

Commentary...

The Asian 'ghost ship' – Part 2

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Editor's note: Last week's edition of The Nugget carried Part One of the story of a Sisters couple caught on board Holland America's Westerdam on its "Ghost Ship" cruise in the South China Sea. Because of coronavirus fears, Westerdam's Southeast Asian cruise was cancelled; but, for two weeks, no port would permit the ship to disembark passengers. Part One can be viewed at nuggetnews.com.

The coronavirus crisis forced Holland America to make some difficult, and very expensive, decisions for an unprecedented situation. Sailing aboard the ship for two weeks, with no certain destination, was a strange experience; but Holland America did its best to accommodate their guests.

While we never saw the promised ports on the second half of our trip, Westerdam improvised along the way, creating new shows and activities. Fortunately, we also met a great bridge-playing couple from Ottawa and spent many hours honing our bridge skills. With good Wi-Fi coverage, we were able to keep in touch with friends and family; and, we received quite a few messages from all over the country inquiring about our situation and wishing us well. A friend in Virginia messaged me to say that he

saw footage of us on CNN playing bridge on the ship!

Curiously, the last time someone told me they saw me on CNN, it also involved a Holland America cruise ship. In 1980, while I was stationed with the Coast Guard in Alaska, my sister-in-law called from Hawaii to say that she saw me on CNN on one of the rescue ships with passengers from the sinking cruise ship Prinsendam. The ship sank and was lost, but we rescued every single one of the persons on board.

Forty years later, I hadn't expected, or wanted, to be part of another cruise ship crisis. The final phase of this cruise — though clearly not the end of the story — unfolded when Cambodian authorities allowed us to anchor off-shore. Cambodian officials boarded the ship, took twenty samples from suspiciously ill persons, and a laboratory in Phnom Penh pronounced us coronavirus-free.

As a result, the ship was allowed to proceed from anchorage to moor in Sihanoukville. There, each passenger was presented with a traditional scarf from the people of Cambodia; but the show of hospitality wasn't over yet. At 0700 the next morning, amidst great pomp and circumstance, the prime minister of Cambodia joined a huge entourage of military and civilian dignitaries by landing in a helicopter on the pier. Scores of media

representatives and countless cameras were present to record the event.

Prime Minister Hun Sen graciously greeted, shook hands with, and presented flowers to every member of the first group of 116 passengers to disembark. We were in the second group, so we narrowly missed the honor. I rather imagine that the prime minister of this very poor country recognized an opportunity to bring Cambodia — which has been subject to recent economic bullying from China — onto the world stage. Regardless, I suspect that I will always have a warm spot in my heart for Cambodia.

Most of us were glad to finally get off the ship and take Holland America charter flights to major air hubs; however, there were a few diehards who were actually sad to see it all end. Anxiety notwithstanding, much of the cruise was enjoyable; although we missed a lot of what we had planned to see. On the other hand, I certainly never expected to fly to Phnom Penh, where we were personally greeted by yet another phalanx of dignitaries; and Kathi treated a television reporter to a dazzling TV interview.

The four-segment flight home through Phnom Penh and South Korea was a two-day ordeal exacerbated by two 12-hour layovers. Our relief at returning home,



PHOTO BY CRAIG EISENBEIS

Homeward-bound Westerdam passengers board a Holland America charter flight to Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

however, was tempered by knowledge of the plight of the people aboard the Diamond Princess and a report that one of our Westerdam passengers tested positive for coronavirus.

That finding, which the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has since reported to be incorrect, brought everything to a screeching halt. Since we were among the first to depart, however, we were home before the alarm went out. The purported coronavirus case was discovered in Malaysia, where some of the passengers had been routed; so those people were held up, as were the others who followed us to Phnom Penh. A week later, most of the passengers were still in Cambodia.

Meanwhile, we had arrived home and learned of the possible virus case aboard our ship, so we decided to impose a two-week home quarantine on ourselves. Local health officials were

notified of our situation and contacted us to assist. Eventually, all 781 passengers still in Phnom Penh and all 747 crew members in Sihanoukville were tested for the virus. All tests were negative, and flights home were allowed to continue.

Deschutes County Health subsequently contacted us to say that the virus report on our ship was probably a false alarm, and they would not enforce a quarantine on us. Regardless, using an abundance of caution, we have elected to maintain our self-imposed quarantine, which will continue to the end of this week. Meanwhile, the full impact of the coronavirus remains to be seen.

By chance, it was Valentine's Day when we got off the ship, and Kathi's card to me said, "I love the adventure of life with you..." When she selected that card before we left on our trip, she had no idea of the adventure ahead.

Portraits OF SISTERS



PHOTO AND STORY BY *Cody Rheault*

Living the bookworm's dream, *Renee Akaka*, founder of the *1687 Foundation*, "basically reads for a living," she says. Her work at the Foundation requires her to filter hundreds of Christian titles for republishing, each carefully curated before distribution.

Inspired by the need for hope and encouragement after the 1995 Oklahoma bombing, the Foundation was started as a resource for service professionals — reaching prison inmates, first responders, and military members to name a few.

The only 100 percent free resource of its kind within the United States, the 1687 Foundation, and Renee's team, serve a multitude of demographics. But she says the letters of thanks she receives from people "are the favorite part of my job." Their warehouse currently holds hundreds of titles in bulk with their new 12,000-square-foot center being built off Sun Ranch Road.

This week's "Portraits of Sisters" presented by *The Nugget Newspaper*.

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