

A Pearly Pacific Island Christmas

Our regular readers will know that we have a very poor record of cruising in the islands of the South Pacific, what with ships breaking down and stormy weather preventing landfall. We decided to try for 'Third Time Lucky' and are so glad we did – we had the most wonderful 10 days over Christmas on P&O Australia's 'Pacific Pearl' ... the very vessel in which we had spent several very bumpy days playing 'tag' with the cyclones last January.

This trip was very different from our usual journeys as we travelled with our family, which includes our grandsons, Toby aged eight and Charlie who is three, which meant that we did things we might not otherwise have done and saw things we might not normally have noticed.

The idea of spending Christmas on a cruise was mooted a whole year before, while still celebrating the 2010 season. As the best ideas so often begin, it was a case of a casual "Wouldn't it be lovely if ..." when we realised that it could be a reality. After some research, we found that there was a perfect cruise leaving Auckland on December 19th 2011 and returning there on December 29th – so no flying involved ... a major bonus! Tickets were booked and Sarah's niece Rebecca and Paul's sister Jo were also invited along; they had been with us at that last Christmas and included in the initial daydreaming. Jo didn't think she would be able to get leave from her job with the Australian Defence Force and Becky decided to stay at home in Singapore and celebrate with friends, so although disappointed, we settled on it just being the six of us.

On December 19th, we gathered at the premises of one of Paul's suppliers in Auckland, who had kindly agreed to garage our cars for the 10 days we would be away. We, plus a mountain of luggage, all piled into a remarkably capacious taxi mini-van and headed for the cruise terminal. It was here that the excitement really started: unknown to Paul and the children, Jo had been able to get away after all and had conspired with Sallie, and us, to arrange for her to join us for the cruise.

In fact, it was the devil's own job to get her booked. The logistics involved in securing a stand-by cabin (the cruise was supposedly booked out), getting messages to Jo, serving with the Australian Defence Forces in Afghanistan, were almost insurmountable but by dint of endless phone calls, erratic communications connections (mainly at around 3am for poor Jo), appeals to the higher-ups at P&O Australia and shameless tears and feminine wiles explaining the situation and how she desperately needed to be with her family, all did the trick and a cabin was found for her not long before we sailed. Phew!

Then came the big 'Surprise' moment: Jo got to the port early and watched out for our big taxi to arrive and she crept round behind it while Paul, Martin and the driver were getting the luggage out and Sallie kept the children's attention diverted. She said to Paul "Need any help with your bags, sir?" and he turned round to decline when the penny dropped. Toby heard the commotion and he and Charlie dashed round to the back of the taxi only to stop dead, not believing their eyes. Toby even asked if it really, *really*, was Auntie JoJo!

Once we were all aboard and had settled in our respective cabins, we went on deck to join in the sail-away party, celebrating with champagne cocktails for the women, beer for the men and passion fruit 'mocktails' for the children; this 'round' seemed to set a precedent and continued throughout the trip.

Having been told that the ship had done nothing special for Christmas the previous year and that Santa only appeared for a few minutes in the Kids' Club, we had prepared the boys for a fairly low key celebration which made the actuality even more wonderful for them. The ship's company really pulled out all the stops and the decorations were simply stunning, with surely more tinsel, baubles and greenery than could have been produced in all the factories in China. There were veritable forests of Christmas trees and gingerbread villages round every corner.



Apparently 2010 had been the ship's first Christmas cruise having only been commissioned a few days before and Christmas celebrations hadn't figured large in their reckoning ... they obviously learned fast and more than made up for it this year. The food was delicious and seasonal ("turkey & all the trimmings!") and the whole ambience enhanced by Christmas music and not only of horrible Chipmunks and "I saw Mommy kissing Santa Claus" variety but lots of traditional carols, too. There were Interdenominational and Catholic Church services and carol singing as well as partying with balloons, crackers and silly hats. All totally terrific! We wondered if having a woman Captain made a difference. Or is that sexist?!

There were two sea days before we arrived at our first port-of-call and these were filled with activities for all ages and interests. Toby loved the 'Shark Shack' children's club for the 6 to 12 age group and was to be found there whenever not required to attend meals. Charlie, however, took an instant dislike to 'Turtle Cove', the club for 3 to 5 year olds and refused to set foot in it, though why he wasn't able to say. Was it too noisy or crowded perhaps? We were afraid this would put a damper on the adults' free time but Charlie was actually very co-operative and the five of us all managed to do what we wanted, when we wanted, even if it meant having him in tow. He did consent to playing in the Turtle Cove paddling pool, which became a daily highlight, as this was approached via a separate door and he didn't realise it was part of the facility.

Our first port was Nuku'alofa, the capital of Tonga. We had booked a morning tour of the city and the others had booked an afternoon excursion to go snorkelling, except for Charlie who doesn't yet swim. The timing was perfect for us to take him off their hands as our tour arrived back at the ship and for Sallie, Paul, Jo and Toby to join theirs. That was without taking 'Island Time' into account!



We had an easy and enjoyable morning seeing plenty of the countryside and typical subsistence farming, mainly of taro and bananas, as well as many pigs and piglets and the odd head of cattle. A visit to the Royal Palace and the Regal Cemetery (seen in the photos above) were included, although they were only visible from outside the gates so we did not get to see the interior of the palace, which would have been interesting. We were then taken to the rugged coastline (below) where blowholes abound and were astonished at the power and sound of the waves crashing on the rocky shore and the might of the jets of water shooting up from the blowholes; they reminded us of the geysers we had seen in Iceland last year. The climate in Tonga is hot and humid and after half an hour in the sun admiring this spectacular scenery, we were glad to be taken to a local resort for refreshments.

We were allowed an hour at the well-equipped resort and the cold beer went down



very well, as did the rich variety of complimentary sliced tropical fruit and fresh coconut which was set out for our party to enjoy. Swimming was on the agenda and Martin had a dip but as the beach was largely coral pieces and access to the water was over sharp, uneven outcrops, Sarah decided not to risk a fall and damage to her 'bionic' knees and hip. It was pleasant just to sit and admire the view from the shade of the beautifully decorated palm-frond shelter.



Our guide was determined to show us everything of interest and the morning went all too quickly. We soon realised that we would not be back at the ship before the afternoon trip was due to leave and tried to text the others to let them know we were delayed. Unfortunately, Vodafone chose that day for our Global Roaming not to work. Fortunately we had made contingency plans and when we finally got back to the dock, Sallie and Charlie were still there, waiting for us under the sunshade provided by their tour company. They had explained the situation and one of the staff kindly offered to take Sallie to join the rest of the party as soon as she had handed Charlie over to us. All went well and although she missed half an hour of her trip, she soon caught up with them all.

We took Charlie up to the buffet restaurant so we could have some lunch and enjoyed a delightful hour looking through the big windows, watching the huge cranes and fork-lift trucks moving enormous shipping containers around. This is not something which would have kept us amused for long had we been on our own, but the little chap's interest and questions made for an entertaining interlude. After he had his nap, we took Charlie back on shore to walk around the little craft market which had been set up on the dockside. He enchanted all the stall holders with his blond hair, blue eyes and ready smile. He wanted to look at everything and when I gently suggested he look at a

little carved wooden turtle with his eyes not his fingers, the lady running the stall shushed me and told him he was welcome to touch and examine whatever he liked. When we left (without buying anything) she gave him a hug and made a present of the turtle he had first admired. When the rest of the family arrived back from their snorkelling trip, we all had tales to tell of a most enjoyable day, which ended with the now-obligatory cocktails on deck before dinner.

Our next destination was Vava'u, also in Tonga, renowned for its wonderful diving. The three divers in the party booked to go on an all-day diving excursion and we agreed to have the boys with us for the day. Once a hearty breakfast had been consumed, we packed our swimming togs, snorkels, masks and some snacks and a bottle of water and set off for the 10 minute tender boat ride ashore – the ship had to moor off-shore as the dock wasn't suitable for large vessels.

We found a taxi easily enough at the dockside and a jolly lady taxi driver took us the 40 minute drive to the resort – in her ancient, beaten up 4x4 complete with cracked windscreen (see photo) and very approximate steering! The children were in the back with Martin but Sarah had the full, terrifying experience from the front seat: Not content with taking her eyes off the road to turn round and duck over the two boys, she also totally ignored all road codes and in her efforts to make the ride more comfortable, drove round the numerous potholes, regardless of which side of the road she was on. As other drivers followed the same drill, it made for a hair-raising 40 minute journey, though to our amazement, we saw no evidence of any accidents. Apparently there had been one involving a Kiwi driver recently but we gathered it was his fault for driving to the NZ Road Code which confused the oncoming traffic! We had been warned not to try and self-drive there and are glad we took the advice.



On arrival at the resort we arranged for our driver to pick us up at an appointed hour and made for the beach. This was much better for swimming and paddling so Sarah was able to enjoy the water. We managed to nab a sun lounger, more to keep our snacks and clobber off the sand than for lounging purposes (with two small boys? Fat chance!) and we then set off for swimming and snorkelling. Sarah had a new waterproof and shockproof camera as an early Christmas present and it got well and truly tried out on this occasion. Toby wanted the honour of taking the first underwater photo and managed a very creditable effort involving a fish and some sea grass; the one of a beer bottle was less attractive but never mind. The picture shows how near the ship we ended up after the long drive – along the only road from the port to that

resort. We got a good taste of the countryside, though, and that was a bonus.

The resort, The Tongan Beach Resort, was rather a disappointment particularly given the fairly high entrance fee they charged for non-residents as there were very few facilities (one toilet each for Men and Women) and no changing rooms or showers. We appreciate that they need to make a living and there's no reason why visitors should get in for nothing but normally in such cases something is provided for the money; we were lucky to get the sun lounger as most people didn't even have that. Drinks and food were ruinously expensive and we were glad we had brought the water and snacks with us. We had an enjoyable time there, however, but were ready to leave when our jolly driver came to collect us – bang on time, to our amazement! Back at the ship after another hair-raising taxi ride (Martin declined to swap places with Sarah – coward!) and tender transfer, we freshened up and went in search of lunch. After all the sun and swimming we had worked up an appetite and were glad of the sandwiches and salad available at the buffet. One of the advantages of a cruise is that there is always food available, even if one misses proper mealtimes.

The divers returned soon after and again, stories of our various experiences were swapped, everyone having voted the day a success. So successful, in fact, that at least two of the divers are now spending all their spare time searching out bargain dive trips to Vava'u; we hope they might need to take baby-sitters with them!

A day at sea provided opportunities to rest, read and take some classes. Martini & Margarita Making was popular (Sarah recommends the Blue Margarita – she should know; she sampled a number of them, all in the interests of research, of course!). The photograph shows the result of 'tee many martoonis', though not all were imbibed by Jo and Paul ...



Sallie and Sarah also discovered a new hobby, the art of quilling. None of us had heard of it but it is done by curling and coiling paper into various designs, to be used to decorate Book-marks, cards, invitations etc. They are now adept at making snowmen, frilly flowers and swirly shapes – no doubt it will all come in very handy and it afforded them hours of innocent enjoyment.

In addition to the myriad opportunities for entertainment, relaxation, sustenance and learning, there were shows every night and we managed to get to most of them. The *Pacific Cirque* troupe of acrobats, jugglers and trapeze artistes performed several times, in the 4-storey high atrium, the theatre and, most spectacularly, on the main deck, where a specially constructed archway (below) provided some breathtaking opportunities to show off their expertise.

One of the production shows was based on a circus theme and there were some superb animal costumes, similar to those used for the stage show of *The Lion King*. The elephant mother and baby (both life-size!) were a tremendous hit and many of the children in the audience were uncertain whether they were real or not – and all this on a ship!



The atrium was also the venue for some extremely loud but very exciting laser shows. The colours and way the beams were focused and bent into shapes and 'danced' to the music was wonderful to behold and although very popular, we were canny enough to manage to get in to see all three of the shows during the time at sea.

There were the usual 'Broadway' type song 'n' dance productions, which are not particularly to our taste but the 'young' people enjoyed them and so did the children. Not for children (and Grandma volunteered to babysit) were the two 'adult' comedians' late night cabaret shows. They were very popular and one of them, a Kiwi, was very funny, making a lot of 'in' jokes which kept the Kiwi passengers in stitches (the overwhelming majority, though there were some Australians, South Africans and British ones, too – though many of these lived in New Zealand). Martin went to both shows with Sallie, Paul and Jo but said that he felt one of the penalties of getting older was that one had heard most of the jokes before ... many times!

On Christmas Eve, the boys hung up the special new stockings which the Stocking Elf had made especially for them and they eventually went to sleep. Early next morning they were delighted that Santa had managed to find them and a jolly time was had emptying the stockings. We then all gathered for breakfast in the main restaurant, where another surprise awaited us. The gingerbread town, which had filled the foyer of the dining room until now, had been removed and instead there was a life-sized model Santa in his sleigh, complete with all the reindeer; the children were absolutely enchanted, and so were we.

After breakfast everyone repaired to our cabin for family gift giving. Although we thought we'd kept the number of parcels to a minimum this year, there were still lots to unwrap and plenty of excitement as surprises appeared and dreams came true. Too many chocolates and lollies meant that no-one was interested in lunch, especially as there was Christmas Dinner to look forward to that evening.

We were anchored off the idyllic Fijian island of Dravuni for the day, with a continuous tender service shuttling passengers from ship to shore and back again. Our party all had a wonderful afternoon in the warm waters and on the shady white beach, variously snorkelling, swimming, digging and relaxing with a book. Toby and Sallie had a particularly successful day, Toby finding a giant clam shell then Sallie finding a giant clam, plus another large, spiny shell. After the photographs were taken, the shells were carefully returned to where they had been found. There were lots of little black and white striped fish visible from the surface even without snorkelling equipment and Toby borrowed Sarah's new camera again for some more underwater photographs.



As it was Christmas Day and therefore a holiday there was absolutely no commerce on the beach, not even the usual craft market, bar and snack stall. It was heartening that even the influx of hundreds of tourists and their wallets

did not tempt the islanders to break their strict religious observance of Christian Holy days. It was hot and sunny and the stewards had brought large dispensers of cold water (and paper cups) from the ship, which was really all anyone needed. All was carefully packed away at the end of the day, leaving no rubbish behind.



Upon returning to the ship an announcement was made that all children should report to the main atrium where an important visitor would be arriving. After a lot of anticipation, and commentary from a rather over-excited cruise director (i.e. entertainment manager), Santa arrived on board on one of the tenders from shore, having apparently been unable to park the sleigh on the ship! Every child was given a present and had his or her photograph taken with the great man to round off a perfect afternoon.

Christmas Dinner was to be a special occasion (of course!) so everyone got scrubbed up and into their glad-rags. Then we experienced the only slightly sour note of the cruise. In spite of booking in advance and the fact they had been able to seat all seven of us at the same table for all meals throughout the trip so far, when we were shown to our seats for dinner, we had been divided between two smaller tables. They were side-by-side but at such a distance apart conversation between the two would have been impossible. Although not given to throwing his weight about or making a fuss, on this occasion Martin let it be known, in no uncertain terms, that this was unacceptable, the complaint going up through the various levels from bus-boy to Head Waiter all telling us the dining room was full and there was no alternative. With a bad grace, we accepted this and got on with making the best of it, pulling the crackers, starting on the dinner rolls and so on. Then the Hotel Manager (next stop: The Captain!) quietly asked us if we would leave the tables, debris and all, we had been given and follow him. We were led into a very elegant semi-private dining room in the centre of the restaurant – The Chef's Table – with walls lined with cabinets of all the best wines and the beautiful table laid with the best silverware and crystal as well as more crackers, much to the children's delight. We were given two waiters for our exclusive use and had a wonderful meal, enjoying the measure of privacy afforded at the same time as not being cut off from everyone else and the party atmosphere. Top marks to the Hotel Manager for handling a difficult situation with flair and salvaging our Christmas!



Boxing Day saw us in the capital of Fiji, Suva, which has the reputation of being very scruffy and not necessarily a very desirable place to visit. The reality, however, was a pleasant surprise and we encountered a modern city, albeit with some fairly 'third world' aspects and one could imagine that there would be areas best not visited alone at night – just as in any major city throughout the world, 'first' or third

After a warm welcome from the Royal Fijian Police Band, which regaled us with some catchy tunes, to which they marched up and down the quay, (they did the same to bid us farewell), we enjoyed a lovely walk along the bustling waterfront. A gentle breeze kept the heat and humidity to bearable levels as we watched the numerous vessels making their way to and from the port. The different ferries plying routes throughout the Fijian Islands, varied enormously in condition and although some were comparatively elegant, there



were many which appeared to be not much better than recycled, patched-up colanders. We were glad we didn't have to travel on them and the contrast was never greater than when they steamed past our 'Pacific Pearl' in all her pristine white glory!



An aside here: Her "pristine white glory" could not disguise the long dent in her side, the result of the 'prang' at Vanuatu in January, which occurred when we were on our ill-fated cruise on her through the Coral Sea, being chased by tropical cyclones. Ours was a 'controlled' collision with the dockside and not to be compared with the events surrounding the recent sinking of the 'Costa Concordia', causing such tragic loss of life.

After our stroll, we walked into the city centre, which was remarkably un-crowded (except with cruise passengers like ourselves) as it was Boxing Day and a public holiday. The old government buildings, now largely taken over by commercial enterprises, were architecturally attractive, with their balconies and verandahs. We were unable to enter any but it was possible to imagine the splendour and beauty of the interiors, if, indeed, they have been kept in their original state. Given the current political situation and lack of interest in these old buildings, perhaps after all it was best to leave it to the imagination? See some photos of the old and new Suva below.



On the subject of the political situation, it was interesting to hear the impressions of both locals and regular visitors. It seems that since the coup the modernisation of the city has accelerated appreciably and one chap remarked that he didn't recognise the city he last visited 6 years ago. A taxi driver also commented that, with all the many faults and loss of freedom, at least the military regime had done as it promised and cut out (or at least cut down) corruption and that money which was supposed to be spent on the development of the country was now being properly spent. Although by no means enamoured of the new rulers, and having initially been reluctant to visit the country and give it any of our tourist dollars, we have to admit that we were very agreeably surprised not only by the development but also the sense of security. There were police and soldiery in abundance but they appeared friendly and welcoming, with ready smiles and greetings, so visitors are obviously now being encouraged.

Our rendezvous point of the ship was usually Charlie's Bar, which served the best coffee and gooey cakes (well, icing with a little cake below!) on board. It also had the most comfortable chairs and windows so Sarah could see to do her embroidery during the days at sea. Although under 18 and therefore not permitted to use the bar, our Charlie was allowed to pose for this photo, daiming propriety rights to the name.



Two more days at sea, returned us to Auckland, where we collected the car and made our way north, stopping en route at our favourite gourmet supermarket to pick up supplies for the New Year's Eve party a couple of days later. It was nice to have that to look forward to as it avoided the inevitable anti-dimax which we would have felt at the end of such a wonderful Christmas holiday.