

## From the Bridge Room – A Cruise Diary – #1

### A Warm Start

by John Arblaster



The value of a vacation starts with the joy of anticipation, and for the 100-odd excited travelers who chose to join Audrey Grant and her Better Bridge team on this Caribbean bridge cruise, the run up was filled with very pleasant dreams.

For those from northern climes, one of the dreams is for a February escape from the endless winter. The mind's eye is full of turquoise water, tropical weather, perfect cuisine, pampering, languid days, and exotic ports. And there are also dreams of a super bridge program...learning better bridge from one of the world's great teachers, and playing bridge with old and new friends. In other words: being spoiled for choice.

Port Everglades is a huge cruise centre. As we entered the Port on February 25 to join Audrey aboard the Holland America Eurodam for a week, we were impressed by the considerable fleet of huge ships from all the big cruise lines. Most had arrived that morning, restocking their supplies and touching up their suites...making sure everything is just right for the incoming guests.

And one of these floating palaces was waiting for us. The Eurodam is sleek, powerful, and only four years old...a sophisticated floating hotel with 11 passenger decks, a topside Pan-Asian restaurant (one of seven) and lounge surrounded by panoramic views, an Explorer's Lounge bar, a new Italian restaurant adjacent to the Lido, an elegant jewelry boutique...in short, a fine place to spend a week. Also, following the Holland America tradition, the ms Eurodam features an art collection based on the theme, "*The Dutch Golden Age — An Inexhaustible Tradition.*"

The cruise lines compete for guests, so being treated like royalty and pampered throughout the ship, from the spa to the bar, meets our holiday expectations. All this we dreamt about, and once on board we sank into the elegantly-appointed, spacious staterooms where we could look at the Port from our private verandah.

The ships slip silently away from their moorings, and then get a rousing and raucous sendoff from cowbells and cheering—even, it was reported, a brief flash of flesh from one of the little boats passing us by. Then we are out of the channel and into the open Florida Straits, heading two days later for the Turks and Caicos.

And we look forward to our first bridge game tonight after dinner. So everyone comes for the early seating in the dining room. Looking around at the Better Bridge group, there is a broad gender and age mix, which is good. Audrey also has a 'no dine alone' approach, so I was happy to find myself dining with Louis who was regaling me with his career as a probate attorney in Florida.

Now that he has retired, Louis' lifestyle includes golf five times a week and bridge three times a week. Louis is 98 years old, he says. His daughter bought him the cruise, and I would guess he will win the Better Bridge longevity sweepstakes hands-down.

So Louis and I are thoroughly enjoying our prime rib, but just when this first gourmet dinner was at its splendid height and everyone was cheerfully toasting their presence at it, not so soft pingy bells go off in the dining room and everywhere else around the ship for ten seconds or so. For veteran cruisers, this means something unexpected is happening which, in this case, turned out—you knew it before I said it—to be a fire alarm! Electrical smoke is coming from the receptacle housing the coffee pot serving the room where (yes, that's right) our 24 tables of bridge is expecting to spring into action an hour later.

Well!!! The Captain, a soothing salt from the Canadian Maritimes, comes on the air a few minutes later and reports that all is well, and the offending plug has been neutralized, and the ship's crew should go back to normal biz, and would we all mind staying away from the Hudson Room—our bridge room—while some cleanup occurs.

Well, dear reader, believe it or not, after a minimum of confusion the game—19 tables—starts on time. The place had been cleaned up completely by the excellent Holland America staff, and there even was coffee, water, and some excellent cookies. Everyone seemed to have a good time. A burning image from the start of this event, somewhat Joan-of-Arc-like, is Audrey directing traffic to tables while boards go out and play begins.

And this is only the Day 1 blog. Stay tuned...more to come.