful, wonderful Copenhagen"! ....What else? The final stop was in Amsterdam, with the most wonderful trip through the Dutch waterways and shore visits for those who wanted them, taking in the very interesting Van Gogh museum among others.

Facilities on board were absolutely breathtaking - and "to suit all tastes". For the "shopaholics" there is a mall which runs half the length of the ship, containing souvenir shops, bars and small arcades. The ice rink - yes an ice rink! - had a wonderful show with skaters of great prowess from Canada and Eastern Europe putting on a beautiful performance. In one lounge, with a small dance floor, a quartet played Swing standards for dancing - proper dancing!- and the girl singer brought memories of the great Billie Holiday. We asked her where the band came from and were delighted to hear that they were Polish! It gave me a chance to show off my ability to say "Thank you!" in their language... I understand that the same musicians played a late night Jazz session in an upper deck bar. What else? Well, we never got to the Theatre where there were several first rate shows by all accounts but usually we found the days' activities enough for us!

A daytime trip - well, several trips - around the "Navigator" took in the sun deck, complete with swimming pool, Jacuzzis and reclining deckchairs, the "fitness centre" which must be wonderful - if you are fit!- a basketball court, which a crowd of Brits were using as a soccer pitch, and believe it or not a nine hole golf course.....! I found the computer centre about the sixth day so didn't get hooked into that.

The meals were absolutely first class. I rather worry that a longer trip might see me putting on a stone or so. The only fault I could find was - no black puddings at breakfast.... We were very fortunate to be sharing a dinner table with two very different, but most congenial couples - we were the only "first timers" so we heard a lot about cruises on other lines. I think we struck lucky for our baptism of fire!

Well, I've probably said enough for you to guess.....we were hooked (and booked!) on another cruise. We were lucky to have found that "Navigator" was sailing south from Southampton in October, taking in Madeira, all of the Canaries and Vigo in ten days. The idea of October sunshine was just too good to miss so..... "Hello and goodbye Southampton" once more!

Tony Davis.

p.s. The Canaries trip did have.... black puddings for breakfast!

p.p.s. We're off again this October - in the "Independence of the Seas". I believe this one takes 5,000 passengers.....! Oops!

p.p.p.s. AND it has a surfing pool - for them wot has legs that work!

Tony.