

travel



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FROM BANGKOK TO BEIJING AND IN BETWEEN

Oceania's 20-day voyage to some of Asia's most glorious cities is a memorable feast for the eyes, the soul and the appetite

Photos and story by Julie L. Kessler
Special to the Star-Advertiser

IN "The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table," 19th-century physician and writer Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. wrote, "To reach the port of heaven, we must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it — but we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor." This certainly resonated during my recent journey through Asia on Oceania's Nautica, a midsize ship with pleasant public spaces, four open-seating restaurants, well-equipped gym, spa, eight lounges and bars, casino, boutique, card and computer rooms, library and 342 staterooms. Passengers were a mix of Americans, Canadians, Europeans and South Americans. Most were in the 50-60 age range, with a few multigenerational families traveling together.

Bangkok
Bangkok, Nautica's embarkation point, is also home to the legendary Shangri-La Hotel, which sits along the banks of the Chao Phraya River. Possessing not only spectacular views, it's just five minutes on foot to the riverboats and the Sky Train. With 24/7 traffic that makes Los Angeles seem like an abandoned city, these two modes provide the best way to get around. No stay would be complete without visiting the Grand Palace, built by King Rama I beginning in 1782; the magnificent Wat Phra Kaew, which served as its chapel; Wat Pho, where Thailand's largest reclining Buddha resides; and, of course, the canals and Damnoen Saduak floating market. Visitors should reserve time to meander through the city's many outdoor markets and sample fresh food from street stalls. Boarding the Nautica on Valentine's Day, the cruise began with a party where

guests danced to the orchestra's romantic melodies. Then, on to the first port of call.

Sihanoukville, Cambodia

Blessed with a lovely coastline and warm waters, though virtually no infrastructure, the beaches near Sihanoukville have plenty of inexpensive, delicious seafood restaurants and bars on the sand.

Nautica made port in the late morning near Sihanoukville's central market. From there it was easy to hop on a moto-taxi or tuk-tuk for the 10-minute ride to white-sand Ochheuteal Beach. Women strolled beachside offering everything from fresh fruit, grilled squid and lobster to \$2 massages and pedicures.

Enjoying grilled prawns — no doubt caught moments before — and an ice-cold Angkor draft beer, I made my way back aboard just after sunset. Dinner of Dorade ceviche and grilled lobster from Nautica's "Healthy Living" menu topped off the day.

Da Nang, Vietnam

After arriving in central Vietnam near the port city of Da Nang, it was a 40-minute drive to Hue; Vietnam's ancient capital, where the massive Citadel, comprising 1,286 acres, looms large. The Imperial Enclosure, containing temples, gardens and palaces, is fashioned after Beijing's Imperial City and was covered in flowers in honor of Tet, Vietnam's New Year's holiday and most important cultural celebration.

IF YOU GO ...

Asia cruising

The best way: Oceania's Nautica has several multi-country, multicity Asia cruises scheduled for 2017, ranging from 15 to 31 days. Rates start at \$5,999 per guest, depending on voyage, including unlimited free Wi-Fi and other benefits. oceaniacruises.com, 855-623-2642.



More tips are available at staradvertiser.com.

Nearby, the impressive, seven-story Thien Mu (Celestial Lady) Pagoda complex houses a 6-foot, 4,410-pound bell. Also there is the Austin Westminster sedan that monk Thich Quang Duc emerged from in Saigon in 1963 when he immolated himself protesting President Ngo Dinh Diem's repressive regime.

The city streets are tangled with passing motorcycles that routinely carry four passengers who seem to defy gravitational theories. Traffic stopped altogether when a herd of buffalo meandered into the road. The day ended with a stroll through the grand mausoleum of Tu Duc, the Nguyen dynasty's fourth king.

Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)

For Americans of a certain age, and all history buffs, coming to

Vietnam is emotional. Americans are often amazed at how well they are received here — as if memories are short, the past is past and the future is right now. Incidentally, here the conflict is called the American War.

With two full days, there was plenty of time to see the main sights. At Reunification Palace, on April 30, 1975, communist tanks stormed the front gate and Saigon fell, resulting in reunification of North and South and creation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Not for the faint of heart is the War Remnants Museum, where the Agent Orange aftermath displays and Requiem Hall photos taken by journalists themselves killed in the conflict leave you sadly speechless.

Onward, Notre Dame Cathedral was built by the French to mirror the original in Paris. The nearby General Post Office, also of French design, might be the world's most beautiful. Strolling Dong Khoi Street — the original French Quarter — with its neoclassical Opera House, shops, galleries, luxe hotels and hip cafes is a clear reminder that while the French departed in 1954, their influence is still felt throughout Saigon in food, coffee culture and stunning architecture.

Ben Thanh Market houses countless stalls of souvenirs, textiles and replica items. When it closes, the enjoyable Night Market opens around the building with open-air stalls and a wonderful food section.

As darkness fell, I headed to the 23rd-floor Shri Restaurant & Lounge for its breathtaking view of Saigon's skyline.

Please see CRUISE, G6



Video is available at staradvertiser.com.

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Above, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha and Grand Palace complex are seen in Bangkok. At top, from left: Bangkok's Chao Phraya River serves as a main transportation hub; one of the many island formations in Halong Bay best seen by junk boat; rickshaws carry mainly tourists around Houhai River in central Beijing; tourists walk past a display showing U.S. soldiers at the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

CRUISE

Continued from G1

Stepping onto the patio, I nearly fainted realizing I was standing on Plexiglas and could clearly see the street and vehicles below. Recovering nicely with a strong martini, I went for dinner at Nha Hang Ngon, devouring delicious and inexpensive authentic fare in a lovely, colonial-style, open-air building.

Negotiating Saigon on foot can initially be intimidating since crosswalks are rare. However, the nonstop motorcycle traffic simply maneuvers around pedestrians. Postwar construction and development are nothing short of miraculous. While the government might officially be communist, capitalism is thriving.

Returning onboard, executive chef Jorg Becker and his talented team prepared a beautiful Vietnamese dinner buffet in Nautica's Terrace Cafe.

Halong Bay

A World Heritage Site since 1994, Halong Bay is by far one of Vietnam's most

brehtaking sites. Like Phoenix rising, there are 1,969 islands protruding in every shape and size amid low, misty cloud formations. Appearing simultaneously mystical and ethereal, they are best viewed from local junks.

Equally magnificent are the numerous caves at which the boats stop. Ascending several flights of stairs, one feels minuscule when faced with enormous stalagmites in cavernous surroundings made more spectacular with multicolored lights in strategic locations.

The following day, many went to Hanoi. I'd recently visited, so instead took a countryside excursion to Ziac Tam Zen monastery, where resident female monks teach the art of meditation. Leaving substantially calmer, I returned to the ship completely in touch with my inner foodie and enjoyed another great dinner.

Hong Kong

Known as Asia's World City, there are few places on the planet more exciting than Hong Kong. One never tires of it since it's constantly changing, though politically and civically the pulse is noticeably different

since the city passed from British to Chinese governance in 1997.

Hopping on Hong Kong's subway, I headed across the border to Shenzhen, the birthplace of all things "Made in China."

Just feet from the border of mainland China is Lo Wu, a multifloor shopper's orgy of clothing, shoes, electronics and textiles. With aching arms and tired feet, I entered one of the many salons for a massage and mani-pedi that together cost less than a Big Mac.

Twenty minutes by subway is Dafen Art Village with plenty of paintings reasonably priced. The Dafen Art Museum at the village's end is also worth a gander. On the ride back, many Hong Kong residents returned with enormous rolling suitcases that I eyed jealously given that I was losing sensation in my arms from carrying my purchases.

Xiamen, China

Leaving the land of Hong Kong's free press and entering the land of the great Chinese firewall, computer access to Facebook, Twitter and the like abruptly ended.

Docking in Xiamen, a short taxi ride brought me

to pedestrian Zhongshan Road. Xiamen's commercial heart. In little stalls, I tasted two dozen local teas, sampled fried squid the size of footballs and steaming dim sum.

In nearby Gulangyu Island's Shuzhuang Gardens, the Piano Museum has more than 40 antique pianos collected from around the globe. It's said that 1 in 5 homes boasts a piano, explaining the island museum's focus.

Shanghai

Many come to China's most populous city for its beautiful Bund along the Huangpu River. Pudong's impressive skyscrapers, shopping on Nanjing Road, the Old City and world-class restaurants and museums. And Shanghai doesn't disappoint. As I'd combed Shanghai's many marvels before, this time I dived deeper.

My father's family had many Eastern European friends who sat out World War II in Shanghai. Though possibly the oddest place globally for refugees' safe haven, Shanghai was the only port that didn't require entry visas. Thus, between 1938 and 1941 more than 20,000 stateless Jews ar-

rived, many on transit visas issued by two courageous, humanitarian Asian diplomats: Chiune Sempo Sugihara, Japanese consul general in Kovno, Lithuania, and Dr. Feng-Shan Ho, Nationalist Chinese consul general in Vienna.

Those refugees not only survived, but also thrived and lived to tell the tale. Walking in Hongkou, a Shanghai section called Little Vienna, the old Ohel Moshe Synagogue is now part of the beautifully restored Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum, possessing an excellent repository of wartime-era items including English-captioned photos, newspapers, artifacts, signage and a database.

I also took a sobering walk through the old, narrow lanes, cramped alleyways and residences of the former Shanghai Ghetto area. In this 1-square-mile section of Hongkou, the Nazis forced the Japanese occupiers to restrict the movements of the stateless Jews. When the war ended and Mao Zedong took control and established the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Nationalists and their leader, Chiang Kai-shek, fled to Taiwan, while

the vast majority of Shanghai's Jews emigrated to Australia, Canada, the U.S. and South America, ironically along with many Nazis fleeing Europe.

Beijing

The massive man-made wonders of Beijing are well known — the Great Wall and Forbidden City — but so too are the blackened skies from overwhelming pollution. Still, the city boasts incredible hotels and restaurants where the service is unmatched.

Beijing was the disembarkation point for a delightful journey on Oceania's Nautica. Such a 20-day cruise can test Holmes' "Breakfast Table" observation on friendship and growth. Besides all the sights, sounds and experiences that broaden your perspective, an additional lovely benefit is that lifelong friendships can be forged over those cocktails being mixed on deck as the sun sets over a perfect Asian horizon.

Julie L. Kessler is a travel writer and legal columnist based in Los Angeles and the author of the award-winning book "Fifty-Fifty, the Clarity of Hindsight."



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