

A View from the Rear Pew #94

I have just returned from an eastern Mediterranean vacation on the cruise ship Celebrity Constellation. It was pretty much twelve days of continuous self indulgence, interspersed with daily tramping around ancient temples, crusader fortresses and shopping bazaars. I give full marks to the cruise line for wonderful food, nice cabins and the ultimate in customer service.

I learned a lot on this voyage:

- . Men over 50 years old should not wear Speedo swimsuits;
- . Don't order red wine on Air Canada flights, as their plastic cups leak and you will end up with a big red stain in your crotch;
- . Greeks believe that they invented western civilization and that their current economic difficulty is what happens when you let the barbarians take charge;
 - . No meaningful traffic laws apply in the city of Istanbul beyond incessant honking and leaping out of your vehicle to scream at other drivers also leaping out of their vehicles;
 - . The Golden Horn is blue;
 - . The SPCA has no jurisdiction on the island of Santorini and cannot help the poor little donkeys who spend their miserable lives hauling overweight tourists up the huge cliffs while being poked in their butts by sharp sticks (kind of like being a Federal civil servant these days);
 - . I am not a very good negotiator (my sister made me stand in the street while she negotiated the purchase of goods after my disastrous purchase of a Turkish table cloth at about 500% of the going rate);
 - . The best olive oil in the world originates from whatever island or port you happen to visit;
 - . Greek yoghurt with honey and walnuts is just about the tastiest thing that I have ever eaten;
 - . Ancient people built huge and beautiful buildings (which makes you wonder how much more they might have achieved if they had possessed steel, plastic and fiberboard); and
 - . Canadians are really nice.

Perhaps this last learning is the one that impressed me the most. As a general rule, you can always pick out Canadians when traveling abroad. We are the polite ones who always stand in line quietly, say “sorry” a lot (even when something is clearly not our fault), wear faded hockey jerseys and Roughrider ball caps; and are always surprised and delighted by sunshine and warm temperatures. We are respectful of other cultures even though we secretly think that most foreigners should work a little harder and spend less time worrying about clothing fashions and the quality of their olive oil.

Canadians don’t shove or jabber loudly when approaching a loaded breakfast buffet table, and usually end up eating cornflakes and oatmeal anyway. We stand clear when somebody is trying to take a photograph. We never volunteer to be the audience participants in stage shows, but are good sports if we get dragged onto the stage anyway. We are the first to offer help to fellow passengers in distress and the last to step into the lifeboat (I am only guessing on this last point, as, fortunately, our ship remained watertight for the entire voyage).

In short, we Canadians are pretty low maintenance – which kind of contrasts with my flight home with Air Canada. Our plane was an older model Boeing with an inefficient cabin heating system and television sets that mostly didn’t work. Our pilot was an older white haired aviator (generally a good thing when you are putting your lives and personal safety into a stranger’s hands) but so was our cabin crew. Don’t get me wrong, the cabin service was fine but we passengers felt kind of bad about having these senior citizens wait on us. It turns out that seniority rules within the airline, resulting with the longest serving union members getting the prime jobs including overseas trips. If it wasn’t for the Air Canada logo on the paper napkins, I could have sworn that I was flying Aeroflot or Uzbekistan National Airways. The flying experience with our flagship airline doesn’t really signal a great introduction to Canada to newcomers. If I didn’t know any better, I would have worried that I was heading into a cash strapped country populated by aging workers who can’t afford to retire and who worry that they will end up eating tepid pasta and drinking cheap red wine out of leaky plastic cups. Silly me!

