



Chapter 15

First impressions as a crew member

Three buses were necessary to get the 100 crew members to the port from the Sheraton North Houston Hotel where we stayed for the night. I was astonished as I had never seen so many Japanese people together at the one time. I would find out later that the shape of their eyes had fooled me! In fact, there were Asians from several different nationalities. The majority were from the Philippines while others were Indonesians and natives from poorer Asian countries. In fact Japanese workers are uncommon in ships.

Would it be pretentious to say that the sky is the limit? But the sea, the sea, the sea, she is not? When I first saw the iron giant full of lights, full of people, I trembled. More than five thousand people in one boat. It took me a while to assimilate that new reality. I followed the group of crew members, dumbfounded, feeling so small before that extraordinary metal monster.

The ship had docked at dawn, after a cruise around the Mexico coast. We waited in line at the port. Geraldo, a Mexican, received us, speaking lousy English. He was a man of about forty years, white, tall, with a typical Mexican round face. He was responsible for the bar department. An ill-tempered man, a nasty host, exhibiting the appearance of a person who had taken all too many tequilas the night before. Even though, in the life manners of an ogre, he welcomed us and took us to an office that served as his

personnel department. One by one we handed over our documents: passport, medical exam reports, international vaccination card, STCW certificate. All went by truly fast and tightly organized; they could not waste time because the ship would sail by 5 pm. I was among the 100 crew members boarding while at the same time, hundreds of crew members were disembarking because their contracts had ended.

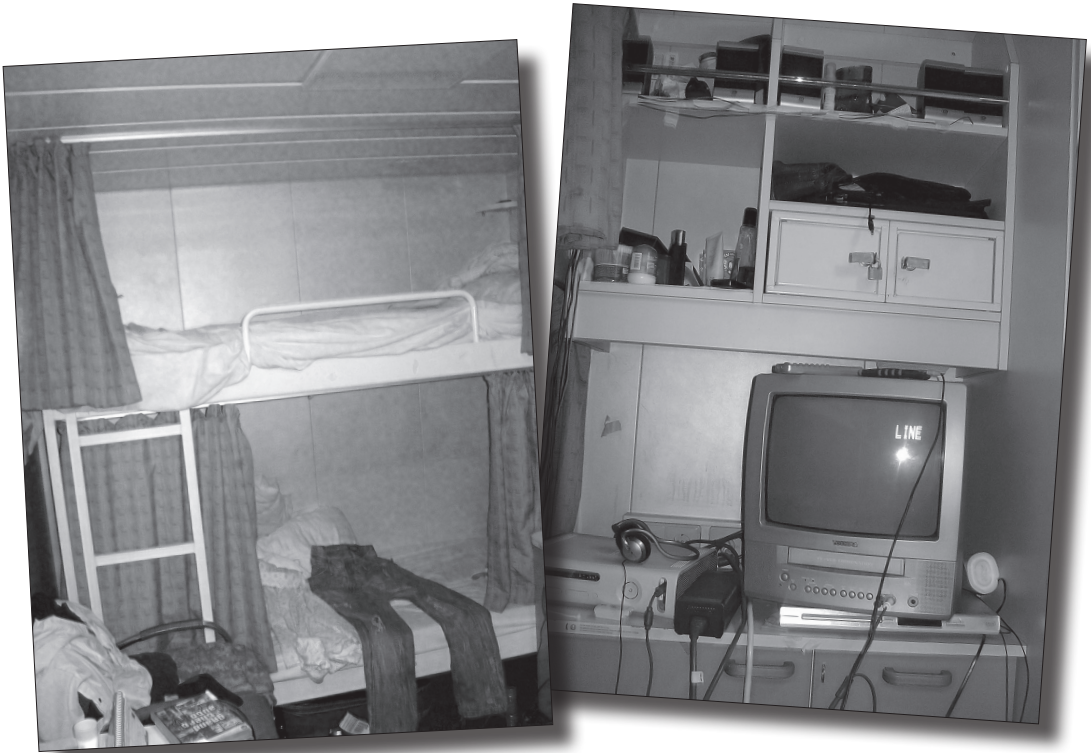
Each one of us signed a contract for either six or nine months. A contract though can last longer—or end earlier—according to the needs of the company. A contract regulates the agreement between crew member and company. We proceeded in single file to embark. Before entering the ship, every passenger or crew members' luggage passes through an X-ray machine. Geraldo, in a hurry, took us to have our pictures taken for our crew pass; a magnetic card ID that also serves as cabin key and debit card for any kind of expenses on-board. It is also a legal ID in any ports where the ship docks. Always rushing, Geraldo explained a few things about work schedules and on-board security. He gave us a stack of documents that we were supposed to read as soon as we could; a time sheet and identification card. He informed us superficially, about everything, telling us that we were to have training periods during the first week to discuss each subject. Then we received our uniforms followed by a visit to see the medical Center, and then the personnel department. It was about time to have lunch so we went to the crew refectory. There are different refectories for the vessel's officers, the vessel's staff (workers from concessionary companies that take care of the spa, the casino, the shops and so on) and the crew members.

The first ship

Inside the ship were more lights and glamour. Everything was charming and, at that moment, all organized, clean, and functional. The reality, however, was yet to come and that reality was work!

With my uniform and ID now provided, I was told to find my cabin. I felt lost inside an iron jungle. How would I find a cabin in a moving city like that? Well, as my mother says, use your tongue and you will go to the ends of the earth. I opened the door to a tiny place, and found Luis Puertas, a Peruvian, already inside. He looked like an Indian, as most Peruvians do, and smiled at me. I said a timid good morning. He answered with sympathy and I noticed right away that he was not a native English speaker. To my query, "where are you from?", he said he was a Peruvian and asked me if I spoke Spanish. I said that I didn't but I promised to learn. And I did; the few things I know of the Spanish language I learned from him. We became friends in no time. Thank God, we Brazilians make friends easily. Luis was already an old sea dog, in spite of being very young, and knew all the ways to a good time in an environment that I did not know yet but, was compelled to understand. He taught me many things. It was easy to like him. He was a calm, honest and supportive man. I felt safe in his company.

During the recruiting process they told me not to carry too many clothes because of the small size of the cabin. Small? They were too kind in saying that. The cabin was, in fact, minuscule; the bathroom, even smaller. Nevertheless, it was comfortable. The cabin I shared with Luis until he finished his contract and took a vacation, was equipped with TV with international channels and internal channels showing activities on the ship. There was also a DVD set, a telephone set for internal calls as well as for the super-expensive calls that I used to make to Brazil, a closet big enough to hang my clothes, drawers, several electrical outlets, space for stowing my suitcase, a hot water tap, a small fridge and a desk where I put my laptop. To future shippers I say this: if you think about working on a ship, do not forget to take a laptop and a camera—basic kit for travellers, because every minute brings a different beauty to be documented.



After our brief acquaintance, Luis went to work. I went looking for the refectory. I had had nothing to eat since breakfast. I knew that I had to be quick because a mandatory training course was scheduled to start soon. Cunard folks call that Training Induction 1. The training lasted about an hour. Some of the officers introduced themselves and welcomed the new crew members. They emphasized security, considering it a priority on-board. The captain, a very young fellow, passed by to say hello and summarized what the others had already told us. He advised us to stay away from drugs and alcohol, inside or outside the ship, since random blood tests would be done from time to time

to ensure we were fit to safely perform and carry out our work duties. He said that drinking was not forbidden, but that we should not overdo it, in order to not put at risk our own lives and the lives of our colleagues. Moreover, we had to be ready for work every morning. He warned us that intimate contact with passengers was expressly forbidden. What kind of contact? Touching, kissing, having sex.

After hearing all this I was sleepy and went back to the cabin. The day had been full and it was already 3 pm. Anyway, there was no time to rest. Geraldo gave me a sheet of paper, my work schedule, and a map with the location of the bar I had been assigned to. Well, I had signed a contract to work. But... to start working like this, without any specific training? That is how it is. A crew member costs a lot for the company, so he has to start working as soon as possible. The future crew member should not be fooled into thinking that life is easy on-board. He will work, as his contract states, between 10 to 12 hours a day (sometimes even 14 hours), without a single day off. A respite on a ship is a rare award, as I will tell you soon. We do not embark to travel, but to work hard, and bring a profit to the company. We sign a contract, agreeing to do that. So, let me work.

It took me several days to adapt to the reality of the ship. Soon I realized that English was not a strong point of many of my colleagues. There was a mix of languages, dialects and slang of several places in Latin America and the Caribbean.

My first time on the ship



<https://vimeo.com>

My workstation!



There were many people who spoke Portuguese on-board. I would like to tell you about some of them.

Eduardo Monteiro, 24 years old, was not very tall but athletic and handsome. He had previous experience of nine months on another ship and worked in the same department as me. A very cheerful young man, he became my good friend. Jorge Fabiano, 36 years old, skinny, religious and a hard worker, had been a Brazilian marine, but was working as a civilian on ships for the first time. Among the three of us, I was the only one that had never been on a ship before. By the way, I had never even seen a ship. You can imagine my surprise! How could such an iron mountain of 138 thousand tons float? No matter how many courses I took in Brazil, I would never have been sufficiently prepared for such a magnificent vision. The ship *Voyager of the Seas* was built in 1999 as one of the three biggest ships of its time: 311 meters long and 48 meters wide. It was like a 15-storey high monster softly floating the ocean. It had 15 decks, each one corresponding to the floor of a building from my way of seeing it. The 1,557 cabins are structured as apartments as in a hotel—four times the number of apartments of the *Renaissance Hotel*. This can easily accommodate 3,200 passengers. To serve all these people, the ship has 1,200 crew members and, by way of interest, they were from more than 60 countries. This was the universe I had entered!

My workstation

Back to that April 12th afternoon, with my work schedule and a salver, a pen and a folder. I went looking for the pool bar, my workstation. The pool is on one of the highest decks from where one can get a 360 degrees view. This is especially great when the ship is leaving the port. There was a sail away party to celebrate the departure. The party would begin by 5.00 pm and Geraldo recommended that we should look handsome and be scented. Following his advice, I took a long shower and shaved. Wearing my uniform, I lost my way in the labyrinths, but managed to arrive on time at Deck 11. Many passengers gathered there for the party.

I will never forget that first vision of the space that would be my new world from that moment on. I was frightened in the middle of such a crowd, but at the same time, I felt distinguished because the passengers, mostly American, when they saw my uniform, surrounded me ordering drinks. They asked for beverages of which I had never heard! In spite of all the courses I had taken, I had no experience with international drinks.

A new warm feeling came over me. I was fascinated by such unique new things: the sea below down there and the land slowly moving away into the distance. Only people who have worked on-board or sail the seas will have an idea of what I am talking about. It is an unforgettable experience.

In the meantime, I was completely lost with so many orders for drinks. Naturally, I was nervous; it was a new job. But there was something else: I went crazy trying to understand the Texan accent—they sound as if they are chewing tobacco while speaking. My colleagues, mostly from the Caribbean and the Philippines, who prepared the drinks in the pantry, made a fool of me during the sail party. In the midst of 30 bar waiters yelling their orders, I had to guess the lousy English that my colleagues used to name unpronounceable drinks and beers. There was, however, a dose of good will, although sometimes they pretended not to understand what I said just so they could watch me get nervous. It is a real baptism of fire for a new hire. Once more, I survived. At sunset, we closed the shift because the pool bar did not open at night. My work at that bar would be my daily routine throughout the twelve days of the cruise. After the party, I proceeded with the cleaning: wash the floor, store the fruit and all the materials used during the day, and then organize the clean glasses. A Philippine utility boy helped me. The highest number of employees in every ship of the world are utility boys. We had to be quick with this, because we had to be at the theater entrance soon to welcome passengers—and try to sell some drinks, too. The interval would last an hour, and during this period, we were supposed to clean the bar and, if possible, have dinner. Having finished the cleaning, the first round was concluded. Now we ran to the theater because the show was beginning. To make money via a 15% commission, I had to sell drinks. In fact, that was my salary. Needless to say that there is a fierce competition among the bar workers. I reached the theater with the help of Gary, a pantry boy. Tired and a little scared, I marvelled at all that beauty. I was seeing, for the first time, the space reserved for passengers. It was like a shopping center full of cafés and bars, including an English pub and a champagne bar. In the middle of the main square was a wonderful red automobile. It was a luxurious environment; enormous, where everything works perfectly. There are infinite options of entertainment for the passengers and the schedules are strictly followed.

I started working. However, being simply a beginner among 15 “sharks”—so called because they are experienced bar waiters and good sellers—in a theater full of people, I was not able to sell anything at all. They knew the terrain and knew how to behave to succeed. I would learn in time. Well, since I could not sell, I watched the Broadway show. So I can say that the night was not completely lost. I had to wait anyway, to clean glasses and the mess. Beginners suffer, that is a truth. But even suffering ends. That first day, at midnight, was finally over. In fact, not the day, but the shift. My crew members social activity was about to begin.

A day that almost did not end

I do not need to tell you how tired I was at the end of that first day. So before going to bed I decided to pass by the refectory to eat something. There I met Eduardo, who from now on I will refer to as Dudu, and Jorge. We talked about my experiences that day which they had no idea about because they served in different bars. Dudu convinced me to accompany him to the crew bar to meet the “paisanos” (Italian word for compatriots). It is a good way to make people meet their fellow country-people. Jorge preferred to rest. I was tired, but wanted to know all I could. Besides, I had heard about that bar, considered the most amusing spot in the ship. We went to our cabins to change clothes. Dudu knocked at my door half an hour later and showed me through the labyrinths—I would certainly not have been able to get there by myself. The bar was a hidden place with windows to the ocean. It was a sight to see at night. I entered the crew bar. I would go there many more times, after that. Dudu introduced me to a bunch of people, without ceremony. I felt welcomed and the place was good for a dose of freedom and comfort. It is an enormous hall capable of holding 1,200 persons, with a big bar in the middle, where one can buy spirits, beers and cigarettes. Smoking is permitted by the open windows. There is a pre-paid Wi-Fi Internet connection, video games, pool tables, and a store with basic hygiene products and instant food. At one corner, there is the so-called staff bar for the contractors (people who work in the casino and spa, for instance). At the opposite corner was the officers’ bar, for the officers and people with military rank. Those two bars are not so much fun though, and many times the officers, and even the Captain himself, joined the crew members for a drink.

My intention was to have a beer and a talk about so many new things I had experienced that day. The major part of the gathered group was formed by first timers like myself. But pay attention to this warning if you are a candidate to work in a ship: the crew bar is highly addictive—every night there is something nice going on and because of that it is always full and amusing. But even so, there is work the next day...

I left the crew bar to finally go and get some sleep with Dudu showing me the way. Once one understands the logic of a ship it becomes easy. Crew members stay in wings, or stairways, according to their occupation. Each group stays in the same stairway. The idea is to put all those together who follow the same schedule, preventing disturbances and allowing for maximum rest and sleep. Crew members cabins are located in decks A, B and C, below the waterline, therefore without windows. Depending on the cabin location one can hear the waves crashing against the ship. I lived once in one of those cabins. After my first impressions, the jet lag, the long flight hours and the work, I was beaten by tiredness and was soon in a deep sleep.

Overview of the ship

I have written about my impressions in relation to the “Voyager of the Seas”. Now I will write about the general peculiarities of a Cruise ship.

First question: *Can a crew member get off the ship in any harbor?*

Yes. That is how I took more than twenty-five thousand pictures throughout the world. Anyway, each case is unique, and the authorizations may change according to the department where the crew member works. Some jobs allow more free time, others do not. Do you remember the research I made through the Internet before choosing the bar department? I did not seek work based only on wages. I selected the position that would give me more opportunities to see places I wanted to see. The crew member needs a crew pass, the ID called a Laminex, supplied by the security department on the first day, to get on and off the ship. With that Laminex I could visit Mexico and the Caribbean countries. It is the same in Europe, and there Brazilians do not need a visa. Everything is simple, but temporary disembarkation can be made only during rest time, and rarely longer than a few hours. Remember: we do not have days off—we have only time off. Sometimes we leave work by 5.00pm and the next work schedule starts the next morning at 9.00am. Therefore, this means we have only a free evening.

To get off the ship in American harbors, besides the Laminex, the crew member has to fill in the I-95 form, a special authorization granted by the US Immigration Department and not easy to obtain. Once on American soil, those who have not yet got the necessary landing card are conveyed to the Immigration Department for an interview. Some colleagues of mine had to wait for up to four months to get the I-95. I was lucky—they never once refused me a visa. Every time I go to the United States I disembark without any trouble. I understand the inflexibility of the US Immigration Department though. A former colleague, Nick, a Philippine, very easygoing, 30 years old, and a male nurse who graduated in Manila; he had the I-95 visa. One day the ship stopped in Los Angeles, coming from Hawaii. Nick got off the ship and never came back again. According to some friends, Nick had met a cousin who was already living illegally in California and decided to stay even without his passport, which was kept in the ship. People from the Philippines, as I said, are the majority on ships, almost always occupying junior positions, as in cleaning, for example.

Second question: *Is it easy to make friends on-board?*

Let me put it this way: 60% of the crew members are Philippines; the other 40% are from other nationalities. In numbers, people from India come next, working in all departments. The other nationalities vary much from company to company. Here,

at Cunard, Philippine people are also the majority. Latin American persons are not many; I would say less than 50 in total. We, Brazilians number just twelve. Lately, I have seen an increasing number of East Europeans working for Cunard. There are Ukrainians, Macedonians, Serbians, Romanians and Hungarians, all very much alike physically: pale, blond hair and light blue eyes. All of them are very professional. Many other nationalities can be found on-board, with only few representatives, sometimes only one: Italian, Australian, Japanese, French, Chinese (Mainland China and from Hong Kong), Uruguayan, Tai, Guyanese, Peruvian, Argentine and Nepalese among others. I am very curious about different cultures and I enjoy making videos. Therefore, I decided to make a video that includes all these nationalities. I had thought to have a short interview with each one of them, asking why they chose to work on a ship. This would be a herculean task, so I recorded 60 colleagues, just identifying themselves and saying hello to the camera. The video turned out to be a success on YouTube. I will write more about this video in the next chapter.

Third question: *How is the training?*

In the first two weeks, the newcomer participates in training almost every day, with the emphasis on on-board security. One of them is the boat drill, which involves training for emergency evacuation of the ship. This training may happen twice in the same trip; one involving crew members and passengers, in the beginning of a cruise, and a second one in the middle of the trip just for crew members. Passengers may participate in the second training if they wish but only a few of them do. I got lucky again: all the training sessions happened during my work hours—Safety Induction 1, 2 and 3. The training hours are registered as working hours, anyway. No one, I repeat, no one, can miss those training sessions, no matter what! Safety is the most important thing on ships throughout the world. Those training events are exhausting.



Fourth question: *Is the food for crew members different from the passengers' food?*

As I said in the beginning, food can be good or bad, depending on the crew member's usual habits. It is not as bad as they say, but it is not as good as the traditional Brazilian rice-and-beans dish. As I mentioned earlier, there are some days when the food is so yummy that we think it might be passengers' food. On other days, however, there is only sticky rice and pieces of strange meat. Desserts, nevertheless, are always superb: great cakes and pies and a lot of ice cream. There are themed parties, with delicious food and sometimes an American barbecue. At Cunard, food is great, and once in

a while the ships personnel manager promotes parties like Cheese Night or a Pizza Night. That makes you forget the regular food.

During meals, I have seen bizarre scenes—bizarre to me, anyway. People from other cultures have different habits; I understand that. But it is quite strange to see people eating with their hands, instead of using forks and knives. On the other hand, people may find it unusual that we Brazilians share a 600 ml bottle of beer with three people—the same amount, in England, for example (a pint) is usually for one person only. So I rather respect the habits of others and live well in the community allowing each to his own way of life.

Fifth question: *How do you communicate to the rest of the world?*

On the ship, crew members can buy an international phone card for a reasonable price. The duration of the card depends on where the ship is, but in general it lasts 45 minutes to one hour. The connection is usually good, although the signal may happen to fail. You use the phone in the cabin to comfortably talk to your family. The company always provides a free card for a new starter to call home on the first day. The card for Internet access is expensive. It costs twice as much as the phone card and lasts between two and three hours. We prefer to use free wireless connection when we get off the ship, in the bars close to the harbors. My advice to candidates for crew members is this: always take a laptop with you. At the crew office, we can buy a SIM card with an American phone number, in case we need to call home. In Europe, I am able to use the Internet with my Blackberry mobile and send messages via BBM (BlackBerry Messenger).

A tough beginning

Now that I have highlighted those important considerations, let me go back to that first trip.

After two days, we reached the second country. I could not get off the ship. In the first week, we went to other Caribbean countries, but I could not get off the ship in those either. I remember well where and how I spent my first three hours ashore. In Cozumel in Mexico, I do not lie by saying that I did not go far from the ship—I was afraid that they would abandon me in that place so far from Boninal. I stayed at a distance of about half a mile from the ship but enjoyed a cold beer and took hundreds of pictures. I guess that taking pictures of nice places is a way to capture and take reminders of places that we might never see again.

The first weeks on-board were harsh. Several training sessions, long working hours, daily pressure for results. I had some dog days, and thought about giving up everything. But, then again, I was in a place that hundreds of people would like to be, thanks to an opportunity I received from God. I had to earn and make the most of it.

Fortunately, the first cruise leg was over. Looking back, it passed quickly.

Bound for Europe

It did not take long for a reward to appear. It was summer in the old continent, so it was time to follow the winds in that direction and cross the ocean to Europe. We left Galveston, Texas, bound to Southampton, England, in 14 days. Every four sailing days the ship made a stop. The first was in Bermuda, more or less in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. We remained there for 10 hours. Since my shy promenade in Cozumel I had been on-board for two weeks and was truly in need of fresh air—I could not stand the on-board air conditioning any longer. I plucked up my courage and invited my cabin mate, Luis Puertas, to go out and visit the British island with me. In fact, working for Cunard, I would go back to Bermuda two more times. The clear sky, reflected on the sea, painting it blue by the beautiful Horseshoe Beach. It was a wonderful sight that gave me strength to go back to work again. I found it very strange that the steering wheel of the bus was on the right side.

Those crossings are tough for crew members. They last eight to 10 days, passing through the Bermuda Triangle, a place of heavy seas that make the tasks of a bar waiter very difficult.

On one of those days, I made a very embarrassing mistake for a bar waiter. I was working at the Cleopatra bar in the vessels' bow. Deck 4, I think. Every day, in spite of the ocean conditions, there was a party specifically for passengers who had made the crossing before. Those frequent travellers had the benefit of drinking and eating canapés and snacks at no cost during the whole trip. The young Canadian captain participated in those parties to shake hands with the VIP passengers who were either silver, gold, platinum or diamond members. One day, while he was addressing a speech to the audience gathered around a table, I was serving a martini to a chic American lady at that same table. Maybe I was seasick, I do not know. What I know is that I dropped the tray, with all the drinks, over the lady. To add to this, it was right in front of our beloved captain. I cannot avoid this joke: my name is Martinês, so it is natural that I drop martinis! The woman was extremely kind. All wet and messy, she kept repeating to me: "Don't worry, don't worry, son, that happens". In fact, I was not worried about her. I was terrified by the looks of the captain and the officers. Just like Andy Warhol, I had my 15 minutes of fame—but I would rather not have it. Anyway, luckily everything ended up fine.

Four days after this terrible event, still sailing by the scary Bermuda Triangle, we reached the Portuguese island of the Azores. A pretty and clean place that I would visit many times. My first time on Portuguese soil had a special enchantment for me since we are very alike in cultures. However, speaking Portuguese out of Brazil, being so far away from home, was somewhat funny. The other crew members flattered me because I could understand the natives. The Azores people are humorous and I spent a nice time on the island. I would find, two days later, that Lisbon people are no different either—I spent a very nice day in the Portuguese capital. Feeling self-confident, I invited my friend Jorge to visit with me. Portugal colonized Brazil in the 16th century. We took a train downtown. We had only a few hours, but it was enough time to visit some tourist places. One of them was the statue of John I, in whose name the island of Azores was discovered.



Jorge in Portugal

Jorge had taken a camera that used acetate film. I remind you that, by the time of the trip, 2009, digital cameras still were not as common as they are nowadays. I had a super camera that I bought in the United States. Jorge was not happy at all with the fabulous pictures I took with my camera and considered that I was trying to humiliate him and his old film camera. He was upset for two days but finally forgot the whole thing and now we are very good friends again. He indeed was my tour guide when we visited the city of Rio de Janeiro, where he was both born and now has his home. Anyway, Jorge got angry and went back to the ship. I decided to do something I had been planning to accomplish for a long time. I went to a small restaurant where the food was cheap, as was the hygiene, and ordered codfish, the national dish, and rice from a moustached Portuguese.

I gave myself forty minutes to enjoy the meal, taking advantage of my solitude to think about my life on-board. It had been a month since I had embarked. Life was getting better and my fellowship with my colleagues was getting more positive. After a month, everything becomes clearer. One enters the eye of the hurricane and thinks that is normal. I was building good friendships; first Dudu and Jorge, then some others became friends too. Angelo, for instance, is a great friend. He was the one that put me forward for a fine job in São Paulo, at the Unique Hotel, when I went back to Brazil. But I will write about this in another chapter.

Let me write more about Ângelo now. He was born in Belo Horizonte, in the state of Minas Gerais. He was 25 years old, at the time of the trip. Skinny, charismatic, he spoke fluent English. He knew the ship very well because of his job in room service. He used to say that his first contract was going to be the last. He has kept his promise, so far.

In Europe, we lived for a few hours of amusement and high emotion. The ship was in the port of Cobh, in Ireland, most of the passengers had left for a walk and so the work diminished. We were all crazy to enjoy a day of rest. Angelo invited a group of five Brazilians, including me, to visit the town of Cork, one hour by train. The train was clean and fast. The day was cold, but at least it was not raining. We had time to take the train at noon and be back on the ship by 6.00 pm to depart for Cherbourg, France. In Cork we visited a medieval castle and had lunch in one of the shopping centers; we were tired of the food of the ship. Since it was pay-day, we had money, so I bought a shirt showing the flag of Ireland and drank the famous Guinness beer. So thrilled were we that we lost all notion of time. When we realized that the time was running away, it was already 5.00 pm. We ran to the train station to find a long line of people—it seemed that all three thousand passengers had decided to take the train at the same time. We entered the line as if we were passengers and managed to get on the train. The carriages were as crowded as the São Paulo subway in rush hour. Fortunately, we arrived at the ship on time. The cruise continued.

Next stop Cherbourg. In that town there is a memorial to the ship Titanic, with a replica of the famous English vessel, because Cherbourg was the penultimate port where Titanic picked up passengers before the tragedy. The port is beautiful and modern, with the neighborhood keeping the traditional architecture of the 19th century.

That was that. We arrived at Southampton next, the port closest to London, and the home of the Titanic; today, the home of Cunard, the company I have been working for over the last three years. It was a morning in May 2009. Southampton was an unknown port to me. Now I have lost count of how many times I have been there.

I woke up early to work on side jobs. When we sign the contract, there is a clause which stipulates that we have to comply with a work load of X number of hours per day, including some tasks different from the one we are hired to perform, such as loading luggage in the elevators on the boarding days, storing boxes of beverages, wheelchair assistance to passengers in need. On boarding days, all crew members work a lot, and it is practically impossible to escape from side jobs. Generally, we arrive at the port by 7.00am and by 4.00pm everything has to be completed for the new cruise. Every crew member is involved in the process. I had survived days of rough sea, a tray accident, almost missed a train in Ireland, but I arrived to the land of the Queen of England full of happiness and not even the side jobs could take away my good mood. My duty was to convey wheel chair passengers to the place at the dock where buses and taxis waited. I enjoyed doing that because it gave me four hours of work and then a break of four hours. After that, we traveled to Germany where the ship was going to stay in maintenance for 13 days. That is what they call dry dock. I will tell more about it in the next chapter. I worked at a high pace, but very carefully. After all, I was taking care of elderly people in wheel chairs. I was feeling happy about helping people that could not walk. Moreover, I knew that after that day we were going to have 13 days of rest in which to get to know Germany.

My excitement was visible. I performed my duties with such happiness that at least ten old fellows generously tipped me. I remember a nice woman that gave me all her Euros—she told me that the currency in England is the pound and she was not in the mood to change her money. By the end of the four-hour shift, I had lots of Euros, pounds and dollars in my pocket. And my holidays were just beginning. Before the departure from Southampton, I had time to take a walk in Southampton. It was very nice to see and photograph those famous red double-decker buses, true postcards of England.

The ship left for Hamburg. The sea could not be better. The weather was cold, but we were relaxed. We organized a party to celebrate the ship without passengers. The next morning we still had to wake up early, but the shift, now, would last only six hours per day. At deck 11 we did all the tasks relating to the dry dock. Slowly the giant entered the dock canal. By then the bar department team were storing tables and chairs from the pool bar and, from up there, we had a fantastic view of Hamburg. It was a well-planned city and very clean. I was so anxious that I could have jumped in the River Elba and gone swimming to find my freedom and a beer.

Many other ships were entering or leaving the port of Hamburg, one of the largest ports in the world. By the canal margins, we could see glass fronted shops where call girls exhibited their personal attributes. A paradise for sailormen.

Dry dock

I have not yet said what a dry dock means. It is the situation where a liner or any other ship is compelled to remain in a shipyard for a period for repair or maintenance. This is usually for a period of 10 to 20 days, in general, or even months, depending on what needs to be done to return the ship to good working order. I have been through two other dry docks, in 2010 and 2012. Dry docks are mandatory every two or three years for most ships. I call those dry docks lucky dry docks, because without passengers the workload diminishes quite a lot. In addition, the crew members can take advantage of the period to make cheap tours, since Brazilians do not need a visa to enter any European Union country. All three dry docks in which I participated happened on German land, twice in Hamburg and once in Bremen. I know many experienced crew members who never participated in a single dry dock.

Oh yes, I was lucky, indeed. After a month and a half of embarking in Galveston, I received the gift of a glorious vacation in Europe. I remember something that I read somewhere: *A man has to travel. Not by means of stories, images, books or TV; he needs to travel with his own eyes and feet, to understand what belongs to him. He has to travel, to plant his own trees, and value those trees; to know the coldness and enjoy the warmth. And the opposite. To feel distance, and lack of shelter, and to feel*

*well in his own house. A man has to travel to places he does not know, to break the arrogance that makes us see the world as we imagine it to be, and not simply as it is or as it can be. To break that arrogance that makes us professors or doctors of what we have not yet seen, when we should be students and simply go to see it.*¹

Gosh how I love these lines that Amyr Klink wrote! I wish I had written them.

Thus, the giant stopped in the dock. For us, it was an extraordinary chance to see naval engineering. The first interesting fact was that, when the ship entered the shipyard, the dock is obviously full of water; it has to be lifted for the water to drain away and the sight of the hull, which usually stays underwater, is impressive. After eight hours pumping water, the ship is put on easels stands—imagine a 138 thousand ton ship supported this way!

Once the ship opened its gangway, a real party began. All the crew members spread out to the streets of Hamburg, for their very own and personal “dry dock” experience. During these 13 days I got to know the city of Hamburg really well. Luis Puertas and I visited the main monuments as long as the admission was free, because we did not have much money. We visited the old train station. At the city library we spent hours and hours using the free Internet. We used the subway to go everywhere, and I would learn the main differences between Germans and Brazilians. At the subway station there are no turnstiles. We bought tickets on the first floor and then validated them in one of the machines on the boarding platform. I did not see anybody checking tickets on the train. Yet everybody had paid for their ticket. How different it is in Brazil!

We used to go out, at night to a bar, where the Beatles had performed their first time in Germany back in the early 60s. We gave a show of our own to the audience there: our friend Joelma stepped up on the stage and danced the samba; the Germans just loved it! The Port of Hamburg was completing its 820th anniversary, it was built in 1189, and the celebration party took the whole month. We could not, and would not, escape from the two unforgettable weekends we had complete with plenty of beer and food. Even though I saw quite a few people drunk there was not a single fight or disagreement. German people behave well and enjoy parties. What I did not know was that the party was just an appetizer for the biggest of German parties: the Munich Oktoberfest. I had the opportunity to spend five days, in 2012, at that party.

Dry dock is a harmonious period for crew members and their bosses. In our parties at the crew bar even the officers abandon their strict behavior and had fun with us. The Panamanian, Rufino, my supervisor, always so serious, danced his traditional salsa like a ballet dancer with an Ecuadorian who worked at the reception desk. They received thunderous applause from the entire bar department. We, warriors of the sea, had days of delicious amusement and fine rest.

¹ <http://pensador.uol.com.br/frase/MTM5Nic2/> on 19/04/2013



What is good, ends too quickly

The dry dock was completed. We only had time for one last party in the bow, with an American barbecue and free drinks. Then the ship, smelling brand new, left the calm waters of the river Elba to go to the Mediterranean.

Our next stop was charming Barcelona, a beautiful city that will remain forever in my memory because it was the base for our ship for the next four months. Even with only two hours of rest on Sundays, I always managed to ride my bike for a “cafesito” at my favorite bar. The cycle lanes of Barcelona are the proof that there is a solution for healthy travel in big cities.

It was time to go back to work, because the Mediterranean Cruise season had begun. All crew members were re-invigorated. I, for instance, was prepared for new towns. After a while, I must say, the routine gets boring. It is not haughtiness; the thing is that routine kills the imagination and repetition kills surprise. After a time doing the same stuff all over again, one gets sick even of beautiful things.

For four months we made the same seven-day cruise several times and rarely did the captain alter the route. The passengers changed every Sunday in Barcelona. It was my favorite city of the itinerary because before boarding the new passengers I always found time to ride my bicycle through the city. Sometimes Angelo and I rode by the beach to have lunch and a Spanish “cerveza”—a Spanish beer. All very enjoyable!

On the Cruise, always the same six places, we left Barcelona and traveled one day to Naples, Italy. From Naples to Civitavecchia, the port nearest to Rome. The next day we went to Livorno, also in Italy, the fastest way to Pisa and Firenze. Every Friday we stopped at Villefranche, France, a beautiful town, close to Nice and Monaco. And last we went to Marseille. We usually left Marseille early, around 4:30 pm—our usual daily departure time was 7.00 pm—because the nautical distance was long and ship travel takes time. If I had to write about all that happened in each stop, I would have to produce a few more books. Anyway, I cannot shirk telling the funny or remarkable stories of each day of the week.

Monday	<p>... a hard workday, but even so we found a way to have some fun. It is hot in Europe in June; therefore, the pool was always crowded and we had work all day long. At night, however, we would party to get rid of the tension. We promoted our crew parties on Mondays because it was the day before the first stop; we know that the passengers would be excited to visit the first port next day, and the ship would then be empty. Therefore, we could party until dawn</p>
Tuesday	<p>... in Naples, was a day for pizza and the local beer, the Birra Peroni. Naples is very similar to some Brazilian cities, especially the traffic. The Neapolitans sell whatever you want to buy. They are famous for being the first in Europe to acquire modern technology. João, a member of the ship tour office was a graduate fellow who knew Naples quite well. At that time, Apple had just launched the iPhone. João got excited and bought an iPhone for 90 euros, a nice price—the lowest cost we saw elsewhere was 300 euros. Back to ship, he opened the box. Inside the box he discovered just a bar of soap. Yes, João had bought a bar of soap for 90 euros! There are people in Naples who are very fast with their hands. Here is a piece of advice to anyone who is intending to visit the island of Capri or Vesuvius: think twice before buying an iPhone.</p>
Wednesday	<p>... was the day dedicated to a small town with a big name: Civitavecchia. As I said, it is the port closest to Rome. It is a bustling port, all year round, because Italians of many cities prefer to embark there. I normally made my phone calls and money transfers to Brazil in Civitavecchia, because they have a friendly system. From there I went twice to Rome by train; it takes one hour and there are a few services per day. Talking about trains, I met a Brazilian family on the ship. Father, mother and three kids all on vacation together. They decided not to pay for the excursion organized by the ship team and left early to take the train. Even without speaking a single word of Italian they managed to get to Rome. The next evening I met them and asked about their tour to Rome. They said it was a disaster. They misunderstood the train schedule and missed the ship. Conclusion: they had to pay five more train tickets to reach Livorno the next day to get on board again. It was useless to complain, because the ship has a strict timetable to obey. In case of delaying to set sail, the company that owns the ship has to pay fines up to ten thousand dollars, depending on the port and the country. I do not defend the price of excursions organized by the ship, but it is advisable for passengers not to risk independent adventures. The ship excursions are safe and never leave passengers behind!</p>

Thursday	... was the day to take advantage of the free internet at the main square of the port city of Livorno; there was nothing else to do in that place. At my first opportunity, I went to Pisa, to see for myself the place that puzzles so many people. It was amazing in the beginning, but Pisa did not impress me as much as other Italian cities such as Rome and Firenze (Florence). Firenze is a city to visit more than once. As for Pisa, I was quite satisfied with the pictures of me holding up the leaning tower with my hands.
Friday	... we docked at the penultimate port of the cruise, Villefranche. Disembarking was exotic, it was the only place where we went to land by tenders, small inflatable boats. The beach is small and shallow so the ship cannot go near the coast. This French village is a magnificent place. We, Brazilians back home, could hardly wait for Fridays because, when the weather was clear, we could watch the girls go topless. For me, a country boy, it was a spectacle. Villefranche is close to Nice, a place that I also visited, and less than twenty minutes away from the Principality of Monaco—a place I have been dozens of times. Walking through the narrow streets of Monaco, I saw the highest symbols of material wealth, and I remembered the races of Ayrton Senna, I felt like I was 15 years old again, watching the racing cars and dreaming of driving one of them. To visit Monaco was a great joy to me.
Saturday	... last day of the cruise, was celebrated in the city of Marseille, one of the biggest in France. I liked to walk in that city because the food is good and public transportation is efficient. I visited the soccer stadium which is both modern and beautiful. The port, however, is distant from the city and, as we had to leave by 4:30 pm, there was never enough time to enjoy the various places on offer. My friend Jorge went out in Marseille and did not read the schedule in the ships daily program. He thought that, as in all the other ports, the departure would be at 7.00 pm. Poor Jorge. By 5.00 pm, he found only a port agent in charge of delivering his passport and money for a ticket to Barcelona. In the meantime we worried about his disappearance. He showed up the next morning happy as never before. He had to make a train connection and while waiting he met people who are still his friends today.

Scenes from European cities


<https://vimeo.com>

Misery

I said earlier that the four months in Europe were boring. That's not completely true. I adored each town, each port. The problem was the price of everything. Europe was in the peak of the economic downturn caused by the US real estate crisis. In that season, almost all passengers were Spanish who had bought cruises at the price of bananas. They did not spend money, and bar waiters became distressed over this—we were on commission. This meant, no drinks sold, no wage! My salary, in dollars, was less than what I earned at the Renaissance Hotel. Anyhow, I honored my contract until the end. Dudu could not handle the lack of money and gave up, right before completing six months. I thought I was doing well, selling more drinks than he did. I had learned to sell, after what I had experienced on my first day. In fact, I was making only enough to pay the expenses charged by the company. Royal Caribbean (differently from Cunard) discounts from our salary, the cost of uniforms and the value of plane tickets from our country of origin. Not to mention that, in Brazil, I had to pay for medical exams, courses, visa, everything. Therefore, I made special efforts and, even in the middle of experienced crew members, I sold enough drinks to pay my expenses and to save some money to take back to Brazil. Not much though, I must say.

Before I left the ship, on October 4th, 2009, many things happened. My buddy Luis Puertas left. In his place came a young Brazilian college teacher, Kyvy, who made my last two months on-board very happy. Another good friend was Fernando Monteiro: a handsome, funny, polyglot. By then, he was dating Simona, a gorgeous Italian girl, to whom he is married today, and they shared a cabin. On a certain occasion, three girl friends of Simona embarked for a short cruise, paying a symbolic fee of 10 dollars given that they were friends of a crew member. Fernando had to give up his place in the cabin for the visitors and asked to stay in our cabin. The cabin, as I have already told, is extremely small; we spent seven days in a tight space. It was fun though. We kept telling jokes all night long.

When my contract ended, I left Royal Caribbean. I found out that other and better companies existed, which could provide me with more interesting and professional experiences. Royal Caribbean, for my career though, was a worthwhile watershed. I said goodbye to that company on a Sunday morning, in Barcelona.

