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LAPD Band

by Christina Challey

The Viking Sun cruise, offered as “Australia, Asia, Europe and Beyond,” was the planned “trip of a lifetime” for LAPD Band member Steve Yerkes and his wife, Della. Little did they know that this cruise, as they renamed it the “Magical Mystery Cruise,” would turn out to be beyond anything they could have imagined.

Beginning on Feb. 11, 2020, Steve and Della were to begin their cruise in Sydney. The cruise was to last 82 days and visit 21 cities from Sydney to London, with stops at ports of call on four continents. Then along came the coronavirus . . .

Steve said they received word a few days prior to their trip that, due to the spreading virus, their scheduled stops in China and Hong Kong were canceled. Undaunted by this news, they embarked on the cruise anyway. Then after a few days of cruising, they learned that their ports in the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Singapore were also

canceled. Alternative destinations would be substituted where possible, but by then the virus was a pandemic, and ports were closing to cruise ships almost everywhere. Since Australia was still open for them, Steve said they managed to tour Sydney, Brisbane, Cairns, Townsville and Darwin.

After this, they took an unscheduled two-day trip to New Caledonia, a little-known archipelago in the Coral Sea 800 miles east of Australia. Then the ship sailed to Komodo Island, where Steve said, “There are actual dragons! Loose ones!” He said he and Della “had a long, strenuous, carefully-guided walk around the island and saw dozens of these fearsome creatures that kill and eat wild boar, deer and the occasional water buffalo. At times we were within 20 or 30 yards of Komodo dragon groups, carefully obeying our guides’ safety rules. What a rare experience!”

Next, the cruise headed to Indonesia, where in Java they were refused permission to disembark at Semarang, even after health officials came on board and took the temperature of passengers, crew members and officers, and confirmed that everyone on board was healthy. So on to Bali.

Since the Viking Sun was in the middle of a full London-to-London circumnavigation in which passengers had booked particular segments, many on the ship were scheduled to end their tour in Bali. Along with these, additional passengers, not knowing if the ship would be accepted at other ports, and with the risk of the virus, decided to end their tour in Bali, as well. So it turned out that two-thirds of their fellow passengers left the ship, with only 321



Della and Steve in Sydney.

passengers remaining on board, served by the full crew of 460. The captain told them that from then on, no new passengers would be allowed on board, so Steve and Della could now consider the ship their private yacht! Steve said, “We didn’t know where we were going, but we sure were having a great time.”

During this time, with news of the entire world being infected, their ship continued to have a clean bill of health, as certified by multiple health checks. “It felt like our own protective bubble, the safest place on earth,” Steve said.

The ship made a technical stop for fuel and supplies in Colombo, Sri Lanka, but no one was allowed to disembark. From there, they sailed across the equator. On board, those who had never crossed the equator were called “polliwogs.” These polliwogs needed to be *initiated* in order to become “shellbacks.” This, according to Steve, was a four-part process. “First, confess your sins to the Norse god Aegir and be judged guilty, then kiss a fish, then swim through saltwater, and finally down a shot of Aquavit.” Steve said he and Della are now shellbacks, certified in writing by their captain!

As the virus worsened, the plan was to send home, from Dubai, everyone on board except Americans and Canadians. They would then continue through the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, cross the Mediterranean past Gibraltar, and head across the Atlantic to the U.S. Along this route, the ship needed to make a technical stop in Muscat, Oman. But in order to make this stop, they had to prepare for the passage between Somalia and Yemen—*pirate territory!* The ship had to be wrapped entirely with razor wire, and high-pressure fire hoses were laid out on the decks. They planned to pick up four armed commandos to augment the six staff observers on deck, along with the senior officers watching from the bridge 24/7. Then they would cruise through the center of the passage at maximum speed. However, as it turned out, the ship never made it that far.

On March 21, they were notified by the Coast Guard that Hawaii had closed its ports, and they anticipated port closings

on the east and west coasts of mainland U.S. They advised all Americans to return home immediately. With that and the level 4 warning from the State Department, Viking made the decision to send all remaining passengers straight home from Dubai. From this point forward, Steve said, “for several days, it was hour-to-hour chaos as governments and local authorities changed the rules faster than Viking could make plans.”

The ship docked in Dubai, but no one could leave. After several days of flights booked and canceled, everyone on board was sent home except 81 Americans and eight Canadians. Viking decided to charter a plane to the U.S., but in the end, the Canadians had to be left behind because of the closing of the U.S. and Canadian border. The charter was preparing to fly from Madrid to Dubai to pick up the remaining Americans when Dubai closed its airport! Then, on March 25, with pressure from the U.S. General Counsel in Dubai, they were told that Dubai *would* open their airport *that* night—just long enough for Viking’s charter plane to land and fly everyone out.

Around 9:30 p.m. that evening, Steve and Della, along with the remaining Americans, disembarked the ship. The plane arrived in Dubai about 3:30 a.m. the following morning. They were flown to Newark, then on to Los Angeles.

The “Magical Mystery Cruise” was over, but despite the loss of planned destinations and the continued threat of the coronavirus, Steve and Della, home safe and well, said they enjoyed their cruise immensely and planned to take another cruise whenever possible. Also, Steve got back in time to play his tuba on the LAPD concert band’s new video of “Stars and Stripes Forever,” played by all the musicians from their homes. (See it on the Band’s Facebook page at [facebook.com/lasown/](https://www.facebook.com/lasown/).)

For more information about the Band, please contact Jim Starr, executive director: sngcop@aol.com. For greatly appreciated donations, please go to www.lapolicefoundation.org, and in the comments box, put “For the Band.” Visit our website at www.lasown.com. ❖



Razor edge of the ship.



Komodo dragon