

THE REIGNING QUEEN

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The Reigning Queen

Our jet banked to the left approaching Miami International Airport. Out of the window, sparkling in the bright March sunlight, could be seen the Dodge Island docks, now the busiest passenger seaport in the United States. Tied up in domino fashion were the gleaming white twin stacked love boats of the Norweigan American Lines. At the far end of this array, towering over ships and port buildings alike and stretching so long that it took two seaport docks to service her, lay the greatest passenger vessel in the world, her blue and white decor contrasting with gleaming solid white vessels before her and her elegant lines denoting her queenly reign over all she surveyed. She was The Norway, last of the great steam superliners.

A month before I had never heard of her. My brother, Bob, had said on more than one occasion in our conversations in the operating room, that for pure relaxation, nothing beats an ocean voyage. He had taken The Rotterdam to Europe years ago on his first trip to Africa and had found the experience most satisfying. My sister, Jean, had crossed the Pacific in The President Cleveland and the Atlantic on The United States and had affirmed this opinion. Nancy and I decided that when our responsibilities would permit, we would take an ocean cruise.

Someone intimated, after we had learned about The Norway and had booked passage, that she was the converted United States and this tweaked my interest since I knew that that vessel was the greatest passenger ship ever built in this country.

Murphy's Law (If anything can go wrong, it will) is not limited to the practice of medicine and when Nancy, my daughter, Doris, and I landed at the Miami Airport, we

learned that our baggage had not been transferred at Charlotte. The airline official felt quite assured, however, that it would follow on the next flight and advised us to go on to the ship, promising that the bags would be sent when they arrived. Should they not reach the ship before sailing, they would be sent by air to the first port of call, St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, three days hence - a somewhat sobering thought as our deodorant was rated for only twenty-four hours.

We boarded the ship through an entry port in the Biscayne deck, three stories above the water line, but five stories below the International or Main deck. The interior of the ship had the appearance of a modern hotel, which indeed it was with 1,000 state rooms with inlaid carpets, elegant modern furniture and Scandinavian style modern art. We had an outside cabin on the Atlantic deck, the first side hallway away from the Windward dining room and near two elevators, a must for Doris.

After depositing what little hand luggage we had and meeting our steward, we went up on deck. The ship was monstrous - stretching 1,035 feet from stem to stern with a beam of 110 feet. Her hull extended thirty-five feet below the water and she was thirteen decks high, eleven of them above the water line. The International and Pool decks were glass enclosed and had wide lighted promenade boulevards on each side of the ship with shops and lounges in proliferation. Around the Oslo deck hung twenty-four large self-propelled life boats some with capacities of 150 passengers each. On the Fore deck were two giant tenders each three decks high and each with a capacity of 450 passengers. These fifty ton aluminum landing craft were attached to davits which could swing them over the side for off loading passengers on dock or beach. The ship's gleaming white super structure was surmounted by two giant stacks that loomed fifty feet in the

air, distinguished by distinctive ailerons that deflected the exhaust laterally instead of overhead. The bridge was capped by a modernistic foremast supporting crow's nest, radar and communications antennas and a proliferation of flags and banners.

Everywhere the ship was equipped for relaxation and recreation - jogging track on the Oslo deck; handball and swimming pool on the Sun deck. She had golf driving and putting, basketball, shuffle board, skeet shooting and sun bathing. A second swimming pool graced the pool deck on the stern and in the bowels of the ship was a third pool and a gymnasium. The ship sported two elegant gourmet restaurants that could seat 500 each and on the stern was the great outdoor restaurant that served informal food in abundance. The theater had three stages and a balcony and presented international quality entertainment. The multiple lounges could hold hundreds each and, to my personal chagrin, the ship carried the largest gambling casino afloat. The shops had a wide variety of merchandise from Scandinavian furs to souvenirs. The drug store had a spiral stairway to the deck above and one could get gourmet ice cream at the ice cream parlor.

We stood on the Sun deck ten stories above the water as the ship pulled away from the dock. People were dwarfed on the pier below. Our vessel slipped down the seaway with hardly a rumble - it reminded me of the stately grace of the steamboat I once decked on on the Mississippi - so quiet and stable - so different from the purring vibrating diesel-driven motor vessels. We were saluted by all the ships we passed and returned the courtesy with mighty blasts of the ship's horns.

At dinner, we met our table companions for the cruise and became acquainted with our dining steward and bus boy. The cuisine was international with a Norweigan bias - outstanding

in quality and served with elegance. The maitre d' was an Italian Swiss who had lost his family in an automobile accident and had adopted the crew as their substitute - a cultured and helpful gentleman. Our room was comfortable and the bath, though small, had all the amenities. We had two port holes, but noted as the week went by that we used them almost not all, somewhat to my chagrin since an outside state room cost an extra \$800.00. At 8:00 p.m. that first night, our luggage arrived.

The cruise equaled its' billing. We slept, sunned, exercised, read, shopped, conversed with friends, ate and generally enjoyed ourselves. We were part of a Christian Conference being held on board and each evening we attended a most inspiring meeting with outstanding music and preaching. My greatest interest, however, was the ship itself. It was so massive and yet such a beautiful thing. It was an engineering and aesthetic marvel. The ship board artist had painted a picture of her and I bought it.

A couple of days into the cruise, I asked one of the stewards if The Norway were the converted United States. To my surprise, I learned that she was the converted SS France. The maitre d' loaned me a book about her and later in the week, ship board TV ran a series on her history.

Each day our ship moved magestically through blue water stretching out to meet a color coordinated pale blue sky punctuated with cotton cumulus clouds with only a faint ripple of motion. The computer controlled stabilizers below the surface of the water kept the roll to one degree in fair weather. The course was frequently, but imperceptibly corrected under radar control to avoid rain squalls and turbulence. Both sea and air temperature were in the seventies. The days at sea allowed the passengers ample time to become acquainted with the ship, to unwind and begin to tan. The Greater Antilles, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Hati and

Puerto Rico passed by our starboard beam over the horizon. On Tuesday, our third day at sea, we made our first land fall, the U.S. Island of St. Thomas, the westernmost of the Lesser Antilles. Charlotte Amalie, the capital of the U.S. Virgin Islands nestled against the hills and spilled out along the bay, offering dockage to the cruise vessels of the Caribbean. Our ship, however, was too large for the port and had to drop anchor in the bay. The tenders were swung over the side and passengers were taken ashore.

The tenders alternated making round trips to the ship every thirty minutes during the day giving passengers free access to the ship and shore.

Charlotte Amalie is a free port with no import duty on goods and is studded with stores and shops catering to the tourist trade. Watches and cameras were the best buy, but all sorts of merchandise and souvenirs were available. Cab and van drivers vied with each other for fares, some even making contact with tourists on the lower deck of the tender as it was tying up. Several of us employed a vociferous obese con artist who called himself Big Bad Leroy Brown to show us the island in his airconditioned van. He did not live up to his promises, but we got a fair tour of the island with Leroy giving a spiel as we travelled. He called all the ladies "Honey" and stopped once on a very narrow mountain road to pick red hibiscus blossoms so each lady could have one in her hair.

There were several dramatic sights at St. Thomas, but the most picturesque was the view of the port from the top of the mountain behind the bay with the cruise ships tied up at docks, the smaller craft swinging on painters in the marinas and the magnificent Norway looming over the whole array standing proudly at anchor in the bay. She was so large, so graceful and so beautiful that she seemed to dominate the entire scene.

Nassau in the Bahamas was our next port of call. We dropped anchor off shore, but the sea was running six feet and it was thought unsafe by the Captain to off load passengers in tenders, so we proceeded on. Looking down from any deck, the waves looked like ripples. I noted that no matter how high I was above the water, it appeared that it was only about twenty feet below. Once Doris and I dropped a banana peel over the side from the great outdoor restaurant. It took a long time to reach the water and it looked mighty small when it did.

The most enjoyable day of the cruise was the one after we left Nassau. Norweigan Caribbean Lines owns a private island in the Atlantic southeast of Florida. It has a beautiful white beach in a lagoon surrounded by a coral reef. The ship anchored off shore and the tenders off loaded the passengers onto the beach, dropping their ramps like military landing craft. The weather was perfect and the scenery was all the tropics could inspire. The ship was positioned so that a perfect profile of her was seen through a gap in the reef. Steel bands played music and the ship's food service provided the picnic. Passengers swam, snorkled, *sunned* and sailed. We went back to the ship that evening with the feeling of the completion of a perfect day.

One can hardly close any description of the service on board without mentioning the midnight "snacks." They were masterpieces of the culinary arts with the buffets loaded with elegantly prepared food. The one on Thursday night is particularly outstanding with a vast display surrounded by multiple ice sculptures. It is estimated that the average passenger gains two kilograms during the week.

Now allow me to speak more directly of the ship itself and of its' history. In the entire history of ship building, only four passenger vessels have approached 1,000 feet in

length - The Queen Elizabeth, the largest passenger vessel ever built with a length of 987 feet and a registered tonnage of 83,600; her older sister, The Queen Mary who was six feet shorter and 2400 tons lighter; The Normandy, only slightly smaller than the British Queens, but faster, having captured the blue ribbon as the fastest ship across the Atlantic, and one of the most elegant, and The France displacing 60,000 tons and at 1035 feet, the largest passenger ship ever built. The first three of these ships were pre-World War II and were prominent in the North Atlantic trade making the transatlantic crossing in five days. Incidentally, The SS United States, although much smaller with a length of only 920 feet, won the blue ribbon crossing from New York to England in three and a half days.

During World War II, the British Queens distinguished themselves as fast troop transports carrying large numbers of fighting men across the Atlantic. Their great speed and erratic courses allowed them to outfox the wolfpacks and they both finished The War without major damage. France lost her passenger flag ship the Normandy when she burned and sank in New York Harbor during World War II while being converted from military service. The brisk post-war transatlantic traffic offered hope of profit and prestige for the French people in replacing the Normandy with another magnificent superliner. The Compagnie Generale Transatlantique, with aid from the French and American governments, laid the keel of The SS France in Saint Nazaire in 1957. Ominously, 1957 was the first year that more travelers crossed the Atlantic by air than by sea. At the time Madame Yvonne de Gaulle cut the tri-color ribbon and smashed a magnum of champagne on her bow on May 11th, 1960, an overwhelming majority of transatlantic passengers were flying jets. It took two more years to finish the construction and equipping of this stunning entry into the North Atlantic service. She was escorted by a quartet of spurting fire boats when she proudly steamed into

the New York Harbor on her maiden voyage in February 1962.

During the next dozen years, The France was her country's maritime showpiece. She was known as the "finest French restaurant in the world." Too broad in the beam to negotiate the Panama Canal (an error in calculation stated to be the reason her naval architect committed suicide), she steamed around the Horn of Magellan with impunity on her two around the world voyages. She made three hundred and seventy-seven Atlantic crossings and ninety-three cruises. She never tried for the blue ribbon, but did keep a record for quality with one thousand crew members attending eighteen hundred passengers. She had a distinctive appearance with a dashing rake to her bow and two giant lateral ailerons projecting from her two massive stacks. She had four double boiler engines generating one hundred and fifty thousand horsepower, enough to cross the Atlantic at twenty-eight and a half knots cruise and thirty-five knots if necessary.

Beneath her luxury, however, she was a floating anachronism. To make the five day North Atlantic crossing, she had to average twenty-eight and a half knots and at that speed, each sea mile devoured a ton of oil. The advent of the oil crisis and escalating fuel costs, accompanied by the progressive loss of passengers to the airlines, resulted in the necessity for the French government to subsidize their ocean queen in the amount of twenty million dollars per year. The burden became so heavy that in the summer of 1974 President Giscard d'Estaing announced that the subsidy would have to be discontinued. The final crossing was from New York to Le Havre, terminating over a century of sea travel on that route. The French crew of The France was reduced to tears as Le Havre was approached and they saw their regal flagship approaching her final docking. Their grief, combined with irrational rage, culminated in a mutiny in a futile attempt to stave off the inevitable. Anchors were dropped and the passengers were off loaded in tenders, but two weeks later, the crew capitulated and

the great ship was moored in the Qua de l' Oubli, "the quay of the forgotten."

She lay there for five years. Then an Arab business man made arrangements to purchase her as a floating hotel off the Florida coast. He was unable to raise the capital, however, and it seemed that The France was doomed to the shipbreakers of Taiwan. Then another trend appeared that brought about her salvation. Miami, over a period of a few years, had become the cruise capital of the world. Seven hundred and fifty thousand people a year were booking cruises out of the port, a large percentage on Norweigan cruise ships and a third of the total on the ships of the Norweigan-Caribbean Lines. NCL had four cruise ships operating in the Caribbean booked at over a hundred percent capacity year round. More tonnage was urgently needed. The available ships of the world were researched and one by one were eliminated until only the SS France was left. The ship was purchased for eighteen million dollars and one hundred million dollars was budgeted for conversion into a Caribbean cruise ship. She was rechristened The Norway in preparation for towing to Bremerhaven for refitting and conversion.

The French people rose up in protest when it was learned that The France had been sold to a smaller country and that the expensive conversion was to be done in a German shipyard. Bidding had resulted in the Hapag-Lloyd yard in Bremerhaven submitting a bid eighteen million dollars less than the shipyard at Le Havre. The French government's offering to subsidize the work by 9.2 million dollars was of no help.

The French communists tried to block the movement of the ship and workers piled on to the locks in an attempt to prevent the movement. Appeals to President Giscard d'Estaing were useless since the government had already declared its' inability to finance the liner. With Captain Torbjorn Hogue

in command of the newly christened Norway, two Dutch tugs pointed the bow of the largest remaining ocean liner toward the North Sea and Bremerhaven. It was August 1979 and she was scheduled for her first cruise out of Miami in June 1980.

Tag Wondborg, a Danish Naval architect who had designed or redesigned one hundred and sixty ships over the past quarter of a century was engaged for the conversion. He was advised that the ship should be outfitted to carry two thousand passengers at sixteen knots on a weekly Caribbean schedule.

Since fuel costs had been the basis for her demise as the SS France, this was a major consideration. Sixteen to twenty knots could be made with half the power, and two of the four twenty foot propellers were removed and the forward engine room was evacuated of its' boilers leaving her with two double boiler engines developing forty thousand horsepower each and reducing fuel consumption to one hundred-seventy tons per day. Great tunnels were cut transversally through the hull of the ship fore and aft and diesel driven "side thruster" propellers were installed run by engines developing fourteen thousand horsepower. These five "side thrusters" allowed The Norway to pivot on her own axis and also permitted her to move sideways toward and away from the dock, essentially eliminating the need for expensive tugs. Integrated electronic controls allowed the pilot to handle the entire movement of the ship in port with a single joystick no bigger than a gear shift in a sports car. Instead of three classes, the entire ship was converted to first class. The wind breakers that surrounded the after decks to protect from the North Atlantic chill were removed and wide "flight decks" that extended wider than the beam of the ship were installed to allow for extensive sun exposure. A great outdoor restaurant, as well as two outdoor pools, sports decks and large areas for sunning were provided.

The two fifty ton three deck tenders were built, and in addition to the two dozen life boats, forty collapsible life rafts were installed giving tremendous capacity in the event of disaster. Angelo Donghio, a New York designer, redesigned the entire interior decor of the ship equipping it with a casual elegance. Six "stair towers" connected the various decks supplemented by multiple elevators. The Norway had again become the finest ship in the world.

What had been the pride of France had now become the pride of Norway. That far northern Scandinavian country was ecstatic when their new flagship steamed into Kristiansand ~~and~~ on the 2nd of May 1980. Hundreds of newspaper and television reporters came out on tenders to board the ship for the overnight passage to Oslo. She was escorted up Oslo Fjord by an enormous armada. It appeared that everything that floated in Norway was out to bring her home - yachts, life boats, lighters, ferrys, rowboats and even the coal fired SS Boroyund, Norway's oldest passenger ship of 1907 vintage. Crowds swarmed her decks, bands played, speeches were made and His Majesty King Olat V boarded for a tour of inspection. After three exuberant days in Oslo, The Norway made her way up the coast stopping at one sea town after another, greeted by the same frenzied exuberance. She went up around the North Cape and then turned her bow south and headed for South Hampton.

After crossing the Atlantic, The Norway entered New York Harbor escorted by The Christian Radich, the Norweigan training ship that may be remembered from the movie, "Windjammer." The next morning, she slipped her cables heading south and passed the inbound Queen Elizabeth II off the Battery. They had been consorts for years in the North Atlantic trade and would remeet off St. Thomas in the months ahead. The Norway finally arrived in her home port of Miami on May 22nd. Since that time, she has made the weekly cruise from Miami to St. Thomas

back up to Nassau stopping off for a day at the private island before returning to Miami - a somewhat confined course for a great lady intended for worldwide steamship supremacy, but giving to land lubbers like Nancy, Doris and me, an opportunity to experience, for a short time, the majesty and the grandeur and the thrill of the most elegant and stately form of travel ever devised by man.