

Cruise Along the East Coast of Australia with Royal Caribbean - November 2017

We are heading off on a cruise on the **Voyager of the Seas** on Monday 13 November 2017 for eight days. I prefer the small cruise ships like the Windstar Yacht we sailed on for our Greek Island Cruise in June 2017. But I guess you must try the bigger vessels to see what it is like (before you rule this option out). Our cruise takes us from Sydney to Brisbane then on to Willis Island (cruising) before heading to Airlie Beach. From Airlie Beach it is a two-day cruise back to Sydney. Most of the time will be at sea so it will be interesting to see what it will be like. I am annoyed at the fact that on this cruise you must pay for the water you drink. At least tap and bottled water on the Windstar Yacht was free; but I'll give it a go and see what the cruise is like. Stay tuned for more (and I expect a wine or two or three.....; but we will see).

Steve

Day One - Monday 13 November 2017



Image of our Suite

We joined our cruise ship “Voyager of the Seas” this afternoon. Boarding was easy for us as we had a suite booked and received priority boarding and received a “gold sea pass”. This pass unlocks significant benefits while on board and is already starting to make the cruise a pleasant experience.



Image of the Suite

We dropped our bags at the bag drop location and then proceeded to check-in. Smooth as said and then it was a walk up the gang plank to the ship, boarding on deck five. We were welcomed as we boarded but no one asked which deck our suite was on or instructions on where the elevators were etc. There are interactive visual display boards near where we boarded so we used them to work out where we were going. There was also about five staff standing around that could have asked us if we needed assistance so in the end, I approached them for assistance. They were very helpful but showed no initiative in approaching guests as they boarded.

We made our way to deck ten where our suite was located. Our room is 1284 and is located amidships on the starboard side. The suite is very spacious with a large balcony where we can sit and have coffee and breakfast or lay on the provided lounge and while the time away.

The only issue is that no one is available to explain some of the functions in the room. Most you can work out but there is one panel that does not appear to do anything despite pressing the switches (eight in all). So, I then looked for a contact number to see who to ring. Nothing in the room for this; however, there was a booklet letting us know that we have an entitlement to go to the Concierge Room (equivalent to business class lounges when flying) and can ring the concierge manager for assistance. Unfortunately, the person is only available at certain times and as we were outside that timing, we decided to leave this issue and try again later.

So, we decided to go and explore the ship. This ship is fully booked and carries 3100 passengers with max capacity of 3800 passengers. The 3100 capacity is based on double occupancy for all cabins but there are cabins that accommodate more (four and six passengers).

We had a look around the pool deck and first experience was the strong smell of cigarette smoke. The starboard exit doors from deck 11 open close to the area set aside for smokers. And of course, there were a lot of people in this area puffing away. The reason the smell of smoke was so strong was due to the breeze blowing towards these doors as we walked through to the pool deck. We will use the port side entrance in future.



Pool Deck

There is a reserved area around the pool deck for gold pass passengers, so this is a good option. The ship also has a useful rule where you cannot mark a pool deck chair with a towel and leave the chair unattended for more than 30 minutes. If you do the towel will be removed

and you must attend the pool towel loan area to retrieve your towel. If you don't do so within 24 hours, then you are charged USD25 for "not returning the towel and getting your name marked off". The towels are provided free to you at the pool and your account marked but this is negated when the towel is returned.

From here we went to deck five which has the promenade. The area is set up like a street with shops along the way and a pub and a coffee shop. We stopped in at the pub "Pig and Whistle" and had a glass of wine as we watched the passersby.



Maree on Deck 5 at the Pig and Whistle Pub

We also had a look at the "Windjammer Restaurant" where they were serving lunch. It reminded us of the Westfield food courts and not a place I would recommend eating at on the ship. So, we will give that one a miss in future.



Maree at the onboard "Westfield Food Court"

From here it was back to the room for a while before we attended the mandatory boat evacuation drill at 16:30. Getting 3100 passengers to the muster points was an interesting exercise and of course all the elevators were in use, although they were supposedly stopping people using them except for passengers with special needs.

Maree needed to use the elevator due to her knee and they were happy for this but getting an empty elevator was virtually impossible. Trying to get an elevator during the day has been very frustrating as you had to wait up to ten minutes for one. People who had cruised before on this vessel advised us that it was like this on day one as the elevators were also in use to deliver the passenger baggage around the ship. So, we will see what the elevators are like tomorrow.

Talking of baggage; Maree's suitcase was delivered quite early but mine didn't arrive which was odd as they were both dropped off together at the Sydney Cruise Terminal. The staff member in charge of looking after our floor said he would look into this to see where my bag was. The staff member returned a short time later to advise me that there was a security issue with my bag, and I needed to go to deck one to get the bag released. After walking down 20 flights of stairs (forget the elevator!) I entered the baggage security area. The security staff told me that I couldn't clear the bag yet and would need to come back. I told them "No Way" as I was told to come down now and I had just walked down 20 flights of stairs and there was no way I was going to walk back up and then come back again. After some discussion they decided to clear my bag. The issue turned out to be the power board I had packed. I always pack one when I travel to use in the hotel room, but I was unaware they were not allowed on board cruise ships. No-where on the Royal Caribbean website do they list the general items that are not allowed to be brought on board. They took the power board and gave me a receipt so I can collect it on departure, which I won't bother doing.

Well, it is 17:30 and the Concierge Room is now open. They offer food and drinks, including alcohol and of course all is free of charge. So, we sat and had a wine or two or three... and chatted with a couple from Sydney. During our conversation the guy mentioned that this was

cruise number 113 for him and his wife. We couldn't believe it and thought we must have miss heard. But no; 113 cruises in 30 years. Incredible.

We left the lounge a couple of hours later and headed down to deck 3 to the restaurant where we are were scheduled for dinner at the 20:15 sitting. We were seated at a table for six but only one other couple joined us. The four of us had a great evening. The meal wasn't bad but the salmon I had was well overcooked and dry and firm. Dessert was ok although the Crème Brûlé didn't crack on top when tapped with a spoon. They had not crystallised the top of the desert. Shame, but it was still tasty.

We left the dining room around 22:15 and decided to call it a day.

Day Two - Tuesday 14 November 2017

After a very good night's sleep we both awoke to the sun shining. The ship is currently sailing past Coffs Harbour and we are about 32 kilometres from the mainland; in the main shipping channel. As Gold pass passengers we are entitled to have breakfast in one of the specialty restaurants, the Chops Grille, so we decided on this option rather than the buffet in the main restaurant. It was a great choice. It is a small restaurant, and you receive table service. Breakfast was very nice, and we even had the opportunity to have a proper coffee, not just the black coffee from the pot as the US passengers enjoy so much.

After a lovely breakfast we returned to the room so I can continue with the blog and Maree and settle back and read her book. The next schedule even was at 11:00 where we, as Gold Pass passengers, were invited to a private function where we met the senior crew including the captain. Drinks and a buffet lunch was provided and of course it was a pleasant experience. We obviously did the right thing by paying the extra for a suite and getting the Gold Pass. The cost of the cruise was AUD5,000 for the suite. Not bad I thought for the eight days and with the perks included, the right choice.



Maree taking in the view from the balcony

Maree went to see the Ice Show this afternoon and she really enjoyed it. After a break during the afternoon, we headed down to the Concierge Lounge for a few drinks and nibbles and some conversation with other passengers. For dinner tonight we decided to try the Japanese

specialty restaurant. The food was excellent and well prepared. We ordered the yellow tail nigiri sushi and the surf and turf hot rock. The hot rock is placed on the table, and you cook your own food to your liking. It was a very pleasant.

After dinner we retired for the evening. We were at sea all day today and tomorrow we arrive in Brisbane for the day.

Day Three - Wednesday 15 November 2017



Port of Brisbane

This morning we arrived into the Port of Brisbane. The ship, due to its size, must use the freight and grain terminal located on Fisherman's Island. The vessel's height does not allow the ship to pass under the bridges spanning the Brisbane River and is unable to use the Cruise Terminal at Hamilton Wharf.



Port of Brisbane

After another lovely breakfast service in the specialty restaurant Chops Grille, we proceeded to take the shuttle bus into the city. We have been to Brisbane before on several occasions, so we just strolled around the shops and visited a coffee shop for Maree; of course.



Brisbane City Skyline from Voyager of the Seas

After a leisurely walk around town, we decided to hop on the shuttle and return to the ship. Maree's knee was started to hurt so we thought it time for her to rest up. On board we decided to risk going to the "Westfield Food Court" again. Food was the usual but edible.



The "Westfield Food Court" on Voyager of the Seas

Maree is now relaxing out on the balcony with her book while we while the afternoon away. At 17:30 we will head off to the Concierge Room again for the usual nibbles and drinks and then it will be off to dinner in the dining room tonight. Hopefully the food will be better tonight in the main dining room. If not, we will most likely go the other specialty restaurants.

I'll let you know. Until later.

Day Four - Thursday 16 November 2017

Today we spent the day at sea. Nothing to look at as we cruise on but water. Maree enjoys the water views and sitting on the balcony reading her book. The weather is nice and warm, so we went to the pool deck for a few hours. It was then to lunch at the "Food Court" and then a relaxing afternoon doing absolutely nothing. Enjoyable for Maree but boring for me. The satellite internet is hopeless. Although the strength shows at peak, I suspect you pay for the slowest uploads/downloads so everything times out. Hence only updating the blog when in port. We are not in port again until Saturday (Airlie Beach).

The usual visit to the Concierge Room and then off to dinner in the main dining room as we weren't leaving our UK friends at the table on their own. We are at a table of six but there is only the four of us. The system used for booking the specialty restaurants is poor as it doesn't send a message to the main dining room that you won't be eating there that evening. It would be good if it did as other passengers at the table are left wondering if you will turn up. So now if we aren't going to be there, we will leave a message with the main dining room staff. It probably won't get passed on though.

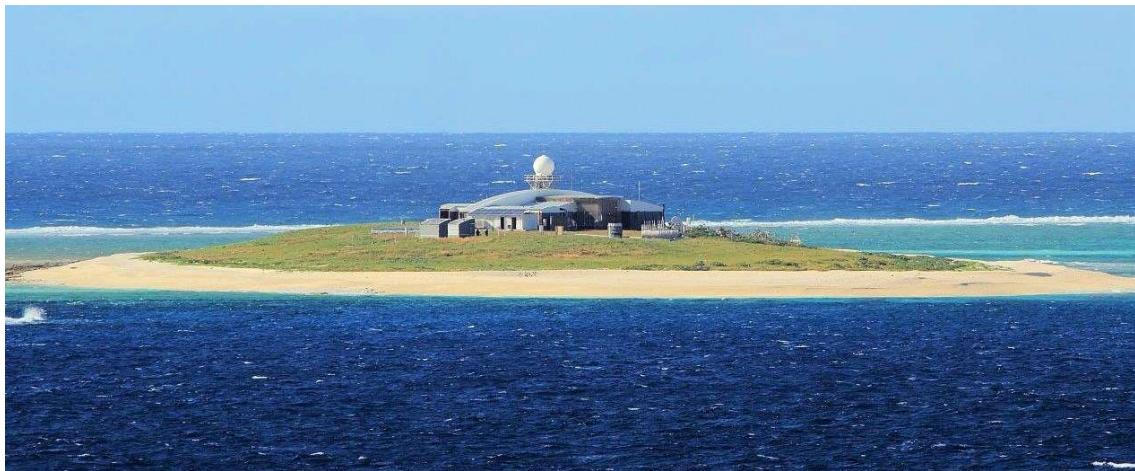
Dinner was terrible. We ordered what was called "Beef Stroganoff" but it was nothing like it. The four of us were very disappointed. As it happened the maître d turned up at our table and asked how it was. I spoke up for the group and told him the food in the restaurant is disappointing and I can understand why people eat at the specialty restaurants. He was shocked to hear it and obviously not was expected as everyone else usually says "the food is great" when it isn't.

Oh well we will try again tomorrow.

Day Five - Friday 17 November 2017

We are at sea all day today on our way to Willis Island. We will be arriving later than scheduled as there was a passenger who had a heart attack in the early hours of the morning and we had to change course to rendezvous with the helicopter. This took us off track and delayed us by about two hours.

We arrived at Willis Island at 16:30 and dropped anchor for about 15 minutes. You cannot get close to the island due to the coral reef surrounding it.



Close up view of Bureau of Meteorology Facility on Willis Island.

The Bureau of Meteorology staff were in radio communication with the ship and provided the passengers with an on-air information show about the island including its history. The following information was provided: Willis Island formed tens of thousands of years ago when coral grew on a seamount or ancient volcano that drowned after the last ice age when sea waters rose. Slowly, wave action pounded the coral into coarse sand, then seabirds helped vegetate what would have otherwise been a barren lump in the ocean. Their droppings contained the seeds and provided the fertiliser that gradually built up the thick vegetation on the island. Willis Island's real value to Australia has been as a weather station. Since 1921 it has provided northeast Queensland with an early warning "ear" that detects cyclones.

Located 450 kilometres northeast of Townsville, Willis Island is one of Australia's most remote weather stations. It is staffed by three observers and one technician who live and work there for six months at a time. Willis Island is home to gannets, terns and high-flying frigate birds. Boobies and wedge-tailed shearwaters can also be seen in the surrounding waters, or nesting on the atoll. Willis Island is also a rookery for green turtles. The island is only nine metres above sea level and the BOM station was refurbished in 2006.

After about 15 minutes we raised anchor and set sail for Airlie Beach. Dinner tonight was again in the main dining room and unfortunately still not great food. We invited an American couple to join us that we met in the Concierge Room as they had been eating on their own every night at a table of eight. Royal Caribbean does not give people in this situation the opportunity to join another table which has other diners and a vacancy at the table. When we went to get the change made so the couple could join us it was not straight forward when it should have been. No flexibility shown by the staff at all for passengers in this situation. However, once we got them approved for our table we went on to have an enjoyable evening. Shame about the food though.

After dinner we retired back to the cabin and had an early night.

Day Six - Saturday 18 November 2017



Airlie Beach Queensland

We arrived at Airlie Beach at 08:00. After a relaxing breakfast in the Chops Grille (great food here) we decided to take the tender across to the town. The ship is too large to tie up and there isn't really a suitable wharf anyway.



Airlie Beach Queensland

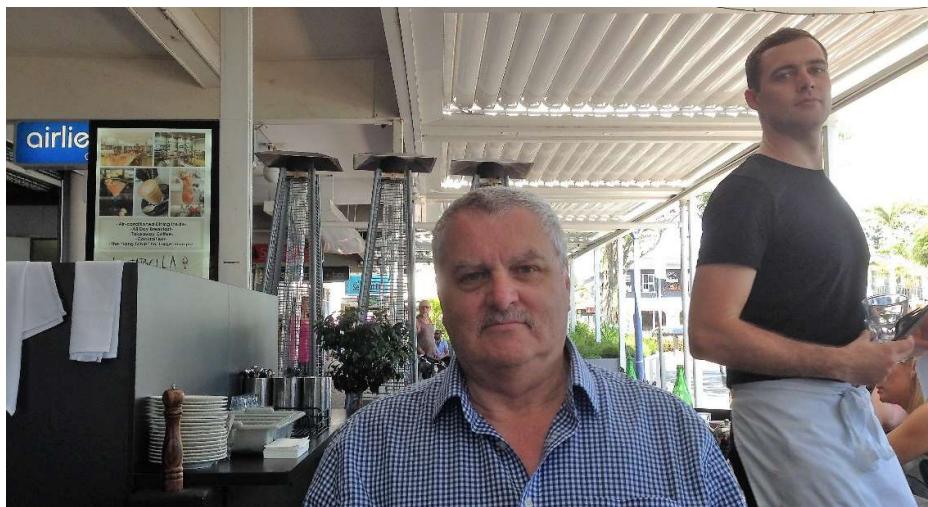
We wandered around the markets and had a coffee and enjoyed being on land again. We spent the morning in the town before catching the tender to return to the ship. Having boarded the ship, we are relaxing by the pool before we head off to lunch.

Lunch today in the food court wasn't too bad. We had a nice pork roast with veg. Most passengers were still onshore, so the food court wasn't busy at all. We have also found out that the cafe on the Promenade deck provides food and they do not charge. We were led to believe that this cafe was in the "specialty restaurant" category and the specialty establishments do charge. So now we have somewhere to go for lunch other than the food court. The food in the cafe looks very nice.

Once we depart Airlie Beach, I will not be able to post any more information on the blog unless I get a strong satellite internet connection. So, keep checking to see if I was successful in posting.



Maree enjoying her coffee at Airlie Beach



Steve enjoying a coffee at Airlie Beach - Yes, I did travel on this trip

Day Seven - Sunday 19 November 2017

We awoke late this morning as the ship adjusted their clocks last night at 2am to Sydney time. So, we have had a lazy start, but it is a holiday after all. We are at sea all day today and the weather is overcast. We are currently east of Gladstone, and we are expecting rain closer towards Brisbane. Not a day for the pool deck today so Maree is happily reading her book in the cabin.

We managed to get coverage of the Fiji and New Zealand RLWC game yesterday and watched it in the cabin. I raced down to the concierge room, and they gave me some wine so we could enjoy the game even more. It was a great game with an excellent result. The Australia Fiji game next week will be very interesting. After the game we went to the concierge room for another glass of wine and then onto dinner in the main dining room.

We met up with our UK and USA friends and had another great evening last night. I ordered a rare steak, and I received a very nice steak cooked to my specifications. My comment the other night appears to have paid off.

We are heading off to the cafe on the promenade deck soon for some lunch as it is just after 13:00. We will then just relax for the afternoon as not much to do when at sea, but I am getting great coverage and speed from the internet for a change so I'm very happy.

Day Eight - Monday 20 November 2017

Today we are at sea all day. We had another lovely evening around the dinner table last night after the customary drinks in the concierge room.

The waters are moderate today so there is a bit more movement with the ship but still comfortable. Weather is overcast with occasional rain and wind gusts. So, we are sitting in the concierge room with Maree reading her book and I am updating our travel blog. Not much more to report. We dock at 06:00 in the morning and are transferred to Central where we will get the Murray's bus back to Canberra. All in all, it has been a good trip.

Last Day - Tuesday 21 November 2017

Another good evening last night with our friends at dinner. Being our last night, we partied a bit before retiring. This morning we had an early breakfast in Chops Grille before disembarking at the International Cruise Terminal in Sydney. We have transferred to our Murray's coach for the three-hour drive back to Canberra. All in all, it was an enjoyable cruise, but I think we will stick with our preference for smaller boutique cruising with the Windstar line.