

# TRIP OF A LIFETIME

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## Singapore to London 45 days on the Vasco Da Gama

*This is a short story regarding our trip of a life time.*

In October 2018 Cruise & Maritime Voyages advertised a cruise aboard the Vasco Da Gama, visiting various ports around Australia and ending in London [Tilbury Docks].

We had always dreamed of doing a cruise and decided to book it, including airfares, skipping the Australia bit and joining the ship in Singapore. The plan was to stay on for a short time after the cruise to visit London and environs.

We were an excited group of four – my lovely wife Susan [nee Rule 5617], her sister Lynette and brother-in-law Ross and myself – departing Perth on a Qantas flight to Singapore on 7 March 2020.



Above:  
Map showing the scheduled ports of call for the Vasco da Gama cruise

### NOTICE

*Due to the novel coronavirus 2019 [2019-n-CoV] situation our nightly light and water show Spectra will be suspended from 8 February until further notice.*

*We regret the inconvenience caused, but seek your understanding that the well-being and safety of our community remains our priority.*



Left:  
The happy group enjoying the first few days of their dream trip, left to right – Ross, Lyn, Susan and Phil

All photos by Phil McLachlan

Health declarations had to be made as there was some outbreak of coronavirus coming out of China. As we hadn't been to China we thought we'd be okay. Arriving in Singapore was hectic but nothing untoward appeared to be happening, save a check on whether we had been to China in the last fourteen days.

On the bus from the airport to the hotel we were informed that four people had not turned up. I thought they must have been to China in the last 14 days so didn't fit the health requirements.

Two days in Singapore wandering the streets and alleys was very enjoyable but uneventful.

One evening after a visit to the Gardens by the Bay we went to Marina Bay to view Spectra – a light and water show that occurs every night at 8:00pm. After 45 minutes waiting, and not too many people around, I noticed a small sign down at the front of the viewing area.



Disappointed, we went back to the hotel. On our return journey to the hotel in a taxi we had a driver who was bemoaning the fact that tourism was under threat because of the Chinese who had orchestrated this virus to take over the world and make everyone lose their jobs.

Right:  
An unexpected bus tour en route to the ship meant an opportunity to view the city of Singapore from Mt Faber



On Monday 9 March we were picked up from our hotel and, on the way to the port, our tour guide informed us that she had been requested to stretch our travel time out for an hour due to the time it was taking for health checks to be carried during the embarkation process. So off we went for a one-hour tour to Mount Faber for a look over Singapore.

That done, we arrived at the port and went through immigration and customs with no issues and we were given our cabin key cards. We passed through a temperature check and were on board in a very short time. That wasn't too hard. We were soon in our stateroom and being greeted by Saw from Myanmar, our cabin attendant.

As we left port, there was an evacuation drill and the weather was quite warm. I was amused that we were told to take something warm to wear. Just the usual drill for these types of trips.

The Vasco Da Gama sailed at 11:00pm that evening and we were on our way. Clocks and watches were to be set back one hour.

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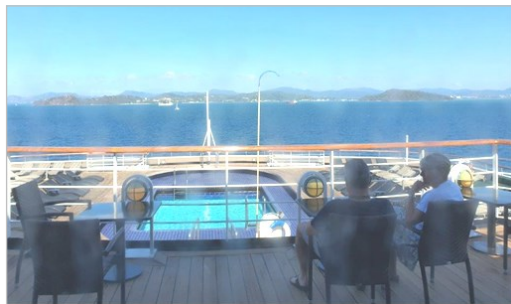
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The next day we started meeting people aboard the ship from the UK, New Zealand, Western Australia to name a few.

Cruise life was pretty normal until we were advised that Malaysia had denied entry into Penang so we were bypassing and heading to Phuket, Thailand. Oh dear, this corona thing is biting. What is going to happen?

We handed our passports to the ship's staff to prepare for visas into Thailand. Whilst wandering around the Lido Deck [11] I met a couple from Palmyra, Bill and Naomi, and whilst in conversation with them discovered that their son-in-law was one of our son Luke's coaches. It's a small world.

On 11 March we arrived in Phuket and anchored about two nautical miles off the coast. The captain announced that we had been denied entry as someone on the ship was ill and had to be transported to the mainland for tests.



Left: Phuket from a distance — after the Vasco da Gama was denied entry into Penang it happened again on arrival at Phuket

Then we waited and waited with anticipation. A yellow flag was on the mast indicating we were under quarantine. There were a few disgruntled guests on board as they had organised and paid for shore excursions into Phuket which were not to be.

A female impersonator, Wayne Rogers, had come on board to do one show and was due to be disembarked in Phuket. Sucked in Wayne, you are now a prisoner on the Vasco Da Gama.

Passengers were advised that the sick person's test had come back negative, but Thai authorities wanted a second test to prove the first was correct. We were assured that it would take no longer than twelve hours.

On Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> March 2020 we were advised that the second test on our sick passenger had come back negative. Everyone cheered.

Now for the bad news, the cruise is cancelled!

The Vasco da Gama will meet the CMV Columbus in Vietnam on 18 March in order to do a passenger swap: Australian and New Zealand passengers will come aboard the Vasco Da Gama and we will give the Columbus our European passengers.

The Columbus would then travel to the home port of Tilbury, arriving on 13 April and we would return to Australia and our cruise will be refunded, effectively giving us a free holiday.

Rumours abounded including that we would be marooned on Christmas Island for quarantine. One passenger was overheard to be trying to get her drinks bill refunded also with no luck, The cheek of some people!

On Sunday 15 March passengers were informed that Vietnam was baulking at giving authorisation for the transfer of the ships' passengers. Thailand then allowed CMV to perform the swap twelve nautical miles off the coast.

Two days later, on St Patrick's Day, we moved off the coast and met with the Columbus, about two nautical miles from us, and the transfer took place.

We also noticed that the spare toilet paper roll in our cabin was missing, not that we needed it. During the tender transfers we noticed two tenders full of loo roll were going Columbus' way and people were horrified given the toilet paper roll war occurring in Australia. We figured they would need them more than us because they were at sea until 13 April and we were due in Fremantle on 27 March.

The transfer went smoothly and we swapped 61 Europeans for 170 Aussies and Kiwis. Guinness was half price so we imbibed.

The staff on the Vasco Da Gama, facing an uncertain future, were fantastic, friendly and offering their services as if nothing had happened; albeit, they were apprehensive about what was going on in the world and borders closing down rapidly.

We still had the female impersonator on board and he offered to do a second and third show, which were fabulous.

The entertainment crew were brainstorming to see what they could do to keep us busy. Quizzes were held three times a day with extremely good attendances, and several other games events were happening. We had ukulele lessons going on, and lots of bargains in the limited shops on board.

We had a second evacuation drill with more people meeting each other whilst it was underway.

The rest of the journey was becoming a bit tedious, but we knew we were heading for Fremantle so that was a relief to the West Australians, but not so good for the others.

On Wednesday 25 March we recovered our passports, which was a relief to some, and a good sign that we would very soon be disembarking.

Phone reception was on and off as was the free wifi that CMV had provided us. People were trying to secure flights home from Perth for the Friday when

we would arrive, but times and dates were changing constantly. We would not now enter the Port of Fremantle until Monday morning when we [The West Aussies] would be transferred to Rottneest for fourteen days quarantine.

An announcement at 3:53pm on Friday 27 March informed us that the pilot would be aboard at 4:00 and we would actually be docking in Fremantle at 5:00pm.

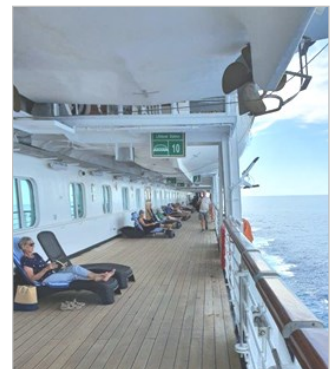
There was a lot of people on the two quays to see us enter the harbour and after a few return cooes we docked.

It ended up that late on the Saturday night the New Zealanders were, after being health checked, transported to Perth Airport for a flight to New Zealand.

We, however, would have to wait until Monday to be transported to Rottneest as they weren't ready for us.

Lots of media outlets were trying to get exclusives from the passengers and a few stories were told, including the fact that there was no sickness on the ship for the past days relating to COVID-19.

The crises faced by the Ruby Princess and the Artania were not assisting our cause, but tightening what was happening to us.



Above: Somewhere in the Indian Ocean, heading back to Fremantle; the unexpected sea days became bit tedious but the crew did their best to keep passengers happy

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On Monday morning we were gathered in the ship's Hollywood Lounge in groups and given a briefing from the CMV port rep who painted a bleak picture of the state of affairs portside. We had seen the barrage of police, health officials and buses portside and the media was telling us how things were progressing, before it was formally announced shipside.

When we finally disembarked, with border control completed, we were confronted by a group of police officers, including Assistant Commissioner Royce who gave us the formal command to go to quarantine.



Above: View of the Vasco da Gama berthed at Fremantle after passengers were disembarked and en route to Rottnest on the ferry

We were then herded down the escalator to our baggage, declared our goods and were further herded to a bus for the short journey to the jetty where the Rottnest ferry was waiting for us.

There were constant reminders told to keep our social distancing to 1.5 metres which was hard at time as there was a number of elderly people who could hardly walk.

The ferry ride to Rottnest was uneventful, save for the escort alongside by water police.

Disembarking, we were hoarded like lepers along the jetty at a social distance to awaiting buses for another ride to our unit for the fourteen days quarantine.

We were all advised that we could not leave our assigned units for the next two weeks and food would be supplied to us daily. Everyone was masked and gloved as though we did have the virus and few of those supervising would engage with us in case we asked any questions about our incarceration.

Medical staff would patrol the street first thing in the morning asking us how we were.

Susan, my wife of 42 years, was feeling poorly with a sore throat the day after we entered quarantine. She was soon tested for COVID-19, knowing that she had a sinus infection. The result came back within a day; however, the symptoms were not treated. The doctor was a federal medical person who then disappeared, and was replaced by a state medical doctor and local nurse and pharmacist.

Susan slowly deteriorated and by the second Wednesday was still unwell, so I summoned the doctor as he was passing. He checked Susan's glands and then ordered yet another COVID-19 swab be taken by the paramedics, who were fabulous people.

Paramedic Steve came and asked permission to enter the premises so that he could undertake the test. Both Susan and I had had enough of not knowing what was going on: we had been isolated for ten days on Rottnest, the food was inedible in a lot of cases, so poor Steve copped a tongue-lashing from both of us. He took it well and empathised with our predicament. The test result came back later that evening and again it was negative.

News reports were abounding that we were to be freed on Friday, however it did not get advised directly to us by anyone on the island until about 6:00pm on that day, despite me contacting the authorities, including Rottnest Island Services Centre and a senior police officer who responded within an hour, with a

negative response.

We received a set of papers with instructions to have our bags out by 8:00am Friday, and the confirmation that we would complete our quarantine obligation by 4:30pm on Friday and would be departing Rottnest by ferry at that time.

That was Good Friday, 10 April. Out went the bags at 8:00am and they were collected about half an hour later; then we sat around after cleaning the unit. At around 10:30am a group of staff were distributing food including lunch, dinner and breakfast for the following day, which we rejected as we were not going to be there. It was a complete waste of resources and food.

Then at about 1:30pm we had a visit from a Rotto employee who advised that we would be getting picked up within the next 30-45 minutes. An hour later we were marched down the road, remembering to keep a social distance!

The first bus was full and we had to wait for the next one and the driver bellowed instructions to us before taking us on a slow ride to the jetty. On the way he was pleasant and gave us a cook's tour, something we could have had during the past ten days.

After finally arriving at the jetty we were again educated about social distancing and led onto the ferry where there were small signs on some of the seats. Partners were split until the boffins realised that their maths was a bit skew, then they allowed us to sit together. The plan was not very well thought out.



With 196 Western Australians finally on board we were ferried to Fremantle arriving at the Rous Head Jetty with a phoned forewarning from family members to keep smiling as there was lots of ambos, media, police and military waiting for us. The ferry was escorted back to Fremantle by a media helicopter.

On the middle deck there was a lot of elderly people who had not weathered the quarantine too well and many of them had to be wheeled off the boat which took a frustratingly long time.

When it was our turn, off we went and we were herded to our luggage lined up according to our unit numbers. We collected our cases and met our family members in the carpark. Ordeal over.

At time of writing, it is Easter Saturday and Susan is extremely unwell. We had a phone consult with our local GP who promptly prescribed medication. [Update: Susan is now recovered, it was a sinus infection exacerbated by an underlying health issue.]

I have seen all the hoo-ha re cruise ships, but I can say that if it wasn't for the honesty and hard work of the captain and crew of the Vasco Da Gama and decisions made in consultation with Cruise & Maritime Voyages, we could have been in the predicament that some other travellers found themselves in and, in some cases, are still enduring.

Thank God we landed in Western Australia and were WA-based, and quarantined on Rotto, or I may be telling a totally different story. How would it have been had we instead found ourselves transferred to a city hotel to endure an potentially intolerable quarantine and then, after that, had to return to another home state only to endure another fourteen days compulsory isolation?

We have a couple of friends in WA who have now gone home to semi-isolate without any pre-ordered compulsory conditions, save those inflicted on all citizens of the state.

I must say that I did anticipate facing different customer service arrangements when I went to the pharmacy on Saturday to get medications — and it was as expected.

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However, I then went into the Coles supermarket expecting access to take some time, only to be allowed into an extremely busy store with no social distancing apparent, and no limited numbers. It was a free for all, that still took a long time to go through the checkouts because they were backed up, all seven of them. The self-serve was also completely utilised, probably due to the measures that had been put in place at the checkouts re social distancing and loading your own groceries.

And some of the trolleys were loaded up in a manner reminiscent of a weekend shop for the next week — but there was toilet paper still available on the shelves.

Definitely not the holiday we expected by a long shot, but I was still able to show off my photography on Facebook. Here are a few of the spectacular Geordie Bay sunrises and sunsets along with a Blood Moon shot as well.

