

# New Zealand, New Caledonia, Vanuatu and Fiji on board the Majestic Princess



**Mayette and Steve Anyon-Smith**

**25<sup>th</sup> November to 21<sup>st</sup> December 2022**

## **The Lead Up**

Much as I love the public hospital system and all who work there, the dates for my bladder cancer treatments were not set in stone months in advance. So we had to best guess the cycle and plan for our holiday within the potential holes. Oh, and Covid. Here there was some good news – Covid was on the way out! Until the week before our cruise, and then it wasn't, again. "Our" ship returned with 800 Covid cases..... On the bright side, that meant that 3000 passengers and crew had failed to get sick.

## **The Plan**

Princess Cruises had very reasonably cancelled our 77 day cruise around the Pacific in 2020, for good Covid-based reasons. Although we had elected to can this voyage ourselves before the cruise line did, Princess generously offered a full refund plus 25% of the fare as "future cruise credits". This is cruise-line speak for free money to apply against a future cruise(s). So we booked three "free" cruises. These were also cancelled. So we booked some more, but only two of these got pulped. Etc. So here we were.

Future cruise credits, like prostate glands and reproductive systems, eventually expire. So we found ourselves somewhat short of choice when it came to booking holidays within the allotted time frame. Despite being something of an expert on the coastlines of New Zealand, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji, these cruises were the best fit unless we wanted to endure endless three day booze, vomit and gambling sorties out of Sydney, which don't actually stop anywhere.

Our cruise was actually two cruises pasted together. We would arrive back in Sydney from Middle Earth and leave again on the same ship later on the same day to pester a few small islands in the Pacific. So we could have a shore excursion to Jannali on the middle day of our holiday! Much joy.

Once more, the Majestic Princess, the largest and least lovable cruise ship we had travelled on, was our home.

We booked no shore excursions whatsoever. Nothing really appealed. That didn't stop the ship booking one for us! This mysterious adventure at Lyttleton, NZ, appeared in our bookings the very day that it was too late to cancel it. Never mind, we didn't worry about it.

We planned to enjoy looking at the sea, going for walks and eating, a lot.

### Itinerary

Date	Place	Time
25-Nov	Sydney	1600
26-Nov	at Sea	
27-Nov	at Sea	
28-Nov	Fiordland NP	0700 - 1600
29-Nov	Dunedin	1030 - 2000
30-Nov	Christchurch	0900 - 1900
1-Dec	Picton	0800 - 1800
2-Dec	at Sea	
3-Dec	Tauranga	0545 - 1700
4-Dec	Auckland	0700 - 2000
5-Dec	Bay of Islands	0700 - 1700
6-Dec	at Sea	
7-Dec	at Sea	
8-Dec	Sydney	0600 - 1600
9-Dec	at Sea	
10-Dec	at Sea	
11-Dec	Noumea	0800 - 1800
12-Dec	Mystery Island	0800 - 1800
13-Dec	at Sea	
14-Dec	Lautoka	0800 - 1800
15-Dec	Suva	0800 - 1800
16-Dec	Dravuni Island	0800 - 1800
17-Dec	at Sea	
18-Dec	at Sea	
19-Dec	at Sea	
20-Dec	at Sea	
21-Dec	Sydney	0600

### Majestic Princess

Majestic is a large ship – 144,000 tons. It was launched in 2017. It was designed for the Chinese market, although it probably won't ever go there now, thanks to Covid. The number of passengers on board for this cruise wasn't known to us. It was many fewer than the 3,800 odd that it can

accommodate. It had recently been upgraded to “Medallion Class”. This allowed our “medallion”, a small computer chip worn around our necks, to talk to our room's door lock, amongst other fairly trivial things. On approach to our cabin, the door would unlock itself. Inside the room was a range of sensors that switched on low level lighting, thus allowing us to navigate to the bathroom at night without crashing into walls or otherwise hurting ourselves.

In all practical aspects there is little about the ship or its amenities that are improvements on the smaller ships. The lift service is better and there are more (but not larger) swimming pools. That's it.

The reason that cruise ships are getting larger has everything to do with profits for the owners. There are more passengers per crew member, making the ships less loved by the crew. There are fewer ports that can be visited, simply because the larger ships can't fit into them. I guess the larger ships deal with rough seas a little better.

The greatest negative for Majestic is the lack of a promenade deck. Deck 7 is the default promenade deck on smaller ships. Not only does this allow all on board to walk uninterrupted laps of the ship, it provides sea-watching opportunities low to the water along with protection from the sun and any possible wind. Whilst the upper decks are better for seeing wildlife at a greater distance and for longer, for very small birds it is difficult to see underneath them. So a blend of high and low decks works best.

## **DIARY**

### **Day minus 1 – 24 November 2022**

The modern world dictates that everyone must be an expert when it comes to the myriad uses of mobile phones. I have no particular love for them. If you wish to cruise with Princess, or any company really, then phone expertise is a thing. Most of the pre-cruise check-in and documentation must be achieved through a mobile phone application. But not all!

The Princess Cruises website and the “MedallionClass” app demand a wide range of inputs. Confusingly, they were not always described in the same way on the constant emails and text alerts that Princess sent. For example, you needed to download a profile picture (photo), a security photo and an “avatar” picture, and, of course, your passport picture. Then you get a message from the shipping line saying that the “photo ID must be the same ID registered in the Medallion App”, or you will be denied boarding. WTF are they talking about? Which “photo ID”? The only photo registered in the app is the profile picture. Then they tell you to upload your Covid vaccination certificate to the app, except there is nowhere in the app that allows you to do this! So I get on the “live chat” line and Georgina explains where it is on the app, except it isn't there. Oh, you'll just have to do it at the terminal. Yeah, right.

How anyone who is not computer literate (e.g. a high percentage of older cruise ship passengers) can navigate the tangled mess of check-in inputs is anyone's guess.

### **Day 1 – 25 November 2022 - leaving Sydney**

Our check-in time was 1230. Naturally we arrived a little early just in case.....

It never ceases to amaze how everyone can be dumped off a ship, and new cattle loaded, in the limited time available. It took us 45 minutes to drop our bags, queue for the cursory inspection to see that you are moderately human, get your MedallionClass electronic colour-coded button, queue for check-in, queue for immigration and queue for baggage scan. If I was managing the process it

would have taken longer and there would have been fewer passengers boarding. Queue-jumpers, non-mask wearers and cripples that can walk soon after they have by-passed various queues would be staying in Sydney.

For the first time, we elected to stay in an inside cabin. This was to spin out our free cruise credits as far as they would stretch. Our “stateroom”, A328, was mid-forward on Deck 12. It was three decks below Deck 16, the Pool Deck. Now some might think that I can't add up. I usually can. There is no Deck 13 on cruise ships.

Our room was surprising good. Mayette exclaimed that she was happy “that there are so many hangers.” The layout is radically different to those with balconies. Ours was one of the few that are aligned with the length of the ship, not across it. First impressions were – I liked it a lot. And there was never any noise at night from anything. Aside from being substantially cheaper, inside cabins encourage you to get out and about. As the cruise progressed it became obvious that many in the ship survived on room service and rarely left their staterooms.

We lunched at Chopsticks Noodle Bar, dining on Sichuan dan dan noodles, whatever that means.



They were delicious!

Our room steward, Wee, a gay Thai chap, met us and made Mayette happy by getting her some bar soap.

The annoying Medallion app, that seemed to want to rule our life on board, had replaced the hitherto normally useful paperwork explaining where things are, and what to do, in the ship. And our mobile phones had no reception inside our room. When outside, lurking in the corridor, they worked after a fashion but

demanded that we were not on the ship at all, and that we should sally forth post haste lest we be left ashore.

Then there was the compulsory safety briefing. The announcement for the briefing's need was made anywhere on the ship except within any of the cabins. Honesty dictated that passengers watched the said briefing on their TV screens, and then present themselves at their muster station, where nobody at all would scan their medallions. This was because the scanning chap was somewhere else entirely.

My day would have been some distance toward completion if my baggage had arrived. Two out of our three bags appeared outside our door before we boarded. The other one had gone a 'roaming. Eventually I found it lurking elsewhere on our deck.





Fat Yak pale ale was imbibed as we departed, on time, at 1600, from Sydney. The mood on the ship was subdued. I reckoned that most of us weren't sure whether to be excited or scared due to Covid.

The so-called sail away party was rubbish. The ship's dancers were lively enough for about ten minutes, before they disappeared, only to be replaced with a small motley assortment of passengers, with many of them, like myself, being clearly challenged in the way of dancing.

Although we'd been on Majesty in 2020, we were once more completely clueless where anything on the ship was located. So a pre-dinner wander, on calm seas, was one of orientation. Finding ourselves only slightly lost but outside of a restaurant, we determined to have dinner there and move on. The food was okay – garlic prawns followed by braised beef short ribs – but it hardly set new standards in cuisine. Five minutes of sea-watching (shared between four widely varied locations) produced a few of the usual suspects and gave some encouragement for the sea day to follow.

Our Elite loyalty status with Princess saw us inherit a complimentary mini-bar set-up. The description of the contents bore no resemblance to the actual goods, but never mind, the volume was the same and it would be fun to try and drink it all before the cruise ended.

When all attempts to use the MedallionClass app were finally abandoned, our blood pressure plummeted. We could chat amicably once more.

What felt like an early night really wasn't as we had to put our watches forward by one hour. Sleep was enhanced by a pill, although a few extra hours of darkness would have been beneficial....

## Day 2 – 26 November – Western Tasman Sea

I wasn't the first of the ship's three thousand odd passengers to have breakfast - there were two others ahead of me. Disappointingly the sea was rough with a 35 to 40 knot southerly gale and mostly cloudy skies. It was not possible to get onto an open deck and remain there. I had to settle for looking through some glass on the bow of Deck 17 in what is labelled the Hollywood Conservatory. At least the vertical panes were clean and you could see through and take photographs if the birds or mammals deigned to fly or flop directly in front of the ship. Birds were almost constant, along with a few bottlenose dolphins.

I went to collect Mayette at 0730 but she was not handling the conditions all that well. So back to my perch. Little shearwater was a welcomed addition to the bird list whilst others were scattered hither and yon. I decided I wouldn't bother to try to estimate numbers – it was just too hard and not all that important in the greater scheme of things.

The empty swimming pools, or rather whirlpools on account of the sea state, kept irritating me by dint of their lack of patrons. Eventually I capitulated and much enjoyed a warm 40 or so laps with no company whatsoever at ten in the morning! Excellent!

Mayette braved the buffet for a late breakfast. We then camped behind the glass on the front of Deck 17. Once more the marine life set to surprise. Bird sightings diminished markedly throughout the late morning and into the early afternoon. Then fifty or so striped dolphins exploded out of the sea directly ahead of us. These most remarkably acrobatic and attractive beasts entertained by jumping well clear of the water, and even allowed us some “through the wall of glass” photographs.



A succession of pleasant gents sat in the one available seat next to me. Upon seeing my binoculars and field guides, all of them made an attempt at telling me how we were too far from land to see birds or whales. Odd that, that sea creatures were incapable of living in the sea....

The downside of an inside cabin, fairly obviously, is that you can't see out of it. So that sudden explosion of oceanic action glanced through a streaky ocean-view window or a windy balcony would go unseen. An inside cabin helped me to relax.

Dinner was at Alfredo's, the pizza / pasta restaurant. Our pizzas were just fine. We had a window seat and the service was brisk and cheerful.

### Day 3 – 27 November 2022 – Eastern Tasman Sea

Slept in until about 0600. After a short wait I managed to have exclusive use of the very warm pool for my pre-breakfast laps. Mayette was feeling much happier with the world as the sea had flattened, along with her stomach.

This was a fine sea day in the eastern part of the Tasman Sea and the bird life had changed markedly. Gone were the hundreds of grey-faced petrels, small gadfly-type petrels and mixed shearwaters. They were replaced by white-headed and mottled petrels along with a single white-necked and a sole black petrel. Interestingly the mottled and white-necked were often associating as foraging pairs. Mottled petrels were present in numbers, perhaps as many as half a dozen per hour, with slightly fewer white-headed. A few albatrosses dutifully followed the ship.

I moved about the Majestic as the sun glare, coughing patrons and conditions allowed. I watched Mayette at both zumba and line dancing for a while. She then descended to the ship's bowels for salsa.... when too much dancing is never enough.

Lunch was at the Chopsticks Noodle Bar.

Post-lunch festivities including more sea-watching, cursory shop browsing and voyeuristic silly game show viewing, where ship-board folk could try to move ping-pong balls with tongs and throw bean bags towards buckets. These brave souls vied to be the new owners of nothing at all that could be considered remotely useful.

I typed whilst enjoying a complimentary G and T. If our room steward was on his game we'd be tucking into some free canapes. Our Thai crewman delivered the necessary paperwork for these at 2130 last night (long after we'd fallen asleep), which required us to return it half an hour later. Tight. Missed out on that one.

The sea state had been quite calm all day and with virtually no white caps. Unfortunately the water depth plunged to 4600m, so too deep for beaked whales and the like. The only "sea monster" seen was a southern sunfish.

It was a formal night dinner and in a major display of being out of character, I was possibly the best dressed passenger on the ship! Certainly no-one else was wearing a tux with a bow tie (the tie being half price at Big W). The actual food for the dinner wasn't going to win any awards, but to be honest, I'm fairly clueless when it comes to assessing the merits of lobster bisque or duck l'orange.

After our meal we lurked for the pouring of the 616 glass champagne fountain. Yes, I know, a waste of champagne (it probably wasn't very good). The Polish maître d'hôtel, who wore no mask, touched every female volunteer wine pourer. If any in the queue had Covid, then everyone later in that same queue would now also have it. To give the captain and the rest of the senior crew some credit – they all wore masks, something that the cruise director and many of his colleagues found incapable of doing.







I met the Captain, Andrea Spinardi, easily the tallest person on the ship (planet Earth?). I asked after the status of Captain Tony Ruggero, our favourite from the 2019 World Cruise. Apparently he is still a captain with Princess – somewhere.

So a much enjoyed day all told. And given the clean viewing windows and the lack of swimmers in the outside pool, I was starting to warm to Majestic Princess.

#### **Day 4 – 28 November 2022 – Fiordland National Park**

This was the Big One – Wildlife Extravaganza Day! Fiordland National Park. On our only previous cruise to these waters there were so many whales, dolphins and birds that I lost friends over the re-telling of the story. So I'd had an early night (missing a scrum of whales that even people in the dining room saw) and declined an early morning swim, just to be in peak physical condition (!) for a full day of viewing – sunrise to sunset!

The forecast was for rain, a 100% chance of it.

As I was the first for breakfast, which opened at 0500, an hour before sunrise, I was well set for a premium viewing position as the day dawned bright and clear. There was no wind. You beauty!

Okay, the weather was good, Milford Sound was stunning and there were plenty of Fiordland crested penguins porpoising or floating about, but of sea monsters – nothing.

We were delayed getting into Thompson Sound by the late exiting Carnival Splendour. We had to stop for a bit, and this was the only time that whales were seen – about 30 long-finned pilots. The local guide, Hamish, called them bottlenose dolphins but the fine folk surrounding me got the correct answer. Eventually Hamish got with the program.

Slowly at first and then with a vengeance, the breeze picked up from the north-west. The birds became active. A hundred or so albatrosses were seen, mostly shy (white-capped) and wandering with





the occasional black-browed. Nothing rare. Lots of shearwaters and a few other odds and sods. Again, nothing to get excited about. At least Mayette got into using her new binoculars to good effect. I had more fun talking to the constantly rotating passengers sitting next to me. Stuart and Sue Veitch, ex-DMR/RTA and world cruise shipmates approached and said hello. Additionally, there were a surprising number of chatty Canadians and Americans on board – all of them pleasant.



We departed our perch at the Hollywood Conservatory at noon. Lunch was taken in the buffet – it was good too! We then made an attempt at freezing to death on the open decks. Mayette went to the room to defrost while I scammed a seat at my prior viewpoint. A rock in Dusky Sound had around 30 New Zealand fur seals hauled out on it.

The wind increased to 50 knots. Thankfully it was directly behind the ship. As I typed I feared for our near future – as we would soon have to turn left at the point where New Zealand ended. As it happened the wind rather dramatically eased and then stopped altogether.

Mayette asked if I'd had a good day. Yes, I suppose so; there was lots of time to search for things, and pretty good conditions for doing it, but rubbish for sightings of anything exciting. Expectation and delivery..... not matched. That's nature.

#### **Day 5 – 29 November 2022 – Port Chalmers**

Majestic Princess wins an award in that the pool never closes and the water in it was warm. An excellent start to the day is a long swim (in a ten metre pool), before sunrise, with nobody sharing. The only other regular pool user passed me as I was leaving. Nice bloke. We agreed that it was magnificent to have our own pool!

Mayette set her alarm for 0700. Except we weren't in Australia, and it was 0500. I said nothing. She ticked off a guy in the buffet for not having her favourite food ready before 0800, except it was five past six. She couldn't work out why I had left for my swim so late – except it was well before sunrise.

We plonked ourselves in the Hollywood Conservatory and stared at the sea through the looking glass. There was no wind, the sea was flatter than I've ever seen it, and it was raining lightly. Our arrival at Port Chalmers was not scheduled until 1030 so we had some time to stare. We chatted about Mayette's family – this took a while – and looked at whatever came into view. There were thousands of birds, mainly sooty shearwaters, fairy prions, kelp gulls and the occasional albatross.

As we approached the entrance to Port Chalmers along with the Taiaroa Headland colony of northern royal albatrosses, there was a small pod of striped dolphins and a few scattered fur seals. Little penguins were seen within the harbour.



Our smooth approach to our mooring was interesting as we spun about and then backed into the working port. We marvelled at some guys driving machines and playing games with piles of rough-sawn pine logs. It wasn't at all clear what they were trying to achieve, but they'd had a little more experience with this sort of thing than me!

We decided not to go to Dunedin in a packed shuttle bus, preferring to traipse about Port Chalmers instead. After the NZ Bio-security Service's sniffer dog took a decided interest in my day pack, I got the chance to find out what was in it. I was obliged to empty the contents. In a double irony, it was probably the New Zealand made Australian possum-fur glasses case that caught Fido's interest.

We made three-quarters of the way up to a rocky lookout before Mayette faded. Of note, en route, was a Kiwi chap with a good line in banter. After an old and overweight ship's passenger ascended a few steps, the cruiser exclaimed that he now knew how (Sir) Edmund Hillary (a Kiwi) felt after climbing Everest. The Kiwi's quick response was "As a native New Zealander, I find that a Nepalling comparison".

Plan B saw us walking on a longish loop road around a headland. It was quite warm – with our jackets soon removed. Methinks this was unusual for the Otago Region. Most of the house gardens were beautiful, and particularly so was a lupin-filled maze. The house next door had an impressively bearded oldish biker with his newest possession, a 1967 Harley. I guessed



its vintage, which was particularly notable given my total lack of knowledge (and interest) in motorbikes. After we'd departed I suggested to a succession of ship's passengers who were walking in the direction of the biker to say to him "Wow, a '67, nice". By the third time he had heard this I would wonder his reaction.... One lady said she'd say "is that a '68 Harley?", just for fun....

It was rather wonderful to go for a walk with no "targets" and no hurry. Early drinks were called on board, as there was no need to be anywhere and it would be dark by the time the ship left port. As the ship had donated us a couple of cans of Budweiser I felt obliged to imbibe what is possibly the western world's most awful beer. Then there was the donated vodka and Sprite....

We were both exhausted and after a couple of drinks we were keen to expeditiously attack the noodle bar so that an early night would come our way. Emerging on deck we discovered that normal New Zealand weather services had resumed – it was cold and drizzly.

### **Day 6 – 30 November 2022 – Lyttleton**

Fabio, a Portuguese swimming pool attendant, was finalising his cleaning as I arrived at 0450 for my swim. He said he knew when I was likely to arrive and wanted the pool to be ready for me. I doubted this, but I took it. A pre-breakfast sea-watch was then enjoyed in perfect conditions as we rounded Banks Peninsula and approached Lyttleton Harbour. There were plenty of birds and a fur seal but nothing to get the pulse racing and no dolphins or whales.

Breakfast in the buffet as we entered the harbour added several Hector's dolphins, which happily (for me, if not the dolphins) approached the ship.

We'd made several casual friends by this point in the cruise. This made the ship feel homelier. However there was much chat about sick people....

Lyttleton is a bustling harbour. It services Christchurch. Several ships were docked at the time of our visit. Others waited offshore. Our arrival was about an hour ahead of schedule so port workers and others important to our near future were more or less absent.

We, or possibly Princess, had rather foolishly booked us on a "Lyttleton Discovery Cruise". I would have thought that I would have learnt my lesson from previous experiences on local boats. Never mind, the weather was gentle and we weren't sick....

A shuttle bus took us to the inner harbour where we hopped onto a medium-sized catamaran. I asked Max, the deckhand, barista, assistant guide and traffic marshal whether he knew anything about the local birds. He looked at me blankly and said something about there being seagulls. Jasper, the skipper, guide and the only other staff member, had just finished talking about Hector's dolphins when a scrum of them were seen closer to the cruise ship than to our catamaran. Jasper went on to say a number of things about wildlife that just weren't true, although I had the feeling that my experience on board would not be enhanced by me correcting him.

Realistically the Lyttleton Discovery Cruise was based on the principle that a cruise ship should have enough interested passengers to sustain such an activity; not on the basis that there was a lot of local product to showcase. Yes, you will likely see or glance Hector's dolphins but that's about it. A commentary was delivered on every "bay" (read: kink in the shoreline). Bay stories included shipwrecks, fortunate fishing trips, "wee" beaches (imagined, more likely), leprosy, a spilt coffee incident, swimming sheep (involuntarily swimming sheep, I might add), pirates (nice ones, by all accounts), and places to live that are nicer than some other places. I rated the experience as four stars out of ten. Three of these stars were given on account of the fine weather.

Lyttleton is a delightfully clean and well-ordered town. It's the largest port in New Zealand's South Island (I think). It appears to have a bright future.

We had a yummy lunch in the ship's buffet. I wore my "Gwapolang" t-shirt. The message written on it proclaims, in Tagalog, that only handsome men are able to wear such a shirt. Given that most of the ship's crew are Filipinos, regular attention was given, along with the appropriate laughter.

When asked, one of the crew confirmed there were a few Covid cases on board but not many. Yet.

We made a cursory search for dolphins from the stationary ship, without luck.

By the time the Majestic Princess had disentangled itself from the shore there wasn't much point in planning "a staring at the sea" vigil before it got dark. So it was off to the noodle bar for dinner and another early night.

I studied the guide books for the seabirds that I hadn't yet seen, and got so utterly confused and despondent that I considered giving up looking altogether. Realistically there is no way that some seabirds can be identified from the upper decks of cruise ships, or any sea craft at all really, without photographs to study. From the lower decks some of these can be sorted, but in my case, often with some hesitation. Doesn't matter.

#### **Day 7 – 1 December 2022 - Picton**

After being exhausted most of the time without any definable reason – except, perhaps, for old age, prescription medication and a pervasive general malaise, I determined not to go for an early morning swim in order to conserve energy. Except it didn't work out very well.

After swimming and showering I enjoyed our passage through the Marlborough Sounds whilst sitting in the Hollywood Conservatory. There were only three others enjoying the stellar view. These fine folk said that they had balconies on the ship, and that they could see into the balconies of others, but nobody was outside on them. They went on to say that the balconies were pretty much useless in New Zealand unless you wished to die of exposure.

Many thousands of fluttering shearwaters fed or rested on the water. Other birds included gannets and arctic jaegers. Two small pods of striped dolphins approached the ship. Alas, the only birds that were said to occur in the sounds that I hadn't seen – the king shag and the black-fronted tern, remained elusive.

We timed breakfast, and then our exit from the ship, well. It was a beautiful sunny morning with no wind.

We were soon on our way into Picton, a town of similar size to the number of passengers on our ship. Picton is another picture-perfect town with clean streets and beautiful gardens and public places. The free shuttle bus dropped us at a convenient spot outside of the town's visitor centre.

Clare, a tout for a wildlife guiding company, told us all we needed to know about a nearby walk in the forest that took in several lookouts. She went on to explain where the local king shags hang out. When asked, she offered a 90 minute boat trip for \$129 pp. This didn't do it for us, despite the tempting promise of a shag or two....





We skirted the waterfront, interviewed a successful local fisherman, interacted with a few dog owners and their mutts, and ascended from the shoreline to a lookout where a chatty Nadia was about to hike to her killing stations. She was a local feral animal manager who was out checking her traps. Another friendly Pictoner, Michael, helped her explain the local fauna for us. A weka sauntered through the car park and pretty much all of the other local birds were seen, save for New Zealand falcon, which was said to be fairly commonly seen where we were standing, but not while we were doing it.







Mayette was flagging, but still functioning, as we returned to town where we shuttled back to the ship. Once on board we elected to hit the pizza restaurant as a prelude to doing not very much at all for the afternoon.

I watched the pine log movers in the acres-wide pine log holding area below the ship. There were two types of machines in operation – those that unloaded the logging trucks with big grabbing front-end loader type thingies, and those that straightened the logs into nice neat

piles. Presumably the operators of the latter machines thought the drivers of the former to be fairly incompetent. One rather large operator was either next to useless or was not having a good day. Her unloads were most untidy, whilst another driver was very skilled. I mention all this as there were no observable king shags, it was marginally too early for a beer, the pool area held no attractive women (or any women at all), and the threat of Covid curtailed a “ship's crawl”.



I found ship's crawls to be a very popular time consumer on the 2019 World Cruise. These are defined as wandering about the ship fairly aimlessly until you find someone interesting to talk with. Generally this would mean a member of the crew. I had my favourite places. These included the Passenger Services Desk, which was great for gossip, either real or invented, the Photo Shop, which was similarly great for Jovana Vlahovic, and the beauty therapists' lurking-with-intent area, which was pretty reliable for bored unemployed beauty therapists.

Thinking about the shipboard demographic on Majestic this time round, there were very few young folk, i.e. younger than sixty. Of children there were none, as far as I could establish. Mayette claims to have seen two of them. I missed out. The crew were mostly Filipino. The only other common nationalities were Indian and Indonesian. There



were a few Latin Americans or Europeans. Rarities included a lass from Granada and the odd Jamaican, Mexican, Zimbabwean or South African. Most of the senior crew were Italians.

We had dinner in the restaurant. The most notable thing about our meal was a message from the Captain over the public address. Covid cases were increasing (*I later discovered that the number was 40*) and compulsory RAT tests were to be undertaken on the morrow.

We rushed upstairs for a dedicated king shag watch. This was equally as successful as the morning's effort. So after braving the now overcast and cold outdoor conditions for a while, we gave up.

Various shipboard entertainment activities had been cancelled due to the Covid outbreak. We were frightened to attend those that hadn't been canned. This was due to the strong likelihood of other cruise passengers being present..... The fact that Covid cases were increasing came as no great surprise as many on board just didn't "get it", plus all of the buffet was still operating on a fully self-service basis.

### **Day 8 – 2 December – Western Pacific Ocean**

This was the only dedicated sea day east of New Zealand. It started stressfully, as everyone in the ship had to do a Covid RAT test after breakfast. As we had no symptoms there was a thought that doing the unsupervised test could only find an asymptomatic downside. Out of an abundance of goodwill to our fellow passengers we made an honest self-assessment and passed.

The weather for the day was unprecedented in my experience at sea. There was no wind whatsoever all day and virtually no clouds. Many on the ship emerged from their hidey-holes for the very first time. The pool area was moderately busy and sunburn-ravaged bodies were soon on display.

For mine this was a memorable day. Although the first few hours produced a few attractive seabirds, the continuing drought of sea monsters had me musing that maybe they'd all died in some unlikely hitherto unrecorded apocalypse. Then a probable Antarctic minke whale surfaced near the ship, then another. Fin whales soon followed.

Jorge, an unlikely name for a Filipina, stopped by to say hello. She was a security guard with fifteen years of experience. Aside from being the fount of all wisdom in terms of ship-board intrigue, she must have been a whale whisperer. After four fin and four minke whales, we added a Blainville's beaked whale, many long-finned pilot whales and what at first I thought were three logging sperm whales. Except they weren't behaving at all like sperm whales. Hmmm. I managed to wrestle the camera out of its bag and snapped a few photos of southern bottlenose whales – a new sea monster for me!







My sea-watching was undertaken from the port side of the ship on an open part of Deck 17. It meant that I could only see one half of the sea. Other passengers reported whales from the other, sunny, side. The upside to the “one side of the ship” strategy is that anything seen could be watched for a fair period of time as we passed by, and I didn't have to look through multiple glass windows as I would have had I been on the front of the ship. Or trample anyone.

Later in the day a couple of large pods of common dolphins bounced past, along with a small pod of long-finned pilot whales. All day there were birds. Oddly, these were less common when any sea monsters were about. I'll never stop learning about the sea.

Jorge explained that security guards on Princess Ships get paid from \$US1100 to \$US1600 per month, dependent on seniority. She bemoaned that Princess no longer pays very well. She added that the cleaners and other crew are obliged to report to security anyone that is stationary against the rails of open decks for any length of time. Jumpers. This is probably why I have had the chance to meet so many security guards on cruise ships.....!

Various other fine folk dropped by, including Michael, who soon established two mutual acquaintances; a young Chinese female couple who redefined the word “bizarre”; a chatty Hong Kong couple who wanted to learn about whales and seabirds; and Lynne and Michael Slattery from Lugarno in Sydney, who have strong prospects at remaining our friends.





After celebratory beers (and a cocktail for Mayette), we had a late dinner in the dining room. The cocktail was loaded, leading to my good wife being extra-ordinarily chatty with anyone within earshot, and everyone else.

A truly excellent day that pulled the wildlife from its position in the doldrums, through a break-even point, and almost into the stratosphere! A complimentary whisky could not be ignored.

### **Day 9 – 3 December 2022 - Tauranga**

Majestic Princess arrived in port before sunrise. For once there was no hurry to do anything. An early swim set me up for being tired. After breakfast, we, and thousands of locals (it was a Saturday), walked around Mt Manganui. This mountain forms the southern headland for the entrance to Tauranga port and is very popular with locals as an exercise circuit. The throngs of Taurangans were notable for their friendliness, and size.

Despite resting regularly we found ourselves back on the ship before 1000. Most of the other passengers were just disembarking. In a rare display of slothfulness I had a late morning kip. Lunch was taken in the buffet.

The afternoon drifted. A ship loaded with pine logs was tugged out of its hole on the dock and pointed out to sea. Very quickly, I might add. I discovered a “Deck 19”, the “Sky Deck”. Not much happens there aside from a putt-putt golf course. When a ship is designed there are a number of important things to be included. Things like a hull, engines, cabins, duty free shops and the like. Many of these are located in logical positions. Then there is that area at the back of the ship that has no use at all. It's there because the ship would look stupid without it, and besides, there was some steel and other stuff left over after all the good bits were finished. So it becomes the putt-putt golf course, which nobody is encouraged to find or use.

At this point in the cruise we had patronised no shows, and aside from Mayette attending some outdoor dance events, we had participated in no organised shipboard activities whatsoever. Covid fear ruled. I found it impossible to compare our cruise with other cruises, or even to the idea of not cruising at all. For us it was impossible to completely relax. Perfectly good people would wish to shake hands or get close and chat. What to do?

There were virtually no youngsters on the ship. Princess deliberately prevented or discouraged young folk as there were no planned activities for them, or supervisory staff. This was why the pools were open 24 / 7. Apparently only kids drown in cruise ship pools. This was all about to change for the next cruise (assuming we stayed well long enough to participate in it). The down side of having almost all of our neighbours being older (and bigger) than us, is this: It is vaguely depressing. It is more fun when there is more fun. Never mind: Southern Bottlenose Whale x 3.

We waited in port while two Chinese passengers returned rather late to the ship. There would be no prizes awarded for guessing what I would have done if I were the captain.

We returned to the sea a little after 1730. Whilst no albatrosses were seen there were thousands of various shearwaters, petrels and common diving-petrels. There was some excitement as a fin whale was seen several times in front of the ship. It was feeding on the surface with lots of birds gate-crashing the leftovers. It approached the ship and was last seen disappearing almost under the bow, upside down. I hope we didn't hit it. I guess we'll never know.

The day ended with a glass of red and the prospect of not much at all in Auckland the next day.

#### **Day 10 – 4 December 2022 – Auckland**

I slept in until 0520. We arrived in Auckland shortly thereafter. Mayette had been unwell for a few days with mild potentially Covid symptoms (*they weren't, as it transpired*). She didn't want to do a RAT test. I hadn't developed any symptoms. It was hard to be really happy with the world.

We had a note in our door that advised that due to the increasing number of Covid cases on board, and on shore in Australia, the Captain's Circle Party had been cancelled. In lieu of this gala event we were given two free drinks vouchers. Bad luck if you didn't drink.

Originally I had hoped to go to Tiritiri Matangi Island, a predator-free sanctuary with most of the remaining local bird fauna on it. Getting to the ferry for the island was always going to be tight, and as we needed to buy food etc., in the end I couldn't be bothered. Plus Mayette tends to panic whenever a conveyance might not return to the ship on time.

As we tied up in Auckland Harbour the view from the nine-storied Auckland Hilton changed. Previously guests could look down and across the harbour. The view was replaced by one cruise ship, which was much higher and longer than the hotel.



A leisurely breakfast segued into a major reversal of my decision not to visit Tiritiri Matangi. It was a magnificent cloudless windless day. We arrived at the ferry booking kiosk just before it opened and secured our tickets with plenty of time for me to get to a Woolies Metro to purchase lunch.

The three story fast ferry made one stop on the passage to the island to pick up extra passengers. The journey, at 25 knots, took 90 minutes, and arrived at 1000. Once at the island we were given a briefing by the ranger, told to be back at the wharf by 1515, and then set free. I had one realistically possible target bird – the North Island kokako.



There were lots of “Friends of Tiritiri Matangi” volunteers and a local photography club wandering about the forest paths. We asked many of them about the kokako. It seems these birds were scarce enough to be individually known. After three hours we had found exactly none of them. We ended up sitting at an artificial bird drinking station where a pair of kokakos was said to frequent. A lovely local photographer, Margaret, soon identified two birds by their calls. They were readily seen as they don't so much fly about as hop. We managed pretty much all of the rest of the local birds as a by-catch.

The return ferry ride back to Auckland was extended in time and distance as we had to pick up some folk from an uninhabited island that was nowhere near being on the way.

A good day out that solved the “what to do all day in Auckland” dilemma. Dinner was in the

Symphony Restaurant and very good too, with a mixed seafood grill as the main course.

#### **Day 11 – 5 December – Bay of Islands**

With maybe the strangest start to the day in cruise history, I rose, managed 40 laps in the excellently warm pool, showered, and went back to bed.





At breakfast I discovered that the Harley owner at Port Chalmers knew straight away that I'd geed up the first of the motorbike "experts" from the ship. Apparently he stared at this family of Americans briefly and then started laughing.

We marvelled that just two Chinese cruisers could eat all of the ship's remaining supply of paw-paws. Mayette just couldn't get past it. These two women had the equivalent of three large paw-paws as just part of their breakfast. A Singapore-born couple of Chinese heritage told us at the previous night's dinner that hoarding food, with much of it eventually uneaten, was a symbol of prosperity for wealthy Chinese.

Our "Elite" status saw us jump the queue for the Bay of Islands tender. Majestic's tenders can carry 220 people; and 240 in an emergency! We survived the twenty minute voyage to the wharf at the Waitangi Treaty Grounds.

Given our almost regular visits to Bay of Islands (this was our fourth), we elected to do the Haruru Falls walk (again). This walk traverses some good forest and has fairly gentle gradients. We failed to reach the falls (again). It was all about the journey, and not the destination! Never mind, we walked nine kilometres and managed to find a lifer bird in paradise shelduck.

Once back at the wharf, given that we were in no hurry at all, we boarded a tender which left immediately. Lunch was taken at Alfredo's, the pizza restaurant.

It was another case of afternoon drift. It isn't really possible for reasonable people to get bored on a cruise ship; although having nothing in particular to do is a thing. I roamed the upper decks whilst surreptitiously people watching. I tried to determine the "ship vibe". This isn't really possible, of course, because any assessment is rather subjective. I took the view that "subdued" would be a reasonable fit. If younger cruisers were present and frolicking poolside or attempting world drinking records then "mildly interesting" might work. Doesn't matter anyway.

The Hollywood Conservatory was my perch for our 1700 departure to sea. I redeemed our "free" drinks vouchers from the cancelled Captain's Circle Party. We motored off slowly and then stopped altogether behind some islands. What the? It turned out that the anchor chain had twisted in its ascent from the depths, so the anchor wasn't seating properly, so it had to be hurled back and retrieved – more than once! When we finally made the open sea, large numbers of Buller's shearwaters were seen and not much else. Roger from Minnesota provided good company.

The towel was thrown before sunset in favour of the noodle bar, a glass of red, and bed.

## **Day 12 – 6 December 2022 – Eastern Tasman Sea**

The day didn't dawn at all. It was overcast, gloomy and drizzly for our voyage back to Sydney. My time in the pool was an early favourite for "highlight of the day".

We had breakfast in the Concerto Restaurant. The food had options not available in the buffet and made us feel a bit fancy. There was no cover charge.

We needed to do another Covid RAT test, which was negative. We learnt that there were "only" fifty cases on the ship, which, at 1% of the occupants, wasn't too bad. *(I later discovered that 266 guests tested positive on the first Covid roundup, and 160 on this later one, or maybe this was bullshit too...).*

On station at the front of Deck 17, my vigil began. It started to rain in earnest. A stiff north-easterly breeze became a strong 30 knot wind. The visibility was pretty awful. Birds were patchy and at no times numerous. There was a fair variety. A small pod of probable striped dolphins were the only



mammals seen. Mayette, along with a number of other passengers and crew, stopped by for a chat. One chap said he had seen killer whales in Fiordland National Park in the early days of the cruise.

As we were staying on board the ship at the end of the Middle Earth circumnavigation I went to Guest Services to enquire what, if anything, we were to do with our luggage. An Indian chap said to leave our packed bags in our room and they would be moved to our new cabin. So, I asked him, our bags did not need to be removed from the ship and re-checked? Probably not, but maybe. Hmmm. Not all that happy with your answer, Fausto. Look, he said, if there was to be a change in procedures, we'll let you know. Really? Well that was a waste of time.

It was a formal night and once again I was overdressed. Dinner was an education. Princess had given us free vouchers for Bistro Sur La Mer, a wanky \$40 surcharge French Restaurant. Here Edmon, a waiter who was so gay that he made our room steward seem like Arnold Schwarzenegger, insisted on reading and explaining every menu option, all in a language that eluded me. Maybe it was French. In any event the food was described in terms that were most un-food-like. Or maybe it was just me. Edmon annoyingly disagreed with our choices. Give us a filet mignon, my friend. Just like everyone else.

Dinner lasted two hours. Not just any two hours, but the two hours of the day when there was no rain....

A late sea-watch added black-bellied storm-petrel, a fair achievement from Deck 17. Another gent that I'd chatted to earlier in the day reported a pod of pilot whales while I was at dinner.

### **Day 13 – 7 December 2022 - Western Tasman Sea**

The only other old guy that swam before sunrise said that that swimming kept us alive. Maybe.

A chap that does walking laps of Deck 17 asked me what I'd been seeing in the sea. I told him, and explained that I was waiting for my wife to get up so I could have some breakfast. He said that he was in the same boat. True dat.

A stellar performance by the Tasman Sea! After some early pre-sunrise showers the day cleared bright and windless. There were no whitecaps all day. Mayette managed her zumba and line dancing, so she was happy.

I found my favourite perch at the Hollywood Conservatory and got settled in for the day. Birdlife was prolific (see table). During the morning it was virtually impossible to train binoculars on any part of the sea without having birds in view. Birds such as grey-faced petrel were in the high hundreds, with at least forty white-necked petrels, and many other types of petrels and shearwaters. A red-tailed tropicbird, long-tailed jaegers, sixty or so sooty terns and a blue-grey ternlet attested to tropical influences. Nineteen different seabirds were seen in all.

Sea monsters didn't miss out, with a sighting of Blainville's beaked whales (*photo next page*), two of Cuvier's beaked whales (with a pair of these repeatedly breaching), energetic striped dolphins, short-finned pilot whales and a southern sunfish. By the end of the day I had Minnesota's Roger, Canberra's Doug (*photo next page*) and Milsons Point's Don and Anne on the spotting team. It was quite the party. The amount of noise we were making scattered many of the other patrons..... A fun day that felt like I was part of a team!



We sorted the luggage imponderable for our impending cruise on the morrow by deciding that we would leave it in our room on the basis that if it was left on the ship we'd somehow find it.

The Covid outbreak delayed our departure from Sydney by a few hours. The crew had to magic wand the ship, so we would have plenty of time at home to do stuff.

The latest update on Covid numbers on board was 500-600.

We had dinner in the Symphony Restaurant and we reckoned it was better than the wanky French place from the night earlier. We had "surf and turf", king prawns and filet mignon. Yum.

A quick scan of the sea showed that a stiff wind had finally attacked the ship. A heavy southerly swell was keeping it company. Grey-faced petrels were scattered all over, along with a snowy wandering albatross, making five of these giants for the day.

An early night on what turned out to be a placid sea.

#### **Day 14 - 8 December 2022 – Sydney – Jannali – Sydney**

A day that ranked in the top five strangest days of my life. We'd never gone home for a shore excursion before.

We had an early breakfast and by 0645 we were off the ship and on the way home. Once there I watered the garden and indoor plants, dealt with 190 new emails, interrogated the internet and various books on the subject of beaked whales, went for a swim in Como Tidal Baths, swept the paths, had a shower and a coffee, made a few phone calls and then headed back to the ship for our cruise to New Caledonia, Vanuatu and Fiji.

Princess threw a curve ball at us when they sent a text explaining that if we couldn't prove we had travel insurance (and we couldn't) then we would be denied boarding during the check-in process. Thankfully we didn't need to check-in as we were "in transit". In fact a new world record was set – it took six minutes to get us from the street to the inside of the ship!

Lots of weird stuff was occurring. Princess had alerted all passengers that the first check-in had been delayed until 1500. So why were there already hundreds of people checking in at 1400? Doesn't matter.

To our inestimable joy, our luggage was in our room before we were. Curiously our balcony, A503, on the same deck as our earlier inside cabin, was smaller than the much cheaper A328. Never mind, it did have a space to sit outside. At the very least, this was a point of difference for the Second Leg of

the Great Covid Challenge! In further good news, our mini-bar was restocked. If I didn't succeed in drinking it all, I could always take it home.....

We had our medallions scanned at our muster station, only to discover that we didn't need to do so as we were considered to be “wise people”, having only recently claimed to have watched the safety briefing. Then we assaulted the Shore Excursions Desk. Here we discovered that a free shuttle bus



operated to downtown Noumea, our first port of call, and no further. We then perused all of the activities on offer at each of our stopping ports and determined that we wouldn't partake of any of them – even if they were offered for free.

We had an early dinner in the Symphony Dining Room; good too!

We were supposed to leave Sydney at 1600. A Covid clean-out delayed the ship until 1830. Numbskulls with passport issues further pushed back our departure to 1930. We watched as the ship backed out of Circular Quay and manoeuvred down the harbour before we towelled it and went to bed.

#### **Day 15 – 9 December 2022 - Northern Tasman Sea**

Much joy; the pool was still uncovered for a pre-sunrise frolic! The short sea-watch before breakfast produced lots of grey-faced petrels,

wedge-tailed shearwaters and an elusive and unidentifiable beaked whale.

Disturbingly a very pleasant couple from Milsons Point showed me a photo they took with their tablet of three Bryde's whales, seen on the last sea day before Sydney and just after I had left their company for beer 'o'clock. Damn.

The Hollywood Conservatory was a different place. Gone was the peace and quiet of cruises past. An old Chinese chap played on the giant xylophone, not so much to display his musical skills but to practice them. He had a very small repertoire. This didn't stop him making a discordant din for 90 minutes.

My personal favourite was an Aussie family, consisting of mum and two detestable small boys. Just next to the xylophone (the first item to be pulped when I become CEO of Carnival Corp), is a 25 square metre chess board, with pieces made of hard plastic that stand up to two feet high. So two Chinese Australians in their twenties are playing a slow and gentlemanly game of chess. Even I twisted my head from time to time to take an interest. So then these two brats start to randomly move the pieces. The players moved them back. Mum said nothing. So the kids start moving them again and again. The players gave up and went away. So the kids got to play their version of (very noisy) chess. After they managed to break one of the pieces, which, given their robustness may well be unprecedented, I decided that seeing I had a balcony cabin, I should use it.

Lunch was in the Concerto Restaurant. The service was very slow. The couples on each side of us knew their way about cruise ships better than we did. One Wollongong couple were on their sixth back-to-back cruise! That is, six consecutive cruises on the same ship. And they rarely left it for shore excursions.

I patronised the duty free liquor shop. A Pommy guy was reaming out the Indian sales attendant for not giving him his "Elite" 10% discount for an already discounted product. He was abusive and insulting and sorely tested my limited abilities not to get involved....

At noon we were 4700m from the bottom of the sea. Grey-faced petrels were in view all afternoon. The nearest land was Lord Howe Island. A Tasman booby took its chances with the flying fish. Three Blainville's beaked whales had me reaching for the camera just as they vanished from sight over the Derwent Hunter Seamount. Staring at the sea from our balcony was working well, although it was somewhat anti-social.

Dinner in the restaurant was delicious – scallops and then lamb shanks. It was memorable for one other thing – the guy sitting next to me was the same Pommy dickhead who abused the Indian duty free shop salesman! He even brought the matter up over dinner. He is now a wiser man.

We weren't the only ones having dinner. Our dutiful Tasman booby skilfully spiralled into the sea and gobbled the biggest flying fish I've ever seen. It must have been 30cm long. It isn't any more. It was no surprise that our booby friend abruptly ceased its ship following in favour of a peaceful night sitting on the sea feeling proud of itself.

#### **Day 16 – 10 December 2022 – Coral Sea**

Rain and thunderstorms greeted me for my soak in the Lap Pool. As we motored toward New Caledonia the rain diminished and the wind, such as it was, dropped away to nothing. The seas became oily on a following swell. Quite beautiful in its own way, but not very productive for wildlife.

Breakfast in the restaurant was great.

The natives in the Hollywood Conservatory were getting restless. This much treasured real estate was seeing boofheads draping their clothes and books in their favourite enclaves, possibly the night before, so that they could take possession by late morning on the following day. One aggrieved lady took to writing interesting post-it notes with colourful character references and leaving them stuck on items of clothing. I would have just moved everything into a corner and sat wherever.





There wasn't much in the way of seabird variety in the pre-lunch sea-watch session. Quite a few shearwaters and providence petrels, the odd Gould's petrel and a lone Tasman booby were the birds seen.

The Captain's lunch time spray informed us that we were in 1250m of water, which should have been a perfect depth for beaked whales, assuming they could find anything to eat. After searching for a few hours, and seeing only the occasional shearwater, I started to get despondent. Was I going insane? Was I already insane and had I been for some time? I studied the bird and mammal guide books. Each time I'd find something noteworthy I'd get inspired for another search. Each search became shorter in duration and intensity. I mused that maybe I should try to be like others on board; learn to dance, get fat, seek perfection in bobbing in the pool, or line up at Guest Services to complain about something. That's it! I could complain about the lack of sea monsters! What sort of a business are you running here?

Our canapes were enjoyed with a glass of red before a formal night dinner in the restaurant. Sitting next to us was David, an old chap that had worked for both EMI (where my parents met) and the DMR (where I started "work").

The formal night was lame. There was no champagne fountain and the captain failed to appear in favour of doing a voice-over. Most of the passengers were formal clothes aliens, like I used to be until very recently.

#### **Day 17 – 11 December 2022 – Noumea, New Caledonia**

Up at 0430 and not swimming in favour of staring at the sea and trying to conjure a New Caledonian storm-petrel (fail), collared petrel (fail), or any kind of sea monster (fail). There were hundreds of Gould's petrels, black-winged petrels and many hundreds of wedge-tailed shearwaters. A passenger claimed to have seen a whale.

The entry into Noumea is attractive, with fringing coral reefs and views of distant verdant islands and islets.

We were attached to the shore by 0900 and onto a shuttle bus to take us through the working port and to the cruise terminal shortly thereafter. Given that we were repeat offenders when it came to visiting Noumea, there was nothing in the way of activities that stood out as a must see or must do.

Exiting the shuttle bus, and who did we see? Kelly! My semi-estranged Ugandan half-brother, who, despite having slightly different parents, does look a lot like me. We chatted about old times and hugged for a photo or two.



We paid \$A15 each for a hop-on hop-off bus that stopped variously at the souvenir, vegetable and fish markets, a supermarket, a couple of beaches and a big fish tank. We bailed at Lemon Beach.



Being a sunny warm Sunday, the beach was alive with locals swimming and snorkelling. The natives of Noumea are a curious mix of French and indigenous Kanaks. They all seem to be friendly and relaxed. I managed my lazy 500m without hitting anyone or anything. Interestingly Princess offered an excursion to the same beach for \$A30 a head with a pre-set drop-off and pick-up time. Even more inexplicable is a thing called the Tchou Tchou Train. This articulated four car trolley uses the same road space as the rest of the traffic. It travels the same route as the hop-on hop-off bus. Being lower to the road than the two-storey bus you can't see too much. Not only do you get to pay \$A105 each for the privilege – you can't get off or on whenever you wish!

Suitably refreshed, we adjourned to the markets. Most of the market excitement centred about finding and using the public toilet. Two hours after we departed the ship we were heading back to it.

Lunch was taken at Alfredo's, the pizza restaurant. The food was reliably good but the rumours were even better. A lady explained that during the ship's previous cruise, to New Zealand, Captain Spinardi caught Covid after touching passengers at the champagne fountain. He was sent home. There was one minor problem with this story – we were in it. The captain avoided the champagne fountain at all times!

The afternoon had some down time. I wrote thank you notes for a few of the crew – “Assamese Mary” and “Filipina Rose” from Alfredo's, and Fabio, the Portuguese deck attendant who prepared my swimming pool early each morning. I bumped Mary on the way back and told her of the note – she punched the air and nearly hugged me. Any personal recommendations from passengers goes a long way to helping the crew in their careers.

I enjoyed our stop in Noumea. It is a clean, safe and attractive city and possibly an ideal size.

An afternoon kip proved that my batteries were draining. I'd flipped over from being wildlife-focused to just having a pleasant time. After all, my fractured sternum had fully healed, I didn't have Covid, I was within the top 10% of the most mobile people on the ship and a variety of free alcohol was available to me!



We had a light but delicious dinner in the buffet before enjoying the evening sail away through Noumea Harbour and beyond. We passed one of the oddest ships I've ever seen, a Chinese-built dedicated electricity supply ship for the New Caledonian nickel smelter.



A delightful end to a very pleasant and relaxing day.

#### **Day 18 – 12 December – Mystery (Inyueg) Island, Vanuatu**



A picture postcard start to the day with light winds, sunrise at 0500, and very warm temperatures. The sea was fairly smooth. Hundreds of wedge-tailed shearwaters and a sole short-tailed were the only birds seen. A lone unidentified cetacean surfaced twice but clearly didn't want to be identified.

I had to laugh. We were waiting in the Elite waiting scrum when the Cruise Director came over the blower advising that the immigration authorities had cleared the ship for disembarkation. Given that almost the entire economy of the 600-odd locals on the nearby island of Aneityum relies on business from cruise ships, I wondered the life span of an immigration official who refused a landing.

We were on the first tender to Mystery Island, at 0830. We waltzed up along the island's airstrip to the far end, where the snorkelling is better and where fewer people gather. Mayette asked whether we might get run over by a plane. Don't be silly Mayette, they're hardly going to land a plane when a cruise ship is in town. We cleared the runway and took a photo of the plane landing. Three flights a week apparently. The airstrip was built by the Americans in WW2.



I hadn't been snorkelling for a year or two. I plunged in more out of respect for the opportunity to snorkel, rather than any great desire. It wasn't too bad. Plenty of small reef fish and a few larger ones. Nothing startling. A strong current meant that anyone snorkelling had to get uphill of it by the simple expediency of walking along the beach and when far enough upstream, jumping in and drifting with it. Not a single other person understood this.

Every one of them swam violently against the surge until they were exhausted, and then they got out of water. I alerted a few folk of my cunning plan and none of them followed it. So I gave up.

Given the proximity to water, salty water, at a perfect temperature, I convinced myself to go for a swim. Although I swam for a while I didn't actually go anywhere on account of the aforementioned current. Mayette giggled and smiled as she sat in the shallows and allowed the small shore break to pummel her. Wonderful to see her so happy.

After a few hours of heat and humidity we meandered to the action end of the island where most of the less mobile passengers were massed. A cursory look at the hastily erected markets (Mystery Island normally has a population of nobody whatsoever), convinced us that leaving our money on the ship was a good idea. Although I did feel sorry for the locals, who were very pleasant and deserved a few dollars just for being.



Now, many folk think that I am a little unfair when it comes to making sweeping comments on the appearance and the behaviour of others. Yes, I get it, it is not illegal to be obese, frail or stupid. So the tender boats have an area of seating upstairs that are reached by a steep ladder. So why do the fattest and most infirm insist on climbing the ladder when they can comfortably sit downstairs? It's not as if the very short tender journey offers any scenery that can't be enjoyed from the ship or the shore. Here I must

digress. Imagine this, a cruise ship has anchored off a small barely vegetated island where the only reasonable activities are swimming, snorkelling and sitting under palm trees. So almost all the punters on the returning tenders are dressed in swimwear of some sort or other. So try not to form an image that combines these words – obese, swimwear, climbing a steep ladder, itchy, and old.

So when the tender arrived back at the ship it was raining, so the top deck unloaded first. All were told to face the ladder when climbing down it in their dress-up thongs. Some figured this out and spun about mid-ladder. Others stalled. The hundred and fifty or so guests sitting downstairs, all of them struggling to breathe through their face masks, watched each freak show slowly disembark in their own inelegant way. Of course some of the impatient folk that were told to wait until the almost humans from upstairs could get closer to the buffet, broke ranks and queue jumped. It was all rather

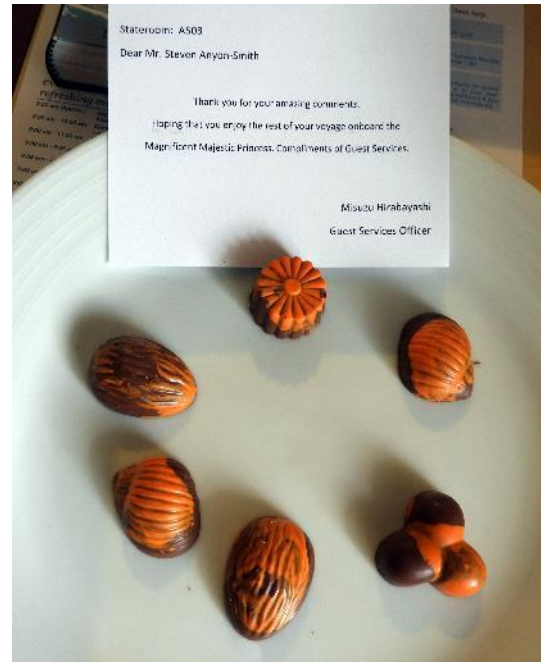


fascinating in an alternative universe sort of way. It convinced me of one thing - not to go back to the island after lunch.

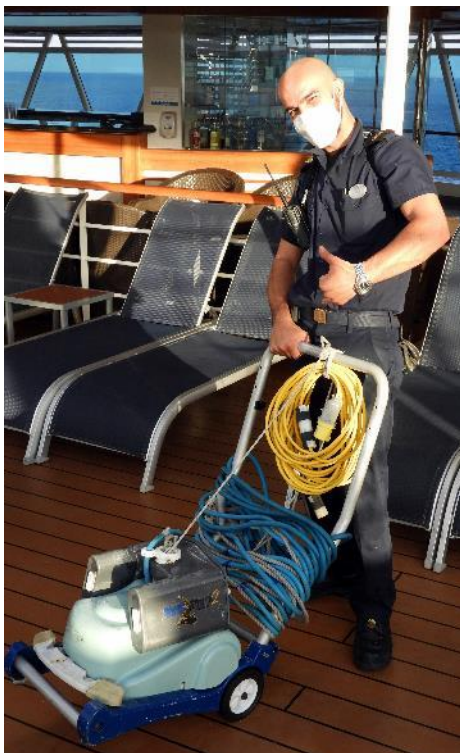
We returned to our cabin after a meal in the buffet to find a beautifully written note from Misuzu Hirabayashi, Guest Services Officer, thanking me for my comments on behalf of certain crew members. It read "Thank you for your amazing comments etc" and it rested upon a plate of fancy chocolates! I could get used to a life aboard cruise ships....

After a couple of "shore days" I was looking forward to a "sea day", although I had a snaky feeling that it was going to be rather frustrating. I'd thrown off the excitement of being at sea in the Tasman and around New Zealand, for the tropical reality that there was much less wildlife to search for, and much less to find. Never mind, the weather was warm and Covid appeared to be off the menu.

Rumours continued to circulate about the fate of Captain Spinardi. Either he had finished his contract, he'd retired (voluntarily), he'd retired (not really voluntarily), he was sick, or perhaps he was just on holidays. The most popular theory was that he had taken the fall for the recent Covid outbreak, and was now employed as a galley slave. As someone who is not unknown for starting rumours on cruise ships, I applauded the latest efforts of others, although they could have been a little more inventive.



Mayette had suggested putting some orange juice from the breakfast buffet into our room fridge so that we could have a celebratory vodka and orange prior to our eviction from Vanuatu. This plan worked well.



Dinner in the restaurant was excellent with our main being rib-eye steak. We poked about the lower decks before going home.....

#### **Day 19 – 13 December 2022 – At sea on the Fiji Plateau**

Someone decided that seeing the ship was in the tropics, then the pool no longer needed to be heated. Never mind. My man Fabio secured me a towel from his secret stockpile, given that all of the others were at the laundry after yesterday's beach experience.

Fabio told me that he'd been to every country that Princess visits, except for Japan and China. He said that the Chinese are big spenders on cruise ships. He further offered that he trusts the Indonesian crew far more than the more numerous Filipinos, with the latter always asking for money or scamming.

The seas were moderate with a 20-25 knot easterly wind. Birds were scarce and mammals non-starters. A sole Tahiti

petrel (a race with white underwing windows) was the only bird of note. There were quite a few wedge-tailed shearwaters and a single red-tailed tropicbird. Lots of flying fish.

Much of the pre-lunch session was in the company of Ian on Deck 7. Ian worked for 35 years at the Sydney Fish Markets and was naturally something of an expert when it came to stories of fish and the sale thereof. His anecdotes regarding cruise ship lore were likely wider of the mark. He insisted that it was true that some Filipino crew members were killed by their families when they lost their contracts at the start of Curse Covid. This was due to the lack of remittances. The poor old Philippines was taking a reputational hammering this day.....

Lunch in the buffet was an education. We discovered that the World Food Court was twice as big as we had imagined it. No wonder Mayette (and others) routinely got lost. Maybe some of the ship's larger customers were possibly that way because they couldn't find their way back to their cabins.

I decided on a wander about the ship, just to get out of the house. My first mistake was to take in the rather extensive outdoor area surrounding the various pools. I wish I'd been brave enough to take a photo of an elderly bikini-clad lady of considerable girth who was in the act of deliberately exposing both nipples, but trying to make it look like a wardrobe malfunction. Others were baking in the midday sun whilst simultaneously getting full value for their drinks packages. Perhaps the alcohol would take care of some of the sunburn symptoms.

Next on my list was Guest Services to thank them for their kind note and the chocolates. This was a test to see whether they would send me another kind note and more chocolates. I thought I might have been onto something.

We discovered the ship's navigational chart for the cruise. My chart scanning was an attempt at encouraging myself that we would see something good on the way home. Good luck with that. It seems that every cruise ship has such a chart in a publicly accessible spot, although never in the same place. It's a bit like a scavenger hunt. Other difficult to find but useful items included toilets and doors that opened onto Deck 7. The chart explained the appearance of Blainville's beaked whales on the first sea day out of Sydney. At the time they were seen we were over the top of the very shallow (280m deep) Derwent Hunter Seamount.

A period of introspection led me to the conclusion that I should get out more. So I decided to patronise the bar at the back of Deck 16. After being ignored by a Chinese and a Serbian barmen for several minutes (they served others that arrived later, probably their favourite customers) I threw my hands in the air in front of their supervisor and adjourned to the Lap Pool Bar. Here a young lady customer graciously acknowledged that I'd arrived before she did, and finally I was served.

So the day presented a new challenge – to determine whether I was invisible. The poolside freak show provided just such an opportunity to test this proposition. I removed my spent ale bottle from its cooler and sat and waited to see if any of the roving barmen, and there were hordes of these, would notice me. After ten minutes a Filipino chap rocked up. I requested a rotund yak. I added “no hurry” just to see what would happen. After another ten minutes he returned to give me the grave news that any remaining yaks had all gone to better pasture. Okay then. A Coopers, por favor. No worries. Six minutes later he returned with a fat yak. My day was complete.

Dinner in the dining room was, for a change, rubbish.

We attended the show, “Fantastic Journey”, in the 900 seat Princess Theatre. The light show was immersive and fabulous. The performers were excellent (as near as I could tell) and frightfully athletic. I understood about two of the words that were sung (“post” and “office”), although I got the impression that this wasn't in the least important. And thanks went to the Cruise Director, a Mr Kevin

Tugwell (I'm serious), who didn't feel the need to tell us a joke after the performance, thus delivering everyone an extra two minutes of sleep. The crowd was well behaved with the exception of one rather large Aussie lady who tried to evict an Asian couple who were sitting in her favourite seats (note the use of the plural of the word "seat"). Just for the record, the Asian couple didn't budge and offered some entertaining seating alternatives to their shipmate.

### **Day 20 – 14 December 2022 – Lautoka, Fiji**

Lautoka, Fiji's second largest city, has no attractions whatsoever. This is a shared opinion. Princess offers excursions from Lautoka to completely different cities. We had been to perhaps the most boring place in the whole of the Pacific before, so we knew that something exciting might happen, like a coconut falling on someone's head or a minor traffic accident, so we couldn't wait to get off the ship so that we could get back on it again.

Breakfast was achieved in the buffet. Mayette was excited as they had some Filipino food. She also discovered Marivel, a lone Filipina who works as a cook and cleaner in a mining town in Queensland. She was enjoying her first cruise.

The entry into Lautoka "harbour" was perhaps the highlight of the day. We entered a gap in a fringing reef at 0530 and travelled within a protected lagoon for perhaps thirty miles before tying up a little after 0730. It was a breathlessly still, cloudless and oppressively hot.

The Fijians on the dock cowered in whatever shade they could find. A binocular search from our balcony of the tours being advertised revealed "site seeing", shopping, village, mud pools, beach and garden. Curiously, for a tropical island where you would expect more beaches than you can poke a stick at, there are none at Lautoka, so the beach excursion appealed more than the others and it didn't appeal all that much. I've never quite understood why anyone would pay to be immersed in hot mud, although if I were 40 years younger, and in mixed company, I guess I might have found something in it. Shopping? Really? The benefits of visiting a village and a garden were not explained, and the accompanying photo of each didn't inspire. In summary, Princess had better not ask me what I thought of Lautoka as a port of call. I don't normally start thinking of alcohol at 0800 in the morning.

Marivel, Mayette and I trudged into town. The absolute highlight was a policemen that wandered over to us while we were sitting in a park. He wanted to give us his best bula and take a photo of us. We reciprocated.

Marivel actually bought something in a shop, which was significant for two reasons. Firstly, given that it was Election Day in Fiji, there were almost no shops open, and secondly, I have a sneaking suspicion that the same item is available for less money in Australia. But what do I know about shopping?

Lautoka, normally dreadfully boring (I may have mentioned this), was even more so on a day when nothing much was open. On a positive note, the people were extraordinarily friendly, with the bulas as constant as Nepal's namastes.

To give myself some sort of target activity, I wished to exchange some Australian dollars into Fijian dollars for





spending on taxis the next day in Suva. As the banks weren't open I had three choices – a Western Union outlet in a big supermarket, an ANZ ATM, or some enterprising bankers who were allowed onto the ship. The guy in the Western Union place hadn't seen a customer for some time and there was the threat of fees and commissions, the ANZ ATM wanted to charge me a currency conversion fee (fair enough) plus an \$A11 activity fee. I refused on principle. The shipboard guys had a long queue of customers and their rate was a little less than extortionate, given the captive clientele.

We were back on the Majestic by 1030. If I ever come back to Lautoka I'll be buying some internet and staying on the ship.

Ghost beers had appeared on my shipboard account. So off I go to Guest Services where Tunisian Helmi and I had a fine old chat. He removed any contested beer (+ 1) without argument. I figured that this happens all the time. Unfortunately my account didn't update to reflect the ship's version of reality. So back to Helmi I go – I had nothing better to do after all. He showed me the reversals on his system. We agreed to wait for a while.

I had planned to do nothing much at Suva, our next port of call. However the Lautoka experience convinced me to go bush. So Plan B was to go to Colo-I-Suva, a forest north of the capital. I'd been there before, in 2020, and seen all the available birds, but the thought of another day imprisoned in our cabin wasn't doing it for me.

Wow – now I didn't expect that! So on my third visit to Guest Services over my ghost beer I discovered how they reimbursed the dollars. Now you would think Princess would put a credit on the system on the day that the error was discovered. No. Well, perhaps cancel the beer(s) in question so that the charge just vanishes. No. They cancelled the first two beers I purchased, except not on this cruise, but on the one around New Zealand!

Chuffed that I'd learnt something about shipboard accounting that even the Guest Services folk didn't know about, I approached the Future Cruise Desk to enquire on behalf of a friend whether there were any inside cabins available on the 2023 World Cruise out of Sydney. The Princess website has had these booked out for a year. But surprise surprise, there were still cabins available but only if you booked them on a Princess ship!

The couple before me at the Future Cruise Desk were hilarious. The lady wanted a particular cabin on a particular cruise. This cabin was already booked. Pretty simple stuff really. Apparently not. But I always get that cabin, she protests. Yeah, but it's already booked. But that's the cabin I want. It's already booked madam; I can get you one two doors down on the same deck. Why can't you get the one I want? Seriously.

Dinner in the buffet on “Mediterranean Night” was delicious.

In the corridor outside our cabin I met a scantily clad, attractive and very slightly muddy young lady. I was right. I should have been 40 years younger.

### **Day 21 – 15 December 2022 – Suva, Fiji**

No swim to start the day. This startling change to my routine was calculated to save some energy for a walk in a forest.

The sun slowly rose on a windless, cloudless day and over a smooth sea with no swell. The first hour peering at it produced no wildlife of any type. As so often happens the drought broke with a number of sightings. A few wedge-tailed shearwaters were joined by a small and sneaky pod of spinner dolphins. A marlin leapt out of the water several times. Schools of (presumed) tuna were scattered about. A larger and more acrobatic pod of spinner dolphins approached the ship. In three previous

cruises to “The Islands” I had seen just one pod, in New Caledonia. I failed to identify them. So two pods in half an hour was a feast!

Meanwhile Mayette was continuing to collect lost Filipinas amongst the passengers. Meal times lengthened and my company was in less demand. This was a good thing for all concerned.

The approach to Suva Harbour is scenic and interesting. Errant fishing boats that misread the location of reefs is rather fun. Not so good was the large fleet of Chinese fishing boats. Poor fish.





I caught a taxi to Colo-I-Suva, an excellent forest park with walking tracks, waterfalls and swimming pools, about eleven kilometres from Suva. I'd been there before and seen almost all the see-able birds. A taxi driver wanted \$F50 for the ride. I said \$F25 would be good. He argued so I walked off. He quickly changed his mind. He told me he lived in Rooty Hill, in Sydney, and was in Fiji for a short visit to his family.

Once at Colo-I-Suva a gatekeeper directed me to an office to pay the entry fee. I couldn't find it but I didn't try too hard. For the first 40 minutes I didn't even hear a bird. Eventually there were a few mixed feeding flocks. Away from these it was tough going.

I crashed into a couple of hundred of my shipmates who had paid \$A90 for a two and a half hour frogmarch through the forest. I kept hearing the local guides telling them about the birds, adding that they wouldn't see any except for very early in the morning. The reality is that you can see them at any time of the day as long as nobody else shares your trail. Being a repeat offender to the site I knew the one long trail that nobody ever uses. Plenty of birds, and most curiously they became easier to see during the middle of the day. A lovely half day in the forest. Much enjoyed.

I stood by the main road for ten minutes until a public bus arrived. I had no idea where the bus stop was nor where the bus terminated. A stretch of road was selected where it was easy for the driver to stop and a minibus soon did so. The driver was a nice guy. He was about to be interviewed for a job driving buses in New Zealand. He dropped me off at the port and thanked me for my conversation. The bus fare was \$F2.50.





My afternoon mission was to change my unused Fijian dollars back into Aussie. There were representatives of a Fijian bank on the ship to do just this, in addition to dealing with a VAT tourist refund scheme. There were at least two problems that came my way. Firstly, Princess had offered the

bank staff a free lunch in the buffet. Seriously, you have never seen people eat like Fijians given a free lunch. Not only was the amount of food that could be stacked on a plate without the plate breaking rather astounding, it was the length of time taken to consume it. The free lunch lasted 105 minutes.

By this time there was a queue of pissed off punters (this was my second problem) with armfuls of receipts and cash, with some of them harassing the ship's Guest Services officers to the point where the bank's city office was called. Eventually some quite large well fed local folk resumed their duties for a very short period of time before they were ejected from the ship. There was no way they could service all of their customers in this time. It reminded me of trying to buy a train ticket in India. The people that sell such tickets have no interest in whether you ride on the train or not.

#### **Day 22 – 16 December 2022 – Dravuni Island, Fiji**

Another still and cloudless day greeted us on our early arrival to Dravuni Island. Dravuni is the last significant island in the Kadavu group, and offered our final chance to get off the ship before heading home to Sydney.

We jumped on the first tender and were soon on the beach. I noted a vendor selling beer for \$5. Marivel joined us for a plod up the beach so that we could get as far away from others as reasonably possible.

With camera and binoculars in hand I found a few birds, but not the one I was looking for, Kadavu honeyeater, which probably doesn't occur on the island anyway. Having satisfied my desire to at least try, I plonked myself in the briny for a snorkel and a swim, just because I could. Mayette and Marivel returned to the ship. I poked about but failed to find any different birds. A few interesting dragonflies were attending a small pond, although not all of them landed for a photograph.



The highlight of the day was an encounter with a coconut. A nice green coconut. This splendid example was lying on the ground. A cursory shake confirmed that it had “milk” inside. With plenty of time on my hands and a two inch long penknife (one of the ones that sit forever inside your day pack and never ever get used), I found a comfortable place to sit and slowly tore apart the outside of the coconut. The best part is that I didn't cut myself. Eventually I earned my Bush Tucker Man patch and savoured the juice and whatever the white stuff is called.

Returning to the village I managed to procure a cold Fiji Gold. I sat with a couple of thirty-something year-old Fijian lads who had motored over from Suva earlier in the day. This took them two and a half hours. We chewed the fat over fishing stories and whale's teeth. In Fijian culture a sperm whale's tooth (known as a “tabua”) is one of the most treasured and important







cultural items. They are used as dowries or “bride price” for desirable women. As very few are ever found today (the teeth that is, not the women) they are circulated and recirculated ad infinitum. “The boys” told me that a dead sperm whale washed up at Suva fairly recently. They and many others rushed with their toothpicks only to find some local fisheries officers had taken possession. Needless to say, the tabua were soon relocated.

Suitably enlightened regarding the ongoing whale tooth culture I walked the five metres

back to the beer tent only to be told “finish”. Bugger, an island that had ran out of beer. Seeing no further point in staying, I hopped on the tender.

As we docked with the ship and started unloading I refrained from constantly telling folk to “face the ladder” when descending from the top deck. Not my job, after all. Even when the crew told passengers to do this, they rarely listened. So the Chinese dude in his thongs climbing down before me could have won an Olympic gold with his descent. You couldn't believe that one person could have so many arms and legs in the air, and all at the same time. He was told to see the ship's doctor to determine which bits of his person could be reattached, and to put on his face mask. He did neither.

Having foregone lunch, aside from a smuggled packet of Just Right, certainly focused my attention on dinner!

We departed Dravuni a little after 1800. Our Fijian pilots jumped aboard their substantial pilot boat to rousing cheers, and veered off to Suva.

Appropriately, a small pod of short-finned pilot whales were seen at long range as the sun was setting.

**Day 23 – 17  
December –  
Tropical Pacific  
Ocean**



Fabio was not happy. My pool had been used by kids until 0430 so he didn't have a chance to clean it properly.... Never mind.



This was the first of four sea days before we arrived back in Sydney. We were originally supposed to stop at Mare Island. Princess informed us that the wharf was broken. Funny, other ships still had it on their itineraries.

Oily smooth seas put a lie to the 15-20 knot southerlies that were scheduled. There was no breeze at all until late morning. By then a variety of birds had been sighted, including dozens of white-necked / Vanuatu(?) petrels, along with some Gould's, black-winged and a dark phase Kermadec. About a dozen red-tailed and white-tailed tropicbirds kept them company. Once more there were plenty of wedge-tailed shearwaters about. A school of tuna proved that they hadn't all been captured. Yet.

The afternoon was much like the morning. There were birds scattered about. I ventured up to the pool deck as there was always something of interest to reflect upon – sunburn, gluttony, sloth, friendly crew, a use for pool towels that I'd never considered, record attempts for the number of people that could sit in a spa pool, things like that. Almost everyone on cruise ships is friendly. Often you need to scratch the surface. Once a conversation starts it can be difficult to stop. A minority, many probably on their first cruise, were not having a good time. A common complaint was that it was too hot. Um, the tropics, perhaps? Overall, the shipboard vibe was a good one. Significantly, we had heard no announcements about Covid and nobody had seemed to have any rumours of anyone contracting it. Maybe the ship was Covid-free! Or maybe not.

After a delicious dinner we returned to our cabin to discover that once again, the Captain's Circle Party had been cancelled, not because of Covid cases on this cruise, but due to Covid cases on the last cruise! I had the feeling that it was a cost cutting measure, despite us getting more free drink vouchers.....

#### **Day 24 – 18 December 2022 – Sub-tropical Pacific (I think)**

Fabio informed me that there were two girls and a guy swimming naked in my pool at 0100. One of the girls asked Fabio to “help her out”, given Fabio's expertise with plumbing systems. Fabio wisely elected to keep his job. He said they looked okay, so maybe I hadn't seen them around.....

After brekkie I ensconced myself at my usual early morning perch in the Hollywood Conservatory. This was the favoured place for the Chinese / Korean guests to gamble and make lots of noise from the late morning onwards. One enterprising chap had “reserved” several sites by placing inconsequential property and pool towels about the place. Others would arrive and seeing the prime locations already “taken”, they would move on. I convinced one couple to evict the left property on the basis that it had been forgotten or lost. So a Chinese guy turned up some hours later, made lots of noise, and tried to displace the occupants. He then stood between them and the window to block their view. I threatened to call security. He left but was really pissed.

This same chap returned and then tried to block other Asians from sitting anywhere at all. Eventually his mates arrived and they took over the whole space. I persisted for a while but the amount of noise they were making started to do my head in.

A couple of large feeding flocks of birds provided a distraction. The sea was quite calm with just a light following breeze. Lots of wedge-tailed shearwaters were joined by a dozen Tasman boobies, with similar numbers of white noddies and bridled terns. I couldn't see what the birds were feeding on.

Princess knows how to provide good food, and so it was again for lunch. Mongolian BBQ, rib-eye steak, myriad salads and ethnic delights generally meant that once you loaded your plate you were already envying whatever anyone else had found. Just too much choice.

According to the nautical charts we were entering water of varying depths in advance of crossing the Norfolk Ridge, a submarine extension of New Caledonia that connects to Norfolk Island. My dodgy theories would have it that there should be more animal life at such places. Alas, sheer willpower failed to generate sightings of any sea monsters, and succeeded in frightening away all of the seabirds. Despite this, I feared turning my back on the sea, as I knew how dangerous this could be...

I found myself despairing that the cruise would soon end, and at the same time was keen to get home and catch up with friends. One aspect of the holiday was undeniable – I hadn't felt so alive and so physically well since the twin "Cs" - the travel hiatus caused by Covid, and my cancer roller-coaster.

Patience, pigheadedness, lack of anything else to do, or maybe the perfect sea conditions had me staring at the water long after I should have given up. I had taken to a Taylor's Shiraz for company.



The breeze had long since stopped entirely, oily patches formed on the ocean, and the very few birds that were about had taken to sitting on it. Heavy cloud and rain showers in the near distance gave a glimpse into the future. Less than 30 seconds before the wind front hit a big splash a couple of hundred metres away had me grab the binoculars just in time to get a perfect view of a pygmy sperm whale as it once more became airborne before belly-flopping back into the sea. It wasn't seen again. I couldn't help thinking that it deliberately breached as the front hit. We were located exactly half way between New Caledonia and Norfolk Island and directly above the Norfolk Ridge in ~500m of water. According to the literature, pygmy sperm whales feed in deeper water than the very similar dwarf sperm whale, which dive to ~300m or so. I would have also guessed it to be the larger of the two. Pretty happy about that!

For dinner Princess gave us a free voucher for the \$40 cover charge at the Crown Grill. I didn't much care what food they had; all I could think of was a celebratory beer! Or two.

I would have enjoyed the best meal I'd had in years a little more if I was actually hungry. The sea scallops, lobster bisque and the four New Zealand lamb cutlets (rather than the two Maine lobster



tails) were first class. For the first time in around thirty years I had a couple of "Crownies", for the celebratory nature of a new sea monster sighting, and, as it has traditionally been the beer you have at a fancy dinner (and at no other time).

We rolled ourselves back to our cabin. We noted a light southerly gale was belting our

port quarter. It was having no discernible impact on the ship; yet. A remarkable day.

### **Day 25 – 19 December 2022 – Coral Sea / Tasman Sea**

Hit repeat. Swim, breakfast, and stare at the sea.

Another fine clear day, and with no wind all morning. A low southerly swell amounted to not very much. Mayette had collected another lost soul last night and had made her own plans, so I found my Hollywood Conservatory Deck 17 perch by 0530. Birding was slow although there was eventually a good mix of seabirds, with Gould's, black-winged, grey-faced and white-necked petrels, red-tailed tropicbirds, Tasman boobies, a sooty tern and a pomerine jaeger. Many wedge-tailed and one short-tailed shearwater were also seen. We were to be in a depth of 1000m all day, so there was a chance for beaked whales.

At 1000 I departed Deck 17 for a top-up breakfast. With half a bagel on a plate I lazily approached our cabin's balcony. I looked forward of the ship and all I could see was whales, in and out of the water. Lots of them, about a kilometre away. With a mouthful of bagel I rocketed up the three flights of stairs, setting a new ship's record for the ascent. Even though the whales were on my (starboard) side of the ship, I couldn't risk them crossing the bow. En route to the open area on Deck 17 I collected a gaggle of teenage girls who were on their way to the pool. I mumbled "whales", with bagel bits spraying hither and yon. They followed enthusiastically.

From a distance I thought I might have been looking at sperm whales mixed up with a big pod of dolphins. Then I thought maybe a mixed group of different whales, as unlikely as that seems. There were at least forty and maybe more than sixty animals. Another smaller pod was nearby. Many passengers were alerted to them by others, and by an announcement from the bridge that there was a pod of dolphins. They all saw what may well be one of the greatest aggregations of Arnoux's beaked whales ever recorded. I was apoplectic, not knowing whether to look through my binoculars or take photographs. If I was a clearer thinker I would have taken a video.







My ship-board friend Colin Palethorpe, from Melbourne, appeared next to me once the whales had passed. He had a fancy camera and much better shots. We re-grouped at the Hollywood and sorted through our photos to establish the whales' identity. The beasts, when they were first seen, were breaching and splashing about. Then they formed a large circle and started swimming round and round. As they passed the middle of the ship, at a distance of less than 200m, they started to dive. I am guessing that an Arnoux's pre-Christmas orgy was in progress. This was the most spectacular sight I have ever seen at sea with the possible exception of some killer whales trying to eat a couple of grey whales in Monterrey Bay. More so because it was so unexpected. How soon should I celebrate? It was pretty pointless staring at the sea again; nothing would ever compare.

Lunch was nuts. The sushi bar competed with the BBQ'd ribs etc.

I spent much of the afternoon chatting with Clive and Pauline from UK / New Zealand and Colin from Melbourne. Colin wanted to see a white tern. Too easy – there's one.

The wind had picked up and the sun was shining from the wrong angle for our viewing point on the bow. The only excitement was a very probable dwarf minke whale which breached a couple of times ahead of us. Given the paucity of sea monsters seen on three previous trips to "The Islands", this trip was stellar.



Our canapes were delivered at 1600, prior to our last formal night. We were now in the home stretch. The second last night of a cruise starts to get sad; with just one full day to go....

Dinner was a tad silly. Probably because we had given small tips to the Filipino waiters in the past, they loaded up our plates. So four monster prawns would replace the usual two etc. I wasn't hungry before I started. The thought of dessert had me running for the exits. A big day.



#### **Day 26 – 20 December 2022 – Tasman Sea**

Fabio came through! The pool was heated again. Although four and a half metres of sea swell made for an interesting swimming experience. Fabio mentioned that the pool should have been closed.

Birding was slow. At one point we crossed an obvious swirling current line. The ocean was rough and blue one side of it, and much calmer and green on the other. Many terns and others were feeding along the edge. I mentioned to a couple seated next to me that this was our best chance for whales or dolphins given that we were in 4000m of water. The lady said she saw a fin, and she did too, from a small pod of (presumed) short-finned pilot whales.

A fresh to strong southerly wind all day made the ship wiggle about a little.

After lunch I visited Guest Services to thank them for their service. I figured that everyone else fronting their desk on the last day had accounting or other negative issues, so I wanted to establish a point of difference.

Mayette was again exhibiting Covid symptoms (*she later tested negative once more*). I met a chap on board who picked it up on the second day of the cruise. Another said he heard there were forty cases on the ship.

[illegible]



Fairy Prion		X		XX	XXX								
Black Petrel			X	XX								X	XX
Westland Petrel				XX				XXX	XXX				XX
Flesh-footed Shearwater													X
Wedge-tailed Shearwater	XXX	XX											XXX
Buller's Shearwater								XXX			XXX	X	
Sooty Shearwater				XXX	XXX	XXX		X	XX				
Short-tailed Shearwater	XXX	XX	XX	XX									XXX
Little Shearwater		X						XX					X
Hutton's Shearwater							XXX		XXX				
Fluttering Shearwater	XXX			X	X	XX	XXX		XXX		XXX		
Wilson's Storm-Petrel		X											
Black-bellied Storm-Petrel												X	X
Common Diving-Petrel									XXX		X		
Red-tailed Tropicbird													X
Australasian Gannet				XXX			XXX	XXX	XX		XXX		
Long-tailed Jaeger													XX
Parasitic Jaeger							XXX						
Silver Gull	X												
Red-billed Gull				XXX	XXX	XXX			XXX	XXX	XX		
Kelp Gull				XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XX		
Grey Noddy													X
Sooty Tern													XXX
White-fronted Tern				XXX	XXX	XXX	XXX	XX	XX		XXX		
Caspian Tern									XX				
Stewart Island Shag					XXX								
Pied Cormorant											XX		
Little Black Cormorant											XX		
Great Cormorant						XX	XX				XX		
Spotted Shag					XXX	XXX	XXX						

Short-b Common Dolphin								100 + 10					
Striped Dolphin		50			5		10					12	25+40
Bottlenose Dolphin		3							2				
Hector's Dolphin						12							
Antarctic Minke Whale								4					
Fin Whale								4	1				
Bryde's Whale													3+^
Long-finned Pilot Whale				30				40+10					
Short-finned Pilot Whale												15	6
Blainville's Beaked Whale													2
Cuvier's Beaked Whale								1					2+1
Southern Bottlenose Whale								3					
NZ Fur Seal				30	8	1			1				

#### NOTES

x one

xx a few (less than 6)

xxx lots

^ seen by others - with photos

#### Seabirds and Mammals - New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Fiji Cruise

DATE	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
Grey-faced Petrel	xxx										x	xxx
Providence Petrel	x	xx										xx
Kermadec Petrel									x			
White-necked Petrel									xxx	x	xx	x
Black-winged Petrel		x	xxx						xxx	xxx	xxx	
Gould's Petrel		xx	xxx						xx	x	xx	xx
Tahiti Petrel					x							
Wedge-tailed Shearwater	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx	xx	xx		xxx	xxx	xxx	xxx
Short-tailed Shearwater		x		x	x						x	

Red-tailed Tropicbird									XX	XX	XXX	
White-tailed Tropicbird					XX				XX	XX		
Red-footed Booby					X		X			X		
Indo-Pacific Brown Booby						XX						
Tasman Booby	X	XX							X	XXX	X	
Masked Booby								XXX				
Pomarine Jaeger	X				X						X	
Long-tailed Jaeger		X										
Lesser Frigatebird								XX				
Silver Gull			XXX									
Brown Noddy							X					
Indo-Pacific White Noddy		X								XXX	X	
Bridled Tern	XX								XXX	XXX		XXX
Sooty Tern	XXX		XX				XX				X	XX
Black-naped Tern			XXX									
Great Crested Tern			X			XX	XX					
Spinner Dolphin							6+25					
Dwarf Minke Whale											1	
Short-finned Pilot Whale								5+				4
Pygmy Sperm Whale										1		
Unidentified beaked whale	1											
Blainville's Beaked Whale	3+											
Arnoux's Beaked Whale											40++	

## NOTES

x one

xx a few (less than 6)

xxx lots

red new for me

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