

## Welcome to the North Atlantic

by A.D.Chacon

From someone who has heard "Welcome to Holland" once too many times after the birth of his SGA preemie - with a touch of black humour.

When we decided to have a baby it was a bit like signing up for a cruise. We heard where we were going to go, Venice, and since many others had gone there without trouble it seemed like a good idea at the time. We knew it would take about 40 days to cross the ocean, and so we planned our life around the ocean trip, bringing books about where we would go, things we would have to learn, and things we would have to do. We boarded the ship without incident, and watched as we pulled out, happy to be on board, just barely noticing that some couples silently watched from the shore, not being able to come.

We went quietly about ship-board life, watching the shows about where we were going to go, being sure to eat all our meals properly, and following all the shipboard rules. We, after all, had many days to kill and a lot of stuff to learn, and wanted to arrive in tip-top shape.

After 32 days we were woken up in the middle of the night. Our first thoughts were "we can't be there yet - can we?" All the things we were going to do - we have not done them. We're not ready - we had just started learning the street names in Venice in the evening shows. That did not matter, we were escorted down the gangplank and one of the crew said that it was time for us to get off the ship. We asked "Why us, the others that had been kicked off had broken rules - did drugs, or caught funny diseases. We've been so careful." All he said was orders from above. Maybe he meant the officers, or maybe he meant God, we never found out. We looked about and saw that we were alone in the middle of the ocean. What was going to happen? We were told that a boat might come along later.

"Welcome to the North Atlantic" he said as he motioned us into the water. We jumped, and the shock of hitting the water stopped any idea of further conversation, and we watched the ship started its engines and slowly slide away. In a few minutes, we were as alone as it is possible to get and still be on the planet Earth.

After what seemed like hours, a lifeboat showed up and pulled us from the water. The crew had shiny uniforms with gold buttons. "Great," we thought, "we're saved. They look so professional." However, the crew spoke only Russian and rarely spoke to our boat mates or us anyway.

The overworked helpers who did all the work had shabby uniforms, and were always busy, too busy. When we looked at the navigational instruments, they looked very fancy and nice, but all the markings were in Russian, and the crew could not explain what they did, or where we were, in words we could understand.

Soon we settled into the routine. Every couple of days a cloud on the horizon would fool us into thinking land was near. We'd watch hopefully, thinking the nightmare was over. And then, every few days, one of those clouds would be a huge storm that would blow

up, and it was all the crew could do to keep everyone on board. The crew would rush about yelling incomprehensible instructions to each other. Sometimes, not everyone made it. We never knew why, just that one day a space would opened up.

After a few weeks, when the boat was full to the point of being over crowded, we came to a beach and the crew motioned us to get off – the space was needed to rescue other people. So we did, but we had no idea what to do next. After the lifeboat was out of sight, we realised that we had come to depend on the overworked helpers, and we had little idea how to survive wherever it was that we were.

After a time we found that we were in England. So at least we could understand what people were saying. But, sadly, English english and American english (our native tongue) are not the same. Whatever they said rarely applied to our situation. And the clothes we bought were always the wrong size. The food we were used to, if available, was a speciality item available in limited quantities. Often we visited several stores just to get enough for a single meal.

Finally we rented a car, a Morris Minor, and set out after our tour group. Sadly, we had only an itinerary of places but not dates, and so we had to head for Venice and then try to catch up. On arriving in Venice we found that our tour group had left for Paris on the train. All the seats on the trains were reserved, and we had lost our seats when we missed the train. So it's back to the Minor, and trying to cross the mountains and catch up with the train. In Paris we find that the tour group has left again, and is even further ahead.

Eventually the realisation comes to you that you may never catch up, and that the tours of the museums, schools, and universities that you hoped for might never happen. Your Morris Minor will never catch up with the TGV (bullet train). To the natives you will look like a tourist, but you will have none of the benefits of a tour guide being able to tell you what to expect and you'll have to continually explain to the natives why it is that you are not doing what it is that every other tourist has done since the beginning of time. Every day will be a new, unexpected adventure, some good, some bad. While this makes your victories and places you see worth more to you, you also realise that you will never go one day without wondering what life would be like if you had been allowed to stay on the ship, and how much easier (and cheaper) things would have been had you been able to use all the reservations that the tour group had made for you.

And after that, comes the realisation that you have to catch up with your tour group if you ever want to return home. Everyone else will, after 18 or 21 months, return home with photographs and memories. Once home they will return to the routine that they knew before, and look back at their trip to Venice. They will look forwards to their own children's European vacations and tell them what to expect and where to go. You, on the other hand, may be spending the rest of your life in foreign countries forever getting used to new languages that most people will never know, with words to describe things that most people will never have to face.

With apologies to the author of "Welcome to Holland"

A.D.Chacon