# THE PARTY IS OVER – I’M BACK

AND am I ever suffering from jet lag – but more about that later.

– THE MOST ESSENTIAL ELEMENT FOR ANY TRIP: SURPRISE/ DISCOVERY/ AND THE UNEXPECTED

And I am delighted to say that HAVE ADDED ANOTHER to that list of prerequisites.

How come? I was contemplating how very little substance is possible on a trip like this. But in checking my prerequisites I was gratified to come to the conclusion that although the substance was lacking, I did actually experience an amazingly high degree of pleasure and knowledge. I GOT SO MUCH OUT OF THIS TRIP.

And it was then I made the astonishing discovery of something that’s actually been present all along, I just as yet hadn’t identified it: THE QUALITY OF JOY \*\*\*

This is amazing and such a wonderful addition: For the pure JOY of the experience is certainly reason enough. After all, this IS supposed to be a “pleasure” cruise. I certainly don’t pretend to categorize these trips as being essential, for collecting material or anything else which would probably entail a certain amount of seriousness to the activity, Actually the first three are conscious efforts and kind of goal oriented entailing some degree of planning and deliberate effort. Joy however, is unrehearsed and pure: right from the heart. I CONSIDER IT TO BE A BONUS , a benefit, and a gift. NOW THAT’S A BLESSING.

HOW WELL DO I THINK I DID? TERRIFIC… t I really feel this trip was a definite success and I’d like to attribute this benefit to the 32.000 word article I spent the last eight months creating on the subject of travel- “Forget the Destination” (available to perusal on my blog nerickson57.com). Apparently it managed to penetrate the confusion and consciousness enough to succeed at generating the mental and emotional smoothness towards travel which I was so anxious to achieve. I think so. I really managed to enjoy this trip to the fullest and to my best ability and I do think that’s quite an accomplishment.

# THE TRIP

THE THREE REASONS FOR MY BEING HERE ARE: Seabourn, Martinis, and “because its different”: yes, in that order.

I’m a bit concerned about the “different”. Will it be possible for any trip of the future to live up to this trip? It was so undeniably unique that the next can’t help but seem anticlimactic.

The trip in its entirety consisted of:

Two very substantial airplane flights, one of which was 24 hours in length.

Six Days at sea – as many days as in any port

Five countries: Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, China and Japan and One magnificent city-state (world’s only island city-state): Singapore

Four MAJOR cities: Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), and Hong Kong, and I’d be terribly remiss not to count Singapore here as well.

Huge contrasts in environment and culture from extravagantly modern neon lit cities to rural rice patties and water buffalo.

EXOTIC being very foreign and unique in its very nature.

NO DESTINATIONS, a most appreciated and unusual situation. At least a dearth of the customary so called commonly designated” destinations”, for which I am very thankful. My above cited blog includes a major diatribe ostensibly involving the negative aspects of “destinations” .

Business class and wheelchair brigade all the way. I couldn’t have done it any other way. It was a killer.

## THE FLIGHT

IT IS FRIDAY JANUARY 15, 2016, we have a 10 am flight leaving Dulles Airport to Tokyo: And we’re off in a cloud of dust and without a wrinkle.

Check in, and we’re almost literally SWISHED through security and the seemingly 5 1/2 miles to the center departure gate’s business class lounge. I must hurry to explain that the major cause of the swishing was the wheelchair method of transport which I have regretfully found expedient to adopt. The very thought of being swished through the airport at all is a life style I simply do not approve of; It’s elitist, privileged, luxurious, etc. I won’t say pretentious because to be that you need to advertise: ie, it’s an opinion. Either way, this may be a life style I eschew but this is one of those things which just don’t bear worrying about: You do what you have to do. This isn’t my fault, of course not. We are simply doing what comes naturally, what is most practical and when all is said and done, most logical.

There is no question I could survive the airports any other way.

For the record: this whole business (that is the whole cruise/trip thing) also would be conceived as aptly fitting the above description. From time to time that has occurred to me but fortunately I was able to dismiss it gently with the excuse that I am justifiably gathering material which I shall make good use of either with writing or painting… or thinking… those activities which keep me active and busy the rest of the year. I hardly need to mention the requisite addition of martinis to the equation.

This morning we didn’t stop on our way out of the house even long enough for a “wake up” cup of coffee so it was our first thought when we arrived at the airport lounge …. and the lounge provided our first puzzle of the trip. We were faced with a vendor coffee machine. After a bit of puzzlement and button pushing I managed to acquire probably my first cup of cappuccino and I could even have had a macchiato. That’s a pretty fancy vending machine.

For the record: the business lounge clientele is not at all as interesting as that of the general public lounge BUT, BUT - it’s so fortuitously accessible AND replete with abundant and free food, an arrangement which is especially appreciated at this often needy time.

Of particular note and rather amusing –remember this was to be a 24 hour flight -was that it was about at that point, 12 time zones, that you could just as well have flown either way around the world. However I imagine you’d have to change planes – I don’t even want to think of how many times. At any rate, I found it very interesting that for half of our trip we were basically exactly 12 hours different from home: 2 AM there was 2 PM here. Amazing! – cool.

We flew All Nippon Air and once again I was totally disenchanted by the “seats”. True, it didn’t resemble a nasty pink plastic cigar tube as it was on Brit Air, but this time each seat was a walled mini-fortress which meant I could see no one else: I was entirely isolated and probably claustrophobic as well. Not to complain or anything; after all I was traveling in a privileged world, quite different from the general cabin but…

Thinking rationally one has to admit there probably was some reason for it being called “business: it was, after all, meant and designed for people actually traveling for “business”, and supine, dark isolation would surely be a preferable arrangement. I had the strong impression that the cabin contained primarily just that sort of passenger. So where are the ordinary comfort- seeking passengers to sit? This is a good question and after even my very limited experience one I am inclined to ask.

It would be nice if I could find a web site showing and even perhaps rating airplane interiors so I could window shop and at least be prepared for any unpleasant exigencies. Let’s get real here –anything is still worlds better than the main cabin.

At three in the afternoon my time and much to my horror all the window shutters were closed, I had been rejoicing at the excellent view, and turned off the lights. Five hours later I was having serious emotional problems. I had no idea how much longer this was going to go on and I was sincerely afraid I was going to lose it. Fortunately I got bright and called the hostess who was able to tell me we had another two hours of this: She brought me some rice snacks, some wine and, when I remembered Japan was the home of Sudoku , she found me a Sudoku to do.

On the way home we were again slated for Air Nippon but somehow it morphed in to United and a different set of circumstances, which proved a much more comfortable arrangement.

An interesting thing I encountered on that flight: The hostess informed me there were no martinis in her bar because no one wanted them anymore. What? (and also HORRORS- nothing deprives me of my sole access time for martinis). Considering the amount of space they take up in the world of advertising and recreational world exposure I do find this very hard to believe. What was available was rum, vodka, scotch and bourbon. Seeing as the only thing I ever see people drinking is wine… I sense something is amiss here. Fortunately this setback was only temporary as the hostess informed me that as a bartender she had learned the trick of using sweet wine instead of vermouth to make a martini. What kind of bar do you think that was? She mixed that up for me and it worked just fine. Let’s face it, it had to: I was in no position to depart.

People tend to complain about airline food but I’m not about to say a word. For one thing I’d have to admit we were flying business and there is no question that is good stuff. On the return flight I figured I had evaded trying Japanese cuisine long enough and in the mammoth menu they jammed into my hand as I sat down there was listed a gigantic delicious sounding Japanese dinner menu which I duly ordered. It was indeed amazing. I felt very sorry for the poor flight attendants having to deal with this seven course extravaganza with a double DOUBLE dessert offering. It was quite an experience. That was just one of the meals for that flight but I distinctly remember an equally memorable dessert offering : an ice cream sundae. I was so overwhelmed with the choice of toppings that I just gave in and had everything. I justified this vast overindulgence by maintaining that this will be the last such for a good long time to come.

All in all, aside from the length, everything went swimmingly. Almost seamlessly even counting security and customs and all that.

## THE CRUISE

The most obvious statement I can make is that this trip was seriously different from any of our prior trips, being the farthest , the least developed, and the most unfamiliar, in history as well as in culture. In effect, it was totally EXOTIC.

An enormous and welcome feature was the perceived impression that we were cruising around in an area which was virtually undiscovered - unexploited. We seemed to be the only ship in port and there were virtually no crowds of tourists. I think of that as a distinct bonus and blessing. This could be explained in many ways I suppose. I checked and I know there are not many cruise lines which go there perhaps due to what appears to be a paucity of deep water harbors. ( As far as I can tell it looks like this whole side of the continent is one big very low lying coastal plain or even beach). Maybe someday I’ll make another attempt to interpret the geology.

There are virtually no desirable focal points which could serve the purpose of a drawing card like perhaps a tourist destination- here I am referring to monuments or perhaps edifices of crowd drawing magnitude. Perish the thought. I also think there may be only minimal infrastructure which could definitely create a form of isolation. However, I gather the area is in the process of extensive development; I saw an evidence of an immense amusement park- shopping center- beach resort which was about to open in Halong Bay. Such desecration I cannot but mourn, and I know Cambodia intends to recreate itself as one big beach resort, and so it goes. At any rate I’m sure it won’t be long before there will be masses and swarms of people here too.

A major and an equally unusual situation for me was that there was a great deal of time at sea: To the eight days on land, there were six days at sea. The result was that this cruise struck me as more of a resort cruise than a travel cruise. This is very unlike all our previous cruises which I now perceive as being more oriented towards the activity of touring: the time on land was the objective of the trip and not the time on the ship. I suppose this condition by default is determined by the itinerary of the particular cruise: the longer distance cruises incorporating fewer ports. So I shall accept the fact that it was a resort cruise which lost a lot of the resort appeal when we encountered winter conditions: or to be blunt, the six days at sea would have been a lot more appreciated if the weather had remained sunny and warm.

We were fortunate to have the privileged of visiting four of the major cities in the area: Singapore, Bangkok, Saigon and Hong Kong, and how magnificent they were. My personal quick and easy description of all four is that they are aggressively modern and glitzy to the extreme and as I love neon I was particularly impressed.

Aside from Hong Kong, which has been well established for quite a while, this area has only recently achieved the peace which is a requisite element for urban development. I is hard to accept this as having implied a disadvantage but I think it was that which bore a large responsibility for the development of such overtly contemporary and cohesive an architectural statement . aside from that might be added the aesthetic thrust of the area so what I saw was a cityscape which was very unique loaded with decorative often colorful detail: a very exciting visual statement. Obviously I loved it.

I have to say sadly however that there seems to be very little left of what could be considered signature traditional or regional evidence, but from what I’ve read that could be a good thing.

We were also fortunate to be here just preceding the Chinese New year celebration which in terms of a spectacular celebration has no competition. Consequently the cities and towns were in the process of an energetic , extravagant and exuberantly excessive in the creation of a very colorful dazzling and imaginative decorating display as only the oriental spirit can conceive. There were banks of flowers, garlands of colorful and immense flowers, entire trees festooned by hand with tiny blossoms, and, the coming year being the year of the Monkey, there were papier mache images mostly of monkeys frolicking in multiple elaborate forms, …there were monkeys in all forms climbing, hanging and cavorting and all else as evidence of delicious extravaganza. I like that stuff too.

THE SHIP: I was really concerned about whether an additional 200 passengers would make enough difference to affect our great affection for Seabourn which was engendered by our two prior trips with the small ships Pride and Spirit. I’m very skeptical of the goal of upgrading to a larger ship. I figure it is meant to produce and convey or signal the presence of “luxury”. I am totally unimpressed. ,

Our introduction to the ship occurred at the pier in Singapore. At first glance I couldn’t see it. It blended in to the landscape and was totally inconspicuous, It looked like a garden apartment: all verandah, no ship. I was relieved.

There is however indeed a difference, but fortunately a very subtle one. There is no question that 200 passengers allowed for a an atmosphere which was more personable, cozy , and warm in tone. There was just that small touch of a difference which seems to be the case with each upgrade in size. This ship, the Sojourn, was newer, more modern and contemporary –the style and ambience projected was minimalism which although striking, I find somewhat impersonal and chilly, projecting the appearance of the staging you see in a model home.

My initial personal introduction was to the main dining room with its… marble, glass, light, stainless, iciness – I called it a cafeteria. Furthermore the maître d’ was a flimsy blond – not the sturdy solicitous variety of the past. The maître d’ has played a starring role in earlier cruises and that is an extremely important point with regards to shipboard PR. Cruise management works conspicuously very hard to make and keep that impression ; they depend so much on customer satisfaction. I think the larger the ship the farther away from that goal they become. That is definitely not for me.

Further, an obvious bit of this luxury thing was very evident with the gift shop and I think this is a very good example of how size and so called luxury status seems to effect the character of the gift shop. This gift shop had become a very high end jewelry store/ designer garment store. I have in the past enjoyed browsing around the shop as my form of after dinner entertainment and have indulged in some fun, not necessarily cheap, impulse shopping: but the merchandise in these shops was so outrageously expensive that I lost interest and no longer gave it a thought. No matter, don’t need it anyway. And then there was the invitation to attend a special wine tasting at $85 a pop. Come on! I’m a paid member of the “cynical about the wine hype” club. If there actually is any difference in taste in the higher priced wines I don’t suppose I’ll ever have the opportunity to find out and I couldn’t care less. I shall just have to remain in ignorance but I’m quite happy with my wine of choice.

Along with the size comes more walking both within the ship but also on the dock, this makes it a bit more difficult for me but really, I was maybe alone.

These examples are really of such little import and is all minor and very subtle, but it is there. A lot of the coziness is lost but that’s progress. I hate to say this but I think they may be trodding a thin, very fine line between comfortable and pretentious. I have to admit this may always have been present and that it simply has had little effect on me- I hope. Actually I didn’t mind it at all - now I ask you .

I saw no apparent difference in style of passenger. We’ve had occasion in all of our tours to be told some really amazing outrageously ritzy stories, but you’d never guess it from outward appearances, or get that impression by behavior.

SHIPBOARD ACTION:

Our first two days involved a life of poolside leisure. Remember, this is January but the temperature was surely a luscious and welcome 90o. My reaction was: I don’t believe this – this is heaven. Did I really come all the way to SEAsia for a Caribbean beach vacation with incidentally a bit of culture on the side? On second thought this situation couldn’t be anything but conspicuously inefficient, but so what. This is a pretty nice life style; not what I was bargaining for at all. The salt water pool with continuous trays of tropical drinks being served; sure beats the Glade pool at home. For that matter and incidentally, and as long as we’re doing a comparison, dinner on board sure has my usual dinner entertainment , the TV show “Chopped, beat by a landslide.

I can’t think of anything better to do with my life than float around on Seabourn… I was literally in heaven. So happy I floated, in the pool, spouting all kinds of laudatory what turned out to be slogans. This slogan inspired condition actually persisted for the entire cruise. I was happy. (more about the slogans later) I discovered the deliciousness of floating in a salt water pool… warm, weightless, delicious buoyancy, free of my usual ambulatory, upright discomfort. I’ll tell you! The only fly in the ointment was all that equally delicious sun – I paid attention but I got scorched anyway. All that brine actually made me feel like a pickle which in turn only succeeded in adding icing to the cake: the shower proved to be nirvana.

Obviously this is a situation I must pay more attention to - in the future. I’ve never learned about sun screen but actually I don’t think this problem will come up again as It requires days at sea in hot weather and we don’t seem to specialize in that kind of touring.

I had forgotten how international Seabourn is and how very much I enjoy that; the much appreciated presence of many nationalities and languages. This situation was happily brought to my attention quite quickly at dinner the first evening as we seemed to be sitting amidst an enclave of Belgians who proved to be quite affable and friendly. I was delighted to have the opportunity of expressing my sympathy over the presence in their midst of what seemed to be a Muslim nursery for budding terrorists. Their very casual approach seemed similar to that of the Parisians even in the face of such unanticipated horror which simply amazed me. Could I do that? Doubt it