

The Cruise From Hell

Arlington, Va
January 21, 1991

Dear folks,

We just returned from our Caribbean trip, and I'm taking this form to let you know how it was. In short, it was an "adventure."

We left via Eastern Airlines at 8 AM on January 8th. We had been scheduled for a later flight, but the snow that had fallen the day before and was predicted to continue encouraged us to change our reservations for an earlier flight, given the way things get delayed around here with a major snowstorm — and the original schedule called for only an hour or so between flights at Miami. After an uneventful trip on Eastern and BWIA we arrived in Port of Spain, Trinidad at about 10:00 their time that night — 9:00 EST. It never occurred to me that Trinidad was that far east of Washington! Our baggage was delivered right from the plane to our cabin on the ship by the crew — a nice convenience. We were bussed to the ship, and after a midnight buffet (which we only snacked at) we retired for the night.

By most standards, the Yorktown Clipper is a "mini." It carries only 138 passengers, is 257 feet long, and weighs in at 100 grt. This compares to the usual cruise ship with capacities of over 600 passengers and weights in the tens of thousands of tons. The small size of this ship is an advantage in that it has a shallow draft and can enter areas denied to the larger vessels. Then too, the people aboard, crew and passengers, get to know each other better, giving more of a "family" feeling. As it turns out, we needed that mutual support.

The passenger compliment was made up of two groups — Audubon members, which included us, and University of Michigan alumni, which accounted for about two thirds of the passengers. We had discovered earlier that John and Dolly DeYoung, friends of ours from New Jersey, were among the U of M people going on the cruise, which was quite a coincidence.

The ship was scheduled to depart at 1 PM the next day, to give some people (the hardier souls) an opportunity to take a tour of a nature center on Trinidad. We declined, as getting up for the 7 AM departure after a long flying day and short night was more than we wanted to undertake. After all, it was supposed to be a vacation for us. We felt that it was kind of dumb for them to schedule that tour so early, because most of the passengers were on planes that had arrived during the night.

When 1 PM came and we weren't departing, it was announced that the departure was to be delayed as some air-shipped material hadn't arrived. Food and engineering parts. We finally got underway after dinner. We heard that some of the food that we had been waiting for still hadn't arrived, but they managed to buy some surplus from the local Holiday Inn. Eggs.

That night and the following day was pretty miserable for most people. We traveled south-by-southeast toward the mouth of the Orinoco river on the north-east corner of Venezuela, and that put us pretty much in the trough of the seas coming in from the Atlantic. There were a lot of people missing at breakfast and lunch the next day; I made out OK but Barbara decided not to push it at lunchtime and demurred. I suspect that the Captain kept the speed down to ease the pounding, because even by a revised schedule — which omitted a stop at Curiapo, an Indian village — we were hours late arriving at our destination 100 miles up the river. Our arrival was sometime during the night, as we recall. Fortunately the night hours were spent on the river, so the rolling and pounding stopped and allowed most of us a good night's sleep.

There was, however, an initiation that night into a discomfort that we would come to experience regularly on the remainder of the trip. The ship developed a significant list — usually to port — and that made sleeping in most of the beds, which were athwartships, quite uncomfortable. I estimated the list, from the way the curtains in the room hung, as between five and ten degrees. That may not sound like much, but when your feet are almost a foot higher than your head for a long period of time, it's not comfortable. Once I tried changing the bed around so that my head was on the high side, but then the curtains over the window touched my face, and if there was any degree of rolling it was a continuous aggravation. We were told that the engineering staff was working on the problem, but it was, as far as I could tell, never solved. We were informed late in the voyage that they found a broken union in some fresh water tank plumbing which was the cause of the problem, but even then the list didn't completely disappear.

By this time many of us were curious how world affairs were coming along. It was the 11th, and coming close to the magic date of the 15th, and we had had no news since departure. Upon inquiring, we were told that the ship normally didn't publish any kind of news (other than ship's activities) and at any rate their teletype system was not working so there would be none to publish anyway.

After breakfast, some of the people departed for an optional tour of a jungle camp and Angel Falls, the tallest falls in the world, while we spent the morning loafing on deck. We had declined that tour because it was of fairly high cost — \$245 each — and we had heard that the odds of actually seeing the falls were fairly low, due to the high likelihood of fog at its location. Sure enough, we heard that the people who went didn't see the falls unless they hired a small plane for an extra trip — at about \$30 a person.

During the afternoon — it's now January 11th — we took a typical city bus tour where we saw the confluence of the Caroni and Orinoco rivers and some impressive falls on the former. Reminded me of Great Falls on the Potomac here, but about ten times the width. We had a "souvenir shopping opportunity" but the only thing we bought was a new lens shade for my camera — I had lost the original somewhere along the way.

I did notice something odd about the city (Ciudad Guayana) during the ride, however. In the more affluent suburbs of the city many of the homes had miniature water towers next to them. They were mostly of the tear-drop shape, about three or four feet in diameter and a few feet higher than the roof. I was told that they held a reserve for emergencies, when the water supply pumps for the city failed or had to be shut down for maintenance.

In the wee hours of the next morning we departed Ciudad Guayana, going down river, and stopped at the village we had missed on the way up — Curiapo — after a brief visit to an anchorage on the Araguaito river where a few people took boats to sight see the tributary in the jungle. The Warao Indians in Curiapo assembled a small fleet of boats to take us on a tour of tributaries in their area, and in many cases this was a high point for us. We saw many types of beautiful birds and saw the homes of Indians who do not live in the village. These "homes" were thatched roof open sheds, with hammocks used for sleeping. Later that morning we visited the village proper; they had pretty much the same kind of homes except they had more privacy walls. All homes were built on pilings, about six feet over the water to accommodate high waters at flood time. Even the walks (in lieu of streets) were raised. Some were of concrete, apparently part of a government project, but most were wood. The place was an ecological mess, with trash strewn everywhere, chickens feeding in the cemetery (conveniently right across the walk from the government run clinic).

I should mention that, during the entire cruise, the emphasis was on nature. The ship had three naturalists in the crew, and the Audubon Society provided two more. These people generally accompanied each group that went on various expeditions — such as the tributary tour in Curiapo — and in addition held regular briefings on shipboard about what we had seen and what we could expect to see at the next stop. They were generally quite helpful, but we felt that there were occasions when they could probably have organized themselves a little better in spreading their expertise around during expeditions.

We left Curiapo about noon, exited the Orinoco delta and headed for Tobago, again through the Atlantic and nearly in the trough. This time Barbara felt ok, but I felt sufficiently uneasy that I skipped dinner (it was prime ribs, of course) and it's just as well I did, for the port list persisted, I found my stomach several inches above my mouth, and the natural result was that I lost my lunch. It was during this leg of the journey that the toilets started becoming temperamental, and then failed altogether. These were toilets the likes of which I hadn't seen before; it appears that they work from vacuum in the outlet plumbing, and they make an awful racket when they flush. I gather they use much less water than our usual shore types. On this ship they use water they scavenge as condensate from the air conditioning systems for flushing purposes. It was reported that one of the (vacuum) pumps had failed, and the other one was being used to alternatively pump the two separate systems. The next morning they had to shut the whole mess down for many hours, and deck hands made their way around to the cabins and evacuated toilets with wet-dry vacuums! We couldn't help but feel sorry for the crew members wearing gas masks while they carried the full canisters of you-know-what down the ladder from the cabin area to be dumped somewhere. Meanwhile we had been told that there was a critical shortage of fresh water for unknown reasons, so we were asked to take it easy on its use. Nevertheless, for some time we were totally without fresh water.

Late that morning we left for a rain forest tour on Tobago. We had box lunches after an hour-long van trip over the winding precipitous roads, then after lunch hiked a mile or so through the forest. The path was extremely muddy — a brown clay-like mud that was extremely slippery — and our sneakers and trousers were well covered by the time we returned. Many a tourist had by then been initiated into the "Society of Brown Bottoms" — from losing their footing — but Barbara and I managed to escape that ignominious

state. The walk was quite interesting; we saw many kinds of plants and flowers, of course, as well as leaf cutting ants in their natural habitat. One of the guides picked one up by the body and held it so it would grab his shirt, then pulled it away and the head stayed with the shirt because of the tenacious grip. It is said that some Indians use these ants to suture wounds!

When we returned to the ship we were assured that they had taken on more water, and the toilets worked, thank goodness. That evening we departed Tobago for Isla Margarita, a part of Venezuela about 220 miles due west. The list persisted during this trip, and it was a little rough so sleeping was difficult. We stayed a few hours in Isla Margarita (some people took a city tour; we just loafed) then departed that night for Los Roques, another 200 miles or so west.

At Los Roques (it is now January 16th) we anchored in a lagoon and visited a small uninhabited island for swimming and snorkeling, being ferried in to the beach on the ship's Zodiacs. Barbara and I tried our hands at snorkeling but neither of us had much success; the water was a little bit rough there for beginners. We did manage to see some beautiful and interesting fish swimming at the edge of the coral reef, however. About dinner time we left for Bonaire, in the Netherlands Antilles. It was about this time we got the first news that there was an active war going on; the Captain announced that he'd heard a report to that effect from another ship over the VHF radio. That evening one of the passenger's portable short wave radios managed to pick up some broadcasts, and he had it set up in the lounge where it was piped into the loudspeaker system by holding the microphone next to the radio's speaker. That's how we heard Bush's address.

Bonaire is an attractive island, with a pleasant port city of Kralendijk. We walked around the town looking but not buying, and saw a myriad of fish alongside the dock and sea wall through the clear water. In the afternoon I took a tour over to a coral reef islet for some more attempts at snorkeling and did a little better in the somewhat calmer water. The "ferry" was a Chinese junk built in Bangkok in 1962, sailed over to Florida by the original owner, then bought by a young couple and sailed to Bonaire in 1984, where they started a charter business. They said it was absolutely great living there, although they finally moved off the boat to accommodate their small child and make it easier to use the boat for chartering.

That night we departed Bonaire for Curacao. We did most of our packing before retiring, had our bags outside our room by 6:45 AM the next morning and were bussed to the airport after breakfast for our flights home. Again the crew did all of the baggage and most of the check-in work for us, a considerable convenience. Here we were finally able to get some newspapers in English that reported the war that had been going on for the last day or so. Our flight to Miami on BWIA was uneventful. While waiting in a cocktail lounge for our connecting flight to Washington on Eastern Airlines we heard on TV that this was to be the last day of Eastern's operations. We arrived in Washington at 8:10 PM; the airline stopped flying at midnight!

The crew on the Yorktown Clipper was exceptional. Stewardesses and deck hands were generally young college age kids hired from various parts of the US for a one year tour of duty. The stewardesses — I guess there were about 18 of them — served all meals,

served beverages in the lounge, and cleaned the cabins daily. They also took one week turns doing the menial tasks in the galley. They maintained a pleasant atmosphere, which was something to be said in the face of the difficulties of the trip. The meals were excellent; not as many choices on the menu as on the larger ships but an adequate number for us and again the preparation was top-notch. On various nights the special entrees were lobster, rack of lamb, filet mignon, steak, crab imperial and so forth. There were four chefs aboard.

In retrospect, no matter how fine the crew that we came in contact with seemed to be, the trip didn't live up to what we had a right to expect. The listing, toilets inoperative, water shortage, off schedule operation from one cause or another, and the lack of news were just some of the things. Some of the speakers on deck were inoperative, so if one was lounging on the deck one missed announcements — and some of them were important. In the lounge there were some navigation instruments for the amusement of passengers. There was a repeater off the navigation radar which worked nicely, but the compass was more than 90 degrees in error much of the time (it read 020 while we were headed into the sunset, for instance), the loran C navigator didn't work except for complaining with beeps that it had no signal, the relative wind repeater indicated the same direction all the time and no speed showed, and the depth indicator didn't operate. I can only presume with hope that the instruments on the bridge were in better shape. The lounge TV set didn't pick up local TV signals and I noticed that the external antenna wire seemed not to be long enough to connect to the set. Our cabin was directly under the bridge, and there were some times when we could hear their radio — even at 2 AM, when they were apparently trying to pick up news.

All in all, it was an interesting trip, but one I would not recommend to someone else unless they were prepared to suffer through the kind of indignities which we encountered. We were glad to get home.

Best regards,

Dick

At this point the reader probably has a good idea what the phrase "the cruise from hell" is based on - but the coinage is even more interesting. Here's an excerpt from another story - this one of our motor home trip to Alaska; we are in Haines:

August 15, 1991: As we looked out the window of our motor home this morning, we saw that the Yorktown Clipper had showed up at the dock! This is the cruise ship we had taken last January in the Southern Caribbean. Later we walked over to the ship and chatted with one of the crew members; when we mentioned the specific cruise we were on he said "Oh, the Cruise From Hell!" He said that all but about three or four of the crew members from last January were gone, and that it took one more cruise after ours before they figured out what caused the list problem.