

The Fairburn singers on tour – (yet again) – 25 – 30 May 2024

Once again, the Fairburn Singers, accompanied by 30 family and friends, embarked on yet another cruise with Fred Olsen Cruise Lines. This time our destination was the Isles of Scilly, Guernsey and Honfleur, from Southampton. After an early start and a 6 hour coach journey on Saturday 25 May, we eventually arrived at Southampton dock and our first glimpse of MS Borealis, pride of the Fred Olsen fleet. Check in was speedy and efficient and soon we were on board and able to sample the delights of “The View” restaurant, located right next to the Lido Bar and pool. The roof of the pool was open to let in the lovely warm sunny weather. We weren’t due to sail until 7pm, so after embarking at around 1.30pm, we had plenty of time to explore the ship, unpack and get ready for dinner at 6pm.

Dinner was the usual 5 course delight, beautifully served by the very efficient waiters and by 7.45pm, we had left port and were sailing along the River Test, into Southampton Water and on into the Solent where we passed the Isle of Wight on our port side as we headed into the English Channel.

At this point, I should mention that we had been informed of a change of itinerary. Unfortunately, we were no longer going to the Isles of Scilly (where we had been due to arrive on Monday 27 May), as we were told that the water around the island was too choppy for the tenders to get people safely off the ship and into shore. This was disappointing as several of our group had been looking forward to a trip to Tresco Abbey Gardens, or St Martin’s Vineyard, but it was not to be. The Captain explained that decisions to miss ports were not taken lightly, and with the safety of passengers and crew being paramount, plus the risk of accidents and incidents in the difficult seas at the Isles of Scilly, we were instead going to visit St Malo, on the French coast. But first, in another change to the itinerary, we were going to Guernsey two days early, on Sunday 26 May. This was a tender port so there was a need to launch the lifeboats to act as tenders to reach the shore, and whilst it was a little choppy and the boat bobbed around quite a lot, it was deemed safe enough for us to leave the ship and travel to the shore this way.

Once ashore, it became apparent that the islanders had not been expecting us! They are always given advance notice of cruises going to the island and they prepare themselves accordingly (rallying the volunteers at the port side and arranging tours). I heard there were several hasty emails and calls to the island to make them aware of our change of itinerary and imminent arrival. Unfortunately, as it was a Sunday, there were very few shops open, but those that were did a roaring trade. We were able to take a scheduled bus and at a cost of £10 a head, we travelled around the whole island in just under two hours taking in St Peter Port, the airport (!), Vazon Bay and Cobo Bay on the north side of the island and then back via St Sampson to St Peter Port. We marvelled at the beautiful flowers, quaint churches and lovely buildings and learnt that it is very

expensive to live on the island and that house prices are bordering on extortionate, and that very few people ever leave once they had settled there.

Some people walked to the Castle Cornet, others explored the underground museum while some people went on the tour to the Candie Gardens and Victor Hugo's House. We were interested to see the French influence on the island with a lot of places and houses with French names.

Once back on the ship, Sunday was the day of our first concert (hastily re-arranged due to change of itinerary). We sang a variety of our favourite tunes including our signature song – 'One Voice', and a choir anthem "As long as I have Music". We also gave a passable rendition of one of the new songs in our repertoire – Africa, by Toto. We have been practising this for months and our MD finally decided we were good enough to sing it. We finished our concert with a 'Tribute to Queen' and were pleased that our audience were soon waving their arms to the tune of "We are the Champions" and then gave us a rousing ovation and we were encouraged to do an encore so, we finished with a "round" of songs which include Swing Low, When the Saints and I Wanna Sing, which the audience joined in and hugely enjoyed.

Monday 27 May found us already anchored outside St Malo by breakfast time. This was another tender port but luckily the sea was less choppy and the distance to shore much shorter. However, the queue to get on a tender was very long and we waited nearly 2.5 hours to get off the ship, which meant our time on St Malo was fairly short. But we walked round the lovely old town, observing the Cathedral of St Vincent, passing by the Maison de La Duchesse Anne (a pre-renaissance mansion dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century), and walked along the Rue du Pélicot. Many people chose to walk along the famous ramparts which surround the citadel and contain many statues of famous people born in the town.

However, we needed to get back to the ship because Monday evening at 5.15pm saw us attending our personal cocktail party courtesy of Fred Olsen, one of the perks of being part of a large group. We gathered in the Observatory to partake of drinks and canapes before trooping downstairs for dinner at 6pm. This was followed by another show, this time with a comedian who was also a fantastic piano player and who told a very funny joke about the dancing made famous by Michael Flatley (you had to be there!). The daily evening quiz at 10pm in the Morning Light pub was a must for most of our group, but in all the 5 days, I don't think any of our teams won the coveted bottle of Cava!

Entertainment back up in the Observatory followed and a very late night ensued, with many sore heads the next day, which luckily was a sea day. When I say a sea day, that usually conjures up the ship slicing through the water at some speed, allowing free access to the open air and enjoying the sights of the ocean. Unfortunately, our sea day could not have been more different. Due to the change of itinerary, after visiting St Malo, we only had to sail round the coast of northern France to Honfleur, passing

Cherbourg, but as we were not due to dock in Honfleur until Wednesday 29 May, we literally headed into the English Channel and that's where we stayed, stationary, for around 12 hours. It was very surreal, made worse by the fact that it was quite foggy so we couldn't see anything, not even any of the ships passing through the Channel. The other very confusing phenomenon was that we were sitting not far from Guernsey, which meant that our electronic devices were picking up BST from Guernsey, yet our analogue pieces were on French time, so no-one really knew what time it was!

However, the one saving grace of being stationary was that our second concert, which took place at 3.30pm that day, was achieved without having to anchor our feet and pray that the ship didn't lurch one way or another when we were on stage (it's happened before). This time we began with another choir favourite, 'Let the River Run', followed by medleys of Oliver and My Fair Lady and finished with You'll Never Walk Alone (always a crowd pleaser). At this point, I feel I should make a special mention of our Chair and MC, Janet. Janet is the Fairburn Singers USP (Unique Selling Point). She is certainly unique, and during a fractious few minutes during our concert when we suffered a malfunction with the keyboard (much to the frustration of our very competent accompanist, Mandy) Janet kept the audience entertained with a number of jokes and stories (of which she has an abundance tucked into her choir folder). At one point, she decided that she would sit on the edge of the stage to tell a particularly amusing story, but standing behind her, we all knew what would happen when she tried to get back up again. It took two tenors and two basses to help her to her feet, there were arms and legs everywhere, much to the amusement of the audience (and the choir), before we could carry on with our performance. But it caught the eye of the Cruise Entertainment Director who approached us after the concert to suggest we would be fabulous as the entertainment on a pre-Christmas cruise. We suggested he come up with a deal!

Tuesday was also the day of the Captain's welcome and cocktail party to which everyone is invited and where we were introduced to the Senior Managers on board who keep the ship running in good order (shipshape even). This was then followed by formal night in the dining room, so posh frocks and dinner suits were the order of the day, along with the posher crockery at the tables. Another bash at the 10pm quiz followed another comedian in the theatre, then more high jinks in the Observatory.

Wednesday 29 May found us finally moored up at the port of Honfleur, where we had arrived very early in the day. Unfortunately, the weather Gods were against us this time with incessant, often heavy rain marring our wander round the beautiful old town and marina. Several tours were happening this day and I was on the tour to a Calvados Distillery which promised tasting and cheese. The coach trip was around 40 minutes from the port, and the French guide, who spoke extremely good English, spent the whole journey telling us how the people of Normandy didn't like looking into each others gardens so planted tall trees (which also lined the roads) and that a lot of famous

people live in the region because the Normandy people are good at keeping secrets. On arrival at the distillery, in the rain, we were shepherded into the room where the apples were taken to be mashed, and then into the bottling room which was not in use that day, and then into two large warehouses full of very big wooden casks, no doubt full of the fermenting liquid, so we were all looking forward to the tasting.

After being ushered into the gift shop, we were invited to partake of the Calvados liqueur, the smallest measure imaginable in a large glass, and offered a small plate of VERY small pieces of local soft cheeses, including camembert. One bite and they were gone. The miniscule offering of the Calvados brandy was also gone in a flash and the rather tasty looking Calvados version of Baileys looked delicious but the amount we were given was so small you could hardly taste it. So all in all, not the best value for money trip!

And then before we knew it, we had had our last evening on board, and we were docked in Southampton by 6am on Thursday 30 May, where our coach was waiting to whisk us back to Yorkshire.

But we had had the best time, as ever. We leave a lasting memory for our fellow cruisers if the compliments and feedback are anything to go by, and certainly make our presence felt on board. But we love our cruises, we love the camaraderie of always finding someone in the group to talk to, the banter between the dinner tables and most of all for entertaining our fellow cruisers at our concerts.

Fred Olsen Cruise Lines, thank you for allowing us to perform on board and for the experience, and for your continued sponsorship. We will be back!

Sally Whittingham, Secretary, The Fairburn Singers  
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