



## **You Can't Go Home Again, at Least Not on This Ticket**

*Robert Thomas Lundy*

Day 66 of the 78-day Cruise Of A Lifetime. Just under two weeks to go, and ...

*Thursday, March 12*

We arrive at the mouth of the Suez Canal, where we are met by a boat ominously labeled "QUARANTINE SUEZ."

At 5:30 AM we start through the canal. A downpour commences as a note is shoved under our stateroom door that informs us our excursion to an archeological site has been canceled due to Coronavirus, so we will have to take the Cyprus Panorama Tour instead.

As we huddle indoors watching the shores of the Suez Canal drift by through the sheeting rain, further news arrives that the US has declared a travel ban from Europe (but not the UK and Ireland) and that most airlines are cutting back on flights.

We are part of a long line of ships headed for Port Said on the Mediterranean end of the canal. At 11:30 PM, the loudspeakers all over the ship, including those in our staterooms come alive to announce that Cyprus is now closed off due to Coronavirus on *our* ship. It appears that at our last stop, one of our fellow passengers mentioned to a reporter that we on the ship were worried about the virus. This has been misconstrued into a banner headline on the BBC World Service that our ship is contaminated, which is not the case.

The next stop, therefore, will be Malta.

*Friday, March 13*

The dreaded "Captain-Speaking-From-The-Bridge" announces that Malta is closed to us as well, so while the ship will be taking on supplies there, there will be no passenger excursions allowed.

Furthermore, Spain is also shut down until April 20, so Gibraltar and La Coruña are out as well. We are now headed straight for Bristol, a 25% discount on top of any other offers for future cruises is available, and another two days of trip refund are to be added back into our bills.

We will be arriving in Bristol a day early, but we have the option of staying aboard the ship until the originally scheduled departure time.

*Saturday, March 14*

This day the drama club performs our little murder mystery that we've been rehearsing most of the sea days. It goes over well, with lots of jokes about the "Coca-Cola Virus."

It is followed up by the captain's now-customary announcement of a new glitch in the schedule. It seems that the authorities in Malta won't even let us take on provisions without a two-week quarantine, so the captain has decided we have enough food and fuel to make it directly to Bristol with no stops. Now, we will arrive in Bristol on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.

In other news, the US has extended travel restrictions to include England and Ireland as well as the rest of Europe.

*Sunday, March 15 - Saturday, March 21*

Cruising the Mediterranean sea while the rest of the world descends into chaos, from what little we hear on our internet-challenged older ship ... We arrive in Bristol even earlier than re-planned.

*Sunday, March 22*

The UK has locked down. Therefore we have no hotel to stay in once we are off the ship. Our flight home to San Diego isn't for another week, but who cares, it's also been canceled.

*Monday, March 23*

Our travel insurance comes through. They get us a flight back tomorrow, the same day we are to be evicted from the ship.

*Tuesday, March 24*

The Airport express bus from Avonmouth to Heathrow is canceled. Fully masked and loaded with luggage, we arrive at Terminal 5 after a two-hour ride in a taxi that smells power-washed with hand sanitizer. The cab driver apologizes and says that there is a problem with the credit card payment system. We need to pay cash. This is a bit awkward, since I have only £10 on hand. All the rest of my cash is in US currency.

"No problem" says the cabby. "There's a cash machine (ATM to you Colonials) in the terminal." Indeed there is. After we watch the said device cogitate several minutes upon my request for £200, it finally informs us it is no longer in service. We settle for the equivalent in dollars.

Of the hundreds of ticket stations in the building, only two are operational. On the plus side, nobody worries about limits on carry-on bags. We passengers (all 25 of us) board an Airbus A380. No issues with social distancing here—the plane is designed to carry over 500 people.

As we fumble with our seatbelts, a text message beeps on our phones that there will be no meal service on our flight due to the disruptions caused by the Coronavirus. It recommends we purchase plenty of food before getting on the plane. Timing ...

We push away from the gate. Then a strong Scottish brogue announces that a passenger has been taken ill and must be removed, and there will be a wee delay in departure. The time we will be stuck inside our flying warehouse has been extended from 11 hours to 13. Regret is expressed for any inconvenience.

In the air, we find to our relief that there is a bit of food to be had on the plane after all. Water, orange juice, and a prepackaged chicken sandwich that officially expired the prior day are available to each passenger. And a small bag of crisps. (Potato chips to us Colonials.)

Three episodes of *Good Omens*, an action–adventure–sci–fi flick starring Will Smith, a couple of documentaries, and a 350-page book later, we land at LAX. We are escorted off the plane six at a time and delivered to a hazmat-suited health screening team. Fortunately, we have not been to any of the places they are worried about within the past 14 days. We are told, however, to self-isolate for two weeks anyway. And have been ever since. And our future cruise discounts? The line just folded.

