



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

6 in 7 - Sport On The High Seas!



Me and my new bestie...NCL44-06s.

ONE day after flying back from Dubrovnik after my seven countries in seven days and recycling of some clothes that desperately needed to have the Balkan dust beaten off them, it was into the office for a frantic catch up of the previous week's happenings and an even more frantic preparation for the following week's legal activities and it was then home to get ready.

My aim this time was merely 6 new countries/islands in 7 days!

I woke before the alarm at 4.10 and we were on the rocky road to Dublin before 5. I had a suitcase in the boot - I couldn't remember the last time I had travelled with a suitcase!

I photographed where I left the car in the airport car park and we were in

Terminal 2 before 8 and in the Executive lounge for a very long time luxuriating in the one concept not well known in airports - time. We had picked up a last minute deal for a cruise and flight combo which were excellent value - we were all set!

We waited ages as we thought we shouldn't go to the gate until it was called. Suddenly, I had a bad feeling about this and we headed off for US pre-clearance to be confronted by several thousand people who all had to go through the same three stage security process as we did - Help! We spent a very anxious hour and fifteen minutes. Normally we curse flight delays but today we were grateful because there was a delay of twenty minutes. We met a guy who was in the queue flying back to the States and he said he hadn't seen this much of a log jam for years.

His flight was due to leave 30 minutes before ours.

His calmness kept us

sane.

A Security Official asked if anyone was late for the Philadelphia flight.

He was. I asked the same guy about the JFK flight.

It must have been something in my desperate enquire that led to an affirmative response and before we knew it we were at the top of the queue.

I vowed I would never be late for a flight ever again!

We sat at Gate 410 practically shaking as the adrenalin and cortisone rushed through our systems.

When we finally relaxed, we knew we were in for a long day.

We had a 7 hour flight to New York and then we had another flight down to Puerto Rico.

The eastern seaboard of the U.S. looked busy as we came into land.

30 minutes later I was sitting reading the NYT in JFK (the New York Times in John Fitzgerald Kennedy Airport) - the

headline in the paper was that the authorities were going to spend 14 billion dollars trying to improve the infrastructure at the airport.

They are obviously trying to catch up on Istanbul which is about to open the world's largest airport.

Meanwhile, the Chinese are building airports for fun while we can't even get a third runway at Heathrow!

Our 24 hour day was becoming a 29 hour day with the time change in which our destination of Puerto Rico is not only a major island in its own right but a gateway for many for a cruise.

The mercury was still at 29 degrees and the humidity felt like a wet blanket.

Seven hours later I was up and out through the security grills (there was either a lot of violent crime in Puerto Rico or a fear of violent crime) to go out for a trot.

I would hesitate to call it even a jog.

I have been fortunate to run in cities and countries all over the world but I have never seen as many early morning runners since traversing Central Park in New York years ago.

As my body didn't know what day it was, never mind what time it was, I allowed myself the luxury of walking occasionally.

I ran up the local beach but ventured back onto the road as the humidity was sapping my energy, never mind the sand.

I ended up seeing a huge cruise ship.

Was this to be ours? I turned around as my water bottle was nearly empty. After an hour or so of so-called exercise, I was back on the beach where I threw myself into a rough ocean to cool down. We had breakfast in a café which had hosted President Obama back in 2011 and shortly after that we checked into the Pan American Pier at the port where we got rid of our suitcases. We got a taxi into the Old Town where we saw the Castillo San Cristobelle Cemetery which overlooked the sea.

Tempted as we were to have a tour of the Bacardi Rum Distillery (the biggest in the world) we were then caught up in a biblical rainstorm where the heavens opened. It wasn't cats and dogs - it was Lions and Alsatians! We sheltered in a café before getting an Uber back for our "Cruise-Cation".

Cruising for years has had a bad press. The boat would be full of old fogies (who am I to talk!) and you feel trapped and claustrophobic if you had any spirit or life in you at all. I have been on two cruises and was pleasantly surprised by the amount of stuff to do and see and participate in - apart from the 20 bars and 12

restaurants of course! There was a climbing wall, a surf rider, a gym with about 100 machines, a 250m running track, several pools never mind the theatre, the cinema and the ice rink etc. First of all we had to have our safety briefing in case we had a Titanic style event. Our ship, the Freedom of the Seas, used to be the holder of the Guinness Book of Records award for the biggest in the world when it was first launched in 2006. Whilst it may have been surpassed in size and numbers, it still retained an efficient charm thanks to its hardworking crew of over 1,500 looking after its 4,400 guests. The sail away took place at 08:00 as we got our sea legs. Several of the waiters were from the Balkans and I was able to show them photographs of their own homeland taken a week earlier. That surprised them!

Day 2 - Destination: St. Martin

The next morning I was in the gym at 07:30 to begin my sporting odyssey - and the gym was bugged! As it was the first time I had been on a (gym) bike since my 180K in Almere, my body didn't react too well but I found 5 minutes easier to cope with than 7 hours! I then finished off with a go at 1Km on the track, i.e. 4 laps and it took me 4 minutes 14. A mark I hoped to beat over the next 6 days.

The communal breakfast featured a lot of communal gluttony (says the bloke who ate more than he ever would at home). They say travel broadens the mind - it certainly broadens the seat of your pants! I was even eating fried rice for breakfast!

We tottered off the gang plank before 10 with our blue beach towels which would instantly mark us as cruise ship tourists and we were on the country / island of St. Martin.

Being in the Caribbean, every island seemed to want to borrow the cultural heritage of Bob Marley and the Wailers despite the fact that Bob is from Jamaica, many hundreds of miles to the west. When I told a local that we had seen the Wailers play at a field outside our hometown of Limavady only several weeks ago, he looked at me very dubiously - but such is the power of Stendhal!

We got a water taxi (7 bucks return) for a fabulous ride across the bay where quite a few were enjoying their first Carib (the local lager) of the day even though the sun wasn't long over the yardarm. Mind you, the next day at breakfast when somebody offered me champagne and orange juice, I didn't hang about!

Meanwhile, we walked 100 meters to the local beach which boasted clear water for swimming which



A typically tropical Caribbean beach. NCL44-07s.

was a welcome break from the 30 degree heat. On a stroll, I came across a local courthouse and wondered what type of justice was dispensed there as I was aware that several Caribbean countries still retain the death penalty. St. Martin is the smallest island / country which is ruled by two different jurisdictions (France and Holland), Ireland and Borneo being slightly bigger. I was still strung out from my road trip in the Balkans and for once didn't feel the need to galivant about the place. We were in the Caribbean where as they say, 'Rush slowly'. We did very little - and we also took our time about it.

Every time you go back onto the boat you go through airport type security and back to the welcome world of wall to wall food and drink and much needed aircon. Never having had lobster bisque washed down with an obscure Californian wine, a cruise was the place to indulge. Cruise ships are not only known for their ability to deliver instant weight gain but they also deliver top quality shows. Tonight's comedian was Kieve Rogers who had featured in the highly rated Jay Leno Show in the States. He was coming on to an audience which had been at the sauce for 4 or 5 hours and it would be fair to say he brought the house down.

Day 3 - Destination: St. Kitts

I was in the gym at 07:15 belatedly to join a stretching class taken by 'Go' from Beijing. To say that I stretched would be to fail the Trade Misdescription Act. Still the next class concentrated on abs which was okay. I can do abs! I then had another go on the track but as it was wet, I was 2 seconds slower. I then had a breakfast which would have sunk a ship (but hopefully not the Freedom of the Seas). When I looked out from our balcony, I discovered we had travelled 50 miles overnight and were now docked in Basseterre, of St. Kitts and Nevis (the smallest independent nation on earth). The

currency was the East Caribbean Dollar. We drove on the left but our taxi driver was driving an American car which meant the steering wheel was also on the left but she drove thankfully very slowly. St. Kitts was the home of a massive slave market and their Independent Square was the epicentre of it - what huge misery and human degradation had this town seen? It even had a Liverpool Square named in honour of a port whence many slaving galleons left.

Debbie, our taxi driver, deposited us at Cackle Shell Bay and said she would see us later. It was the ideal place to go for a swim - until a 20 year old girl staggered out of the water screaming the place down. She had stood on a sea urchin which had lanced her foot with barbs of poison. The only solution was to let them slowly emerge over the next 3 days. Perhaps paradise is not all it's cracked up to be. It reminded me of the worst jellyfish stings I had ever suffered whilst in the sea off Borneo where the only treatment was a bottle of vinegar and to vigorously rub sand over it. My shoulder was scarred for months.

We had a seafood chowder which reminded me of the fantastic chowder served in the Point Bar but there was a little spicy Caribbean extra in it, something which with the waters of Magilligan and Greencastle are not familiar. I had my

photograph taken with a local celebrity, Christian, with his colourful beard and clothes, and talked cricket with him. He thought West Indian cricket would bounce back from their current dismal form.

St. Kitts neighbour was Nevis and we wondered if it had a Scottish heritage. There was a 2 mile gap between the two islands celebrated with an annual swim race each March. St. Kitts unfortunately is known as Monkey Island and a few of those miserable downtrodden creatures were in evidence - the modern slaves - and they were paraded for the so-called amusement of tourists.

Rather than by a fridge magnet to celebrate my visit, I treated myself to a St. Kitts baseball cap (which I am sure will be of great comfort in a Northern Irish winter). They speak English in St. Kitts and their laid back style, as we were to discover, was the norm rather than the exception for this horizontally relaxed part of the world. We embarked ready for a cold beer and a hot shower and an international class dinner before I watched some brave souls tackle the rock climbing wall. The show that night featured a juggler. I just wish I could juggle the demands of my time half as well as this bloke was able to juggle tennis balls and swords!

St. Kitts was history. It was now onto our next scheduled port of call - and another trip to the gym - and another go at 1k on the track!



Local Justice in Saint Kitts. NCL44-09s.



The floating city that is the Freedom of the Seas. NCL44-08s.