



# 2012 Costa Pacifica Cruise

Savona–Katakolon–Haifa–Ashdod–Izmir–Athens–Rome–Savona

*Thursday, April 19, 2012 – From Nice to Savona... and beyond!*

## **11:30 am**

The cab picks us up at home right on time at 11:30 in the morning and takes us to Nice airport where we're supposed to catch a bus to Savona. There are, in fact, several Costa buses, and we manage to get on one that leaves at 12:15, a quarter of an hour before the scheduled time. Surprisingly, the trip to the monstrously huge *Costa Pacifica* takes a full two hours. As soon as we're checked in we make our way to one of the many restaurants since we haven't had a meal all day. When we return to our cabin, the luggage has been delivered, and a few minutes later we're unpacked. This is one of the nice things about a cruise: even though we'll be visiting six areas in four countries, we will not need to pack again until the end of the journey.



## **4:45 pm**

We take part in the mandatory safety drill. Following an interminable message delivered in six languages, we grab our life vests and head for our muster point. Our ship is still in the harbor at this time; it looks like following the disaster of the *Costa Concordia*, the sister ship of the *Costa Pacifica*, the safety drill now takes place *before* the cruise gets underway. In fact, while the drill is still in progress, we feel a slight rumble of the deck and notice that we're pulling away from the pier.



### 6:30 pm

We have managed to get a table for two (though except for dinner, the meals are all open seating) and head down to the *New York, New York* restaurant. We then catch the 9:15 pm show at the theater and have a cappuccino in our suite. Inexplicably, we are absolutely exhausted. The bed is comfortable, and with the gentle rocking of the waves, we fall asleep within seconds. This vacation is starting out well!

## Friday, April 20, 2012 –At sea

### Morning

At 7:15 am, thinking it is an hour later, Vicki has ordered 4 (four!) Cappuccinos which are promptly delivered to our quarters, so we have a leisurely pre-breakfast. After the real breakfast in the main dining-room, we explore the ship. Because we're not up to having a full lunch, we choose to snack in the self-service restaurant.



### Afternoon

The highlight of the afternoon comes when the *Costa Pacifica* passes the Stromboli at a distance of only 2 miles. The weather is cold and gray, and since there is a strong wind, we abandon the upper deck and take some pictures from our terrace.

### Evening

The evening features the first of three gala dinners; though we have decided to stay away from these, we change our mind when we find out that it is not an overly formal affair. We have just finished the first course when the ship enters the Strait of Messina, a narrow body of water that separates the Italian mainland from Sicily. We tell the waiter that we will be right back and run up to deck 11 to take pictures. The weather has improved dramatically; in particular, there are some gorgeous clouds. Later on, we attend the evening's theater performance. It features a circus theme, and among other acts, there is a Hungarian







performer who juggles with three running electric chainsaws—don't try this in your own home! After setting our clocks ahead by one hour (we're entering another time zone during the night), we drift off to sleep, exhausted from all this relaxing.

### *Saturday, April 21, 2012 –Katakolon*

#### **Morning**

We have our breakfast delivered to our suite: cereal, eggs and bacon, breads, rolls, butter, jellies, and a fruit platter. Even walking around on the ship isn't enough to work up an appetite again, so we heroically decide to skip lunch. Oh the sacrifices one has to make...

#### **Afternoon**

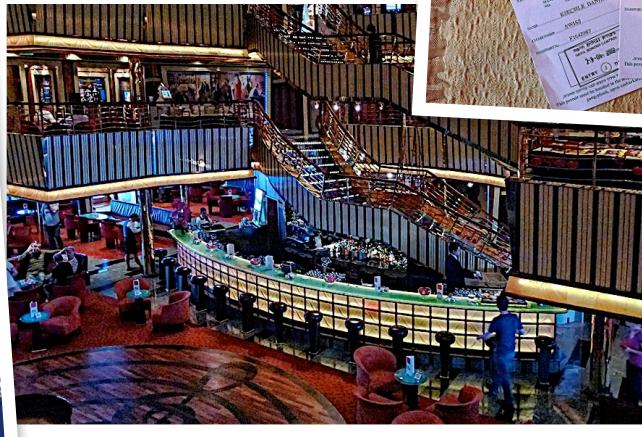
At 1 pm, our ship enters the harbor of Katakolon, a Greek village whose claim to fame is that it is a forty-minute bus ride from Olympia, the site of the original Olympic Games, and the place where to this day, the Olympic torch is lit before the Games. It turns out that Olympia is pretty much the way we remember it from our 2004 visit, but the area we drive through to get there clearly shows the signs of the economic problems facing Greece: residences no longer look well maintained, there are buildings that are left unfinished, and the whole area gives a somewhat run-down, not to say seedy impression. Once back at the harbor, we have some time to walk through the village before boarding the *Costa Pacifica* again.



#### **Evening**

After dinner we enjoy our customary cappuccino, this time at the Chocolate Bar (so named because they serve an amazingly good praline in addition to various coffees and drinks). The timing is perfect: we are facing the Mediterranean and the setting sun. For the first time ever, we both see the so-called green flash just as the sun dips below the horizon. Magic! We then make our way back to our digs on deck 7. We are amazingly tired and are asleep well before midnight.





*Sunday, April 21, 2012 –At sea*

### **Morning**

After we get up, we realize that the anemic hairdryer will take longer than expected to deal with Vicki's hair, so we order two cappuccinos and a couple of pieces of a very nice and fluffy cake to tide us over until breakfast. We are eventually able to head up to deck 9 and get some eggs and bacon at the *La Paloma* Grill. Our next stop is on deck five where Costa crew members, working hand in hand with Israeli immigration officers, give us back our passports and an entry permit for Israel. We are getting pretty excited to tour Galilee on Monday and visit Jerusalem and Bethlehem on Tuesday.

### **Afternoon**

In addition to finding more and more different ways of doing absolutely nothing (this is, after all, a vacation), we attend a lecture on Ephesus, the place we will visit on Thursday.

### **Evening**

After dinner, we spend a good part of the evening in front of the television watching the results of and commentaries about the first round of the French presidential election. The very good showing of the extreme right is worrisome, the less than stellar performance of the extreme left a relief. Still, socialist François Hollande narrowly edges incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy.



*Monday, April 22 – Haifa*

### **Morning**

We're in Israel! From our terrace, we see the *Costa Pacifica* sail into the harbor of Haifa, the second largest in the country after Ashdod. Our tour bus leaves shortly after 9 am as our guide Alberto welcomes us to Israel and goes over the day's itinerary with us. He does this in two languages as it





turns out that our anglophone group has been paired with a Spanish-speaking one. Our first destination is the city of Nazareth and the Church of the Annunciation built on the spot where the angel Gabriel is said to have announced the birth of Jesus to Mary. We then continue our tour and stop in a place from where we have a wonderful view over the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan valley some 200 meters below us. We are stunned to discover that we are, in fact, at sea level! Our next stop is Yardenit on the banks of the Jordan, and after that we are driven to the Kibbutz Ginosar where we enjoy an excellent lunch.



### Afternoon

We proceed to Capernaum and visit the ruins of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century synagogue built on the still visible foundations of the one Jesus is said to have preached in. Our next stop is Tabgha, site of the Sermon on the Mount and the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Our last stop is a visit to a museum that houses an ancient boat that was discovered in the mud of the Sea of Galilee in 1986. Experts believe that it is from the time of Jesus. From there, we board the bus to Haifa again.



### Evening

We are just in time for dinner, after which we spend some time on the upper deck to watch our ship leave Haifa. Our alarm clock for the next day is set to 6 am, so we make this a very early night.

## Tuesday, April 23 – Ashdod

### Morning

After enjoying a copious breakfast (it is going to be a long day!) in our quarters, we head for the meeting point on deck 5. Our bus for Jerusalem leaves before 9 o'clock and promptly gets caught in a gigantic traffic jam. After making a brief pit stop *en route*, we arrive in Jerusalem just before 10:20 am. We stop in a place from where we have a spectacular view over the city, and our tour guide Lilach explains the sites to us.





Today, our tour is English only: aside from a few Americans, we are in a group of people for whom English is a second language. We then proceed to the Church of Gethsemane, built on the spot where Jesus was betrayed by Judas and apprehended by the Roman soldiers. Next, the bus takes us up to the old city where we have some time at the Wailing Wall before entering the maze of small streets and joining the *Via Dolorosa* up to the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher. Our next stop is the Olive Tree Hotel where we enjoy a very tasty buffet lunch.

### Afternoon

We are off to Bethlehem! The town is under control of the Palestinian Authority, and normally no Israeli citizens are allowed. Lilach benefits from a special status because she brings in tourists who might well spend some welcome cash in Palestine. To this end, we are first driven to an unbelievably tacky souvenir shop from which we would not take a thing if it were free. After a very long 30 minutes, we are finally driven to the Church of the Nativity, built upon the very place where Jesus is said to have been born. It is just unbelievable how much history and culture is present in this area! When we return and reach the checkpoint on the drive back into Israel, two young soldiers armed with Uzi automatic weapons walk through the bus to make sure that we're not bringing in anyone or anything we're not supposed to. *Shalom!*

### Evening

After almost 11 hours, the bus drops us off at the *Costa Pacifica* just in time for dinner. Our waiter expresses the hope that Chelsea will advance in the Champions League at the expense of Barcelona. I tell him to dream on. Unfortunately, the game is not on television and I am way too tired to head down to the sports bar where it is shown on a large screen. It is not until the next day that I find out that Barcelona is, indeed, out!



## Wednesday, April 25 – At Sea

### Morning

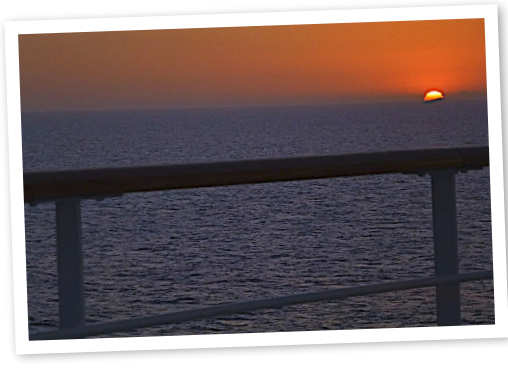
We sleep a little bit later and have breakfast in the *New York, New York* restaurant. We then spend some time going through the many photos exhibited in the ship's photo store. We do indeed find a few of us during our Jerusalem tour but decide against buying any.

### Afternoon

We just want something light for lunch so we go to the *La Paloma* self service restaurant on deck 9. We find a table for two, Vicki leaves her jacket on one of the seat backs, and we go get our food. When we return, there is an elderly Italian woman seated on the chair that still has Vicki's jacket on it; the chair opposite her is empty but there is already a bowl of salad and a water glass on the table. I politely explain that we have reserved that table; she responds in Italian that tables are not reserved unless one has put a water glass on them and refuses to budge. This annoys me no end. I move the salad bowl aside and sit down with my food while Vicki, who doesn't want to get involved, finds a seat at the next table. A minute later, the woman's husband shows up and suggest to her that they move to another table. "No!" she yells at him, so having recuperated his water glass and salad dish, he takes off. And so it happens that I am having lunch at a table for two with an Italian woman I've never seen before and sure hope I'll never see again.

### Evening

On this second gala dinner evening, we choose to avail ourselves of the invitation we have to dine in the *Blue Moon Club*, the fancy on-board restaurant. The food is very good, the ambience excellent, and the view from our dinner table incomparable! Halfway through our meal, we witness another Mediterranean sunset, but on this occasion, there is no green flash. Tomorrow we get up early again: We tour Ephesus!



## Thursday, April 26 – Izmir

### Excursion to Ephesus

At 9 o'clock, our bus takes off for the roughly one hour journey to Ephesus. On the way, we stop in a place called Selçuk so people can get a drink or make a pit stop. From the rear of the parking lot, one has a nice view of Selçuk castle.

We then continue to Ephesus which we reach in another fifteen minutes. The place is simply incredible! The sheer size of the excavation boggles the mind;

Ephesus used to be a city of some 20,000 people, and a full third of the town has been excavated while work continues to bring the rest to light. The most famous and best preserved building, the two-story library, has become the symbol of Ephesus. We visit all areas of interest, including the theater where the Apostle Paul used to preach and where, many years later Elton John performed. After a fascinating visit, we leave Ephesus and stop at a place where they make Turkish rugs. The whole process is interesting and explained to us in detail. We are then shown a bewildering number of various styles of truly beautiful rugs. During all this, we are served our choice of beverages, and everything is done so well that we just barely escape without making a major purchase. The bus drops us off at the harbor again at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

### Evening

We have dinner at the *New York, New York* restaurant, and it's Italian night! Over dessert, some of the waiters put on a show singing Italian songs, twirling napkins over their heads, and causing passengers to form a huge conga line. We flee to the Chocolate Bar which is turning out to be our usual after dinner coffee hangout; it's quiet and we like the mellow music the guitarist there plays. Later that night, we attend the *Cirque Surreal* show at the theater and we enjoy it a great deal. Tomorrow, we are in Athens and the alarm will go off at 6:15 am, so we call it a day.





## Friday, April 27 – Athens

### Excursion to Athens

We arrive in Piraeus, the harbor of Athens that was built in the early 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC by Themistocles. Our bus follows the coast for a while, so we get to see the yacht harbor as well. We get off the bus at the foot of the Acropolis and ascend to the top with our remarkably competent guide Irene, a former school teacher. We are lucky in that we are only six people in our group. We get a fascinating lecture on the Parthenon as well as the other treasures of the Acropolis. Afterwards, we are driven to the amazing Panathenaic stadium, built of nothing but white marble, and we get the chance to take some pictures before heading for the Plaka, the old part of Athens with its many boutiques and eateries. Vicki enjoys a *frappé* (in Athens, this is a cold coffee drink that is both good and strong) while I follow the good advice of our guide and try an *Ouzo*, a Greek drink made with anise. It tastes a little bit like the French *pastis* but is more white than yellow and quite a bit stronger. We are back on board just before 2:30 pm and have a light snack in our quarters. The *Costa Pacifica* leaves Athens at 5 pm.

### Evening

We have dinner at our table; it is the third and final gala night, this time with a farewell theme as many passengers leave the ship in Rome on Sunday. At 9:15, we go watch a magic show in the ship's theater, and we wrap up the day in the Chocolate Bar with some delicious coffee. Earlier in the day, before going on our Athens excursion, we have left two huge bags of laundry with the staff, thinking that our clothing would be returned washed and pressed the same day. It now looks as if *Costa* needs a bit more time. A good thing, then, that during this night, we're gaining back the hour we lost a few days ago!



## *Saturday, April 28 – At Sea*

### **Morning**

We sleep a little later and have breakfast delivered to our cabin at 9 o'clock in the morning. At 10:45 am, we meet with other English-speaking passengers and pay attention as Sean, our anglophone host, explains the disembarkation procedures to us. This talk takes place today because many passengers will leave the ship in Rome, and those who will journey on to Savona will in all likelihood spend the day in Rome and not have time to listen to Sean. He is quite an entertaining speaker and he shares some funny questions guests have asked him over the years. Our favorite by far occurred following a display of various figures that had been sculpted in ice by some of the staff members. "What do you do with the ice sculptures after they have melted?" somebody wanted to know...

### **Afternoon**

Around 3 pm, we sail through the Strait of Messina, and just under two hours later we pass the Stromboli again. The other exciting news is that we get our laundry back! In Athens, we have taken advantage of an inexpensive Costa offer to wash and press our clothes for us; we believed we would get the stuff back the same day, but that turned out to be an error: when we call guest services, we are told that the laundry will not be delivered until Sunday evening! We immediately talk to Caroline, a truly wonderful and useful lady who calls herself our butler; she promptly runs down to the ship's laundry and returns with our neatly folded stuff. This woman is amazing!

### **Evening**

After dinner, we have coffee and attend a performance by singer Roberto Sinagoga (great voice!) in the ship's theater. Another day gone...





## *Sunday, April 29 – Rome*

### **Morning**

After we get to Civitavecchia, the harbor of Rome, a bus drives us to a waiting train which takes us to San Pietro station in the Vatican. As we have not booked a tour, we have the whole day to ourselves. We first fight our way through throngs of people in Saint Peter's square and head for the Tiber, Rome's river. We walk along its banks, past the Castel S. Angelo, and head for the Piazza Navona. Naturally, we take a few minutes to enjoy a cappuccino and a tartufo at *Tre Scalini* before continuing to the Trevi fountain and the Piazza di Spagna. We climb up the Spanish Steps, take the Via Sistina, and crossing the Via del Tritone for the second time, we find an eatery to have lunch. A bit pricy, but outstanding!



### **Afternoon**

We continue our walk, take a picture of the Hotel Cosmopolita where we stayed during our Christmas 2004 vacation with the kids, and then head towards the Piazza Venezia and down the Corso Vittorio Emanuele back to the Vatican. Our train leaves at 5 pm, and shortly after six we are back on board the *Costa Pacifica*.

### **Evening**

Over dinner, we say goodbye to our waiter and wine steward, and later to our butler and chamber maid. These people have been phenomenal and have all contributed to making this cruise the wonderful experience it has been. It is then time for a last visit to the Chocolate Bar, our favorite place to have coffee. Finally, we have to pack. Our suitcases have to be outside our suite door at the latest by 1 am, so all we keep with us are the clothes we will wear tomorrow and a travel bag that will hold our pajamas and toiletries. We arrive in Savona at 8 am tomorrow.



## Monday, April 30, 2012 – From Savona back to Nice

### Morning

The *Costa Pacifica* pulls into the harbor of Savona just after 7:30. A few minutes before 8 o'clock, we leave suite 7286 for the last time, at least as far as this cruise is concerned. A last wistful look, and we head up to deck 9 and have breakfast at the *Lido Calypso* pool restaurant. We leave the ship at 9:15, pick up our suitcases that are waiting for us in the terminal, and minutes later we are seated on the bus that leaves Savona at 9:45. The weather is cool, wet and gray, a perfect end to a vacation during which we have been spoiled by balmy temperatures and sunshine at every port of call. We arrive at Nice airport at 11:45 am, and we are home by 12:30 in the afternoon. Thus ends this log of one of the best vacations we've ever had—but we say this every time, which is as it should be!

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