

Panama Canal Cruise

Celebrity Millennium



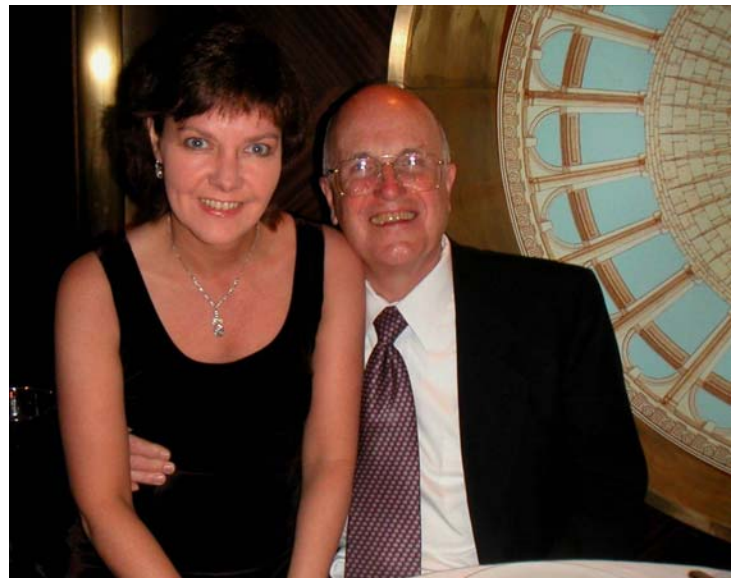
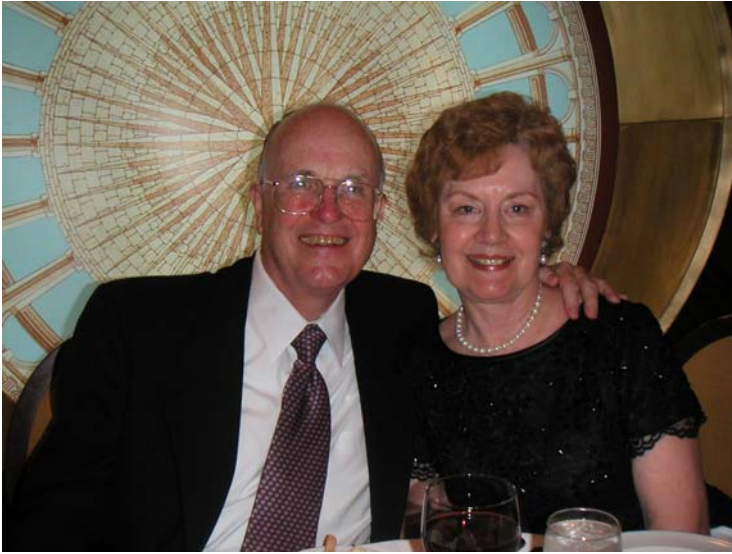
**San Diego, Cabo San Lucas, Acapulco, Huatulco (Mexico),
Puntarenas (Costa Rica), Panama Canal, Aruba, Ft. Lauderdale**

April 10-25, 2004

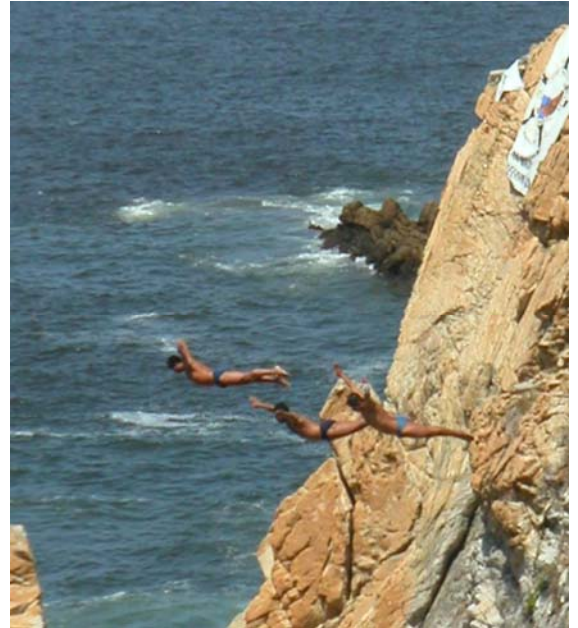
THE SHIP *(living the good life for two great weeks)*



GREAT COMPANY *(including rare photos of Bob in dress clothes)*



ACAPULCO *(celebrating cliff divers...and the number 11)*



HUATULCO *(just look at those smiles)*

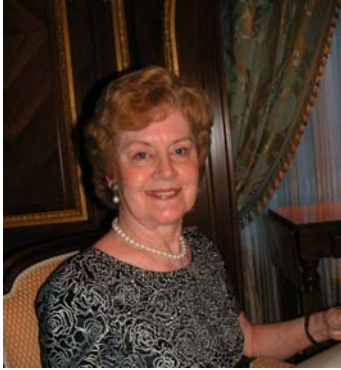


FINE FOOD (*and a fine table, courtesy of the Soup Nazi*)



Dinner at The Olympic *(a marathon of eating)*

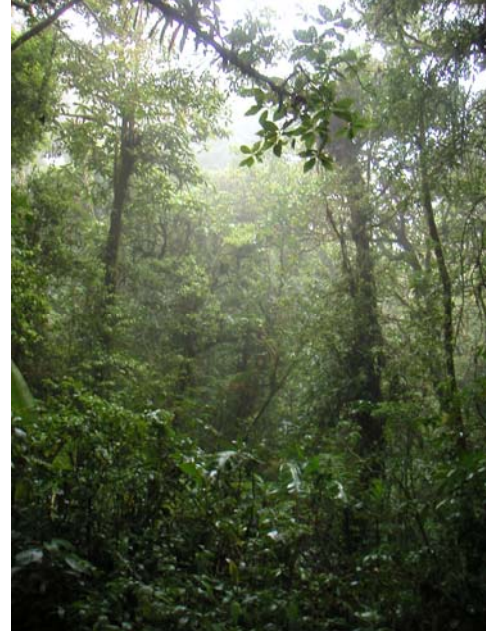
Before...



After...



COSTA RICA (*mystical, magical...wet*)



COSTA RICA *(so that's what it's like being in a cloud forest)*

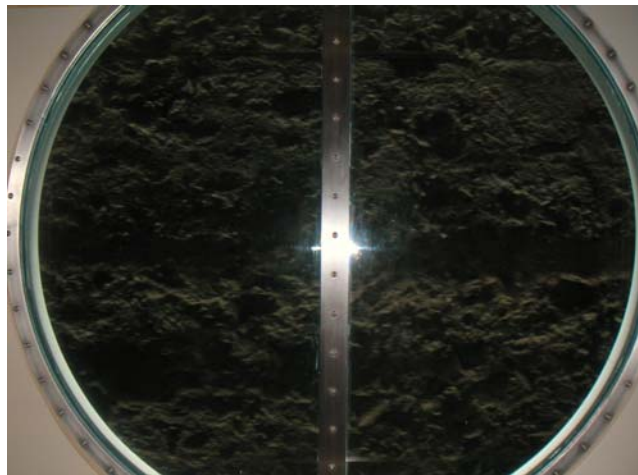
Before...



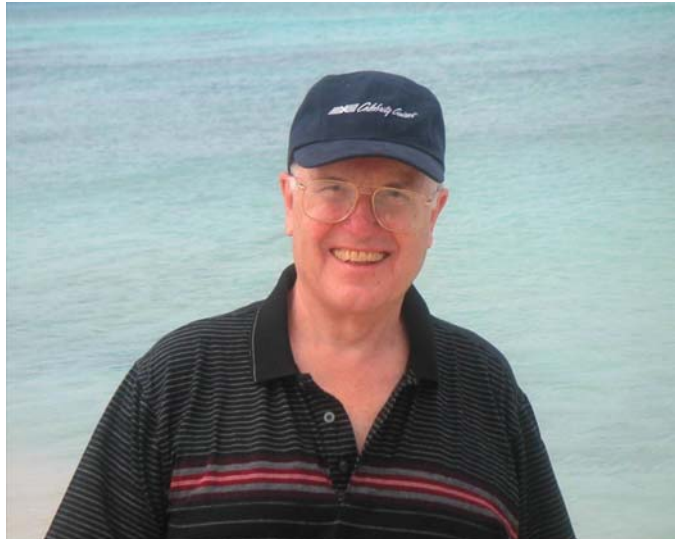
After...



Panama Canal *(we never expected to see concrete out our porthole)*



Aruba *(still can't believe we got mom in that open-air jeep)*



Aruba (so who's ready for another two-week cruise???)



Panama Canal Cruise – Celebrity Millennium

April 10-25, 2004

Saturday, April 10 – Denver to San Diego. Our two weeks of tropical bliss started off with a twist—I was shoveling six inches of snow off the walk at 5 am. But by that afternoon we were in San Diego where the weather was balmy. We took the free hotel shuttle from the airport to the Days Inn Hotel Circle, and shortly thereafter took a complimentary shuttle to the San Diego Zoo. Mom and Dad called us on our cell phone and told us they had arrived at the hotel but decided to stay put and skip the zoo. After a long wait at the front gate to get in, Robin and I had a great time. Highlights included seeing tree kangaroos, a hippo paddling through the water with his toes not touching, an enormous rhinoceros, active colobus monkeys, two small antelopes with their horns interlocked, a polar bear who took the plunge while we watched, and of course the adult panda (the line was way too long for the baby). We took the zoo's open-air double-decker bus when our feet needed a rest. By 4:00 we had seen almost everything in the zoo in at least a cursory fashion. We were at the far side of the park at 4:15. There was an incredibly long line for the skyride back to the front, so we had to jog through half the park to reach the front parking lot by 4:30 to catch the free hotel shuttle bus back. We barely made it.

Mom called us while we were on the way back and said they were *very hungry*. We met them just a few minutes later and went to dinner at King's Seafood just down the street. Mom and I split two dishes: macadamia-nut-crusted halibut and a fantastic thin parmesan-crusted sole that was the highlight of the dinner. Robin got six enormous shrimp with cocktail sauce, and Dad ate some very tasty coconut-crusted shrimp. An auspicious gourmet start to our trip.

That evening we got together with some friends of ours, Tom and Debbie. They took us to the San Diego yacht club where we shared a few drinks and met friends of theirs who actually own a yacht. After hanging out for awhile at the club, we went to visit their friends' yacht. Quite nice, like an RV for the seas. Tom and Debbie drove us back home. It was nice to reconnect with them.

Sunday, April 11 – Board Ship. We headed off to the cruise pier before noon on Sunday and got checked onto the Celebrity Millennium, their flagship, with no problem. In fact, they let us check in early instead of waiting until 2 pm. So we were able to put our carry-ons in the room and have a tasty lunch at the Ocean Café buffet on Deck 10. We enjoyed staring down the "porthole" in the floor to the ocean far below. We began eating too much immediately, including tasty Edam cheese and the first of many stops at the ice cream bar.

After unpacking, Robin and I explored the ship with Dad, making a deck-to-deck exploration. What a beautiful ship. With Mom we went to check on our dinner table assignment. We met the maitre d' who we henceforth referred to as the "soup Nazi" because of his abrupt attitude. "You have good table, near window, very nice," he said dismissively. At least he was right—we really did have a great table in the corner by a window on the main dining room floor.

That evening at 6 pm, we had our first fine dinner on board. We met our waiter, Reyes, and our assistant waiter, Jose, who were both fabulous. Reyes, from Guatemala, always has a smile and is very courteous and professional. He looks like an Aztec, and is lean and tall. Jose is from Columbia and is small in stature, peppy in his service, and likes to joke, calling cream and sugar "oil and vinegar" and pretending to be about to pour water into my Coke. I got on the soda plan on the first day, so enjoyed having Cokes with each dinner. I soon developed a friendship with Devon from Jamaica, who usually had two Cokes waiting for me when I arrived and two more delivered halfway through.

On the first evening, we visited Michael's Club and listened to the piano playing of Nat Reed. The lounge he played in was like an old-world living room, but his singing wasn't exactly to our taste. A bit too flashy and jazzy. We had yet to discover our favorite entertainment on board, the Serenada Quartet.

Robin and Dad went to the 9 pm "Welcome Aboard Introductions" starring the SeaTones and the Pampas Devils Gauchos. They said it was a

good opening show, and they both liked the cruise director, Edwin Rojas, very much for his sense of humor and low-key approach. I went to a movie in the cinema called "In America," about an Irish immigrant family. This turned out to be the only movie I saw during the cruise. Dad and Robin checked out the Unison Duo after their show; the main singer had a Russian accent which made his interpretations of common easy listening and dance music intriguing. We enjoyed exploring the ship some more that evening, including the Cosmos Lounge (the disco), but the music was most definitely not hip-hop.

Monday, April 12 – Day at Sea. We ate a filling breakfast in the main dining room. Afterwards, Dad and I picked up the daily quiz for the day, then headed to our first "Battle of the Sexes" trivia challenge at 10 am. This turned out to be great fun and something we were involved in for the rest of the cruise. Robin and Mom began playing on the women's side a bit later in the trip. Dad and I made friends with a fellow passenger named Fred, a former woodshop teacher, and another guy named Bob, a heavy-set and very trivia-knowledgeable fellow. We also had an English gentleman on the team who proved invaluable when it came to sewing questions (his mum was a seamstress) and royal family questions. We now know, for example, that Beatrice and Eugenia are the daughters of Fergie. The host, Harun from Turkey, was great fun and kept the men and women laughing. "I didn't pick the card, you picked the card" was one of his favorite lines. When the other team got one wrong, he would say "Aaahnt" like a buzzer. "Ladies, ready, one, two, three, Aaahnt." Then the next team would get a chance at the question for two points. Harun had quite the accent, so it was sometimes funny to hear his readings of the questions, and much time was spent re-reading and interpreting what he said. "If you like I can spell some of the words, I do have this capability," he would often say.

In the afternoon, Mom, Robin, and I went to a Wine Appreciation Seminar in the Rendezvous Lounge. The sommelier described each of the six wines we tasted, including La Crema Chardonnay, a sauvignon blanc, a rose, a pinot noir, and a cab sauvignon, followed by a champagne. A good taste testing for \$8 per person. The assistant kept pretending to surreptitiously drink wine from her sommelier's cup when he wasn't looking.

That afternoon we got lotioned up and ventured up to highest deck for some sunbathing. We both nearly fell asleep relaxing in the sun with a nice breeze blowing. After about an hour, we got changed for the gym, did a few laps around the jogging track on Deck 11, then headed through the elaborate AquaSpa to the fitness center at the very fore of Deck 10. Its picture windows offer a lovely view of the ocean ahead as you work out. I familiarized myself with the Nautilus equipment and the treadmill. Robin put in a half-hour on the treadmill then headed down for a pre-dinner shower. I got to the room about twenty minutes before the first Formal Night dinner and had to rush to get ready. This became something of a tradition for me—a late-afternoon workout followed by a quick shower and a scramble to get dressed just before dinner.

Our first Formal Night dinner was fantastic. We can't remember exactly what we had for each meal (though I'll bet Mom can), but some of our favorites were the lamb and veal dishes that Robin alternated between almost every evening of the cruise, shrimp cocktail with very large and crunchy shrimp, escargots in garlic sauce, frog's legs, lobster tail, prime rib of beef with tangy horseradish sauce, Crème Brulee, a molten chocolate cake (Mom ordered one after tasting mine), a banana-chocolate-and caramel-sauce cake/pie, ice cream nightly for Dad (two scoops), and the bottle of wine that Mom and Robin split for most of the dinners on board, a half-bottle per evening.

At 8:30 we attended the Captain's Gala Toast and drank free wine and champagne. Then we saw "Spectacle of Broadway" with the Celebrity Singers and Dancers. This was one of our favorite shows, with numbers from Les Mis, Phantom, and other Broadway musicals. The singers were surprisingly good, not just the main ones but the whole cast. The caliber of entertainment on board was a real surprise—it was consistently high. We all agreed it was the best we'd seen on the high seas.

Tuesday, April 13 – Cabo San Lucas. Mom and Dad went on an overview sightseeing tour of Cabo. Robin and I got off the ship lotioned up, wearing our swimsuits, and carrying our snorkel masks, towels, water, etc. in a daypack. We walked in and out along the marina for twenty minutes to reach the far side of the channel. From there, it was a short walk to Medano

Beach. We rented a two-person sit-on-top sea kayak from Cabo Aquadeportes near the Hacienda beach resort. It was a hot sunny day. We paddled past the rugged coastline through crystal blue water. After about twenty minutes of easy paddling in the bay, we passed Lover's Beach and arrived at a small keyhole arch in the rock where the water was rushing through to the other side. Beyond that we saw Los Arcos, a famous natural bridge that rises sharply out of the sea at Land's End. It is visible only from the water. Nearby is a sea lion colony, noisy and smelly but fun to see up close. We shared our space with many water taxis making quick trips to and from town. We paddled out to Pelican Rock, the last big rock at the tip of Cabo San Lucas, then turned back. We were warned not to travel around the rock to the rougher waters of the Pacific side.

We paddled our kayak straight onto Lover's Beach, which is only accessible by water and one of the few beaches in the world that actually joins two seas: the Sea of Cortez and the Pacific Ocean. I pulled the kayak higher onto the sand near some other kayaks. Our day pack, unfortunately, was sopping wet on the bottom, and our towels and supplies were a bit worse for wear. We were surprised to see guards with semi-automatic weapons patrolling the beach. We spent most of our time on the Pacific side, which is quieter in terms of people and more dramatic because of the pounding surf. The waves crashing to shore made an especially loud BOOM every once in awhile that made you look up from your nap. I let the warm sand trickle through my hands and the hot sun bake me. A pleasant breeze made it idyllic. We had a great time on this picturesque and unusual beach with a body of water on each side.

As we got our kayak back into the water, we struggled with the waves a bit before making it out to deeper water. We crossed the bay carefully to avoid the tenders making transits to and from the ships. We paddled hard and got the kayak back to the shop just at the two-hour point, so the whole adventure only cost us \$30. A great way to spend the day in Cabo. We even stopped for a tasty cup of Haagen-Dazs dulce de leche ice cream on our return stroll to the ship.

That evening, after a casual dinner, we saw a comedy show featuring Cary Long. He made some funny observations about packing for the

cruise (the "packing room") and how men "air-clean" their clothes in the room. Around 11 pm, we all went up to the Caribbean Island Night Celebration poolside but only stayed for a short while. As Robin and I headed into our room, our neighbors across the hall, two wild twenties-age kids, invited us over for shots. Their names were T.J. and Joey, both from New Jersey. We shared two shots with them that night, Jaegermeister and Jack Daniels. They were close to being out of control for most of the cruise, and their antics made for great conversation. Especially noteworthy: ordering twenty cartons of milk from room service, having wheelchair races on deck, doing flips into the pool despite the "No Diving" sign, and T.J. dressing up as a banana during the Formal Night Grand Buffet.

Wednesday, April 14 – Day at Sea. Dad and I went to Battle of the Sexes II at 10 am. Robin and Mom went to a Culinary Demonstration and Martini Tasting at 10:45. Robin especially liked the blue martini, with vodka and Curacao liquor. We shared one later that evening in the martini bar. Dad and I attended an "Origin of Words" seminar by a dapper British gentleman that was not very interesting. Then it was lunchtime, and after that, time for tanning poolside. At 3:30 Dad and I attended a "Spelling B;" I got 19 out of 20 points but missed "rhinoceros." While Dad attended afternoon trivia, Robin and I did our sea-day workout. I had one of my best workouts ever. I started jogging on the treadmill, gradually increasing my speed, and went for over half an hour going faster and faster. I felt like I could have run forever and think I experienced one of those "runner's highs" I've always heard about. I went to dinner that evening feeling wonderful and quite ready to eat.

Dinner was "informal," meaning jacket and slacks. That evening we discovered the Serenada Quartet in the Cova Café on Deck 5. Violin, cello, bass, piano—a group of four Polish musicians who played such beautiful classical, Russian, Hungarian, and gypsy music in addition to the occasional popular piece like "Yesterday" or "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" (Mom's favorite). We also enjoyed the friendship and service of one of the waitresses there named Andreana from Macedonia. She had a cute accent and was very animated and spirited. She served Robin a drink which became her standby on the cruise every night after dinner—a Moscato by Saccaro in Italy. This sweet bubbly drink, only slightly

alcoholic tasting, was like a Martinelli's Sparkling Cider with a kick. I tried three different sherries over the course of three different nights—a sweet sherry, an ultra-dry sherry, and a middle of the road sherry (Dry Sack, which I liked the best). Showtime featured the international singer Helen Jane, who really knew how to belt out a tune.

Thursday, April 15 – Acapulco. The four of us went on a leisurely morning bus tour of Acapulco called “City Tour and Cliff Divers.” The tour took us along the main boulevard, known as Costera Miguel Aleman, or just “the Costera,” past increasingly elaborate beachside hotels. The beaches are pleasant and, like all Mexican beaches, open to the public. The sand is brownish yellow, though, not Robin's cherished Caribbean white. We passed Playa Hornos, Playa Condesa, Playa Puerto Marques (a sheltered bay ideal for swimming), Punta Diamante (a ritzy area), and Playa Revolcadero. The farthest point was about 12 miles from the zocalo, the main square in downtown Acapulco. Our bus driver somehow managed to get lost before finding the correct entrance to the Mayan Palace Hotel, which resembles a Mayan Temple and features a mile-long swimming pool. We fell in love with the Mayan temple entranceway, the tropical pool with waterfalls, and the beach with palm trees and pounding surf just beyond (not to mention a golf course that Dave and Diane would love). We made a stop at a hillside overlook for scenic views of Acapulco and its main harbor. We also made the obligatory stop at a gift shop. Robin bought two decorative pins and Mom tried on but didn't buy necklaces costing from \$500 to \$15,000. We walked next door to the Hotel El Mirador in Quebrada, where, as the finale to our tour, we sat at a nice table on a verandah high above the sea and watched Acapulco's famous cliff divers leap from rock formations as high as 132 feet. They wisely prayed at a shrine before diving.

We returned to the ship for lunch, then Robin and I ventured off the ship again for a brief journey to the nearby shady zocalo, or central plaza. After some strolling around, which included a stop at the local beach which was packed with Mexican families, we sat at a table under a huge “parota” tree at an outdoor café nestled in the back corner of the zocalo and sipped two Coronas. There were no tourists except us, only locals, which made it fun and authentic feeling. Mexicans reading their newspapers, little kids who seemed

as interested in us as we were in them, and the sound of Spanish everywhere. I had to try to communicate in Spanish. We paid in U.S. dollars and received change in pesos, so on our way back to the ship, we gave our last pesos to a little girl who needed them a lot more than we did. She beamed as Robin gave her her last coin.

That evening after dinner we attended a Mexican Folklorico Show by local dancers from Acapulco. Beautiful costumes and dancing from different parts of Mexico (clacking balls, “old lecherous man dance, candles on heads, flamenco-like stomping, tying a bow with a red scarf using only the feet, etc.) We made a brief appearance at the Tex-Mex celebration by the pool, ate some Mexican food we didn't really need, and watched a bit of the country line dancing before calling it a night.

Friday, April 16 – Huatulco, Mexico. We arrived in Huatulco mid-morning and were able to walk right off the pier into paradise. A beautiful beach called Playa Santa Cruz beckons just off the pier, an 800-foot gently curving stretch of sand featuring calm waters and plenty of sun worshippers. Palm-thatched palapas and beach chairs dot the sand down to the water's edge. The cruise ship towers above, a gleaming, immense incongruity against the primitive-looking beach scene.

The four of us started the day with a stroll through Huatulco. We stopped at an outdoor café where Mom and Robin had Oaxacan hot cocoa. A little Mexican boy approached our table, smiling shyly—apparently tourists are new enough to Huatulco that we are still of interest. A flock of black birds right out of Hitchcock kept jealous watch over the shady plaza, squawking and shrieking. They brutally attacked another bird of a different species and nearly killed it in a bush before a man shooed them away, carrying the poor bird away in his hands. We continued our stroll through town and were surprised when a traveling circus passed us with music blaring and a cavalcade of animals going by, including camels, lions, tigers, giraffe, and a scruffy buffalo, to name a few.

Lunch on board gave us a welcome respite from the heat. That afternoon, Mom and Dad stayed on the ship while Robin and I went to the beach. We walked its length, which didn't take very long. It was essentially divided in half by a jet boat launch zone. The far side was literally packed

with Mexican families. The near side, closer to the ship, contained a mix of cruise passengers and Mexican families on vacation. We made our home near some Mexican families on the near side. All the chairs and palapas were taken so we simply spread our beach blankets on the sand and called it good. We went for a swim and were immediately approached by four Mexican boys in their early teens who were quite openly curious about us. They wanted to know where we were from, how many people were on board the ship, were there lots of pretty women on board, how much did the cruise cost, and more. We had fun talking to them, with me conversing mostly in Spanish. We spent most of the afternoon just lounging on the beach and taking an occasional stroll along the seashore. Robin went to a flea market nearby where she saw a two-month-old baby parrot. She returned to the ship shortly thereafter and went to the pool. I hung around until close to 5 pm enjoying the beautiful day. The beach remained crowded all the way to the end with Mexican families, but I did manage to snag a beach chair towards the end of the day. All in all, though, I think I preferred my simple beach towel. There are eight other bays in Huatulco to explore besides Santa Cruz, so this is definitely worth another visit.

In the evening we attended a magic show with Brett Sherwood. He did some dramatic large-scale effects but the best stuff was the sleight of hand (e.g., with cards and balls). Afterwards we listened to the Serenada Quartet, which by now had become a special part of each evening's experience.

Saturday, April 17 – Day at Sea. By now our days at sea tended to follow a certain routine. Dad would get up for an early breakfast of cereal and bring Mom back a yogurt, pastry, and coffee. We would get up around 9 am. Robin would get a yogurt, a hard-boiled egg, orange slices, and a carton of milk from the breakfast buffet. She would bring me back an OJ. I would pick up the daily quiz from "Words" on Deck 8. We would meet Mom and Dad at the Battle of the Sexes trivia game in the Rendezvous Lounge on Deck 4 at 10 am (this was the first day all four of us played). From 11 to noon was filled with whatever sounded interesting on the schedule. On this day, Robin and Mom attended a "Royal Scandals" talk while Dad and I played our first game of Upwords in the room. Lunch at noon was either in the main dining room or the buffet

upstairs. Mom tended to relax in the afternoons while Dad attended trivia games and such. We usually lounged poolside, followed by a gym workout before dinner. At 2:30 the wait staff served lemon ices in little cups to all the sun worshipers poolside, which was quite wonderful. Another nice touch was the cold facecloths they handed out poolside and whenever you returned from a shore excursion. The pools were saltwater so we usually showered after going for a dip. The second pool was indoors and tended to be bathwater warm. It had an interesting set of metal roller bars that you rested upon, with jetted bubbles churning all around you; it felt a bit like being coddled like an egg. Robin and I got quite brown during the course of the two-week cruise, and amazingly, we never got burned.

At 2 pm, Dad, Robin, and I attended a Close-up Magic Demonstration by Brent Sherwood that was truly impressive. He performed sleight of hand magic with two people right up on stage watching his every move as well as a large video camera that showed a close-up of his hands and the cards he was holding. This demonstration left us far more impressed than the larger magic show we had seen. At 3 pm, Mom, Robin, and I attended a Wine Education Seminar sponsored by LinCourt Vineyards. It was free, so it was packed. We got to try a chardonnay, a pinot noir, and a cab sauv, although the dribs of chardonnay and cab sauv I received were almost too tiny to taste.

That evening we paid extra to get to experience the Olympic Restaurant, a fine dining restaurant that attempts to recreate the luxury of dining during the era of the Titanic. It felt formal and possibly too elegant for our taste but we still had fun. All the waiters would lift the covers off our plates at once and say "Voila." By far our favorite part of the meal was the appetizer. We all got the goat cheese soufflé, which came highly recommended and fully deserved to be. This dish was fantastic and memorable—killer-rich, light but filling. Next came the main course. Robin had the veal (twice in two nights), I had the fish (third time that day after starting the day with Scottish kippers), Mom had the shrimp scampi (a disappointment, unfortunately), and Dad had the beef filet with a tasty sauce. Robin's veal was the best, with Dad's beef taking a close second. Third course was a cheese course, and none of us found any cheeses that impressed us that much. Mostly they filled us up past the comfort

point. The last course was dessert. Three of us got the gourmet bites and stuffed ourselves silly. Robin got a vanilla custard. I was left to finish off the chef's "bonus" mini desserts at the end of the meal. All of our ribs hurt. Dad said even his head was full. All in all, we enjoyed the experience but agreed we could have just had the appetizer and been happy. The show that evening was *Classique*, a Musical Odyssey (songs and dances from around the world, including Scottish dancers, Sound of Music, *Nessun Dorma*, etc.) We got out of dinner so late that we ended up attending the late show at 11 pm.

Sunday, April 18 – Puntarenas, Costa Rica.

We had an all-day tour of the Monteverde Cloud Forest scheduled, so imagine our surprise when we got off the ship and found no one from the tour company there to pick us up. After rushing up and down the dock, we happened upon a guide from the tour company who told us our tour had been canceled because there weren't enough people and that someone had been trying to get in touch with us all week. Of course, we were on our cruise so never heard a thing.

We scrambled and managed to find a small group of people who were also wanting to go to the Monteverde Cloud Forest. We split the cost of a van and paid \$80 for the two of us. (Not bad, since the original tour would have cost \$200.) I had to jog back to the ship, get enough cash, then jog the long pier again to get to the waiting vehicle, so I was perspiring quite a bit by the time we headed off.

The couple just ahead of us in the van was really nice. Their names were Tony and Judy and they were retired and traveling all over the world and living in an RV, very much as we hope to be doing in the not-too-distant future. They were on the Norwegian ship in port that same day. The third couple spoke only German. We talked quite a bit with Tony and Judy during the 2.5 hour drive to Monteverde. After the first 45 minutes the paved roads disappeared and the dirt and gravel roads became extremely rutted and bumpy. But the scenery was beautiful as we journeyed up into the hills of Costa Rica. Amazingly, after two hours, we could still look back and see our two cruise ships docked next to each other many miles distant.

The closer we got to the cloud forest, the wetter it got. That's another way of saying it rained. But only in the cloud forest itself did it rain

continuously, not in the surrounding area. You could actually see the misty wisps of rain when you looked into the cloud forest from the approaching road.

The German couple seemed to have misunderstood the amount of time involved for the overall trip and wanted to return to the ship immediately. That was out of the question as far as we were concerned, after having spent that much time and effort getting there. We negotiated for 1.5 hours of time to tour the park on our own. We bought tickets for \$12 each, got a map, and headed into the dark and somewhat forbidding forest with Tony and Judy. We came prepared with rain ponchos but they had to buy theirs in the gift shop. They were very much needed—it alternately rained, spitted, or "misted" on us as we followed well-marked trails through the jungle. To keep you out of the mud, the trail builders relied on "stepping stones" that consisted of the bases of tree trunks with steel matting over the top. Occasionally the trails were steep. We saw no monkeys, parrots, or butterflies, probably due to the weather and the time of day. In fact, we didn't see many animals at all, with the exception of a very long row of ants crossing the trail, a large bird (unidentified), a woodpecker, a bright yellow finch-like bird, and a caterpillar. So from one standpoint, we drove five hours to see a caterpillar in the rain! But from another standpoint, the cloudforest itself was worth seeing, very misty and mysterious, with wisps of fog meandering through the trees. Bright flowers both on the ground and hanging from the trees added punches of color. Some of the pictures we brought back give a sense of the forest's beauty and strangeness. A final highlight was the suspension bridge at treetop level, near the end of our loop trip. You got a good view of the epiphytes growing on the trees, deriving their nourishment right from the misty air. You also got a good sense of just how tall the trees were—it was a long way down to the forest floor.

The return journey was just as bumpy as the way in. Despite the rain and long drive, we had a good time overall, thanks in part to the good company of our friends. We do hope to go back to the Monteverde Cloud Forest when we have more time to adequately explore it. Going in the middle of the day is probably not the best approach. The morning (or night) with a guide would make a big difference.

By the time we got back to Puntarenas, it was quite hot and humid in the van. It had been much cooler in the cloudforest due to the rainy weather and the higher elevation. We were relieved to get back onto the air-conditioned ship. Our showers before dinner felt heavenly.

We met Mom and Dad for dinner. Their tour experience went much better than ours. In fact, it was their favorite tour of the trip. They saw the coffee plantations in Costa Rica and had a fantastic tour guide who really made the experience special. They particularly enjoyed hearing about the pecan trees that have one nut per each piece of large fruit. Mom brought back a gift bag of coffee for Robin to try at home.

That evening we attended a show by the Pampas Devils gauchos. The show combined Latin dancing with some very impressive “clacking balls on ropes” feats. Mom thought the male dancer looked like a character straight out of one of Robin’s romance novels, with his long hair and striking features. He had a very macho attitude and would make “fireworks sounds” (ooh and aah) that the audience would mimic as he twirled the clacking balls.

Monday, April 19 – Day at Sea. In addition to our regular day at sea activities, we attended an interesting Panama Canal Lecture by Patricia Holmes, who lives in Panama and really knew her stuff when it came to the canal. She grew up in the Canal Zone and seemed to wax nostalgic about those days. For Robin and me the afternoon was mostly a quiet day in the sun. Every day of our cruise except our day in Panama was almost perfect in terms of sunshine and temperature. Robin worked out by walking briskly along the jogging path, enjoying the outdoors. In the evening Dad and I attended a show by the violinist Hanna Starosta, who once was the private violinist for a sultan. Mom and Robin went to see a documentary called “A Man, A Plan, A Canal.” They tried to see it in the Cinema but it was full so they watched it in Mom’s cabin on TV. We ended the night at the Cova Café sipping drinks and listening to our favorite quartet.

Tuesday, April 20 – Panama Canal. The day started early. We got up around 7 am and had breakfast. It was the only gray day of the trip, and it got rainy later that afternoon, on and off. We arrived at the first lock around 9 am. This was the Miraflores Lock on the Pacific side. The front

decks of the ship were packed with people. It was actually sunny and hot at this point, so we ended up watching from the Cosmos Lounge on Deck 11, in air-conditioned comfort. We sat on a wooden ledge behind the rows of chairs and counted ourselves lucky. Many people were standing behind us. We took many pictures. We were at the center of the ship and had a good view as we made our way through the first lock. You could feel the ship rise or fall as the water level changed. After watching the whole process “face forward,” we watched the next transit of a lock from aft and sides. We were amazed at the narrow gap (less than 2 feet) between the ship and the sides of the canal. We took a nap in our rooms before lunch. Robin woke me to a surrealistic view: a dark concrete wall loomed one foot away from our porthole. We were actually several decks below ground level in one of the locks! This was the most memorable aspect of the canal crossing for me. We watched as the ship was raised up. It got lighter in our room as we passed the concrete blocks on the way up. Eventually we saw daylight again and were above ground level. A dock worker stood just outside our window for a time. We hurried to get dressed!

The day got cloudier. We enjoyed a relaxing lunch at the Ocean Café while looking out the windows at the canal transit. We were in the Gaillard Cut at this point, passing through the Continental Divide. This represented the hardest work in terms of the canal building effort. In all, over 25,000 people gave their lives in the building of the canal (mostly to diseases like malaria). While the canal was impressive as an achievement, the scenery was only moderately interesting, and eventually we retired to our rooms. Mom and Robin went for a glass of wine and sat at a quiet table outside the cinema. Dad and I played two games of Upwords in my room while watching the scenery pass by. I should mention that there was a very comfortable couch/chair that could hold two people just in front of our porthole. Robin and I enjoyed sitting there especially in the mornings or late afternoon.

We passed through the Gatun Locks on the Caribbean side around dinner time (we were later than planned). After dinner, we went ashore for a brief time in Cristobal. A covered “flea market” stood just outside the gangplank. The quality of the goods was actually very high, and Mom bought several small gifts. We saw wood

carvings and other artwork that caught our eye. I happened upon a Panamanian dance show offered for free and enjoyed watching the traditional dances for awhile. I also stumbled across a liquor store and decided to smuggle on a bottle of vanilla rum so we could return the favor and offer our rowdy neighbors across the hall a shot. I was a bit nervous as the bottle of liquor passed through the security screen, but no one said anything. I headed back to shore, found Mom and Robin, and watched “topless” native dancers with them while sipping a very large Panamanian beer. Late that night, around 10:45, Robin and Dad went to the Extreme Juggler show by a performer who called himself “Edge”. His antics included a funny little jump with leg kicks (“Flashy”). He called himself a flashy juggler and performed some unusual juggling feats. I wish I had attended. I spent the end of the evening reading instead.

Wednesday, April 21 – Day at Sea. We did our usual sea-day activities, followed by a show called “Platinum” by the Celebrity Singers and Dancers. This was a very high-energy show that Robin and I liked better than Mom and Dad did (“too noisy” they said).

Thursday, April 22 – Aruba. We spent the day exploring Aruba by jeep. We got a rental from Thrifty right at the pier. We drove north to the Lighthouse first. We stopped at a beautiful beach with white sand and not many people just outside the lighthouse. We used the restrooms in an Italian restaurant with a lovely terrace that we would have loved to eat at if it had been a bit later in the day. We saw lots of goats, iguanas, cacti, and divi-divi trees as we traveled through this desert-like northern part of the island. Next we headed for the Alta Vista chapel. Half the fun of the day was the challenge of navigating from place to place. We eventually found the Alta Vista chapel, a quaint yellow-colored chapel on a hill overlooking the ocean. The day was hot and sunny enough that we all agreed it made sense to head back for a free lunch in air-conditioned comfort on the ship. This was very pleasant. We went up to the Ocean Café and got homemade pasta made to order. It was so pleasant on the air conditioned ship that Mom decided to stay on board the rest of the day! Dad, Robin, and I continued our island explorations after lunch, stopping first at the Natural Bridge. Churning surf passed beneath a natural bridge of rock onto a pristine white beach (very small). We sat and

enjoyed the view for awhile. Then we got some ice cream and a Coke in the Thirst Aid Station, a nearby snack bar. After that, we stopped at a cut in the rock with some dramatic surf. Dad nearly took a header into the surf when he tripped on a rock! Luckily he caught himself with a foot or so to spare. We saw our wild neighbors, T.J. and Joey, barreling past us at 70 mph on ATVs that they had taken the speed safeties off of. A long drive to the southernmost tip of the island brought us to Baby Beach. This idyllic cove of very warm ankle-deep to waist-deep water was a delight. We went swimming with Dad and floated on the warm salt water. Robin and I also went snorkeling near the one ocean inlet to the beach. The water was a bit colder and deeper here. We saw many colorful fish in a small area, including a puffer fish and parrotfish. This was our only snorkeling of the trip (I tried snorkeling in Cabo but it was too murky). We only got to snorkel for about twenty minutes but it was great fun. Then it was time to head back to the ship. I tried to get dried off but first Dad and then Robin got sand on me as they shook out their towels, so I kept trudging back to the water for another dip (poor me). We were very glad that the return journey to Orenjastad went as smoothly as it did, because we didn’t have a lot of time to spare before the ship’s departure time. We returned the rental (a Jimmy with a manual transmission and no air conditioning) around 5:20 and got back onto the ship around 5:30. All passengers had to be on board by 5:45 to allow for the 6 pm sailing. The show that evening was “A True Hawaiian Cowboy: Wes Epae.” I was a bit worried about this one but was pleasantly surprised. He did great impressions of many famous singers, and did them very well indeed. He received a standing ovation at the end. Robin and I spent a short time at the Cosmos Nightclub featuring a tango and meringue performance by the Pampas Devils Gauchos.

Friday, April 23 – Day at Sea. We all went to the penultimate Battle of the Sexes. By this time the two teams had grown quite large, with many people contributing answers. The women were just 2 points behind the men, having won the last two sessions. Competition was fierce! In the afternoon we enjoyed our time by the pool, interspersed with a shuffleboard lesson at 2 pm with Dad. Mom went to the “Runaway Jury” movie at 2:30. Dinner that evening was the final Formal Night. Mom was quite excited to see

lobster on the menu. Robin and I did a surf and turf, splitting lobster and steak. That evening we tried to go to the main seating show but the place was packed with people because of the Captain's Farewell Toast in the same theater. We enjoyed several free drinks while we looked for seats but ended up deciding to wait for the late show. We went to Michael's and I tried a warmed Courvoisier cognac. Robin tried a drink that tasted like a liquid chocolate covered cherry. Then it was back to the theater for more drinks at the second Captain's Farewell Toast. This time we got great seats right up front for the Fantasea production, billed as the entertainment highlight of the cruise. It was outstanding. Dominique and Clarisse from France performed an aerial act with two "scarves" hanging from the ceiling to the tune of "Let Me Fall", a la Cirque du Soleil. They also performed some fantastic ballet-like dancing and acrobatics. The dancers also performed some aerial feats, and the singers were all top-notch. As the cruise director said at the end, "You just got to see a show that would have cost \$100 or more in Las Vegas or New York." The performers received a standing ovation. (We were described as a "hot" audience by the performers on the cruise because they felt we were very appreciative.)

But the night was not over yet. We stopped by the Grand Buffet after midnight but the place was packed with people taking pictures from the balcony. We took a brief look after standing in a long line then decided we were too full to eat anything anyway. Mom and Dad had already given up and gone to sleep for the night. We decided to check out the party scene (if any) at the Cosmos Nightclub. We ran into T.J. (wearing a banana suit) as we were leaving our room and headed over to his place to share a shot of the vanilla rum we'd purchased in Panama. After that, we headed up to the club and had some good fun dancing. We also made a brief foray to the Grand Buffet for a quick bite. It was much less crowded this time.

Saturday, April 24 – Day at Sea. Our last day aboard. We played our final Battle of the Sexes and the men squeaked out a victory. Robin and I spent the last day in the sun poolside. I spent about an hour playing volleyball at 2 pm. Then, around 3:30 pm Dad showed up and we all played a game of shuffleboard. Then at 4 pm I headed up to the paddle tennis courts and played a really fun round of doubles paddle tennis. I wish I had discovered this sooner. T.J. and Joey were both there, and Robin stopped by for awhile but only watched. She did several laps on the jogging track, so we both got our exercise. In the morning and the afternoon, we did some packing as time allowed. We shared our final dinner, handed out tips, said our goodbyes to Reyes and Jose and Devon, and went to the Final Variety Show which had snippets of many of the previous entertainers. The show was preceded by the final round of snowball jackpot bingo. I bought the last card before the game started. We came close, with only two holes unpunched, and could have won over \$7000!

After we finished some hectic last-minute packing and put our luggage outside the room, we got to listen to our favorite Serenada Quartet one last time. Robin of course had her favorite Muscato drink, and I had yet another Coke. We gave a nice tip to Andreana and hugged her goodbye. We turned in around 1 am after filling out the last questionnaire.

Sunday, April 25 – Ft. Lauderdale to Denver. We disembarked at 8:30 am after a quick breakfast. We shared a cab with Mom and Dad to the airport, where we parted company with hugs all around. We spent all morning in the airport working on this journal and sharing an individual-size pizza from Pizzeria Uno. We're looking forward to getting home to Chaucer after two weeks away. But we're not looking forward to work the next morning! But what a great vacation. Two weeks of almost perfect weather, great food and entertainment, and fantastic company.