

2006 Late October and the wind is picking up.

Hello all

We've been off on a free holiday, again, (makes ya sick doesn't it?), and are about to head off to Pakistan, so I thought I'd tell you about it, along with the usual general newsletter stuff. The blogging exercise keeps my memory active and, if it doesn't actually make it work better, at least I have a convenient external memory bank. Also I can listen to basement jaxx at the same time, which I have been known to do occasionally, just to keep up to date.

The holiday in Madeira got off to a rocky start when the Holiday Company that was providing it moved its office and left no forwarding address, so we had to set off blind with no idea where the hotel was or where the hire car was. The Holiday Company is still in business and presumably still unable to find its base with both hands. It really is called The Holiday Company. Avoid them. We had the last laugh though, they forgot to bill us for £400, so it all turned out ok and more free than most "free" holidays.

Madeira is a lot greener than I expected and has a quite different climate than the Mediterranean Islands we've visited. The geography produces a lot of rain and that cuts dramatic gorges into the volcanic rock which makes the contour-following roads very lengthy. The rainfall is indicated by the buildings. Instead of the usual flat roofs of the Mediterranean, there are pitched roofs of red tiles. What with that, and the lush vegetation, we rather expected a good soaking, but it fell heavily in the week before and after our stay. Weather avoidance is something we're quite good at.

Funchal, the capital, provided Fiona with two immediate opportunities of getting me far off the ground, one of her favourite activities. A cable car up into the rainforest-like top of the mountains behind the city, and then a tethered balloon, for the straight up, no messing, not even a pointy rock between me and the unforgiving ground. I managed both with scarcely a whimper. Later there was a startlingly realistic "flight" in a simulator where the 'camera' gives the effect of power-dives over, between, and, strangely, even under rather inhospitable, jagged and seriously lofty terrain. I suspect I'm being tested.

There is quite a bit to do on the island, though strangely it ignores sun worshippers, not that it bothers me as I don't really do sunbathing. There are no beaches worth mentioning, but loads of geography and views. The Madeirans think that sitting in the sun or even the shade, with a glass of wine is utterly insane, so they sit inside and unbelievably, in one restaurant, had a roaring fire in the corner. That restaurant was perched on a cliff with excellent sea views... entirely blocked by a solid wall. I think air conditioning would have been more useful, but I guess it's what they are used to.

The road system is impressive, and uses tunnels whenever it can. I think the islanders had become well tired of having to go the long way round, and when the tunnel boring technology arrived they took to it like diamond tipped moles. There is one oddity that might be worth considering. Obviously there are very few frosts in the area, and the roads are quite new. We were surprised by the number of potholes, shallow and usually round, similar to our local roads around Scotland. They have few heavy lorries and good drainage, so why the potholes? I eventually worked it out, many of the roads are skirting cliffs and occasionally a rock takes a wee jaunt and drops a few hundred feet. This causes a dent in the road, and judging by the size of the dents would punch a hole straight through a car. Worth considering.



Apart from a bit of sunburn, the trip on the Santa Maria, a replica of Columbus' ship, was very entertaining, featuring swarthy muscular types who scrambled up masts and doing nautical, if quite pointless, things with bits of rope. Between putting the sails up and down again for no particular purpose, (no wind, not a breath, zephyr, gust or breeze) they plied us with Madeira cake and the local fortified wine.

Dolphins sported, whales did not. (they had a previous engagement 500 miles north). I took a lot of digital seascapes where there had, seconds before, been dolphins. A fault of either that kind of camera, or that kind of photographer, or both. By comparison Egyptian scenery moves very slowly, so I was unused to needing quick reflexes. Another dissimilarity with Egypt was the age of the other passengers. On the Nile they were all younger than us and more Australian, on this trip our fellow travellers seemed rather older than us and more French. Probably something to do with the type of boat. One or two were sick, which added to the entertainment, but not spectacularly so. The lack of children was a plus and although Madeira generally seemed to be shifting to a wider age range, it suits the older visitor better at present.



Back in Tarbrax the weather has been very pleasant indeed, although at the time of writing the autumn colours are well in fashion and the light has gone well before six, mostly because of the cloud cover. We had a very good summer and have had enough nice weather to put up most of the conservatory. It's being hand built (slowly) by myself and it should now be able to withstand the autumnal winds. I think I might leave the door into the living-room until spring, however, since subzero draughts aren't appreciated by the cats. Having it built by professionals would probably be a lot faster, but this way we save £10,000. I didn't believe it till I did the maths, twice.

Work continues at the hospital, the whole place is now so far beyond its budget that the administrators will soon be throwing themselves off the buildings, although they'll have to use the stairs to get up there. Various brilliant plans have been reviewed, generally after a pause for the next batch of unsuspecting executives (who change jobs like musical chairs) to settle in. That way the outgoing can say it was working when they left, and the incoming can say it wasn't their fault. The latest edicts are a job freeze and a ban on "non essential stationery" but it seems beyond the understanding of the budgeteers that they aren't going to get a pint out of a thimble. Perhaps they'll offer me redundancy. Now there's a plan I could go for. One of the Nurses retired a year ago and keeps getting called in to do "agency" where she used to work for 2/3 of the pay she gets now, so she works part time and grins like a cat in a dairy. Ah well, time to go, I've grown a beard a week early to fit in better with Pakistani culture, I haven't a hope of learning the language without a long stay, speaking of which, don't pay any ransom if you hear I've been kidnapped, life's too short to worry about, and it gets shorter if you do.

Love to all
Jim