

CRUISING THE MEDITERRANEAN: Part I

**Barcelona – The Riviera and Monaco – Tuscany – Rome –
Pompeii and Capri**



Text: John Biggs © 2006

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Barcelona

Ramon, the cab driver, picks up an elderly man and his Chinese wife at Barcelona Airport. 'Rialto Hotel', the man says. Ramon nods and, as is his profitable custom, he eavesdrops – he understands a lot more English than he lets on. He picks up the word 'cruise'. Ah, usually these are Americans and ignorant of European currency, but these two are too slim to be American and they speak quietly. What are they then – Australian? Yes, he picks up a nasal giveaway. Good, he thinks, Australians probably wouldn't know the currency either. It's worth a try. He pulls up at the end of the alley where the hotel is and points to the meter: €23.75. The man hands him two €20 notes. Ramon gives him some coins for change and because Ramon continues sitting there, the man pockets the coins quickly and, muttering, gets out to haul their two large cases from the boot. As soon as the cases hit the ground, Ramon is off with a shriek of rubber.

When we arrive at the hotel I have a chance to familiarise myself with the currency and check my change. I've been short-changed by a 10€ note. Well, we had been warned about Barcelona.



The Rialto Hotel, pre-booked online through Hotel Club, is good, centrally located near the Cathedral end of Barcelona's spine, Las Ramblas, Las Ramblas is a continuing stream of cafes, stalls, street artists, human statues that are more bizarre than usual ones, such as the bicycle from hell with skeleton passengers. We sit down at a café and take in these wondrous sights over the rim of a carafe of an excellent sangria.

Paella for dinner, Catherine's favourite, which we have in a beautiful large plaza, the edges fringed with restaurants. The paella is so richly flavoured it more than holds its own against a Rioja tempranillo: I wouldn't pair an Australian paella with a powerful red.



Next day we take a full day bus tour. Ellie our guide multi-skills her way through four languages without seeming to take a breath. The Cathedral, where our cunning cabbie dropped us, is the centre of architectural masterpieces and community activities including pick-pocketing. One of our group returns to the bus to find he's been relieved off his money belt and credit cards. Ellie tells us to do what seasoned tourists do: wear your backpack as a frontpack, your money belt slung around your shoulder *inside* your shirt.

Lunch at a reconstructed Spanish village prepares us for Barcelona's favourite artist after Picasso: the architect Gaudi. He was commissioned to design



to design Guell Park, a housing estate for the super rich – but it was too



super expensive and was never finished. It has amazing lopsided curvy columns, animals, rosaries, a Hansel and Gretel house with lots of mosaic. His masterpiece, also unfinished but due in 2020, is the Temple of the Sacred Family, a hugely ornate Cathedral, just the right side of kitsch and the pride of Barcelona, with figures telling biblical stories

around the walls and roof.

We finish with a tour of a large museum devoted entirely to Picasso. Huge queues stretch for blocks but as guided tour members we go in directly, a major reason for going on guided tours, as we found also in Florence. Go individually and you are likely to spend half the day queuing. Neither of us are Picasso fans; we find his early work the most accessible.

On the third day in Barcelona, we board the massive *Millennium*.

mv *Millennium*

Millennium, 91,000 tons and carrying 2,000 passengers, is the latest in the Celebrity Cruises fleet, providing corporatised tourism *par excellence*. An American ship, the captain and senior officers are mostly Greek, the great majority of crew from low-paying nonOECD countries from Albania to Peru. Our paperwork tells us: 'tipping is a personal matter but we recommend 3.5% of the cruise cost for the dinner waiter, 3% for your stateroom attendant . . . and to make this easy for you, we will deduct these amounts from your account' Since when are compulsory levies 'tips'? We are in fact paying the wages of the crew, on top of the cost of the cruise itself. I calculate that our dinner waiter will receive about \$1,500 US a month: excellent wages in the Caribbean, where he comes from.



Celebrity Cruises works the celebrity theme to death. Our drink waiters are *sommeliers*, a glittering silver *tastevin* dangling from their necks; our pool attendants are pool *butlers*; our cabins are *staterooms*. ‘Informal’ dining is supposed to mean collar and tie, ‘formal’ means dinner jacket, which the company is delighted to rent at \$80 US for the only three ‘formal’ dinners. We discover most passengers are American ‘new money’, as Kate Winslet in *Titanic* perceptively put it, and are thrilled with this charade. But the wannabe celebrities are made to feel at home: kitschy ornaments at the stairwells, large



portraits of Minnie Mouse and Pluto, while the pools and sun decks rock to loud pop. And for those still peckish after the help-yourself buffet breakfasts and lunches, and seven course dinners, pizza and hamburger bars are open from early morning to midnight. Many

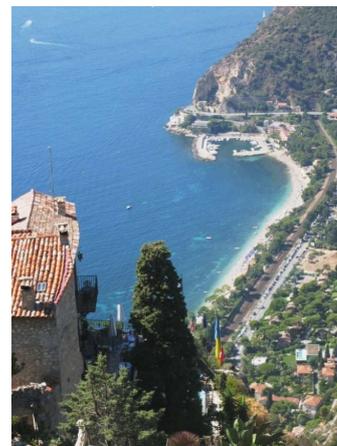
passengers are grossly obese, wearing patriotic T-shirts, their waddling bodies importantly annexing space, the men making loud observations on any topic whatsoever in deep rumbles that carry for long distances. They make me realise that George Bush isn’t an extreme right-winger but mainstream.

The only alcohol available is at ship’s prices. Duty free purchases of bottled alcohol are to be handed in (except mine) to be collected at the end of the voyage. We are to visit several wine producing countries, but a strong disincentive to buy local wine is a corkage charge of \$US15 per bottle, often several times the cost of the wine. Very frustrating to one who is interested in French, Italian, Greek and Slovakian wines. But the food is excellent, the dinners are superbly cooked, even if we never manage all seven courses.

But the real point is not the cruise or the company but the destinations: the Cote d’Azur, the Tuscan countryside, Rome, Pompeii and Capri, Santorini, Athens, Dubrovnik and Venice.

Cote d’Azur

We dock at Villefranche. After the compulsory airport-style security check as we disembark, a bus takes us east along the steep cliffs with magnificent views along the coast to Nice. Today is Sunday, market day, and like French markets is superb for flowers and all edibles. Nice presents a cultured face, the library a box on top of a huge



cut-off human head. Our first toilet stop introduces us to the unpleasant fact that urinating in Europe is not only thin on the ground, if I may put it so, but expensive: a mere €0.40 a head here at Nice but €1 in Venice, we are to find.

Up the mountains to the little fortified medieval village of Eze, now a very upmarket tourist town. The village is accessible only by footpath. Tourists load



their gear onto donkeys who carry their luggage up to the hotel perched up high. At the very summit is an exotic garden of cactuses and statues with a 360° lookout over the Cote d'Azur. Lunch was in a restaurant garden at the foot of the cliff. The bridge one hundred years old is a magnificent piece of engineering, so challenging the engineer was told it was impossible unless he had the help of the Devil. The Devil's price was the soul of the first person to cross the bridge after it was built. But the engineer cheated: he built the bridge then shoed his dog across to wag its tail at a very cross Devil.

Monaco is a shining example of how to make a small state prosperous beyond dreams: you make its income depend on gambling and motor-racing. But if Jim Bacon and Paul Lennon congratulated themselves for making Tasmania the most gambling-addicted state, they should note that Monaco does not allow internal bleeding – Monacans are forbidden from gambling in the Casino. They are to reap the profits, not contribute to them.

Monaco was for many centuries a dirt poor province owned by the Grimaldi Family until in 1860, the ruling Grimaldi on advice set up a casino in the suburb of Monte Carlo. The second smallest country quickly became the second richest, second only in small size and wealth per head to the Vatican. In 1920, the Grimaldi's had the bright idea of setting up Formula 1 racing.



Anyone wishing to become a citizen has to have an annual income of at least 5 million Euros and they pay 10% of that as 'shareholders' – in effect a 10% flat tax although Bill Gates, Elton John and company don't call it that because that dreaded t-name is why they are not living in their own countries paying genuine tax at rather higher rates. With all these rich people and a paranoid royal family, security is ridiculous as closed circuit TV cameras pan the streets and public places; police keep people moving.

While in the grounds of the Royal Palace, we see a huge black-windowed limousine with police escort. Prince Albert, Grace Kelly's son, is inside; he is driven through heavily guarded gates into the bowels of the Palace. His main concern is to continue playing the field despite pressure to marry and have a son. He has two already, one by a US waitress and another by an air hostess, but as they are illegitimate they can't be called Grimaldis and can't inherit the throne. If Albert has no legitimate heir by male descent – his sisters Caroline and Stephanie are married and have children – the country of Monaco disappears after six centuries of existence and reverts to France. And Elton John *et alia* will lose his tax haven.



The suburb of Monte Carlo boasts the Hotel de Paris, with its underground passage to the Monte Carlo Casino, built so the big players can take their mistresses into Casino unobserved. The Casino, modelled on the Paris Opera House, has a strict dress code and a rule of silence. There are no inane electronic whistles and squeaks that keep lesser beings entertained in the pokies room; the only sounds are the clattering rushes of the small percentage of cash that isn't poured into the deep pockets of the citizens of Monaco.



A pleasant drive back along the coast to Villefranche where *Millennium's* crack security system ensures we don't bring any bombs or alcohol back on board.

Tuscany

Volterra was built high on a hill in the 12th century. When we arrive, the citizens are in medieval costume, preparing for their medieval festival the following week. Recently discovered was a Roman temple that had been the rubbish dump so that it is unusually well preserved, not plundered for its stones as the Coliseum and many other temples have been.



The farm and winery of San Daniato provide a spectacular

'home-made' lunch in the middle of the official Chianti area. San Daniato has a powerful red but it is not great in flavour; a prize-winning vernaccia white, which is dry and 'Italian-tasting', and a vin santo made of sundried raisins, which is not very sweet – unlike a vin santo from Santorini we are later to sample. The farm make their own honey, very sweet and distinctive, and olives. Lunch is alfresco: salamis, their own gorgonzola fresh and soft, and various salads saturated in olive oil. A wonderful country lunch – could it be replicated from a good delicatessen, I wonder?

In San Germiniano, another hilltop medieval town, we are left to our own devices. This means walking the town in the hot sun, sneaking into shady tunnels and staircases that connect buildings and streets at different levels. We end up sitting in an outdoor café waiting for our coach, drinking beer and watching the young things become inspired by the romance of the beautiful old place.



Rome

Vatican tourism is total chaos, saved only by an excellent guide who spoke through remote headphones. We walk through the long corridors to the Sistine Chapel. Strictly no photos, even without flash. The chapel is crowded with people gazing upwards to the newly restored Michelangelo ceiling and Last Judgement – and digital cameras likewise gazing upwards and capturing the amazing scene. Those on the edge of the crowd are the target of the Swiss Guards, who from time to time move forward menacingly, bellowing: 'NO PHOTO!' It makes no difference, as you can see.



Two popes forced Michelangelo to paint the ceilings and walls even though he saw himself as a sculptor, not a frieze maker. He hated this horrendous work that nearly blinded and crippled him. His revenge is captured in the detail. He painted Satan with the face of a cardinal, who was scandalised by the naked bodies in the Last Judgment. He expressed his own self-pity by depicting himself as beheaded in one place and skinned in another – see what you've done to me, he is saying.

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Cameras aren't however banned in the Basilica, likewise crammed with art treasures, including the Pieta, and a splendid ceiling. Why the difference in photo policy between the Sistine Chapel and the Basilica is not clear.

We see the usual sights, both of us have already seen, the Trevi Fountain, the Spanish Steps built and paid for by the French but the Italians called them 'Spanish' Steps to spite the French, and a lavish well-lubricated lunch at the Majestic Hotel, where the famous have left their photos, while we less famous leave ours on our websites.

Emperor Titus built the Coliseum to gain the approval of the people – as do politicians like Paul Lennon who sponsor cricket, horseracing and football to placate and distract the masses. The major difference is that Lennon uses public money and yet the public still has to pay: Titus's shows were free. Our guide is at great pains to dispel the notion that Christians were killed there for entertainment. Only one was, she says, St Ignatius of Antioch. She also stresses that most gladiators were either professionals or slaves, in either case too useful to be killed on a whim. It was only political prisoners and condemned criminals who got the thumbs down. Rather different from what I had been led to believe. She explains how the animals and victims were kept underneath, as was the machinery enabling the floor to be flooded for naval battles. Wild animals of all kinds were starved for a week then let loose to hunt each other down to amuse the crowds.



In the men's toilet, I stand beside a fellow *Millenniumite*, replacing top down from a beer can what he is voiding from down below. He laments: 'This is my fourth goddam piss since lunch. Why the heck do I keep doing this to myself?'

Pompeii, Sorrento Capri

'Follow that prick,' Tullius Magnus cried to his Greek companion Phillanos, 'for it pointeth the way to where we shall find that which pleaseth us most.'

'Even that which most pleaseth me?' Phillanos asked, his big brown eyes soft with exotic hope.



'Surely, my friend. You need only look on the frieze above each room, for there is displayed her – or his – speciality.'

There's something for everyone in Pompeii:



When I was in Pompeii 17 years previously there were fewer crowds and Vesuvius was 1,000 ft higher. This time the bordellos are restored, complete with the speciality of each lady, and sometimes gent, above the door. Pompeii was a port for sailors on R&R. To make sure the poor fellows found what they wanted, the city fathers embedded tile penises in the footpath, pointing the way to the brothels for the benefit of the Tullius Magni of the ancient world.

Another less diverting difference is that many corpses have been recovered and are now displayed as they were when showered with pumice ash two thousand years ago. A bakery, a whole row of houses are now excavated and restored, telling us how the people lived and worked and played before Vulcan, the god of volcanoes, angrily ordered Vesuvius to cut these self-indulgent hedonists off in the middle of their priapic activities.



From Pompeii, our bus takes 1½ hrs to get to Sorrento only 20 km away. A beautiful place, what we see of it, but crowded with rich Italian celebrities and tourists. We have a quick lunch then go by ferry to Capri. Emperor had a pleasure dome at the Blue Grotto, where Tiberius had his 'minnows' nibble him as he swam naked.



But we see nothing like that. The trip up the steep rock to the city is by funicula (of funiculi-funicula fame) to a very upmarket town with hotels and top brand name shops lining the narrow, whistle-clean streets. Out of the town there is some stunning scenery.

Capri would be wonderful in spring, say, with only a normal crowd, but queuing for an hour in the baking sun to catch the funicula rather spoils things.

It doesn't help that our guide, Antonio, is a diminutive man with atrocious English. He issues us with radio-phones to cope with the crowds, but it doesn't work. While his 'Here I am' rings plaintively in our ears, we can't see him as he is small and frequently forgets to hold his sign up.

On the boat back to the Naples we are wedged into a group of heavy drinking Americans including my friend from the Colliseum, who continues to test the elasticity of his bladder. Another depressing sight is a John Howard look-alike.



I'm sitting next to a garrulous lady who tries to be friendly.

'Where do you come from?' she asks with a vague, cheery grin.

'Tasmania,' I say, trying to fog her with precision.

But she has heard of it: 'Australia, eh? Hey, I know nuttin' about Tasmania. Tell me about it.'

I launch into the usual green and clean routine, with a meaningful discount for woodchipping. Then it's my turn to be friendly: 'How about you? Where're you from?'

'Houston, Texas.'

'You don't seem to have a Texas accent.'

'No, that's the suburb where I live. But when I visit my sister in the down part of the city, then I do. Guess I'm amphibian.'

Her friend opposite is looking at me enquiringly, like-who-is-this-guy? type of look. My amphibian friend informs her:

'This guy comes from Tasmania.'

'Tasmania, eh? Where's that – Africa?'

[Continued in Cruising the Mediterranean: Part II](#)