

## THE LAND OF THE FREE

Our visit to South America has concluded, our tour group has split up and we are headed north to the US. I figured we would go there because it was so close – or so I thought. I mean, you can fly from Auckland to South America (Santiago) in 11 hours and to Los Angeles in 12 hours, so there can't be that much difference. Wrong! I had overlooked that we had moved from the west coast of South America, to the east and thus had to fly back (about 4 – 5 hours to Lima in Chile) and then fly eight hours to LAX (not close at all)

However it was in daylight and so I figured the 15 hour journey would be easy to handle. Having fed us on this second leg they pulled all the blinds down and pretended it was night! I could not quite follow the rationale for this as our arrival time at LAX was 7.30pm. By then they had put the blinds up again so that we could see it was in fact still daytime!

Off the plane we stumbled through Border Control, never getting the electronic “fast passage” to work and finishing up dealing with a human! We were booked into an airport hotel so it was good to “shuttle” there, have some space again and to have a sleep.

The next morning I got busy trying to organise transport to my friends place on the outskirts of Los Angeles. I knew it was about an hour and a half away and debated whether to get a rental car from a nearby depot, some form of public transport or some sort of shuttle.

This is LA, there is little public transport and everyone goes by car. I eventually acquire a sort of “shuttle” (called a “limo”) and for US\$180 got to my friend's house! It would have been cheaper to get the rental (which I had in fact done a couple of times before) and just leave it sitting in the drive until I drove back into the city again.

Anyway we had a pleasant stay with our Rotary friend and over three days enjoyed resting, laundry and catching up on things. One of the important tasks was to replace a suitcase that had been damaged on the flight into Buenos Aires. A new set of luggage purchased just before this trip, had not survived (our last set had lasted ten years!). For a brief moment I thought we could use a spare case, already positioned in LA and that I had loaned our friend last year – however it was too small and off shopping we went.

Come the time to return to the LA I called our limo friend and this time he quoted \$240! He was good though and took us to our city hotel door, promising to pick us up in a couple of days for our ride to Long Beach – if we still wanted him.

We enjoyed ourselves right in the heart of the city, the first time we had ever done anything like this in all our trips through Los Angeles. We did some walking and also used the “Hop On – Hop Off” bus to travel around & even as far afield as Hollywood. It was a great day.

In the courtyard of our hotel each evening, there was a free public concert and we could watch it from our hotel bedroom, admittedly some 15 floors above. Come Sunday morning we were on the road again and our now familiar driver called to collect us, this time for a quoted fee of \$80 to get to Long Beach.

In all the, we had spent US\$500 on LA transport and heard great tales of how our Somali driver had come to the US 15 years earlier and educated and set himself up in the new

world. He still looked after his family in Somali and Kenya and indeed I felt I had contributed about a year of support for them myself, in my brief association with “Ahmed!”

We were heading to Long Beach to join an ocean cruise from LA to Miami – “*The Panama Connection*” with the Oceania Line. To get us in position though, we had asked our travel agent (“*World Travellers*” at Napier) to get us a hotel there for the final night before boarding our ship the “*Insignia*” on Monday.

In a stroke of genius she booked us on the “Queen Mary.” We had seen the ship a couple of times in earlier travels but never had the time to actually go on board. This quaint old vessel, built in 1936, used as a troop carrier in the Second World War, then returned to her role as a luxury liner at the end of the 1940s, sailing until she finished up in 1976,

Purchased by the Long Beach city and going through a number of iterations, she is now used as a hotel and special events centre, tied up alongside a wharf at the massive Long Beach dock. Being on board for about 24 hours, taking a tour of the ship and eating in her restaurants, was like taking a trip back through time.

As well as the ship, we were able to observe the working of the Long Beach port. This is a massive operation, the likes of which I have never seen before (well except perhaps Rotterdam when we briefly drove over it a couple of years back.) There are ships, cranes, containers and trucks everywhere. The port does not seem to ever stop working.

Time to move on though. I had noticed a dock for cruise ships alongside the Queen Mary and had the vague impression that our ship might dock there in the morning. We saw a Carnival line ship leave in the evening and the next morning, an identical one was tied up! Hence a 15 minute taxi ride to some other part of the port to find our ship waiting for us.

There it was, the *Oceania Insignia*. Not a large ship by modern standards for it only carries up to 680 passengers (if all cabins are filled on a twin share basis) and has a crew of around 400. Some of the larger cruise liners now days handle thousands of passengers, and of course, with a commensurate number of crew members. Not so the Insignia line. They have five ships of this particular size and pride themselves in that. I think they have got it right!

We board the ship and find they have impeccable service. The crew can't do enough for you. Having travelled now for three weeks, the greatest joy for us though, was getting to our cabin and being able to unpack our suitcases and put away all our clothes. To this point we had not stayed in any place for more than about three days. Now we were unpacking for 17 days.

We have a lovely cabin on the seventh floor (of 10) and towards the front (bow) of the ship. It is of reasonable size with a kingside bed, two seat settee as well as a desk, chair, wardrobe and drawers. The bathroom though, vies in size for that in our Fifth Wheeler RV!

As well though, we have an outside deck and it is so much fun being able to stand outside and watch the ship docking or leaving port, or perhaps just sitting in our chairs on the veranda enjoying a gin and tonic! Glancing into one of the internal cabins (i.e. without a deck) I am pleased we paid the extra for this privilege.

I think I am going to quite enjoy this trip.



*LA - in glass*



*Paramount Pictures*



*Meeting Minnie*

*The name that says it all*



*QM The Bridge - in brass*



*QM The deck*



*Queen Mary at berth*



*The Port of Long Beach*



*Oceania Insignia*