

My wife, Jovita, and I arrived at the San Francisco port with our friends Jerry and Suzanne at what looked from the ground like the largest cruise ship on the seas. It was the Celebrity Infinity, the newest ship in the Celebrity fleet and reportedly as posh as the big ships come. We breezed through a well-organized boarding procedure in precisely 39 minutes. (We were a bit worried at the curb because a seemingly inept porter left in the exact opposite direction, dropping a large piece of our luggage off his cart every 45 seconds.)

Once aboard, we quickly found the popular Oceanview Lounge on the fantail, where we soon discovered that a glass of cat piss cost \$5.50, and a glass of very drinkable Chardonnay cost \$9.50. But we were amazed to find also that a vodka tonic made with your choice of Ketel One, Absolute or Stoloy cost the same \$5.50 as the cat piss. Our minds were made up.

We wanted to experience going out under the Golden Gate Bridge with a glass of wine in the fantail bar, but a late departure made this a conflict with our first dinner (6 o'clock seating) in the sumptuous Trellis restaurant. It ended up not mattering much, because we drank the wine under the bridge, and by the time we got to the restaurant, the rest of the table were just finishing their salad.

Friday: All day at sea on our way to Vancouver wasn't as bouncy as people told us it would be, probably because we were on a huge ship with state-of-the-art stabilizers. (Which we were to appreciate greatly in only one more day.)

Dinner was exquisite, as we were to observe throughout the rest of the cruise. An Italian wine steward and two Indonesian waiters fussing over us at every meal. And the food was consistently fine.

A demographic note here: The Celebrity Infinity holds almost 2,000 passengers and a staff of almost 1,000 from 50 different countries. Besides concluding that there are no ugly women in Romania, I also noticed that we never had the feeling of being

crowded; you can be as private or as public as you want, even to having meals catered to your room, at no extra cost.

Another demographic note: the common mindset is that there are only old people on these cruises. Not true. I would say of the 2,000 on board, maybe 30 percent were under 40, with some couples having brought their toddlers and small kids.

Saturday, Vancouver: I hate to alienate the Vancouverians, or whatever they're called, but if you live in San Francisco, Vancouver is just an exercise in *deja vu*. Now, I'm sure there are lots of interesting places there, but we only had time to walk around Gastown (their North Beach) and Chinatown (ours is better). Anyway, we had a nice lunch at Mitzie's, which I recommend, and got in some walking time.

That night was our first formal evening and either the tuxedo rental company sent me an undersized suit, or I grossly underestimated my measurements when I made the reservations. It was touch-and-go with waist, sleeve length and neck. I recommend double-checking your measurements when you order in advance.

Sunday, at sea: At about 4 p.m., an announcement came from the captain that we were headed into gale force winds and seas of 30-foot waves in the Gulf of Alaska. This was very exciting because we were getting ready for dinner and thinking about "The Poseidon Adventure." Dinner was, in fact, tumultuous, with the ship rolling wildly and porpoise-ing through the waves while hapless waiters tried to bring us soups and salads.

The ship rolled all night, and by morning we hadn't had much sleep. And it was raining outside our veranda.

Monday, Hubbard Glacier: Without spending too much time thinking about it as I write this, there are three indelible geographic memories so far in my

young life: my first sight of the Grand Canyon, my first sight of Yosemite Valley and the sight of Hubbard Glacier from only about 500 yards away.

Hands down, it was worth the price if we'd just headed home right afterward. It's truly one of the most theatrically dramatic sights in the world. And the coldest three hours I've spent since waiting for a discontinued bus in Brooklyn one winter. I have a strong hunch our captain, a guy with one of those long "opolos" Greek names and who looks more like a Jewish tailor than a 91,000-gross-ton ship's master, took pity on us for last night's storm and today's boring and misty cruise in the Gulf of Alaska, and made the decision to inch as close to the glacier as he and the harbor pilot dared.

We witnessed the phenomenon of "calving," which is the shearing off of entire blocks of ice from the glacier's face, and plunging into the frigid waters. Imagine this, and you'll have it: hearing the CRACK! of an unusually close lightning bolt followed by seeing a wall of ice 200 feet tall breaking from the face of the glacier and crashing with an enormous splash into the sea below. Except you see the ice fall before you hear the CRACK!

If you take a cruise to Alaska, bring binoculars. We were to find that every day, and in every port, we were each glad to have a pair with which to bring cliffs, bears, whales, eagles and a myriad of sights closer to our eyeballs.

Tuesday, Icy Strait Point: This remote village of 860 people only opened itself to cruise ships a year ago. It's actually the town of Hoonah, a salmon-fishing and cannery village a mile walk away from the dock. After a stroll along the beach (we saw a small pod of porpoises) and around a small second-growth park, followed by lunch in a small restaurant on the beach (the best clam chowder in Alaska, Jovita claims), we took the Wilderness Search tour into the back country, where we saw lots of bald eagles (they're not really bald) and sighted a brown bear trolling for fish along a remote river. We had to

view the bear through our binoculars, but it was well worth the tour.

Wednesday, Ketchikan: I had brought along two burgees from the Sausalito Yacht Club and got the location of the Ketchikan Yacht Club from an information lady at the dock. We walked around for a while in this picturesque little town, a lot like Sausalito. We found the oldest church in town, built by the local Tlinget (pronounced Kling-it) tribe 100 years ago, and heard a short lecture from a lady from Mount Vernon, N.Y. We rode a funicular 160 feet up for a grand view of the harbor, and walked around Creek Street, the quaint old brothel section from gold rush days. Alas, the ramshackle little hut in the marina that was supposed to be the Ketchikan Yacht Club was closed, but looking through the windows convinced me we didn't miss much.

Someone had told us there would be northern lights tonight, so we slept in our clothes and got up at 1:30 in the morning, rushed outside and saw...nothing. Overcast.

Thursday, Skagway: This is the most charming little town on the whole trip. With only 1,000 residents, it's four blocks wide and 23 blocks long. We walked around for a while and then had an excellent lunch at a fish-and-chips place that happened to have Guinness stout on tap. Then we had a great adventure on a three-hour train ride on the White's Pass & Yukon Railway, an old-fashioned, narrow-gauge train winding 20 miles up to the Canadian border into its Yukon Territory province, where a lot of the gold-rush activity was. It was a fabulous tour through a pass surrounded by 9,000-foot, snow-capped mountains. Except for a lady who kept noisily and interminably blowing her nose, it was a great trip.

Friday, Juneau: The capital of Alaska. We woke up to a light rain and heavy fog. Since we were too late to book a helicopter flight to the Mendenhall Glacier, we decided to see what we could find on shore. But it was too misty and we heard all the

flights had been canceled anyway. So with Jerry and Suzanne we hired a van and the Mexican driver gave us an excellent two-hour tour of Juneau and a ride out to the Mendenhall Glacier. I imagine this would be almost as spectacular as the Hubbard Glacier on a sunny day, but it was so misty and rainy that we could barely see it.

Saturday, at sea: Lazy day. We didn't wake up until 9:30 (our excuse is that we had to turn our watches an hour forward again last night).

Sunday, Victoria, B.C.: Woke up to a bright, clear sunny day, blue skies and temps I'd guess to be around 75 degrees. So we got a cab to take us to Butchart Gardens. I hadn't been looking forward to it, since flowers and shrubs are not my thing, but it was a beautiful experience. Someone named Jenny Butchart spent 25 years around the turn of the century planting her husband's abandoned 50,000-acre rock quarry, until today the world-famous garden displays more than a million plants a year.

Jovita had a ball, and so did I.

Monday, at sea: Woke up with a sore throat and decided I had caught a cold somewhere. It was probably that lady with the gushing mucus on the train in Skagway.

After a day of rest and sniffing, lazing and napping, I decided I had a bona fide head cold, but didn't let it affect our final day. I went down to the clinic on Deck 1 and found some Nyquil, which is magic stuff if you're trying to get a good night's sleep. In fact, Nyquil is the reason I believe in God. The first deck on the ship is pretty eerie, kind of like being lost in a warehouse. The medical clinic was just like a regular doctor's office, replete with a little waiting room, a small window to check in, etc.

The post-dinner show was disappointingly short, probably due to everyone either celebrating the last night aboard or rushing to their staterooms to pack,

or both. David Meyer, a phenomenal xylophonist, was impressive with a number done in blacklight with illuminated mallets, but only did a few numbers. Eliot Finkel, a genius pianist, played a few numbers and orchestrated a selection for which he had spent the night writing an original score.

Space hasn't allowed me to comment on each evening's show, but the talent on this cruise is exceptional; Celebrity's audition process has to be extremely vigorous and brutally demanding.

Tuesday, disembarking: There was a slight delay when an escalator broke, and we were promised only a 10-minute wait -- yeah, sure -- and exactly 10 minutes later we walked off the ship. Very slick indeed. Excellent marks all around for Celebrity's disembarkation process, another high-quality notch for this classy cruise line.

Our luck held out when our ride showed up precisely when we crossed the Embarcadero. Loaded up and crossed the Golden Gate Bridge into Marvelous Marin, a great place to call home and a fabulous adventure to remember forever.