

ELVIS WAS KING BUT BING COULD SING - & CRUISING THE COLUMBIA RIVER

We now move to the final part of our 2018 trip, a river cruise in a paddle steamer – just like we did last year down the Mississippi. At the Seattle airport we once again use the now familiar self-check-in, print our boarding passes and baggage labels (with only one error) and then hand in our bags. We are flying to Spokane and the lady at the counter remarks, “*You are from New Zealand and you are going to Spokane?*” This makes us wonder just what we are letting ourselves in for. Security check is a breeze now and also, I find a money exchange so am able to get some US dollars at last.

Anyway, the plane (another Q400) takes us across snow-capped mountains and within about an hour we have landed at Spokane. It occurs to me as we got ready for this flight that I did not appear to have any “airport transfer” to our hotel. It seemed to be listed as “own arrangement” – and I did not have one. Having collected our baggage we made our way out the door, looked up and down (in a bewildered fashion obviously) and a well-dressed man in dark uniform and cap came up to us and asked if we were going to “*The Historic Davenport Hotel.*” I assured him we were and he escorted us to his equally smart black van with a small number of other people similarly bound. He had names for them – but not us. He must have recognised us as “paddle boaters” though!

We make the hotel in quick time and find it is a splendid old fashioned hotel with impeccable furnishings and service. Our room is large with a giant bed, though so high off the floor, we almost need steps to get up into it. We eventually work out ways of assisting each other to get up into bed. Our stay is only one night and it is the assembly point for those joining the cruise. We go to the registration area, check-in, get instructions and then amuse ourselves for the evening.

In the morning, cruise passengers meet for breakfast in a ball-room, make friends and then, at various times board buses for a tour of the city of Spokane. Recalling that last year at our pre-cruise assembly point (Memphis) we took a “*Graceland*” tour to check out if Elvis had actually *left the building*, well we have a similar objective in this city. Visit the home of Bing Crosby! Now we are talking real

singing!!! Bing’s family house is near the Gonzaga University and preserved for all to see. What a nostalgic visit this was. While Bing studied at this university, he never graduated for Hollywood seemed to get in the way! Of course the tour continued on all around the city and was very interesting – but the home of the old crooner was the highlight. Returning to our hotel, our bags have been collected and loaded (somewhere) and we eventually make a way to a series of busses that take us over a couple of hours, through the Washington farmlands, into Idaho briefly and then finally to the cities or towns of Clarkston and Lewiston, one on each side of the Snake river (and named after the original explorers, Lewis & Clark - we hear lots more of them over the next week).

The *American Empress*, our paddle steamer is tied up alongside the river and we make our way on board to find our suitcases already stored in our room. The cabin is small (but perfectly formed) with its own bathroom and as well our own private outside deck. We unpack and rejoice at not having to do that again for a whole week! We explore the boat and discover that it is rather similar to the one we rode last year though a little smaller (200 odd passengers as opposed to 400 odd). There are a couple of dining areas and a smaller theatre and we soon settle down to our first meal with “new friends.” We are not the only Kiwis on board and over several days meet up with three other couples from our country.

This particular boat is only about 15 years old and was originally built for doing Alaska tours in the summer and then in recent years has been bought out by the *American Queen Steam Boat Company* and used exclusively on the Snake and Columbia Rivers. I discover to, that, unlike last year’s boat, it is not in fact a paddle “*steamer*” but its power comes from electricity! That is, diesel generators make electricity to drive motors which turn the paddle wheel and as well other independent motors that give the boat driving and steering power so it can go sideways. I figure, on this boat anyway, the paddle wheel is actually not doing a great deal. It doesn’t matter much for we are sailing down the river and that’s all I require.

On the first night we just do a cruise around the Clarkston Harbour while having dinner. Maybe they just want to check if we get sea-sick (or river sick). The next day we leave Clarkston and begin to make our way down the last 125 miles of the Snake River before we reach the Columbia.

Another aspect of these rivers is the dams that have been built on them and I recall one of our friends saying earlier that we would not be able to ride all the way down because of this! I figured there must be a solution and very quickly after our departure discover there is. It is a series of locks (three at 100 feet in the first night) that go alongside the dams and we just sail in, empty the water and drop to another level. There is even a "fish access" ladder up one side so that they can also get by. These are all managed by the US Army Corp of Engineers. We pass eight such dams in all.

There are cattle grazing areas and as well some orchards along the river. Wild animals (black bear, cougar & coyotes) are said to inhabit the banks but we don't see any. On the water there is a proliferation of birds, one to stand out is the white pelicans who constantly fly alongside us. There is also a lot of grain grown in the early area of the cruise – so much in fact that it does not fit into silos and extremely large heaps (perhaps 15 – 20 metres high) are seen out in the open. First time I have seen that. I query what happens when it rains and am told that they only have about 200mm per year in that area and it has already fallen!

The first real port of call on our way down is Richland which I thought was just a small town however it turns out to be a collection of three cities and became well known during WW II when aluminium plants sprang up (due to power availability from the dams) to build aircraft and also for the *Manhattan Project*, i.e. the secret facility that was the nation's first nuclear reactor. The rest as they say, is history.

Buses accompany the boat and they do "Hop On – Hop Off" tours of the area and these are complimentary with the cruise. More extensive tours can be purchased and occasionally we take these – like the wine tour one! We are now on the Columbia River and the blinding obvious occurs to me, namely that it (the river) originates in British

Columbia, from whence we have just come! We are going to sail down some 300 miles of it. We can see the hillsides alongside are getting greener now and a lot more crops are grown. They refer to the area as the "Fruit Loop" (though it does not mean what you just thought it did!)

The next port was The Dalles. We take the bus tour & inspect an Art Deco Theatre. Pointed out to us in this city are two very large buildings that belong to Google who have invested a couple of billion dollars here for some of their technology bases. We take in another "extra" tour, this time to a vintage aircraft and automobile museum. It is spectacular and I have never seen anything like it. On each side of the rivers we do see a lot of trains and the river guide tells us there can be over 100 per day and each with 100 wagons. We see several of them, carrying both grain, oil and no doubt other products. On the river though we see barges but not in anything like the numbers we witnessed on the Mississippi last year. When we reach the city of Astoria at the mouth of the Columbia though I can see seven large freighters sitting "in the stream" and I am told they are awaiting berths at various ports up river to collect grain and logs – to go overseas.

Astoria is the mouth of the river and a bus tour there takes us to the top of a hill which is home to the Astoria Column. We had visited it before in 2007 but the internal stair case was closed. This time it was open and one of us was silly enough to climb the 164 steps to the top and, like the other kids, launch a little balsa wood plane to fly to the bottom and land at Eleanor's feet. That night we travelled back up the river to the cities of Portland (Oregon) on one side of the river and Vancouver (Washington) on the other. We ended our cruise with a bus tour of Portland and then to the airport for a journey of around 30 hours back to NZ.

In doing that we leave Portland on the 23rd, reach Auckland on the 25th and miss altogether the 24th of July. Fortuitous perhaps for, if she were still with us, this date would have been the 50th birthday for our late daughter Lisa.

Home, in the middle of winter but it is fine and sunny – and we love it. It is great to travel, but it is good to be home again.



Spokane Hotel



Highrise Bed!



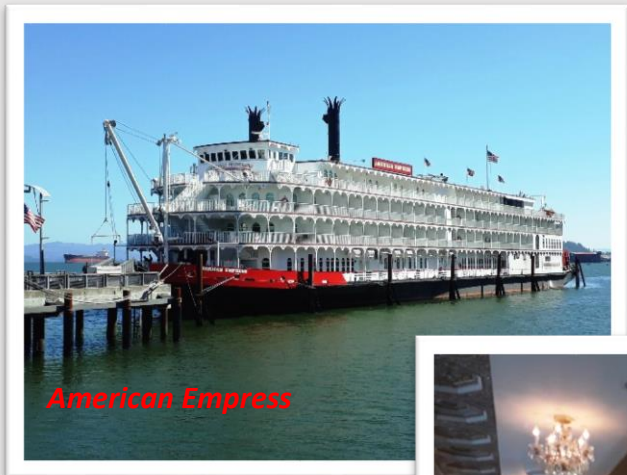
Bing's House



Me & Bing @ University



Bing can sing!



American Empress



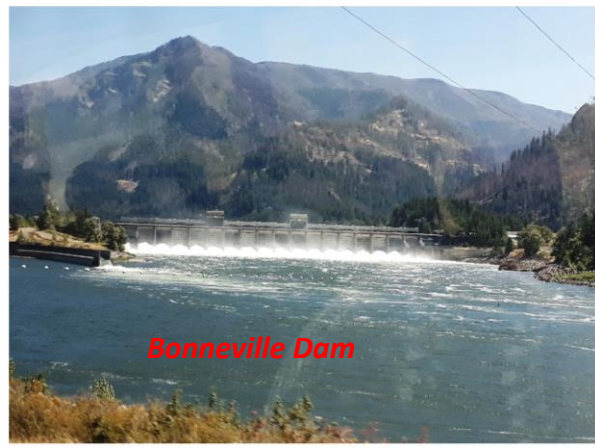
Breakfast on deck



Fine Dining



Fish ladder @ Bonneville



Bonneville Dam



Automobile & Aircraft Museum



Big River – big bridges



Astoria Trolley



Astoria Column



Astoria Gardens



Last lap: Our busses – Our bags