

Terry Baker shares this experience with us -

Eastern Mediterranean Cruise, October 2009

Our cruise was with Oceanic Cruise Lines on the MS Insignia. This ship has 684 guests with 400 crew. This cruise line allows you bring your own liquor onboard and they charge USD\$20 corkage at your dining table.

Our trip started on Tuesday, October 20th when we caught the mid-afternoon flight from Nanaimo to Vancouver. For our overnight stay at the Accent Hotel, we had a rate of \$89.00 plus tax, the Air Canada rate was not available to retirees, but with our \$15.00 coupon, picked up from a brochure on a previous ferry trip, the cost was reduced accordingly.

We checked out of the Accent at 08:00 next morning and got the jitney to YVR, had breakfast at Tim Hortons, then visited the observation area for a few hours, reading, doing crosswords, Suduko and watching the ramp vehicles completely ignoring the painted 'roads' and the 'STOP' sign at a junction. We also took turns walking around until it was time to check-in to Lufthansa for our flight due to depart at 14:25. During my walk around I met up with Clarence Ash, an airline retiree, who worked as a 'Green Coat' at YVR; we spent quite some time chatting. Clarence was the Director at Large in the YVR Pionair organization.

When we did check in, we were advised that the flight was delayed due to a mechanical issue and that we had been rebooked out of Frankfurt (FRA) on a flight which would get us to Athens (ATH) at 01:10 on the 23rd – problem was that our cruise left ATH at 22:00 on the 22nd. The check-in agent suggested we go to the Customer Service desk. We contacted our travel agent for assistance, they called Oceania who advised that Lufthansa would be contacted. Upon contacting Lufthansa the advice was to have Lufthansa at the airport handle the problem. All this while, we were in contact every half hour with our travel agent. As we had no cell phone, our afternoon was spent using 1-800 on the public phone. Our travel agent was extremely helpful in this regard.

So we went back to the Customer Service desk of Lufthansa, and they arranged for a flight from ATH to Mykonos which was where the cruise would be on the afternoon of the 23rd. The flight was on Aegean Airlines and left at noon.

We advised our travel agent that we would meet the cruise at Mykonos and to advise Oceania Cruise Lines of our revised travel plans. We would miss the first port of call which was Delos where the cruise was in the morning before sailing to Mykonos in the afternoon. Our luggage was booked through to Mykonos, so at least we did not have to worry about the luggage. This all added a new dimension to our cruising experiences.

Our flight, an A340-600, departed YVR at 16:40. We arrived in Frankfurt at 13:40, where we were bussed to the terminal – which seemed to be a retrograde step for such a huge and modern airport.

This airport is not just big, not even huge, but humongous. Why airport planners provide such a labyrinth under the terminal for the large buses to negotiate, heaven knows.

We found a nest of about a dozen chairs which had extensions for our legs, got quite comfy and were able to stretch out. At 20:00 we located our departure gate A22 for our A321 flight of 2.5 hours to ATH. As the flight was only 50% full, we could stretch out.

We landed at 01:10 – there was an added time difference of one hour. We wandered around until we found some chairs. Not too many chairs vacant as there seemed to be lots of people waiting for early morning flights.

We checked in for our flight at 10:20, well before the deadline, fortunately, because when asked about our luggage, we told the agent that the luggage had been booked right through to Mykonos.

Not so, we were informed, as there are no customs facilities at Mykonos, the luggage would be held by customs at ATH. We had to get a permit which allowed us to re-enter the arrivals area. We obtained this permit from the Information Desk at Exit 3. Armed with the permit we went to the door marked 'Delayed Baggage' and hammered on the locked door. We peered through the window until we could attract the attention of someone who opened the door and inspected our permit and passports before directing us to the lock up. We located our luggage and went to the customs area but there was no one there. An agent looked out of his office and waved us through to the exit - a smugglers delight!

Back to the check in agent, we rechecked our luggage, got our boarding passes and we were done. Relieved to know our luggage had gotten this far.

At gate B11, we had to go through security again, removing watches, belts, money, jackets but not shoes. Then found some seats and waited for the flight. We and several other passengers did not realize the flight had been called, and when we heard that the flight was closing – that got our attention. Anyway, the A320 was only filled with 25 passengers.

We landed at Mykonos, collected our luggage and tried to find the Oceania representative, without success, so we got a taxi to the port. There is an old and new port and the driver did not know which one to take us to. They were relatively close together so he dropped us at the old port. There was no sign of a cruise ship, so we dragged out luggage over an uneven waterfront, which had lots of restaurants and cafés with outside tables and chairs, until we got next to the pier. I left my wife with the luggage in the shade of a building and went to locate the ship. I threaded my way through a labyrinth of tiny shops in various narrow alleyways until I got to the headland and there was the ship anchored in the harbour.

I waited until a tender appeared and, thankfully, it headed my way. I managed to find my way back to where my wife was and there was the tender just at the pier. I approached a crewman and told him I had missed the cruise in ATH and he said “Oh yes, you're Mr. Baker and you live in Canada, came from England and born in Bristol; I have come to collect you”.

I was astonished that he would know such information and he said we were expected. He sent a crew member to help collect the luggage. We had a 160-passenger tender to convey us to the ship where there was a welcoming officer who conducted us to our stateroom. After three days travelling, we felt quite scruffy, so the first thing needed was a shower. Then unpack and fall into a decent bed for several hours. Later we prowled the ship to orientate ourselves.

At last, our cruise had started.