

Anchors Aweigh!

The Best of the Caribbean with Exmoor Extroverts, 5-19th January 2017.

2017 had an extremely exciting start for over 40 Exmoor Extroverts who joined the planned visit to the Caribbean on **MS Braemar** which is one of the Fred Olsen cruise ships.

The journey to Gatwick included a lunch stop at a new venue near Thrupton, just off the A303, at **Rosebourne Garden Centre**. This provided a very pleasant break before finally arriving at the **Premier Inn** at Gatwick Airport. The overnight stop and enjoyable dinner enabled all to set off early the following morning in high anticipation of the exciting itinerary over the next 2 weeks.

The arrival at **Bridgetown Airport, Barbados** was handled with great efficiency with luggage being taken to the ship almost immediately and a very swift transfer through immigration to waiting coaches for registration aboard.

MS Braemar is one of the smallest ships in the Fred Olsen fleet with a capacity for 929 passengers. This enabled passengers to find their way around the ship very quickly and settle into the routine of life aboard. Daily events on board and a full itinerary of tours departing each day were published in The Daily Times and delivered to the cabin each evening. Some passengers had pre-booked their tours organised by Fred Olsen but what became quickly apparent was that it was possible to arrange an individual tour with the many mini-bus/taxis waiting in the harbours at considerably less cost.

This cruise was advertised as “The Best of the Caribbean” and it certainly provided a rich and varied chance to see 11 islands each with their own individual character. Starting in **Barbados**, Extroverts quickly adjusted to the warmer climate and the beautiful sights of clear blue seas, gorgeous white sandy beaches, tropical vegetation and colonial architecture. Two detailed presentations given on board helped to remind passengers of the history of the Caribbean and the many sea battles between the British, French and Dutch who each tried to secure sovereignty of the islands. Nearly every island had a fort as evidence of previous fortifications and battles. **Tobago**, (our second island) is dominated by Fort King George, named after King George 111, was built in the 1770s. The contrast of life on board ship then, compared to the comfort of MS Braemar was a stark reminder of how times have changed! The beautiful coastline and bays provided opportunities to see Pelicans diving for fish and Frigate birds waiting to scavenge.

The next port of call was **Grenada** also called the “Spice Island”. The mountainous volcanic landscape provided many wonderful views over the island much of which is preserved in the Grand Etang National Park. Renowned for its cascading waterfalls and lush vegetation, Grenada is also well known for nutmeg, ginger, cinnamon and cocoa.

It also boasted some rum distilleries and in common with most of the trips on the islands offered many chances to sample rum punch – a delicious distraction.

This was followed by a visit to **St. Vincent**. Here was another fort, this one named after Queen Charlotte. Byahaut Cove was the location used in “Pirates of the Caribbean” but happily St. Vincent is more peaceful now and one can snorkel in tranquillity.

Dominica is renowned for its natural beauty and travelling to the south of the island one was able to see at the southern tip both the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. One of the main attractions here are the underwater geothermal pools which bubble away like champagne – Champagne Bay is considered to be the best spot for snorkelling in the Caribbean. A small statue in Roseau of a slave was erected to commemorate the abolishment of slavery and was a salutary reminder of the hardship that islanders had endured in the past.

One of the highlights on **Antigua** is a visit to Nelson’s Dockyard – a beautifully preserved 18th Century dockyard which is still used today. The buildings were used by the Royal Navy until 1889. By contrast some Extroverts swam with Stingrays and declared it was “the best ever!”

Arriving next at **Tortola**, you are immediately struck by the shopping centre built next to the dock with buildings with red tin roofs, a characteristic of many old buildings also. The newness of this complex illustrated how the income from the many cruise ships has helped provide essential finance for many of the islands we visited. Tourism was acknowledged as the main industry everywhere and the impact of this could be seen in the growing provision of schools, hospitals and general wellbeing of the local population. Tortola has a National Park where mahogany trees and many tropical plants flourish. The highest point of the park stands at 523 metres and affords stunning views over a very beautiful island.

There were 2 days at sea travelling to and from **Grand Turk**. This allowed time for many activities such as Bridge classes or a quiet visit to the spa for a massage or hair do. Sailing on the Atlantic side unfortunately was rather rough with high winds. Grand Turk is rather flat geographically but nevertheless has some lovely beaches. It boasts a lighthouse on the northern tip which is a popular with the many local donkeys who wander quite freely around the island. The donkeys are clever enough to know where the tourists go and were ever present for a photo shoot or better still a small snack. Grand Turk also has a space centre next to the port to commemorate the landing of John Glenn in a space capsule in 1962 when he splashed down near the coast. The American airbase (now defunct) on the island was where Glenn was taken to recover from his space mission. There is little industry on the island and the previous export of salt from inland salt lagoons no longer continues. The presence of salt in the soil prevents any local production of food and everything has to be imported.

One of the memorable sites on **St. Kitts** was a visit to Romney Manor – a former sugar estate but now a privately owned house set in beautiful gardens with a saman tree said to be over 300 years old. Here was a flourishing batik industry with many beautiful articles of clothing with vibrant Caribbean design. The capital, Basseterre, has a great array of Georgian architecture and the occasional sighting of a red telephone box gave a hint of the island's history. Many Extroverts joined the St. Kitts railway journey – built in 1912 to deliver sugarcane from the fields to Basseterre.

St. Maarten is divided between the Dutch and the French. Whilst walking along Philipsburg High Street it felt strange to hear the odd snatch of a Dutch conversation in a café whilst being invited inside the many jewellery shops by an English speaking local. That apart, the island again has beautiful beaches and the benefit of two differing influences.

The affluence of **St. Lucia** was evident as the ship entered the port of Castries. Rather splendid residences could be seen around the coastline with a few private helicopters flying off in the background. The island is famed for The Pitons (now a UNESCO world heritage site) but also its forests, wildlife and beaches. The French influence on the island could be seen with La Toc Battery and the mineral baths built for King Louis X1V's troops on the Soufriere Estate. An aerial tram enabled some visitors to glide over the island's rainforest and see some wildlife. Was this a fitting end to a very busy itinerary? Well, not quite – we were afforded another day on return to **Barbados**. Whilst the ship's crew were essentially preparing for the next intake of passengers, the outgoing contingent was tactfully offered tours ashore before departing to the airport for the flight home.

It was a very sad departure after such a wonderful 2 weeks on MS Braemar. Exmoor Extroverts were treated extremely well on this cruise – we were welcomed aboard with a special drinks party which coincided with Sue Shapland's birthday. This also provided us with the chance to meet the ship's crew, talk to the Captain and enjoy yet more wonderful food and drinks.

Four other Extroverts celebrated birthdays whilst on board and I am sure that the memory of the dining room staff singing "Happy Birthday" to them will not be forgotten.

I could not fault this cruise. The itinerary was varied and very exciting. On board the standard of dining, the willingness of the staff, the entertainment in the evening in the theatre, provision in the cabins and cleanliness was of a very high standard. There were opportunities for dressing up for 3 formal evenings and a "British" evening also. I believe it was Evelyn Waugh who once commented that people open up more on a cruise than in a hotel. This was certainly true on MS Braemar. Apart from meeting many other passengers it was a great opportunity to get to know many Extroverts and enjoy their company. It certainly was the best!