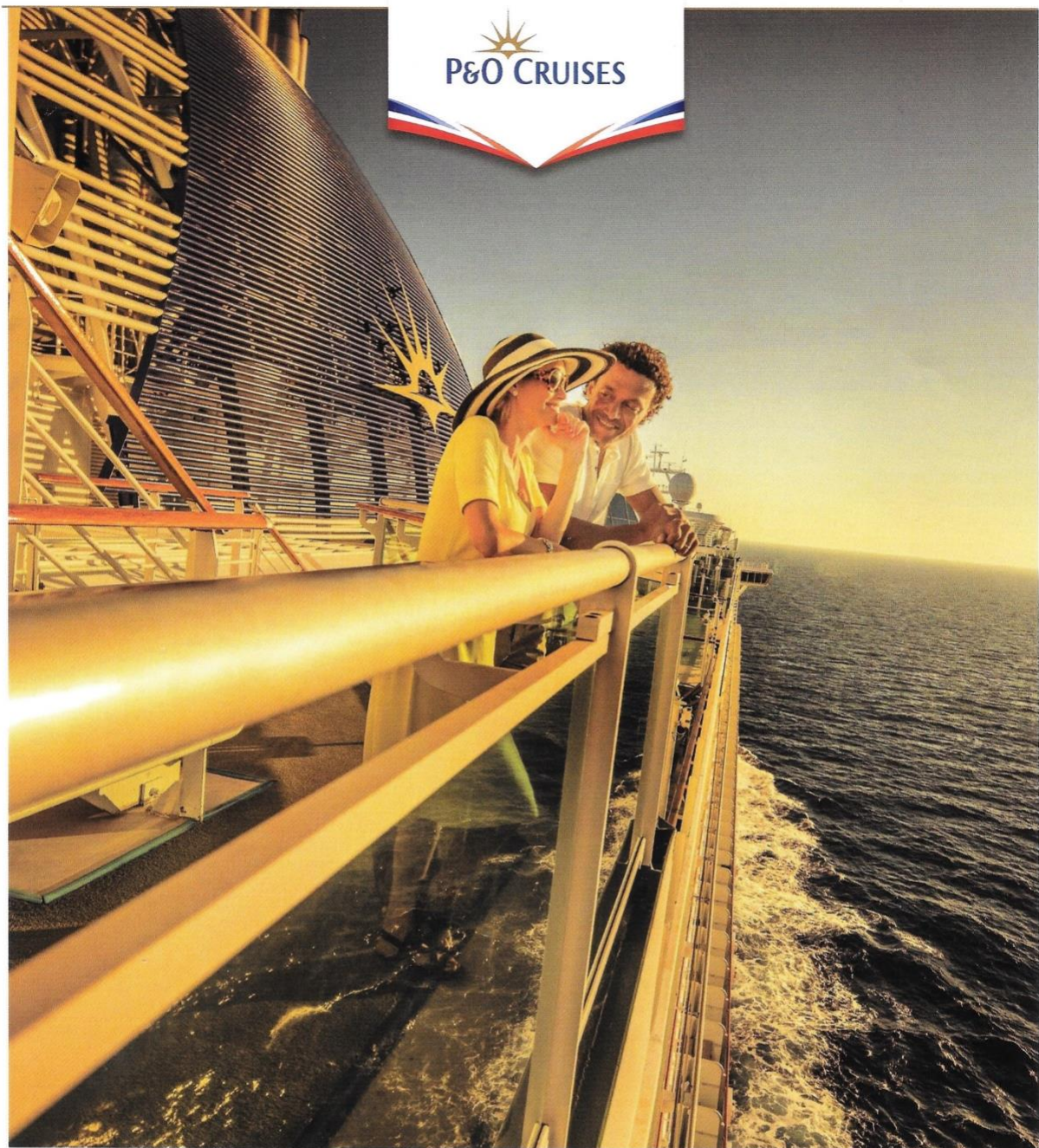




P&O CRUISES

Your Cruise Log

Notes from the Bridge

Oh what a wonderful voyage !

Day 0 – ‘to the right, I said!’

There’s a lot of anticipation to this holiday cruise lark it is fair to say. For starters, there’s the arriving / car drop-off / where’s my luggage gone escapade. That said, it’s fair to say that the whole process is remarkably well organized. As if they’ve done it before, once or twice. Granted, half of Southampton must be employed in the task, all assuming that half of Southampton is in fact a member of the WI or the IAM, but that aside, once you’ve had your first holiday snap taken, for insurance purposes, you’re away. At least they can show you what your car used to look like.

A smooth check-in, a Disney style gangway (presumably to build suspense as opposed to the ship moving gleely away from the dock in a random fashion), a quick welcome squirt of hand sanitizer – a promise of what’s to come, clearly – and you’re launched into cruise world. And what better way to be greeted than a quick swipe of your barcode and a welcome blast of the Spice Girls...



Where be my cabin?

It's obvious. Up a hundred flights of stairs, or 10 mins in a lift, hang a left, then retrace steps and hang a right, and then pick a direction. Any one will do, because it's inevitably incorrect. Follow the carpet design from hell and, eventually, you will find your home for the next week. All in all a reasonable experience since some other poor long armed soul has the job of re-acquainting you with your luggage, thus making your responsibility more fun than it actually could have been. Thank goodness.

Feeling peckish... take a compass

For the first journey out, this is a bold move. Granted, there's an awkward interlude, because you don't really have time to grab some food before the obligatory H&S group meeting. Instead, you do the briefest of orientation trips .. which will involve either the pointy end or the flat bit on the back, depending on where you are.

Midships ?? Then the world's your lobster.... Go with the flow. Follow your dreams (and the carpet)

A quick check that the sea's still flat, and then the budget version of Frankie's Two Tribes doth commence. A number of short blasts, and long one (has anyone ever waited to check for the full pattern before proper panic ?) and you grab your favourite orange teddy in a crisis (and warm clothing if (a) you want to take it seriously and (b) aforementioned luggage has arrived in your cabin by then), some important medication (gin ??) and off you go to your muster point. Where you will mill around, with hundreds of other awkward guests. El Capitan will give you some reassurance, some general info, some stern words (no bow), and then a big thank-you. And that's you done. If it happens again during the voyage, rest assured all hell will break loose, you'll stand on anyone and everyone in your path, irrespective of their quality of wheelchair, and you'll forget how to clip your safety strap together and that'll be that. Still, they did tell you and they have a barcode to prove it. Or rather Davy Jones has.

Panic over... time for a glass of. And a well deserved one at that. Congratulations, you've made it. You've popped your cruise cherry, the boat's on the move, you've found somewhere calm and tranquil, garnished with a plastic tree, a fake star ceiling and a very happy waiter who does seem cheerful to be starting his next 9 month long stint, and all's well with the world.

Ahhhhh, what a life.

After that, you feel like a pro. Pretend you're not lost, be purposeful wherever you're walking, even if it's in a circle, and no-one will know you're only on Day 0.

Oh oh... first breakfast and –

Famous last words. You think you've got it sorted, then this happens....

Captain Ahab at the restaurant door:

'How many are you ?'

'Four'

Do you wish to breakfast on your own (presumably as a family, as opposed to 4 singles), or are you happy to wait ?

'No, happy to join another group'

Aaaargh, who said that ? On what planet is that an acceptable answer. Answer – none in the discernible galaxy.

And then it's happened. We're on a table with the cruise couple collection (2 of, as it's clearly special discount day). Thankfully, couple number 1 seem to take the 'mornin' greeting' at its face value, and rapidly conclude that the conversation is probably exhausted at that point. Not so, couple number 2 from Leicestershire, wherever that is – although we did find out in due course. Suffice to say, 5 minutes and we knew about matey's 3 foreign houses, office in Belgium, 3 BIG holidays a year and 1 ex-wife, with most of his accrued wealth, so technically the 3 houses don't actually form part of his bragging rights and therefore ought never to have been raised in the first place.

Welcome to cruisin' – enough said. There's a need to redress.

I think I've gone crazy

I have no idea if there's a prize for the number of firsts that a person can have in one day, but I'm pretty darn near Olympic standard, if I say so myself.

1. Sit on cruise ship balcony, listen to Spotify on phone (having studiously checked 5 times that said phone is not, no way, no way, not ever going to connect to Dick Turpin's maritime WiFi at £100 per nanosecond).

2. Marvel at the North Sea, which according to Attenborough, D. Sir, teems with wildlife in a doomed battle against human detritus Aka 1 seagull in $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour's observation. Those wildlife cameramen must have the patience of Job.
3. Go to gym. Yep, you read that correctly – gym. To be fair, the first dip into the palace of pain was to attend a raffle draw to see if anyone had 'won' some treatments – many did, but not us. Second visit involved a Cross Trainer – which apparently had a preset program that required following. Didn't see that one coming. And then a treadmill. With Ronnie Corbett ever present in the back of my mind, it was only ever going to be 'stiff walk'. 4 kph will do, thank-you. Slightly disconcerting to be walking in a straight line, but 10 degrees to starboard thanks to the geometry of the bow and the placement of the gym, but nevertheless, mission accomplished, mild sweat broken and 2 glasses of lovely white wine with lunch fully justified.

So much so, that we even decided to attend a naffle (naff raffle for you non-cruise types) which was loosely based on a 'guess the diamond from the shiny turd' game in one of the shops and, with typical English calm, the fact that one of our cabins was rescued from the plastic tub of otherwise broken dreams (ticket draw) was met with a 'whoop' from James, now the proud owner of some lovely ear-rings. Apparently, Tasha on C Deck will sort his ears out and he can wear them with pride. We also learnt about the purveyors of fine diamonds, Fellati (I may have misheard that), and the all important 4Cs, although by then we'd lost the will to live and buggered off.

Ahhhh, Alex

Not the daughter. A nice chap from Bombay. Quite why I'd agreed to have the unruly locks trimmed on a boat, I do not know. Nor, quite frankly, after the bill, do I still.

However, as the trimming involved a shave (double?) and other applications of cream, foils, fake cucumber eye masks (I always thought they were cucumbers), rubbing, squeezing and thankfully, at the end, thank goodness, a haircut. After all that hair oil I looked like a cheap Philip Green and that wouldn't do. I have to say I'm a convert. Every week, until the end of time, I am convinced that an hour spent discussing the merits of Bombay vs cruise ships, as the North Sea glides by, in the company of Alex and his firm grip and equally solid knowledge of Elemis' product range (other extraordinarily expensive products also available) is an hour well spent. Granted, it would need to be wrapped around by a week of travel to all sorts of places, which could present a practical restriction on the idea, but nonetheless, I am sold. A slave to the furtherance of my own well-being. Well, until next Monday, I guess.

Suffice to say that I actually didn't feel like the massive pillock that I thought I would. In fact, it was pretty hard to stay awake through the whole process, so judge me if you wish, but I think I've made my contribution to the wider economy and feel a whole lot smoother as a consequence.

And I can see out from under the 3 months of thatch that was previously there. Result.

Dinner #2 in the Big Brother House

And, all things considered, not too bad an evening. Set up nicely by the need to go all James Bond, in any case. And of course the trial by photographer at Captain's Drinks. Note to self about the need to source a pager first, before enduring the weary tones of P&O's finest and his tales of Norway and the joys to come. Anyway, back to the snapper (man, not fish) – an odd approach which consisted of a variety of stock shots, which ranged from the semi-adoring to the 'sod you, I've had enough' pose. Anyway, job done and shots endured, we retire to the bar with pager in hand with the daunting prospect of 'shared dining' before foursome solace.

Fortunately, in due course, the poor unsuspecting that were thrust upon us were actually relatively sane .. cheerful Chichesterians Alison and Derek, with tales of the motorhome, and Rod & Suzanne, whose main claim to fame was to have ostracized an eccentric English couple once on a river cruise – they outed the aforementioned Englanders' love of naturism. Strange what you learn in a short space of time. Clearly going to have to concentrate on the quality of dinner stories. Yet to consider anyone for the high echelons of the Christmas card list just yet.

Day 2 - Stavanger

Nice place. Lots of white clapperboard houses, a very informative museum of oil and petroleum with an interesting little journey into the wounded psyche of the modern Norwegian, played out through flashbacks to some chap's damaged paternal relationship. Odd, but the 60s Mustang lightened the mood somewhat, although I'd have been a little reticent about driving it all the way up to Pop's summer shed. No amount of emotional trauma could ever justify the potential toll on the bodywork IMHO.

Oh, and who the hell parked that at the end of my street ?



The sun then shines down upon the decks and all is prepped for leaving Stavanger to the mercies of the next boatload. Or, as P&O marketing would have it, a sail-away. Because, of course, the ship sails away. Genius!

And so we set sail for Olden – a village far, far away in a fjord up the coast. But first, dinner

Oh dear, it had to happen

Dinner #3 – so far, so good. Should have known the luck wouldn't last that long. That's the trouble when you get cocky, you agree to all sorts of stuff. Sure we don't mind sharing a table – after all, the formal dinner worked. Surely all cruise attendees are cut from the same cloth (or is that more properly jib). Anyway, they ain't.

Excusing the nice older lady from near Newcastle, who at least expressed a polite interest in the future well-being of the offspring, sadly the rest of the bunch didn't live up to much. In fact, it was touch and go whether they actually did 'live'. As in were alive. Certainly Mr & Mrs Dead at our end of the table weren't. Suffice to say that I'd rather have dinner in a bus stop, waiting for the last one home after party night in town. It wasn't great. Equally, nothing was right for Mrs Dead, especially when the thoughtless folks from Durham town decided to have soup when others weren't. I ask you ... seriously ? I'd say they needed to get out more, but that would actually inflict them on more people and so all things considered, they're best left in their beige and grey world, twitching their curtains at the passing postman and all.

Retreat to the Glass House, and decide that in future, either we invent ourselves with totally new personae and give them all hell, who e'er they may be, or accept the longer wait and dine amongst ourselves in a more relaxed fashion. I simply can't stand the strain of the dating game any more.

Day 3 – Bring in the Old(en)

Our first Fjord..... Kind of reservoir-esque, but on steroids. Olden is, well, er, a quiet town. Quiet, that is, until 3000 cruisers hit town, and then it kind of fills up. Still, if you're short of a reindeer rug or three, then head down the souvenir store (next to the Qworp) and you'll be sorted. Don't forget to pick up your Norway tat for around £15 for anything (even a plastic bag).

Anyway, not to worry because we were off kayaking ! Yay. Ably escorted by How-Vard and Linda (for whom the 'looking for' was easy, because she was mostly behind us), we conquered the fjord single (well double) handed. When I say conquered, I probably mean circled, or rather part-circled, then headed back across the deep waters to our departure pond enclave. A good time in the sun, involving moisture, the wearing of a nylon skirt (for safety purposes, not fashion or fetish) and general merriment.

Even dinner was a bonus – no sharing tonight and whisked straight to a table, all for our own exclusive occupation. Strange how the bloody obvious somehow becomes a major victory in this strange palace of contradiction. And I should mention the musical genius that isn't Olly Murs. Actually can't remember who he really is, other than a fair likeness for the mighty Wanderer, old KCD, but probably fairer of voice.

An all-round OK day

And you can join with me in a game of 'where did I leave my cruise ship ? - Oh! There it is !



Day 4 – Flam (accents optional, once I can find a keyboard shortcut)

It's fair to say that if the villages on this itinerary get any smaller, they'd be Lego. Which, of course, is Danish, but let's not split Nordic / Scandinavian hairs.

Anyway, back to Flåm, now suitably accented. It is from here that the mountain railway ascends loftily to, err, somewhere lofty. Now, spoiler alert, this is no quaint cog railway, dipping under stone arches and clinging precariously to the cliff sides. It is, undoubtedly, beautiful as a train journey goes, but there are some qualifiers.

1. The train itself is, naturally, Norwegian technology. So yes, there is wood on the inside, but the rest of the thing is hydro-electric power (and has been since Shakespeare roamed the earth, apparently) and there's a snag on this tourist mecca.
2. Fat bottomed girls. Well, girls is potentially a misnomer – think fellow cruiser, desperate to record every moment of their pioneering on the all powerful smartphone. With which, presumably, they will bore their circle of friends endlessly on Snapchat / FB / Instagram with clips of 'my crap filming on a train up a mountain', 'oh how funny how the tunnel appeared just as I set off another clip' etc. etc.

Unfortunately, for those trapped in this little cell of environmental transport wonder, they won't be able to share in this message of joy, not even in its origination, because the artist's arse simply covered the angle of viewing out of the window, thus obscuring much of the Norwegian countryside on show. And there's a lot of countryside available, so you get the gist.

Ahh, but you alight in order to appreciate a glacial torrent at close quarters. Nope, not even then will you find respite. Once your fellow travelers have taken 4 minutes to alight the train, of your 5 allotted for the stop in question, you'll be faced with a football crowd jostling for position in front of this wonder whilst, all the time, haunting folk music adds to the ambience. Or not, as the case may be. Ah well, they did give it a shot, I guess. See 'container' later on in this drivel

And then you 'summit' as the mountaineer would say. Which roughly translates as 'you alight (see above for speed of process), you search for the man in red (Fabio – not at all Norwegian in case you're wondering) and then you board another train' – not a hint of cute about this baby – it's a commuter special all the way down the mountain to Voss. Efficient, in fact beautifully efficient – smooth, quiet, clean, comfortable – everything a train should be and what a train in the UK isn't. So, if a billion trees, rocks, streams and red & white houses don't amaze you at every turn, at least the train will. Comforting.

Thereafter, an authentic Norwegian buffet awaits. To be honest, I'm not too clear if the authenticity was due to the range of meats, fish etc., on offer or the queuing behaviour of the guests, but it was a buffet, genuine in all ways that a buffet can be.

And, after a little appreciation of the locale, we board our final mode of transport for the return – the coach. Ah, who doesn't like a coach trip. The highlight being a section which is, apparently, the steepest road in Norway – interesting that this is the best bit when you consider that the result of any mechanical failure would probably be certain death (see what I've done there – something for you probability fans out there!). Ohh, and a handy hint for Prink, which I think is what the tour guide was called – we don't all need a running commentary on how Norwegian kids go to school if it's too far to walk (apparently they take the bus, shock horror). And Voss isn't 'famous' for everything that happens – it's well known that everything just 'happens' in Voss. And, quite frankly, I wished it had stayed in Voss – silently.

And did you know that the Norwegians paint their houses red because they're too tight to pick another colour ? Well you b----y well will by the time you've been in the company of Prink and her fellow information-imparters for more than 3 seconds, I have to report.

Anyway, eventually we return to Flom (phonetic freebie there, for you) and away we sail, with the most elegant of 360 turns executed by Captain Kirk. The only shame was that we didn't swoosh the morons in the pedalo into the nearest fjord wall. Must be some health and safety law in Norway against that. Written by someone in a red building, I'll wager.

Dinner is a relaxed affair, taken in some of the best company thus far – our own. And then, a real treat – theatrical entertainment in the form of the magic that is Neil Lockwood... maybe the word 'was' may have been more appropriate but I fear that would be an incredibly harsh review from someone not qualified to do so. Actually, he was a decent performer – clearly performing as yourself is a better strategy than performing as someone else that you don't look much like. And he's played in some proper bands, although I think Neil needs telling that the jeans / t-shirt / skull bandana look went out some time ago. Times they are a-changing, Neil ...

Today's picture quiz conundrum for you wonder why the world is slipping south-east in the picture on the following page ?

I'll leave that one with you, but suffice to say you won't be able to 'contain' your amazement when you find out the answer !



Day 5 – Bergen

And so to our final stop on our voyage through the wonders of Norway. Did I tell you that red is such a popular house colour because the paint's cheap? Just thought I'd mention it. Anyway, Bergen awaits, slightly shrouded in a mist of mystery. Or mist, as you might say.

Bergen is a port. A proper sized town, with a port. It comes with different coloured old looking shops, some not red, an aquarium that costs a year's salary to visit and that is seemingly replete with those most exciting species of fish – brown ones.

However, it does have an ice bar. Nope, that's not a spatial cock-up – an ice bar not a nice bar. Actually it's a nice ice bar, more accurately. What's an ice bar I hear you ask yourself? Well, it's a nice bar (we've already established that) which is made of ice. And housed in a sizeable freezer. You get to dress up like a Jedi knight in a thermal poncho, with grippy gloves so your drink doesn't

slide out of your mitts – forgive the mixed hand-wear reference. And you sit on the remains of someone's dog, or reindeer, sipping a very pleasant cocktail whilst admiring the skills of an ice artist all around you. Conceptually, it works very well indeed – particularly since you can't actually stay long enough to get too blatted because your metabolism starts to shut down. And the added bonus that you feel like you've landed in Miami when you exit – even with the mist.

What other treasures does Bergen offer, I hear you clammering to discover ...

Well – it's got a fish market – quite famous apparently for, errr, selling fish. Bloody expensive fish, as it turns out. And a lot of 'em are brown.

And it has a funicular that whisks you silently to the top of a hill in the middle of Bergen, where you can look down on the mist from above. Or canoe, for free. They sure have it all, these Norwegians.

And so, once safely boarded, and we've had an hour's delay thanks to two muppets who haven't changed their watches in a whole week, we're setting sail once more for Blighty. Land of Brexit, Wimbledon, Cricket World Cup Final and, oh yes, Brexit.

And then a lovely afternoon tea, designed by Eric Lanyard, or someone or other. Quintessentially cruisy, if such a word exists, but very nice thank you very much. The rocky inlets of the Bergen fjords slide by, bathed in sun.

Dinner awaits (James Bond style).....

Thankfully the company at dinner was once again excellent – once again our own.

And a world's first on the service front :

Me – 'I'd like to order a bottle of Gigondas, please.'

Waiter – tap, tap swipe ... 'I'll bring it over'

Pause

Waiter arrives – 'who's having wine ?'

Us (in a break with tradition, suggest James has a small glass with dinner. James agrees)

Waiter – 'would sir like to taste ?'

Me – taste, swirl, usual faff about – ‘that’s fine’

Waiter – goes around table, pours generous glasses of wine. Then, looks at bottle, thinks ‘OK, I know how to save further faff’ and then does a further lap, making sure all glasses are full, and bottle is empty. Looks at bottle to ensure job well done, then trots off.

NB - James not keen on wine.

Today’s pictorial evidence ... two up and coming individuals with a desire for dressing up:



Day 6

The long sail home.

And so dawns the final full day before the great disgorgement back in Blighty, home of the still Brexitally challenged no doubt. A 'sea day'. Which means there's a lot of sea to see, you see, because you're on the sea.

By now we've discovered the daily challenge of the crossword - note the use of one word, not two – we are all paragons of Harmony at Sea. Good name for a boat, I'd say.

Time passes. Market stalls open up in the Atrium, and there's a mad rush to grab a bargain from a trestle table – much glitter on show, bags from the local market in Portsmouth – that kind of high class stuff. And how they like a bargain on board! 20% of complete crap and suddenly its crapness is even more complete. But good value, clearly.

Bingo !! Not some Eureka moment, in case you're actually wondering, but actual Bingo. 'Never have I ever' will no longer have the same impact again. And we (well, Alex) actually won something and therefore escaped with a very slight profit. No dibber, though. £6 for a P&O felt tip pen is a bit too much for anyone.

Nice lunch in the Glass House. A visit to the gym (twice in one week – this could become catching, although I doubt it), once lunch is digested. A short siesta, I feel, is necessary.

And so, things draw to a close – drinks (eventually) in the bar at the blunt end of the ship, dinner in the Epicurean and then off to the cabin to shoe-horn in all the clothes I haven't worn into the cases ready to be dumped outside in the corridor as the world's most planned and organized H&S hazard for those who've made the most of the last night, and then we're akip.

Day 7 - And so, the final curtain

... is opened and there's Southampton. We're back, within about a foot of where we started as far as I can tell. Final breakfast to check that fellow passengers are still quite dull, generally – actually they weren't – and then a final loiter before the disembarkation that had been billed as some Bombay street style scrum to retrieve baggage. Except it wasn't, because apparently in the last 10 years someone discovered that a piece of A4 with your deck written on it, and a big shed with all the bags spaced out in it, was a good way of doing things. Which it is.

Fin

(small protuberance on a fish used to help it swim)