



## Our Members Write

### Dick & Marilyn Holyer RTO/ERO Toronto Travelogue Hosts as referenced in our Newsletter of May, 2010

OUR FIRST MAJOR TRIP THIS YEAR was unusual for us because we have always avoided prolonged exposure to hordes of people, hell-bent on over-indulging in food and drink, often accompanied by loud music and the rude behavior typical under such circumstances, but, overcome by curiosity and a certain fatigue generated by several years of facilitating workshops for seniors in the winter and slugging away on an extensive roof garden at the condo in the spring and summer, in a mad moment, we signed up for a holiday consisting of one week at a resort hotel in St. Pete's Beach, Florida, followed by a one-week cruise in the Western Caribbean with the Holland-America line out of Fort Lauderdale. To add to the motivation, we contracted for some minor renovations of the condo just before Xmas, and all things considered, we knew we might be even more burned out than usual at his time of year, just after Xmas. Dick's mother died in May of 2009, leaving a lingering sadness, which a complete change of scene might address.



Thus, we ended up on Dec. 27, on a deluxe express coach with our favorite tour company for a 36 hour marathon from Toronto to Florida, with regularly scheduled short stops for fuel and meals and bathroom breaks, and motoring steadily along highway 75, between Detroit, Michigan, and the Sunshine State, and, in the process, encountering huge garish signboards, some seemingly several stories high, advertising fast food and reduced rate motels, in greater profusion than on any stretch of highway we have ever encountered, here or abroad. (Perhaps in these states (Michigan Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia there are no regulations governing such things, but the effect was surreal.) Common sense might suggest that this arrangement is not recommended for people with arthritis, bursitis and an attachment to sleeping in a real bed with three purring cats, but I digress. Little did we know that my neck muscles would also rebel and go into prolonged spasm not too long after the end of this odyssey back in Toronto, where I had access to the services of an excellent chiro.

Traveling in such a manner in daylight is not too stressful, but, at night, in the winter, in the middle of an ice and snow storm in Ohio, with traffic backed up for miles and several vehicles in the ditch on either side of the highway, made this traveler very uneasy, even a bit paranoid, remembering the experience a few years ago of a serious blood clot that suddenly appeared after a swimming pool accident, which has changed my life style ever since, knowing the condition can reoccur at any time, and that I would need to get to Emergency fast, according to the surgeon I had seen at Sunnybrook in Toronto. Fortunately, after an agonizing crawl in sheer "whiteout" conditions, we were able to get off the road for a supper break, and the fear lessened on a full stomach.

Back on board the bus, however, facing many more hours in the darkness of the road, the mind entertained the fantasy of quietly opening the door of the rear compartment (next to the on-board toilet), where the spare driver retired to rest in between shifts: I would just crawl in without disturbing him and stretch out on the floor beside his bunk, hoping to fall sleep, if only for a few minutes. Dick, seated up further in the bus, and able to catch a few winks, might not have been amused, but, at least, the other passengers might have had something else to talk about, other than the daunting weather to which we were hostage. I finally settled for standing in the aisle by the toilet and shaking my legs vigorously.

We were pleased to discover that even some of the greasy spoon eateries on the highway offer a seniors menu, with reduced prices and portions. By the next morning we knew we were in Dixie because the menu offered “grits” (corn soaked in lye??) with everything for breakfast. A “feedlot” (barn-like) restaurant called The Cracker Barrel, one of a chain which we had encountered before in Arizona, provided a rewarding experience, offering quick service, unlimited hot coffee, huge portions, and even a chess set, on a table with two old-fashioned rocking chairs in a cozy spot by a blazing fireplace. On the veranda outside were many more of the “hand-carved” chairs, even some with a military motif, for sale and available for shipping anywhere the customer desired. Outside the dining room area awaited a cluttered selection of colorful but ultra cheap merchandise from China, reminiscent of the best dollar stores in Canada and living proof of the fact that the USA continues to have a negative trade balance with the Peoples Republic.

Many similar products, including packaged food items, filled the shelves of the convenience store/ gas bars scattered along this southern route to paradise, but the Chamber of Commerce or the tourism authorities must have forgotten to adjust the external thermostat on this particular route, as we dragged ourselves off the bus in the middle of the night, stamping our feet to increase the circulation and marched in like disgruntled penguins, hoping for spring-- and maybe a fish. Obviously, the Chinese are versatile enough to churn out goods with a traditional down-home country western theme, as well as a variety of items reflecting an intimate connection with Jesus. And everywhere the sweet southern drawl of the staff poured out like the syrup on the hotcakes, embellished with Georgia pecans, fresh peaches and a mountain of real whipped cream, which we wolfed down for breakfast. By the second day, there were tantalizing roadside signs offering fresh pecans and bags of citrus fruit at bargain prices, but there was no stop for shopping in our race to the sun!

A few days on the silver strand at the beautiful Tradewinds Resort near Tampa Bay, although with more of the colder-than-usual-weather for these parts (60F, 15C), did wonders for the body and soul, especially after we bundled up in all the layers we had brought and retired to those wonderful big hammocks, nicely shaded by trees, but right on the on the pristine beach. But good things don't last forever, and, on the last night of the stay in that resort, Marilyn awoke with severe cramps and then numbness in both legs, just hours before we were to board our tour bus to cross Florida to the Atlantic side to catch the cruise ship in Fort Lauderdale. After some exhortations from my beloved to “wait a while and see if it goes away”, an executive decision was made to call for help because this condition could be the harbinger of a return of the serious blood clot from which I suffered a few years ago. Our young tour director, a caring individual and mother with kids of her own, was gracious about being awakened in the middle of the night after having recently arrived herself to fill in for someone who had to make an emergency trip home. She called a cab and whisked us to the nearest emergency ward at 1:30am, patiently addressing our concerns about what might happen next. Kudos to Katie, who is a good very manager and trouble-shooter for the tour company.

The place was deserted, and, after the application of a nice warm blanket fresh from the oven, and the drawing of some blood and a chat with the intern, who is from North Bay, Ontario, where he used to be a fireman, the young doc on duty appeared and said there was no blood clot, but that the kidney function analysis showed severe dehydration, which, as he had thought, had caused the muscle cramps! Meanwhile, Dick had been busy on the phone with the international phone number provided by our teachers health insurance plan; approval of the claim came through by fax very promptly and did not delay my treatment at all. (This was a trial run for us with the comprehensive health insurance we purchase thru the Retired Teachers Organization.)

The incident was a positive experience in many ways, and I vowed to stay hydrated for the duration of the trip, which would not be a problem on the ocean cruise, but would once again pose a challenge on the 36 hour return bus trip to Canada at the end of the cruise. Understandably, there is some reluctance on the part of most thoughtful passengers to drink a lot of liquids in between the rest room and fuel stops every few hours, knowing that the toilet on board the bus is basically for emergency use only. Nobody wanted to be “the spoiler” in the crowd, and, with the cold air outside, the air in the coach was quite dry. Lesson learned about this mode of long-

distance travel.

On the return trip from Florida to Canada, there would be less people and thus more empty seats on the bus, in which one could sprawl and attempt to sleep, in between the necessary stops and the mostly mind-numbing movies, probably well intended to soothe the sleepless beasts like myself (“Dumb and Dumber” type films, I call them). Going into the USA, we had been greeted by a rather determined official from the US Dept. of Agriculture, who boarded the bus briskly and demanded to know if any of us had any “contraband” fruit, warning that he had a sniffer dog at the ready, and that he had recently apprehended a traveler and imposed a \$300 fine on the spot, in the process holding up the bus for some time!

We gulped and handed over our passports, hoping there were no holdouts amongst us, or anyone with a misplaced guilt complex, who might feel compelled to confess to something. Fortunately, the obnoxious bureaucrat must have decided to let the sniffer dog rest on its laurels that day. We broke into a smile of relief, as we headed into the Disunited States of America, as I am wont to label my mother country, which is currently experiencing yet another attack of disunity, dyspepsia, and a deep distrust of politicians of any stripe. The Doctor (Obama) is in, but under siege by the goddess of less government, none other than Sarah Palin, who, in her rambling keynote speech to the assembled Tea Partiers in Nashville, Tennessee, recently asked the beleaguered President rhetorically how “that hopey-changey thing is working out”. Her high-priced smirk provided the answer, as the crowd once more climbed on their chairs to cheer her loudly, their “Palin for President” tee-shirts clearly visible to the cameras.....As a South African author once titled his book about apartheid, “Cry the Beloved Country”, as I do for mine.

Re-entering Canada was a different story: our spare driver went into the customs office and emerged quickly, saying he needed “four volunteers for a strip search”. That woke up several snoozing people and raised an eyebrow or two, but then our two bus drivers began to laugh, as we wheeled away from the border, not even having had to show our Canadian passports or lay eyes on a customs official. Obviously, they have seen a regular stream of tour buses with seniors heading for Florida at this time of year on round trips to the sun belt. Oh, Canada! We were SO glad to be HOME again!

Ironically, it was actually a little warmer in the Frozen North than it was in parts of Florida at the time. In fact, getting off the cruise ship, we had encountered customs people and security guards attired in warm coats, hats and gloves and shivering miserably. According to a local newscast we heard in one of our roadside stops in Georgia, two teenagers had recently drowned in one of the many sinkholes dotting the landscape, some visible from Highway 75; apparently, the ice was thinner than the boys thought, as they tried to approach a couple of girls. The secondary roads in the area were closed due to icy conditions, as we headed north.

Life on the ship, however, was good, if somewhat unreal, for people unaccustomed to being waited on hand and foot by a bevy of smiling Indonesian stewards, who turned down the bed, created an animal “sculpture” made of towels, and placed a chocolate mint on the pillow each night. It seemed dreadfully decadent to order a full breakfast to be delivered to the room, but, for the novelty of it, we tried it a couple of times. The various buffets offered a multitude of gastronomic delights, but Marilyn found it a bit disconcerting to find an attentive steward hovering at the elbow, once the items chosen had been passed over on a plate by the chef or server. As a compromise, she began explaining to the stewards that, although their faithful service was much appreciated, she had a balance problem and needed the practice of carrying two heavily laden plates back to a table in order to develop her “sea legs”. (One might imagine that they hastened to look up that idiom, as most stewards were quite eager to practice their English skills.) The two swimming pools reminded us of the wharf at San Francisco where the barking seals flop in the sun. Here the urge to bare all in the bikini and the disturbing number of the obese among the sun bathers was disturbing, and the blaring disco music from the bar would have drowned out the seals, so we simply avoided the pool areas and sought out secluded deck chairs in the shade. Our favorite refuge became the quiet lounge where an exceptionally talented string quartet played soothingly for several

hours after dinner every evening.

Of course, the casino and bars on the ship were jumping almost 24/7, but of passing interest to us. We rated the three shore excursions we chose-- to a private cay in the Bahamas and to the desert islands of Aruba and Curacao---near Venezuela from whence came our fresh produce, with love from Hugo Chavez--as under-resourced and over-priced, although the beaches in Aruba were public, pristine and inviting, while the colorful tropical ambience and Dutch influence in Curacao were more striking, but, even a brief exposure to the blazing sun, was enough to remind us that we are more comfortable in the northern climate, snow and all. Apparently, we were not the only passengers who preferred the A/C on the ship to the heat; at the foot of the gangplank were some of our stewards with cold towels and a drink of cold water, as people returned from the shore excursions to the luxury of our mother ship.

However, Dick did get his few seconds of “fame”, as one of the sexy folk dancers in Curacao beckoned some of the men in the audience to have a go at the sensuous movements on stage. (He did not have to be asked twice!) We observed, even among our own small group, that some people had apparently become “cruisaholics”, chalking up dozens of trips, and perhaps the price of room and board and entertainment on board IS inviting enough to tempt a retiree with a decent pension to make the cruise ships a semi- permanent address. (We would be tempted only if the three cats were made welcome aboard and guaranteed the same level of service as the two-footed guests. Even then, we realized, no doubt they would miss watching the birds, and squirrels in our back garden, and our own serene outdoor pool at the condo puts the goldfish bowls on board ship to shame). We noted wryly that in the Caribbean travel book we purchased on board the ship, the island of Cuba appeared on the map but was NOT to be found in the descriptive passages. Holland America, headquartered in Seattle, Washington, and registered in Holland, does NOT visit Cuba, but, hopefully, that will change, if President Obama is able to survive the current battle over health care reform, bailouts, stimulus funding, “big” government and the size of the deficit in the USA, and to seek a second term.

On reflection, the current cruise prices do seem “reasonable”, and the aggressive marketing of future cruises was tempting, with attractive discounts being offered, requiring only a small down payment to hold the space. Our main deck cabin with an ocean view was available for about \$800 for a week. A veranda could be had for at least another \$200, but, on this trip, we learned, people kept the sliding door shut to ward off the cold! Seen from the glass elevator, most of the balconies appeared to be just large enough to accommodate a small table and chairs, and it was apparent that the occasional rocking motion of the ship in choppy waters was far more noticeable the higher the deck (of ten). Sick bags were made discreetly available in the common areas near the elevators, but we did not need them with our room on the stable main deck. We looked forward to the lazy days at sea and began to love exploring this floating city with its diverse population and stimulating activities, (Dick maintains these do not include on-board shopping) but we were both delighted with daily computer lessons subsidized by Microsoft and well presented by a young “Techspert” who offered sessions on enhancing digital photos with free soft ware.

We returned the evening of Jan. 11 from Florida, a lot more sleep-deprived than we would like, after a second 36 hour bus ride, still sleepless but convinced that there is a lot more to Florida than cruise ships and beaches. If one could avoid the current ordeal of airport security and have a vehicle at one’s disposal, the sunshine state offers many delights, to name a few, in terms of the Tampa Bay Aquarium, which we loved; the Sunken Garden (which grew out of one of the many sink holes) in St. Petersburg; the abundant wildlife (other than the Tampa Bay Lightning hockey team, whom we saw defeated by the Montreal Canadiens); Cape Canaveral (The Space Centre); many places of historical interest; and the scenic drive on the Florida Keys, which is not a good place to be during the Hurricane season, but how could we, not want to see Hemingway’s home with the descendants of his herd of six-toed cats!

Interestingly, on board, we received two daily bulletins/newspapers, one with a fair summary of world news,

and the shorter Canadian version, containing mostly sports news. (Does that tell you something?) At a lecture and film by the one and only environmental compliance officer aboard ship, attended by a handful of male passengers, we learned that the cruise line had stopped providing diners with food trays because it cut down on food waste when people simply could not physically carry everything their hearts might desire in a single foray! The officer said, in reply to my question about educating the passengers, that even gentle reminders about the need for conservation, to say nothing of the perils of over-consumption, were deemed not acceptable, since people were deigned to be aboard for a NON-STOP good time, regardless of the environmental or health implications. Nothing to be smug about, I suppose, since we, too, enjoyed our multiple desserts and second helpings on occasion!

The trip was an opportunity to sample an increasingly popular choice of “re-creation” and a temporary escape for travelers from more extreme climes. However, a serious question might well be posed as to what Jesus would chose as an ethical mode of transportation: I know what I would chose: give me the donkey anytime! I leave the express bus and the airports to hardier souls with better lubricated and more resilient bodies than mine! If you see me on Highway 75 next winter, give a wave! \*My donkey and I will be making regular stops at the EconoLodge or the Days Inn to hit the hay on our next trip to Paradise.

**Marilyn and Dick Holyer**

(back in the Promised Land of the Prorogued and the Perogie)

\*Actually, we adopted one from the Donkey Sanctuary near Guelph last June, but she may be too old (the animal, not Marilyn) to make the trip.