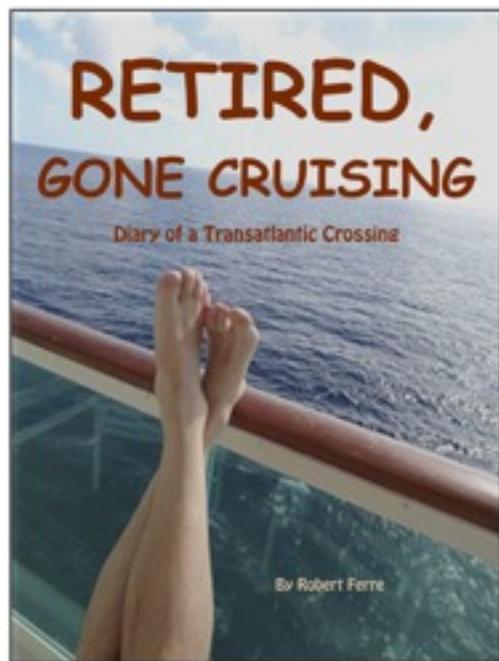


PART I: EMBARKATION

In 2009, Linda Ricketts and I (Robert Ferre) went on a repositioning cruise from Barcelona, Spain, to Galveston, TX, as travel companions. By the end of the cruise, we were a couple. The next year, our honeymoon was a cruise from New York to Southampton, England, and back, on the *Queen Mary 2*. More cruises followed. Totally taken with cruises, I have read widely of their history and the industry itself. On October 26, 2011, Linda and I boarded the *Mariner of the Seas* in Italy, disembarking 17 days later in Galveston, TX. There are few books available about the experience of cruising, especially by someone of retirement age. So, I'm working to remedy that situation, writing a detailed account of that particular cruise, which will soon be a book entitled, *Retired, Gone Cruising: Diary of a Transatlantic Crossing*.



Many people are familiar with the romantic images, luxury and panache of the golden years of ocean liners, gleaned from Hollywood and literature. In those days, ships were the only way to get across the ocean. If you were rich, you did it in style, but if you were a poor immigrant, you were consigned to wretched steerage class. The ocean divided the continents of Europe and America, but also served as a bridge, connecting them. More than 75 million immigrants came to America on ships. Indeed, more than slaves or cargo, immigrants created a demand for ships that led to the development of giant ocean liners, impressively long with multiple tall funnels (smokestacks) to dispel the sulphurous smoke pouring from the throbbing coal-fed steam engines.

A hundred years ago, great liners held as many people (thousands) and crossed the ocean as fast (20-25 knots) as do modern cruise ships today. Then, crossing the Atlantic involved danger and hardship, illness and courage, with masses of people coming from the Old World to the New. After laws were passed to limit the number of immigrants, the flow changed directions --from west to east -- as Americans thronged abroad to "do" Europe, or take the Grand Tour. Immigrants went back home, either permanently or to visit. No longer was travel across the Atlantic just a necessity. It became a pastime.

After jet airplanes turned a six-day crossing into an 8-hour hop, few took ships out of necessity. Ocean liners became obsolete, replaced by ever larger and grander cruise ships. Soon, many cruises became circular, returning to the original port from which they left, not destined for a distant country. Travel on the sea became only peripherally about ports, as the magnificent cruise ships became a destination in themselves. If there was once a Golden Age of ocean liners, today is the Platinum Age of cruise ships.

What is unique about repositioning and other transatlantic crossings such as ours, is that they represent the best of both worlds, cruise ship and ocean liner, in which comfort and convenience unimaginable by our predecessors combine with appreciation of the ever-present and deeply-moving sea that stretches from horizon to horizon. That's why I included both of those words, cruising and crossing, in the title of

the book. This website supports and enhances the book with additional photos, stories, and information that give a brief preview of the book itself.

As with all diaries, this book is about my personal experience. It's not a textbook about cruising. The internet is filled with advice columns on how to find and book a cruise. But then what? Nor is this website trying to sell you a cruise, or to fill its pages with lucrative advertisements, as with most cruise websites (well, make me an offer . . .). Frankly, the book is a love story, of Linda and me for each other, and the two of us for cruising. Neither book nor website are sufficient to tell the whole story alone.

ALL ABOARD THAT'S GOING ABOARD

The above title is a bit of a pun. Ocean liners used to allow visitors to come aboard while the ship was in port. When the time came to sail (a word used for ships even long after sails disappeared), the stewards would walk through the halls ringing small bells and calling, "All ashore that's going ashore." I wonder if anyone missed the call and found themselves leaving on an accidental voyage. Or, perhaps, it wasn't so accidental, yielding to the temptation to stow away. For us it was deliberate and long anticipated.

So great is my fear of missing the departure of the ship, due to a cancelled flight or a train strike or some other unexpected factor, that we arrived at the port of departure two days in advance. We had flown on Iceland Air to Paris, because they have reasonably priced one-way flights, and stop in Iceland for 90 minutes, providing a break in the nine hour journey. We enjoyed France for a whole month, followed by two more weeks in Italy before taking the cruise.

The cruise is usually listed as leaving from Rome, but it is really Civitavecchia, the port closest to Rome. We had learned enough about the train system to travel easily from Cortona, in Tuscany (where they filmed "Under the Tuscan Sun") to our destination. We passed through Rome in little more than an hour, changing trains there. The train to Civitavecchia was a local, stopping at every little town; but we were in no hurry.

Arriving at the station, we noticed an interesting phenomenon. All of the taxis were 9-passenger vans. They were available only to take people to the cruise ships. If you want to go to your hotel, be sure to pick one that has a shuttle that will come and fetch you, as non-ship taxis are not available. We saw other passengers from the train setting out by foot down the hill, pulling their luggage. We had decided to stay outside of town, to rest up from our travels. We go to bed early and don't need to be surrounded by bars or nightclubs. So we stayed at a dude ranch. Actually, that's not what they called it, but it is a working ranch that raises steers and produces natural meat. Guests may, upon arrangement, ride horses or learn how to rope cattle. The restaurant features beef, which, as vegetarians, wasn't a big draw for us.

Called Tenuta dell'Argento (I think Argento refers to Argentina, which also has cattle ranches), it sits up on the hill, looking down at town and port. One room in particular, number 25, has a wall of windows offering an extensive view. It is an upgrade from the standard room, being quite spacious and having a large bathroom. That was our room. We arrived in the afternoon, had the whole next day to relax (I was nursing a cold), and left for the ship following our second night there. We loved the place and would recommend it. The staff was friendly. The meals were so so, but overall, it was a good value and the perfect place to prepare for our cruise. Other guests were also cruise bound. For two nights in the best

room, two breakfasts (included with room), two lunches and two dinners, the entire bill was \$341. Their free shuttle bus took us right to the ship at the appointed time the morning of October 26..

From the driveway and the buildings, the blue of the Mediterranean was quite evident (right).



This was our room (left), which included free WiFi connection, a great convenience. We didn't ride any horses or rope any cattle, but we could see the port, cruise ships, and Mediterranean.



The buildings are one story, and rustic in nature. The ceiling had exposed beams. The television had 500 channels, including programs in every known language, including Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and more. We were able to watch CNN and catch up on the news -- the same old same old. Yawn.



The restaurant was larger than needed, apparently drawing frequent customers from town. There was also an extensive outdoor patio. Our room was next door, so that the windows on the left in the dining room faced the same view that we had. The website calls this a resort, and can be found at <http://www.tenutadellargento.com/>.



From our bedroom window, the port was almost lost in haze. We counted seven major cruise ships in port, and several smaller regional ones. For some cruises, this is a port stop, so people can go into Rome for the day. For others, like us, it was the port of embarkation. That was also true for the Norwegian *Jade*, as we met some of their passengers at dinner. From our vantage point, it looked like the three ships shown here (left) were all from Royal Caribbean. Could that be true? All at the same time? We would soon see.

In a light rain, the shuttle took us to the port. We could catch glimpses of ships between the industrial buildings, until finally we pulled into the parking lot. There, towering above us (right), was the *Mariner of the Seas*. It has been said that cruise ships are the largest man-made objects that move.





Numerous buses were disgorging passengers. Porters casually unloaded luggage from trucks and waited with their dollies to help passengers. We gave them our three suitcases, complete with tags indicating our stateroom number, plus five euros as a tip. Then we headed inside the terminal to check in. It was about 11:30 a.m.. On some cruises, we have not been able to board the ship until 1 p.m. How long would we have to wait? We have friends who have avoided cruises because they imagine standing in long lines for everything. We'll find out.



Inside the terminal we saw that the lines weren't too bad, and that the chairs were mostly empty. That means that people were already being allowed to board. They wouldn't be able to go to their staterooms until an announcement was made, but it was better to wait onboard the ship than in the terminal.



There were 45 agents checking in passengers. Some of them were reserved for people with special “diamond” status due to the number of previous cruises. We didn’t qualify, so we waited in line. When an agent was ready, he or she held up a paddle, with the number of their station. Our friendly agent checked our paperwork, took possession of our passports (a rather unusual step we had never seen before), and issued our pass cards, which would be used as door keys to our stateroom as well as for charging purposes and for checking on and off the ship at ports. Mine(right) shows that our dining room is Sound of Music, “my time dining” (no fixed time or table), and that the last three numbers of our stateroom were 598. In fact, we were on the eighth deck, so our full number was 8598, located midships on the port (left) side. Our lifeboat station was C-08, noted in large letters. Gold member status means I was on one previous cruise with Royal Caribbean. After this cruise I will jump to Emerald status.



On the way to the gangplank, we ran into the ubiquitous photographers. Thanks to digital photography, they take thousands of photos with no obligation to buy them. They are posted in the photo gallery later. Here, the background was a photo of the ship. After many hours of travel, people didn’t always look their best. One author suggests taking another one at the end of the cruise, offering a “before” and “after” comparison.



Exiting the terminal, we walked up the gangplank onto the ship on Deck 1. I looked at my watch. It had been 35 minutes since our arrival. Not bad. Once inside the ship, they took a security photo which would appear on the monitor each time they scanned our pass cards. That way, no one can use another person's card.

The ship towered above us. Just above the waterline are the small portholes, probably crew quarters. Next are larger portholes, for the "ocean view" staterooms. Above those are the fourth deck, above which hang the yellow lifeboats. The smaller boat is the man overboard boat, used in case of emergencies when speed is important. The fifth deck is hidden behind the lifeboats. Then there are five decks of staterooms with balconies, decks six through ten. We know ours is on the eighth deck, but on the other side, as this is the starboard (right) side. The eleventh deck holds the buffet restaurant, Windjammer Cafe, as well as open-air swimming pools, sports facilities, hot tubs, fitness

center, and many other things. Decks 12 through 15 hold sunning decks, bars, and even a small chapel.

Along the dock, the area was a beehive of activity with trucks and fork lifts, off-loading the recycling and trash and then on-loading the tons of provisions needed for the cruise.

I have always been fascinated by large projects, like the Big Dig in Boston or a complex highway interchange or the construction of a million square foot hospital. Keeping straight what is loaded and unloaded onto a ship, where it is stored, and how it is subsequently distributed and used falls into this same category of wonder. Among the pallets being loaded were wire containers filled with 7,000 suitcases to be delivered to their respective staterooms within two or three hours. What a busy day for the stewards. Well, we made it. safe and sound. We were assured that the cruise was going to happen.



This ends Part I. There are a total of eight parts.