

Salmon World

2:02 PM PDT, June 22, 2008

June 21 (ish) - I'm not quite certain what date it is - as I've just gotten off a cruise ship where the days kind of meld together like one big tapestry of eating and sightseeing and gambling at the casino and eating some more. This was an Alaskan cruise, sailing from Vancouver return, with stops in Ketchikan and Juneau and the Hubbard Glacier - all in Alaska, and Prince Rupert, BC.

Seeing glaciers was indeed awesome. We were in luck at the Mendenhall Glacier in Juneau in that it had just "calved" the night before (only luckier if we had been there for the calving). Calving is when a chunk falls off a glacier (becoming an iceberg I suppose). But what was so cool was the colour. This huge chunk of ice was an electric blue. If you saw a painting of it, you'd never believe it was truly that colour. As it is - some people have told me - seeing true blue in nature (flowers and what have you) is quite unique - so to see this chunk of blue (described by a fellow traveller as the blue of a beautiful woman's eyes) was really something. I'll get this a bit wrong, but the reason newly calved ice is so blue is because the compressed crystals cannot refract the colour blue. It is the same reason that ruby's are red.

It did strike me this past week how incredible it has been to, within a period of a couple of months, have been in the presence of both desert (Arabia in March/April) and ice in such expansive environments. What a world we live in. Particularly at the Hubbard and Mendenhall Glaciers did I have those moments of clarity about what grandeur we humans are surrounded by.

But what is rather curious about the human condition is that one of my favorite moments of the week was last night. The temperature was finally warm enough for my dream. I snuck away from the myriad of planned shipboard activity (after stealing a few fresh-baked cookies from the dining room), and holed up in my stateroom. I put on the big fluffy white bathrobe and sat on my balcony and read a lovely mystery (Set Sail for Murder - I think it was called - by Carolyn Hart) while watching the beautiful scenery slip by like my own private National Geographic movie. Lovely!

This voyage was a family trip, celebrating the X5th birthday of a charming woman, my mother-in-law. There were eight of us. And surprisingly, although we'd never all travelled together before, got along famously - happy to be together for a

happy occasion. A true life moment. Never to be repeated. Worthwhile. Important.

I had intended on working more during the week. But it wasn't that kind of ship. Or that kind of holiday. And that, I've decided, is just fine.

Looking forward to getting back to beautiful, sunny, hot Saskatchewan for summer. I work a lot in the summer, but I also know about balance, and when the weather is perfect, put down the pen, throw a few steaks on the BBQ, take a dip in the pool, smell the flowers, and enjoy life!

Bloody Words

5:10 AM PDT, June 8, 2008

June 8, 2008 - Bloody Words is the clever name of Canada's foremost crime writers and readers conference, founded in 1999 by Caro Soles www.carosoles.com. Having gotten to know each other in a bar in New Orleans (no lie), I've had the privilege of touring with Caro in Texas, and just a week or so ago we were competing in the same category at the Lambda Literary Awards in Los Angeles.

The festivities began on Thursday night with the Crime Writers of Canada Arthur Ellis Awards, MC'd by the musical author Rick Blechta www.rickblechta.com. It was a terrific evening spent in the company of one of my editors, Gillian Rodgerson, and many fine writers, nominees and their guests. And, it is always exciting when you have a winner at your table, which we did: D.J. (Dorothy) McIntosh who won the Unchanged Arthur for her first novel, *The Witch of Babylon*. A full list of the nominees and winners will soon be posted at www.crimewriterscanada.com.

Friday began for me with a series of meetings in which I became a member of the executive and board of directors of the Crime Writers of Canada. Our incoming president is Kay Stewart, past president Michael Blair <http://web.mac.com/mjblair/iWeb/Writing> , and then we have Lou Allin, Nat Grant

www.natgrant.com, Terry Carroll www.carrollgroup.ca, John McFetridge www.johnmcfetridge.ca, Sue Pike, along with our executive director (and this year's Bloody Words chair) Cheryl Freedman. All of them wonderful writers.

After a rather spirited AGM, it was time for the opening night reception and to get Bloody Words started. It truly was an action packed weekend, with many interesting panels, readings, and exuberant socials.

On Friday night, I hosted a special event. Long story short - each year at Bloody Words there is a Guest of Honour and an International Guest of Honour. At last year's Bloody Words to be held in Victoria, I was thrilled to be asked to be Guest of Honour. Sadly the event was cancelled. So my Friday night power point presentation was my tongue-in-cheek version of "Oh yeah, it happened" - what Bloody Words 2007 looked like based on a would-be Guest of Honour's determination to make it happen even without a single attendee. It was fun to put together and many thanks to everyone who came out and laughed so heartily.

After this I was a contestant in the annual Hang In game where they pitted West (me and Lou Allin www.louallin.com) against East (Caro Soles and Katherine Hobbs - chair of Bloody Words 2009 in Ottawa). Our gamesmaster was easterner Rick Blechta who unabashedly gifted the eastern team with millions of points (even for wrong answers) whilst grudgingly allowing the western team a mere one or two points at a time. This was a fun game where they tested our knowledge of Canadian crime writers, and Rick was very witty as the host (even though he is a lowly easterner).

Saturday was a full day of programming and I was invited to the Hammett Awards lunch as I would be reading an excerpt from one of the short-listed books at that night's ceremony (and I am currently on the board of the International Association of Crime Writers). First bestowed in 1992, the Hammett Award is given out by the North American Branch of the International Association of Crime Writers to reward a work of literary excellence (fiction or non-fiction) in the field of crime writing, by a US or Canadian author. This was terrific fun for me, because along with Caro Soles, Cheryl Freedman, I got to have lunch with the chair of the Hammett Reading committee, author and lawyer Michael Bowen, IACW ED Mary Frisque, my dear friend and colleague Mary Jane Maffini www.maryjanemaffini.ca, and I got to meet for the first time our International Guest of Honour, Carolyn Hart www.carolynhart.com. (Carolyn has written over 40 books, including a Pulitzer Prize nominee), and Hammett nominee Gil Adamson giladamson.com As it turned out, some hours later, Gil was the winner of this year's Hammett.

Saturday afternoon I moderated a panel called Oh My God, I Sold My Book - all about what authors go through before they get published and immediately after. My panelists were all first time authors: Phyllis Smallman, Susan Kingsmill, Howard Shrier, Julia Madeleine and Sharon Rowse. The panel was very well received, and I hope we provided some valuable information and perspective for the attendees.

After a mass autograph session - set up alphabetically so I was happily placed between two of my favourite authors, Rick Blechta and Giles Blunt www.gilesblunt.com - it was time for the banquet and my gig as the MC.

It was a wonderful gala event, including the presentation of the Hammett prize, the Bony Pete award for short story, and speeches by Carolyn Hart and Guest of Honour Rosemary Aubert www.doortosummer.com/aubert. And we even managed to get through it all before 9:30 pm.

Those were just some of the highlights. But as always with these things, the best part was the people, seeing many old friends, readers and writers, I haven't seen since last Bloody Words two years ago, and meeting so many new ones. It was so great to see people like Vicki Cameron, Vicki Delany, Jo Dereske, Honora Finkelstein and Susan Smily, Barbara Fradkin, Elaine Freedman, Kate Hamilton all the way from Phoenix, finally getting to meet one of my favourite authors, Lyn Hamilton (and trying to convince her not to stop the Lara McLintock series), Robin Harlick, Madeleine Harris-Callway, Susanna Kearsley (who did such an awesome job on my profile in the conference booklet), Jennifer Lanthier (it was her first Bloody Words and although she claimed not to, she fit in perfectly), Rick Mofina, Nigel Tappin, Brian Trainor, and Jim Napier. There were so many more - thank you for your good humour and companionship and making this Bloody Words a wonderful experience.

The 2008 Lambda Literary Awards

5:57 PM PDT, May 30, 2008

May 30, 2008 - The bad news is that Stain of the Berry did not receive the Lambda Award at last night's gala awards ceremony in WeHo. But there is a ton of good news. First and foremost, my good friend from New Orleans, Greg Herren did win. Well....he was a better friend before he stole my award....but otherwise, I'm okay with it. :)

Beyond that, it was a terrific night here in LA, especially getting to see so many of my writing buddies again: Robert Taylor (and Ted), with Patricia Nell Warren, my fellow finalists Neil Plakcy, Caro Soles and Chris Beakey (we all sat together and booed and hissed when we lost - not really), Charles Flowers, John Morgan Wilson, Katherine V Forrest, Laura Baumbach, Christopher Rice, Joe Pittman....and the list goes on.

It was a beautiful LA night as we all pulled up at the fantastic looking Pacific Design Center on Melrose Avenue. It was a full house by time we arrived at not yet 6:30 pm. Wine flowed freely as everyone, dressed in their best, tried to balance getting some eats from the buffett with visiting with friends. Quite alot of fun, and in what seemed like seconds, it was 7:30 and time for the show to begin! The host was Michael Corbett with Extra and host of Mansions & Millionaires. We all felt like millionaires, just to be there. Thanks Lambda!

And the nominees are....

9:17 AM PDT, May 28, 2008

Wednesday, May 28, 2008

...in the category of:

MEN's MYSTERY

Double Abduction, Chris Beakey (J. Boylston/ ibooks, Inc.)

Stain of the Berry, Anthony Bidulka (Insomniac Press)

Pierce, Roberto Ferrari (Haworth)

Murder in the Rue Chartres, Greg Herren (Alyson Books)

Mahu Surfer, Neil Plakcy (Alyson Books)

Drag Queen in the Court of Death, Caro Soles (Haworth)

Tomorrow we fly off to Los Angeles for:

Lambda Literary Foundation
and the City of West Hollywood

present

The 20th Annual Lambda Literary Awards

Thursday, May 29, 2008

Silver Screen Theatre
Pacific Design Center
8687 Melrose Avenue
West Hollywood, CA 90069

Designed by Theo Kalomirakis, the theatre pays tribute to the Silent Era of film with its subdued palette of blacks, whites, greys and silvers, offering a 21st century interpretation of that historic period.

All pretty cool, actually. Since I first won the Lambda Literary Award (I had to get that in this post somewhere, right?) for Flight of Aquavit, I've been to the ceremony as a presenter a couple more times.

My first time was for my 2nd book, and I'd never been to anything quite like this before. And to win - the first Canadian to win in that category - just blew my head off. Today, one of the cool things about 'growing up' in your career, is that this time around, I know three of the finalists - Caro, Neil and Greg - very well. I consider each of them friends as well as colleagues. I've toured with both Caro (Texas) and Neil (most recently in DC and Philly) and see Greg every year at Saints & Sinners conference in New Orleans. Although I've not yet met Roberto, I just appeared with Chris Beakey in Washington. The whole competitive crap aside, to me this makes the whole thing much sweeter. I'm a firm believer in writers supporting writers, what is good for one of us can only be good for all of

us. Would I like to be the winner? Of course. We all would. But a win by one of these other five terrific writers takes nothing away from me. The list of nominees was a long one this year, so to be amongst the six finalists is a prize I already have. I'm excited to be a part of it.

This is the first year the ceremony is being held in LA (previous years in DC and NYC). LA is the new home of the Lambda Literary Foundation's head office. It appears they've glitzed up the ceremony and we finalists (who will be seated in colour-coded seating areas) have been told we have one minute for our acceptance speeches. There will be a green-yellow-red lighting system, dimming lights and a strong-armed MC who will hook us off the stage if we go too long.

One minute. You try to say something other thanwow, I uh, I uh, I'm so excited, I only have a minute and, uh, wow this is so...oh gosh I wanna th.....DONE.

Win or not, I found a terrific, age-inappropriate, rockin' outfit to wear when I was in Georgetown (DC) last week - topped off with a pair of crystal skull encrusted boots! Oh yeah.

Eighteen Questions & Answers

12:46 PM PDT, May 21, 2008

May 20, 2008 - An interesting website <http://www.eighteenquestions.com> has a nice idea:

“101 Best Website” Writer’s Digest Magazine, 2007, 2008

We all learn from experience, both our own and the experience of others.

The Eighteen Questions (18Q) is a Q&A series developed for the newsletter, The Fabulist Flash. The questions are designed to share the views and experience of published authors.

The Writers link will lead you to those who've taken the 18Q. Click on their names to read their 18Q responses.

Is there an author you'd like to take the 18Q? Email your request to Gregory@Kompes.com

Are you a published writer? The 18Q Survey link will take you to the questions and submission instructions.

You can read my Eighteen Answers at:

www.eighteenquestions.com/index_files/18QAnthonyBidualka.htm

Philadelphia Feeling

10:44 AM PDT, May 15, 2008

Thursday, May 15 - I am now in Toronto Pearson's Airport Maple Leaf lounge - as it seems I often am - on my way home after several days away on US tour - New Orleans, Washington, DC and Philadelphia. The Philly event last night was awesome. There has been a de-sexiness of author readings in the last decade or so. Not many people come out to them, or, at least, attendance is unpredictable, especially at independant bookstores. The owner of Giovanni's Room in Philadelphia even said to the three of us authors on our 'Men of Mystery' tour, that he hoped we wouldn't be disappointed if no one showed up. But I would like to put forward, that perhaps we have started to..Bring Sexy Back? :)

I learned some time ago, that touring with a book is not all about the bookstore events themselves. It's also about getting to know the generous booksellers who populate our communities doing a great job supporting writers and literature, its about being in the community, being visible, having your name on posters and online calendars and perhaps in the local arts & Entertainment magazine, getting radio time, that sort of stuff. I've lucked out in often having great attendance at

my events, but I've certainly had the one or two person reading. And on those evenings I gave my all, just as I always try to do. I am eternally humbled by every single person who took time out of their busy lives to come listen to me read. Afterall, the last time most of us did that voluntarily was when we were six.

Anyway, every chair in Philadelphia was filled.

Thanks to all of you who came by. Some from some distance, like John from Trenton - great to meet you - and much luck in your studies and new career; and Far...Faroun...no, that's not it...oh dear, I've forgotten how to spell your name - but the great fellow from Central America who once lived in South Africa who, even though he was travelling (and we all know about those airlines and those darn baggage weight restrictions), still bought a book. Books weigh a lot! I know this. And Gary - I hope we get to connect Book Expo weekend in LA. And so many more. We so appreciated your attendance and attention.

To my fellow Men of Mystery - Neil and Mark - as always - a great pleasure to share those special evenings with you.

Some Saints, Some Sinners

7:16 AM PDT, May 14, 2008

Wednesday, May 14, 2008 – For the sixth annual Saints & Sinners Literary conference, held in the heart of New Orleans French Quarter, Exec Director Paul Willis and his associates put together another wonderful event. From the “Glitter with the Literati” welcome party in the beautiful courtyard of the W Hotel to the closing reception and awards presentation at the Bourbon Pub/Parade, it was a cajun-flavoured success.

After the welcome party, a group of us dined at W's terrific Bacco restaurant where I got to meet authors Dorothy Allison and Amie Evans, Pat and Michael (a most charming couple), and catch up with old friends Carol, Thomas, Greg and Paul.

Saturday I did a reading with other Lambda Award finalists Vincent Diamond, Mark Doty, Marianne Martin, Michelle Tea and my old friends Greg Herren and Robert Taylor. That night Robert, his spouse Ted, and I went a great spot called

The Bombay Club. Imagine stepping off a sweltering New Orleans street, a jangle with the noises of drinkers and partiers and bead tossers, into a James Bondian/British flavoured parlour with dark woods, sumptuous leather booths and a martini menu to make Auntie Mame tear up. To top it off, Herb arranged – all the way from Saskatoon – to have a bottle of perfectly chilled Veuve Cliquot waiting for us. What a superb night spent in lovely company.

Sunday morning bright and early – well, 10 am – I moderated a panel about the Writing Life – which was exceedingly well attended (doesn't always happen first thing Sunday morn in New Orleans). Although one panelist (Stephen McCauley – remember the movie *Object of My Affection* with Jennifer Aniston?) was called back home on an emergency, the remainder – Cynn Chadwick, Jean Redmann and Gary Zebrun – were more than up for the challenge of delivering some wonderful information to the crowd. They were awesome.

Speaking of which, I also attended many other awesome panels and readings throughout the weekend. And in some ways the best of all was spending time with old friends and meeting new ones. In addition to the ones I already mentioned: Kathie Bergquist and Robert MacDonald, Dale Chase and Bill Holden, Becky Cochrane, Aaron Hamburger, Trebor Healey, Jeff Mann (hi John!), Rich Merritt, Kelly McQuain, Gillian Rodger, David Rosen, Michael Walker, and Jerry Wheeler.

After the last hurrah, I stole away and found the perfect little spot for some quiet me time. (I am an introvert after all). The Pelican Club entrance is by way of an alley, great ambiance indoors, but they also have two – only two – lovely white linen-covered tables outside. I lucked out and got one. It was a perfect evening for outdoor dining, not too hot, playful breeze. The next table was quickly snapped up by a trio of women who each seemed to be speaking a different language – weird, right? But way cool too. I had a wonderful Ellen Hart novel with me, ordered a nice glass of red and some Louisiana style cioppina – a lovely fish stew with crawfish, white fish, shrimp, mussels, and more – topped off with a bit of limoncello – wonderful.

I'm now in Washington, DC. Flew here on Monday. Georgetown has some of the best men's shopping in the US – I'm just saying. Then I met Carrie and her friend Emma for drinks at Leopolds and dinner at Hook. Without going into much detail, Carrie and I first met in a virtual cemetery. I think I'll leave detail on that one for another time. We've emailed/Facebooked since – but this was truly our first in person meeting. The three of us got a long famously and had a terrific evening together. It was the perfect example of one of the great benefits of doing what I

do – getting to go to these great cities, meet interesting people, and make friends who are so generous to spend time with me. Hook, by the way, is an awesome seafood restaurant in DC. The food was some of the best I've tasted. Emma had a dessert that was a lingonberry (sp?) tart with a cheese mouse – the big winner of the night.

After a rainy Monday, Tuesday dawned bright and blue; perfect for some walking about in the morning. After a nice lunch in the sunshine at Paola's, it was time to head to George Washington University campus, where I sat on a panel for the International Association of GLBT Criminal Justice Professionals Annual conference. There were six of us, including Mark Zubro, Neil Plakcy, Chris Beakey, Rich Merritt, and Greg Miraglia. Michael Nava was supposed to join us, but did not make it – which was a big disappointment as he is one of my literary heroes and I was looking forward to meeting him. Many thanks to Scott Gunn for coming up with the idea and organizing it, and to all the attendees for listening to our stories and telling us theirs.

That evening, Mark, Neil and I read at Lambda Rising Bookstore, where we had a terrific turnout of fun, high-spirited readers. Thanks to Deacon and Chris and Marcus for having us, and taking care of us. Carrie and friends, thanks for being there. Richard, thanks for the CDs! Bob – great bow-tie – hi to Lloyd! Rich, great to see you again. Scott - the male Janet Evanovich - good luck with your new book, hopefully the first of many Kevin Connor mysteries. And hey - don't forget to email me that photo!

Now I am off to Philadelphia. My flight is an hour delayed. Que sera sera.

NOLA, DC and Philly

7:10 AM PDT, May 5, 2008

I love that spring is here. Being able to spend time in the back yard again is like doubling the size of your home. But alas, I am off again. On Thursday I leave for New Orleans for an annual writer's conference wittily named Saints & Sinners.

I'll be doing a reading with other Lammie finalists, Vincent Diamond, Mark Doty, Greg Herren, Marianne Martin, Robert Taylor, Michelle Tea. I'll also be moderating a panel with panelists Cynn Chadwick, Stephen McCauley, JM Redmann, Gary Zebrun - where we'll be talking about an author's basket of tricks.

Then I'm off to Washington, DC where I've been invited to participate in an author meet & greet as part of the 12th Annual International Conference of Gay & Lesbian Criminal Justice Professionals at GW University. The other authors included are Rich Merritt, Micahel Nava, Greg Miraglia, Neil Plakcy, Marak Zubro, Chris Beakey.

Neil, Mark and I are also doing a reading that same night in DC: Tuesday, May 13, 2008 at 7:00 pm, at Lambda Rising Bookstore 1625 Connecticut Avenue NW

Everyone is welcome!

Then its off to Philadelphia - my first time - I hope to get a chance to see the Liberty Bell. Neil and Mark and I are together again for a reading: Wednesday, May 14, 2008 5:30 pm – 7:00 pm Giovanni's Room 345 South 12th Street

Again - all welcome!

So, if you or anyone you know is in the area, come on out!

I'm looking forward to those Hurricane drinks in Nawlins and seeing and meeting many friends!

Arabia to Athens

2:29 AM PDT, April 8, 2008

Tuesday, April 8, 2008 – These are just some excerpts I thought I'd share—ramblings more like it, I suppose – from my journal as I've been sailing about the Arabian Peninsula for the last couple of weeks.

After eloping, we flew to Paris where we stayed at the famed George V hotel, toured parts of the city – like the Marais and Montmartre, and the Latin and Jewish Quarters – we'd never been to before. And despite being attacked by a hail storm at one point, it was a fantastic couple of days.

We then made our way to Dubai. One can hardly describe the unique nature of this city. It defies explanation. But one that comes to mind is the Las Vegas of the Middle East on steroids (without the gambling). The ridiculously wealthy royal family led by the seemingly well-loved and respected Sheikh Mohamed Maktoun (many call him Sheikh Mo), has taken a once poor, downtrodden, pearl-diving, port village and rebuilt it from ground up into a replica of what you might imagine an Arabic Fairy Tale Kingdom would look like. Any photos you may have seen about the massive structures being built here are true. Everything is built to impress and usually does. The Burj Al Arab Hotel is most commonly thought to be representative of Dubai – it is 54 stories tall, sticking out into the sea, looking a bit like a thumb, with a helipad sticking out one side at the top. One night we went there for drinks and dinner – you are only allowed into the hotel if you have a reservation. The bar is on the top floor with a stunning view. The drinks and food were astronomically expensive.

We spent the rest of our time in Dubai having great adventures like riding a camel, doing dune crashing in the desert, eyeing up what will be the tallest building in the world (Burj Dubai), trying to smoke a shisha pipe, getting henna tattoos. We toured the city souks and floated across Dubai Creek in an abra (old wooden dhou boat). We learned a bit of Arabic, but in Dubai, with only 20% of the population being Arab Emiratees, it wasn't until the last day that we actually met a real emiratee. The temp was close to 40 degrees every day.

We then boarded the sumptuous Silversea's Silver Cloud cruise ship. Today, after sailing through the Strait of Hormuz taking us from the Persian Gulf into the Gulf of Oman, we arrived in Fujairah which is another of the seven United Arab Emirates countries (Dubai and Abu Dhabi being another two). In Fujairah we again went out into the desert where we had breakfast at a Bedouin camp. Our next stop is at Salalah in the country of Oman. In the meantime we enjoyed the fantastic ship and the great bunch of people we've already met.

After Oman we bobbed along, somewhere in the Red Sea. The air is filled with an odd mixture of excitement tinged with trepidation. Part of it is because we're now at sea (with no ports of call) for three days, as we make our way from the UAE. (We completely bypass the country of Yemen which is the poorest of the poorest third world countries.) But mostly, I think, it is because we are about to

do what very few westerners get to do. Tomorrow our ship will pull into the port of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

You've all seen the statistics about this country or that, and how many millions of tourists they get each year. Heck, the UAE, on on this same continent, accepts about 6 million "western" tourists each year. Saudi Arabia? Well, they accept only 95,000 westerners a year. And many of those are muslims heading for Mecca. This cruise ship we're on, the Silver Cloud, is making its maiden voyage to Saudi with this stopping. It's sister ship, the Silver Shadow, which just happens to be in this same part of the world, by-passed Saudi and will meet up with us in Egypt. We are the first western cruise ship to dock in about 5 years.

There are restrictions here we must follow if we're going ashore. The men must wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts, the women must don an abeyya (which is a black robe that will cover them head to foot – not over the face). We can only photograph specifically identified places and objects. Men with hair below the shoulder are encouraged to get a cut. No affection is to be shown between anyone in any way. This is the ultra conservative of conservative places in the world. Religion plays probably the greatest part of everyday life here than anywhere else. I read somewhere today that Saudi is the home of everything we westerners find foreign: the middle east, politics of oil, Islam, terrorism, the vast Empty Quarter. This morning there was a special meeting on the boat just to answer people's questions and calm their nerves in some cases. It is, to say the least, exhilarating. And at the same time, here we are going about our tourist business, sunning on Deck 9, getting massages and facials, playing shuffleboard, eating fresh goose pate and quail eggs, drinking great spirits. Yet on one side of us is Sudan and Saudi on the other.

The three days at sea have gone much quicker than we'd thought. We had concerns that it would be too long without an outing. Fortunately, the sea has been smooth, oftentimes still as a millpond with barely a baby's breath of wind (which, apparently, is typical in these waters). And there seems to be so much to do. Early in the trip we befriended Dr. Rosanne Martorella and her husband Lou. As it turns out, Rosanne is our on board lecturer and a sociologist . So it has been fascinating hearing her thoughts each day. Last night Judie Abbott, did a talk about her 44 years as a lady cruise director. She ended it off with a song. And we were all taken to tears with the power and beauty of her voice. It was really something.

So – if nothing else, these last days have taught us about vastly different experiences existing in the same space. I suspect tomorrow will be, if nothing else, a truly unique and memorable life experience.

As I write this, we are floating in the Gulf of Suez heading for the Suez Canal which runs through Egypt and connects the Red Sea with the Mediterranean. Here the temperature has plummeted to under 20, while we've been used to high 30s with 75% humidity. We're travelling rather slowly, about 8 knots (top speed of our ship is around 20). We are in a convoy of other ships, which, as we round bends is quite a sight to see. We are number 13 in our convoy, and our sister ship, the Silver Shadow is behind us. 17,000 ships pass through this canal each year.

As you can guess, we made it safely through Saudi Arabia. Not only did we make it, but it was perhaps one of the highlights of this trip. It is a perfect time to be visiting Saudi. They are so desirous for the return of westerners as tourists, who, of course stopped coming to the Peninsula almost entirely after 9/11. Our welcome and entire visit could not have been friendlier. We were with a guide who happened to be the Head of Tourism for the country. As such, we had media - print, TV and radio - with us the entire day. At first we didn't know what was happening. We were being followed wherever we went by this entourage. They were taking more pictures of our group than we took of them. We soon came to realize that we were being focused on as the return of the western tourist to Saudi Arabia. I wouldn't be surprised to find our photos on tourism brochures and in documentaries.

And then!

I did something which turned out to be the genesis of a wonderful experience. We were shopping in a souk (market place) in Jeddah. One of the shopkeepers put a Saudi headdress on me – you know the type that look like a red-checkered tablecloth, with a black ring around your skull. I bought it and walked away with it on. This was still early in our visit, and everyone was more than a little nervous about where we were. I was feeling unsure whether they would find it disrespectful that I was wearing this outfit. Instead, quite the opposite was true. At first I noticed other shopkeepers suddenly smiling and waving at me. Then people on the streets. Saudis were coming up to me just to shake hands and teaching me how to wear the head dress in different ways, and when it got windy how to wrap it around my head. Then the media converged on me and I was interviewed and photos were being taken and my hand was being shaken even more. For the rest of our stay, right up to the immigration officer who stamped my passport as we left, it was as if I'd suddenly made friends for life. One fellow even said I reminded him of the King of Jordan (which I don't know if that is such a nice compliment or not!). It was truly a great cultural experience we'll never forget.

We feel very blessed to have had this opportunity to be here, and to have such a fine – and safe - experience.

We then set sail for Egypt and Jordan. There are simply too many tales to tell about our exhilarating time in those countries too. Driving through the Sahara in a convoy (for safety reasons) was quite an adventure. Karnak Temple made our mouths drop with its entrance avenue of ram-headed sphinxes and Great Court with 134 huge columns. The sheer grandeur of the Temple of Luxor is so amazingly preserved – there are still colours on the walls. Then crossing the Nile to the remote area where great pharaohs were laid to rest in the Valley of the Kings, not the least of which is King Tut. Tut was only 18 when he died (likely murdered) and so, surprisingly, has one of the least ostentatious of tombs. The highlight of Jordan is of course, Petra, announced in 2007 as one of the contemporary New Seven Wonders of the World. I can only describe Petra as a very narrow (sometimes little more than a two-arms-wide span) Grand Canyon. 2000 years ago, people called the Nabateans found it and build their fortress city within the walls of this gorge. Truly astounding to see.

We learned that only two days after we'd been in the same area, Somali pirates overtook a small French cruising vessel. This was a sobering reminder that we are still in an unsettled part of the world.

We have had many discussions, too, about the obvious issue of women and their lives in this part of the world. It is a complicated and ultimately unresolved issue in our minds.

And so much else has happened. Planet Earth moments like sailing alongside a huge collection of joyfully leaping dolphins. Seeing a sea turtle. Watching flaming oil platforms in the middle of no where. Dancing to ABBA and the Village People in a wild wind on Deck 9 as the ship pulls away from port. Meeting 80+ year old Margaret who is travelling alone, is mostly blind, and tells dirty stories. Crossing the Tropic of Cancer. Being entertained by the stunningly good pianist, Filip Wojciechowski. And now making our way through the Suez Canal, saying a fond farewell to Arabia. We have only two more nights aboard the Silver Cloud. Tonight we don our tuxedos one last time. The process of exchanging contact information with the many people we've befriended has already begun. What a voyage this has been. Unforgettable. After a couple days spent in Athens, we'll be on our way home. Every night as we enter our stateroom, somehow both exhausted and exhilarated at the same time, we look at each other, shake our heads in wonderment, and are grateful.