



October 16, 2017 Update – Group Cruise News



"Norwegian Getaway" docked in Nynäshamn Harbor, Sweden

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Welcome! Following two September weeks of land touring in Wisconsin and around both the northern shore of Lake Superior and the eastern shore of Lake Huron in Ontario, I departed the U.S. on the 26th for over a full month in Europe. On my schedule were three cruises...a nine-night Baltic sailing aboard *Norwegian Getaway*, round-trip from Copenhagen; another nine nights on *MSC Preziosa* on a repositioning itinerary from Hamburg to Barcelona; and an eight-day (mostly) Western Mediterranean experience from Barcelona to Lisbon on *Wind Surf*...as well as overnights in Copenhagen and Hamburg, and three-night hotel stays in both Barcelona and Amsterdam. I'm about halfway through the trip at present, but unexpected adventures have certainly played a major role in *this* European sojourn.

First, the three different (but partnering) airlines I flew on to get across the pond managed to pool their resources to send my luggage to who knows where, requiring me to travel for fully two-and-a-half weeks with but the barest of essentials, including only one pair of trousers. My suitcase and I were finally reunited yesterday in Lisbon, so I hope it had a nice journey without me. Fortunately, I just happened to check the Scandinavian Airlines (the last of the carriers involved) baggage service website after we arrived in Portugal, since no one had bothered to contact either me or anyone on the *MSC Preziosa* cruise staff directly to advise that my bag had indeed been located and had been sent to the Lisbon airport three days earlier. At least I was able to find out on my own, and have the bag delivered before the ship continued on to Gibraltar.

Next, my wallet was stolen on October 3rd by a pair of expert pickpockets in St. Petersburg, Russia. Since then I've largely been without clothes, money, or credit cards, although happily, most of my arrangements had been prepaid, and with some welcome assistance from my traveling companion 'Di' Varnell, my bank, and both the cruise lines involved so far, as well as a few emergency purchases, I've been able to cope pretty well. Furthermore, due to high winds and waves, *Norwegian Getaway's* safe departure from the relatively narrow and shallow St. Petersburg harbor channel was delayed long enough so that our scheduled call at Helsinki, Finland, had to be cancelled. And due to a general strike of workers in France, *MSC Preziosa's* call at Le Havre had to be replaced by one in Zeebrugge, Belgium, which at least had the advantage of allowing a visit (my fourth) to the charming historic city of Bruges.

Finally, somewhere along the way I picked up a still-lingering chest cold and laryngitis, and was also aboard a Belgian taxicab when it collided with a large tractor-trailer. Although no one was injured, we had an unexpected roadside delay until the local police and a replacement cab arrived on the scene. Assuming that I survive the rest of the month unscathed, I'll report on all three cruises and related happenings in my October *Group Cruise News Update*. Elsewhere, however, my good friends Jon and Bess London recently returned from a well-received, 24-day Mediterranean cruise on Holland America Line's *Westerdam*. Jon graciously provided me with a detailed report on the sailing, which I have excerpted as follows.

"Our waiter told us that the ship had recently come out of dry dock, and the carpeting, paint and furniture all looked brand new. Also during the dry dock, HAL added their Billboard OnBoard and Lincoln Center Stage entertainment venues to the *Westerdam*, which both proved to be welcome additions. The food in the main dining room was very good. I was especially impressed with the fresh fish that was served on several occasions; usually only frozen fish has been available on past cruises. Soups in the main dining room were innovative and consistently excellent. Also, Holland America has greatly improved its pizza, which was available most of each day in the buffet. The *Westerdam* Lido Deck Grill, called Dive-In, featured excellent hamburgers at no additional cost. The room service club and caprese sandwiches were consistently fresh and tasty.

"My favorite entertainment...by far was the twin piano players at Billboard OnBoard. These two talented musicians played an incredible variety of Top 40 and country hits accompanied by amiable chatter. (During) the all-request sets that were performed each night...the performers showed their ability to tackle just about any song that the audience wanted to hear. As you know, I'm not a big classical music fan, but I still enjoyed the quintet that performed on the Lincoln Center Stage. This was a vast improvement over the two-person Adagio String players that Holland America used to feature in the Explorer Lounge. In addition to classical selections, the quintet performed jazz and even some rock.

"The other nightly entertainment venue was the BB King Blues Club. I found this disappointing in comparison to the incarnation that I experienced last year on *Noordam*. On both ships, however, the volume level of the music was beyond excessive. I was only able to listen from outside the showroom itself and do not understand why anybody would want to have their eardrums blasted by the noise level within. The Main Stage entertainment seemed weak this time on the *Westerdam*, especially compared to what I saw last year on *Noordam*, or earlier this year on *Royal Princess* and *Celebrity Eclipse*. The production shows were fine, with talented singers and dancers, but there were only four of these shows on a 24-day cruise. The other singers, magicians, jugglers, and comedians didn't seem up to the standards I have experienced in the past. Perhaps HAL felt that the nightly entertainment was not as important on this cruise, since the itinerary was very port intensive.

"One factor that always makes a Holland America cruise special for me is the attitude of the crew. I don't know if their friendliness and willingness to accommodate is an intrinsic quality of the largely Indonesian crew, or the result of a superior training program, but HAL staff at all levels always seem the most welcoming of all the cruise lines, and the *Westerdam* crew was no exception. All in all, we were very pleased with *Westerdam* and were sorry to disembark when our 24 days were over."

LOTS of news this month...

CroisiEurope's Christmas cruises through Alsace and the Black Forest will now stop at the lively Freiburg market, where guests can browse locally-made Black Forest crafts like blown glass, wooden toys, ginger cake and mulled wine. They will then travel on to the cinnamon-scented Christmas markets of Colmar in Alsace, plus visit the Eco-museum, which showcases Alsatian Christmas traditions. This four-day program departs Strasbourg on November 28 and December 4, with prices starting at \$771 per person, double. For those looking to experience the spirit of French Christmas paired with the warmer weather of the South, the line is offering a new cruise through Provence and the Rhone Valley this December, departing December 21 in Lyon and returning on December 25, with stops in Viviers, Montelimar and Avignon. Pricing for this itinerary begins at \$1,409 per person, double.
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