

Thursday 8th March: Afloat SW Australia



We set sail after obligatory lifebelt/evacuation instructions, a little before 3.00pm, The Black Watch tentatively moving astern and away from the quay and turning herself around before heading, oh so gently, under the Sydney Harbour Bridge and clearing it by what seemed to be an infinitesimal margin. Luckily, the weather had improved after the wet morning and there was some blue sky, although we saw a band of rain to the south-west.

We picked up a little more speed as we moved downstream, following the markers and all too soon we were starting to rise and fall as we headed thro' The Heads and into the ocean.



That was three hours ago, and we are now rocking and rolling along. From our cabin window I can still see the Australian coast but, probably by sunset, in another hour or so, that will be well below the horizon. I managed to write a hurried blog this morning, and Nick donned wet weather gear to walk into the city to upload it. At lunch today we met two ex-headteachers/antique dealers who live in the south of France and are on their n'th Fred Olsen cruise, and an Italian/Englishman (I thought he looked French and a tad Picasso-ish!) who does a world cruise each winter (this is No.8) to escape the British weather and who entranced us with stories of his family's wartime experiences in Italy and London! Captain Corelli came very much to mind.

Photo left: leaving Sydney harbour mouth



This afternoon I attended a talk about Noumea, New Caledonia – our first port of call in two days, and since then we have been chatting more with fellow passengers.



Saturday 10th March: Tasman Sea

We are now less than 24 hours away from our first stop, New Caledonia, after two whole days at sea, travelling north east. It's amazing how the days are filled. Nick has visited the gym twice, each time for a serious workout, and has attended a water colour seminar; I've done my first Pilates class and attended talks on our first three stop-overs (is it or is it not worrying that they were all cannibals, just a few centuries back?); together we've learned a simple social foxtrot and enjoyed some lazy time out on deck.

Last evening was a formal evening so we dressed ourselves up, somewhat. (Nick in new gear, me in op-shop stuff!) My only concern is that we have been placed at the 2nd sitting for dinner which it starts at 8.30: I find eating so late less than ideal! Yesterday morning there was concern that our 2nd stop over, scheduled for Tuesday, Port Vila, Vanuatu, had experienced a 7.1

earthquake out at sea. The captain, fresh aboard with us in Sydney, had made light of it at the Cocktail Party, and we've since learned that there was no structural damage of any significance in the area we will be visiting.

Tomorrow we're going on-shore by ourselves, but next Tuesday, where we are tendered off, we're taking a short tour. Then it's just another day at sea before we have a full day in Suva, Fiji, where we will explore on our own or with other like-minded folk.

Sunday: Noumea, New Caledonea



We are new to this cruise thing, unlike the majority of folk on board; in fact I've just checked with Nick and we have not yet met anyone at all who is new to it. Over a third of passengers are doing the full round-the-world cruise and probably a third more joined the ship in Sydney to do the leg to Peru. We're wondering whether getting off in Lima might have been the better option for our first time – but we're committed now!

Surprises? The way the swimming pool water swooshes around in a hair-raising way with the movement of the ship – it looks positively dangerous! {Just as well we found a smaller, safer one two decks up!}
And the ordinariness of folk (80% Brits, average age somewhat older than us) who seem to be able to afford to cruise frequently.

Just another morning at sea until ahead on the horizon – land! The final two hours approach saw mist shrouded hills and then to starboard surf breaking over a reef which seemed all too close! I watched the pilot boat speed up and oh so expertly move alongside for the pilot to grab the ladder. (no photos – Nick in gym again! that, and his lying in the sun, and we'll be able to enter him in the mature/veteran body-beautiful competition! [No comment!]) We slowly edged our way to shore by islands and through an impossibly narrow harbour, the town, not so picturesque up close. Then came the excitement of the tribal dancers greeting our arrival and by this time Nick is, naturally, wielding the camera.



We had a quick lunch before walking up through the town which was incredibly quiet as it was Sunday – also incredibly hot!



In the tree-lined square there were a few bodies draped along and over seats, and we passed a family enjoying lunch in the shade and wished them 'bon appetit'. There was a valiant clamber up to the elegant cathedral – sadly no access. On our way back to the boat we moved carefully from shade to shade, and stopped to watch a small group of locals, old and young, enjoying a game of boules. There was more fun on the quayside just before our departure with women and girls in colourful costume bedecked with flowers, dancing to drums – real erotic belly gyrating /bum swaying stuff! The highlight of the day was our departure to music and the most amazing sunset; for over an hour we hung over the sides to enjoy breathtaking loveliness.

