



This is how it all Began

Many years ago, in ‘another lifetime’ as it is said, is when this narrative really starts. It really was another life. Coming to America was like being Born Again, as I have started calling it of late. And being in New York City - living and growing there - is like having the Third Birth.

It was still the early phase of my Second Birth, having been in USA just about two years or less, when I started a journey across this land which lasted for three months. I was acutely homesick for India, my physical birth place, and realized the need to see this land in order to acquire any liking for and understanding about this country.

So it was that I took a series of Greyhound Buses. I knew that I had to go by buses so that I could see the landscape of the country. This searching for a cure for my homesickness, as it were, went on for three months, during which time I went to many cities and small towns, and saw a lot of beautiful and glorious places in this land that is America. I did go to the mid-West and North-West etc. during this journeying, but I had actually started this quest from the Port Authority Bus Station in New York City in the East and I went all the way up to Los Angeles in the West. In other words, I had started from the shore of the Atlantic and had reached all the way to the shore of the Pacific.

This, my very First serious travelling by myself, occurred many years ago. From then on until at present, after having travelled extensively and almost 'non-stop' upon this Earth, at last I was about to do something that would reverse that First going across the country. So this time I was starting at the shore of the Pacific, from the Port of Los Angeles, on a ship that went down South by the Western coast of the continent; the length of Baja and Central America; then through the Panama Canal, and finally, entering and sailing the Atlantic, until arriving at Port Everglades, at Fort Lauderdale in Florida.

It seemed to me that, in some mysterious way, I was making a full circle - although not in any exactly definable design-shape. Still, this idea of reversing my very First Journey, after many years, thrilled me superficially, and stunned me in a more significant sense. It may be a popular route for commercial cruises, but for me this Sailing from 'Ocean to Ocean' carried more meaning.

I have traversed the Upper Arctic Ocean, on the Expedition to the Magnetic North Pole, and have been on a ship through the Antarctic ocean, and have felt as if I was taking the Globe in my embrace, symbolically, of course. And then there are countless other Seas upon the Earth - Indian Ocean, North Sea, China Sea, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the Baltic etc. that I have experienced. And still, the Pacific and the Atlantic are the main and mighty ones, like two pods encircling the Earth. Connecting with them on one voyage gave me a sense of some deeper wonder.

I have certainly been on that whole Route by land, by local buses, in several different travels - from Los Angeles to the Border of Mexico and down South to Baja (pronounced Baha), and all the seven countries in Central America. I even crossed the Panama Canal once before, and have been to some of the Islands like Aruba, Cuba, Puerto Rico etc. in the Atlantic. Now I was going to connect all these parts in one swoop. My desire, and hope was to see the whole area from outside now - to see the line of the Coast of the continent of North America, from both its sides, West and South-East.

All these thoughts, long before embarking on the ship, were being tinted with Romantic colours. I am not one to fear a trip, or feel uncertain about it, but I must say, off and on I felt some nervousness about this watery venture. It is because so far I have been on very small ships, with just about, or even less than, a hundred passengers. These days large and larger ships are the desired size, offering non-stop wordly enjoyments and endless ocean-glamour. Moreover, these ships carry 5000-6000 passengers. That felt like travelling with a small town, and did not appeal to me.

It was as if I was seeking empty spaces, like the miles of Oceanic expanse all around. And quiet, in the presence of continuous waves. Fortunately, the ship I would be on is considered 'small', transporting just about 2000 passengers, or a few less. It still seemed like too many people in one place, but I worked on my mind, and in time, felt comfortable with the number. I was sure I would find quiet spots to sit and think, read, write. (Or was it really possible?!)

The way inspiration has struck a few times, I would write a poem, sitting at home, even before I had seen that place; and even in this instance the same thing happened. Excited to be following this route that wrapped both sides of the Continent, I resolved to write one Haiku every day, about the Oceans. Haiku is a Japanese poetic form. I call it a "small poem" for easy explanation. It is, really, just three lines, but it has a strict form which must be maintained. I have written Haiku in English and in my mother tongue Gujarati, and even 2 or 3 of them in Japanese language (called Nihongo) as well! I am familiar with how the Haiku form is to be observed, and the combined excitement - about sailing and about penning - was such that I started writing Haiku even before I was on the Ocean!

As a rule, when I travel, I carry minimum luggage, and only a few things. I limit my needs, and do not pack anything that may be unnecessary. But I realized that on a voyage one may want to, or need to carry a few more outfits. Still, I did not over-pack. One medium-size suitcase would be sufficient, and that too, not very heavy.

I was fortunate to visit and stay with some old-time friends in Los Angeles, before the voyage started. I felt that my trip was having a special start. There was a little concern about the weather, because the forecast was for rain and wind storm over Mexico and Central America. Ships are very heavy and have a lot of balance, but once in a while a ship gets caught in a furious storm, rocking and pitching constantly, and then the Sailing is not comfortable.



I travel by myself through tough places, and difficult situations at times, but there is no fear in my mind. Some may not believe it, and might think it is foolish not to be fearful, but I always remain positive and hopeful for 'safe travels'!

Suddenly I thought of the story of Sindbad the Sailor. He sailed through Seven Seas, faced severe storms and many adversities, but he remained strong and determined, and overcame all impending disasters. This story is taken from an Arabic book of short fiction, called "A Thousand and One Nights". In India, we knew it as "Arabian Nights", and were enthralled by all those stories about some exotic land. A fictional story as it is, readers have drawn positive lessons from the adventures of Sindbad the Sailor, in that he fought evil, stayed confident, believed in himself, and never gave up hope.

As a fiction writer - of short stories as well as novels - I enjoy such positive fiction, and Believe in such characters also. In the same book - "Arabian Nights", there are many other imaginative stories, set in atmosphere that seemed unusual. There are stories about Alladin and his Magic Lamp, and Alibaba and Forty Thieves. Then there is the Khalifa Harun-al-Rashid, the benevolent ruler of Baghdad, wrapped in his black cape, going around stealthily in the dark streets of his city to make certain that no crimes were being committed, and that all was safe for his citizens.

Oh, then, this Oceanic Adventure of my own is sliding me back towards the exotic realm of the fictional world where everything ended well, and happy times prevailed. Ah, to have the feeling of the innocent wonder back!

In real life, I took an Uber to the Port of Los Angeles. The sky was blue, the California air was, somehow, free of pollution, and even the L.A. Freeways were free of traffic that afternoon. A good omen to start with! I had heard about a lot of crowding at embarkation time, and had thought that I may have to line up. But no, there was no crowd of passengers there, as if not many were going! But it is likely that many were already on the ship, and many others were late in getting to the Port.

In the entrance hall, many personnel stood by to help, and to give out the Cabin Number. And then the ship's entrance is right there. Once inside, in a few minutes, the first announcement came to inform the passengers that the cabins were ready to go to. On Deck Eight I walked the narrow inside corridor, looking at the numbers, and walked more, all the way to the end of the ship, and there was my cabin. Must be the very last cabin in the whole ship, I thought. Right outside was a door to the small open deck at the back. Once the shore receded, there was the open sea out there. It was a nice quiet spot after all. My first find on the ship, as the first night on the voyage approached!



Here are the first two “Ocean-Thoughts” in Haiku form :

1. From the Pacific
To the Atlantic - I ride
The connecting wave.
2. Sea may be restless,
but, on its bosom, I seek
Calm, Depth and Stillness.



And this is how it continues

As the ship sat in its berth at the Port of Los Angeles, it seemed confined, and a novice wondered how it would ease out to the open sea. Was there that much room for it to turn around, to wiggle out? In fact, it certainly is a tricky track to navigate the ship safely out towards the open passage, and to help the ship's captain to do this there would be a small motorboat, with an expert sea-pilot aboard, who would stay close by, and would guide the ship safely, slowly, and without a nudge, out.

It was some sort of a large labyrinth, through which to find the way out, I thought, as I watched this patient maneuver, trying to observe it as patiently as the navigators seemed to be doing.

In reality of the ship, as far as the passengers are concerned, no patience seems to be required. All the fun is available fast, if not instantaneously. From morning to late night, there is a detailed schedule to keep everyone busy pursuing their interests, or at least, to “kill” time, as many use the term with some thoughtless conviction. And then there are places like the Art Gallery, Photo Studio; a Game Room, and several stores with glittery jewelry, expensive watches, fancy wearables etc., and not to forget the Casino, which seemed to

draw people from morning till late night, or even early morning. And that I am guessing from what I saw in the Daily Schedule.



I looked at the long list in this daily schedule, not paying much attention. Most of this did not draw me out to those venues. In fact, I discovered these venues only after a few days - passing them without getting an impression on my attention span. It is not that I did not want to do any worldly activities, but none of this felt worthwhile - neither on the ship nor off it. I did keep walking on a deck or two and suddenly felt like having 'arrived' when I spotted the Library.

My Ultimate Quiet Spot - not just because of lack of noise, or any crowding, but because it offered me silence inside of myself. Not just to read, but to look at the Ocean outside the window, as eager to be noticed, I imagined, as I was to keep looking at it. There were only a few chairs, arranged by the windows, and several towards inside of the room. I sat at whatever was available, read my big book by Dean Koontz - (in case this got finished, I even had a second book as a backup) - or kept counting syllables on my fingers for the next Haiku or just gazed at the unencumbered expanse outside.

So there were all these activities just sitting in a chair - I looked outside at the Ocean, flaunting its vastness and the sense of Permanence; I looked within and sought that limitlessness to be reflected; I did worldly action like reading fanciful fiction; I wrote in my notebook, and I let ideas approach my mind in form of a new Haiku. I kept busy this way, quietly, happily.

Getting bored or feeling bored is not an attitude I am bestowed with. Time itself is so precious that I never want to disdain it for not having been filled with chatter or laughter, which is mostly of the superficial kind, any way. Sitting in the Library was really a perfect Time - there was silky silence, allowing one to introspect, and it let some melodious music, of the quiet type, drift in too.

Outside, on a Deck below, as part of the stylish Atrium, there would be a singer pouring out Portuguese and Fado-style songs, along with sober strokes of a guitar. Or there could be a pianist working up the keys of a Grand Piano, painted white, made to appear fitting for an up-scale mansion. There was not one, but there were two such pianos – both painted white, of course. This second one was in a small open bar or coffee or conversation space. Here the pianist went on singing songs also, as his job required, but no one seemed to be listening to him, although off and on there may be some weak clapping going his way!



AT both ends of the ship, on Deck 14 there were two large Halls with stage. In one, during the evenings and during daytime there were activities of the popular kind – from Zumba to Bingo, and Game Shows to Trivia etc. I did not have reason to go there, except that the seats were very comfortable, especially at the back. Even at the other Hall which presented various performances – a magician, a juggler, a stand-up or two, singers with big bands, and proficient dancers, I would see people rush to the Hall 30-40 minutes ahead of the starting time, to get ‘good’ seats, but I was not too tempted. If I did go, it would be almost as it was starting, and would find a seat in the last row, or just stand at the back for a few minutes. Most times that would be enough to send me back to the library, or to the outside deck to look at the Sea, to feel the breeze.

Occasionally, when I did go in to see or to listen to a performance, what impressed me thoroughly was the total finesse of the presentation – the sound with ideal volume, the dramatic lighting on the stage and on the artists, and the swiftness with which scenes or items or costumes were changed. All this was so perfect that it astonished me as much as it impressed me. One always hears the ‘entertainment’ on a ship being called ‘average’, ‘mediocre’, ‘sub-standard’ or such, but it may not be always so. Here, all the revues were superb in their execution, and that only proved that there is no dearth of talented artists around the globe.

Walking to this Hall, one time, I passed by a bar area, where a Quartet was playing Jazz. That did stop me in my track. I sat outside the dark room, almost empty at that time, quietly listening to the lovely notes of a trumpet, accompanied by guitar, base and drums. I sought this out as often as I could. At another place, by the Atrium, in the afternoon, I found two musicians playing, both Classical and popular numbers on Violin extremely well. When I asked the young woman where she trained at, she said, in Ukraine. Perhaps she has been living in the USA from her childhood, but the answer made me conscious of the splintering world somewhere outside. I could not ask her more because she was doing her job and was playing – not bothered by who was listening and how well. I saw just one couple dance to the tunes, gracefully and becomingly, almost every day.

The very first day was a half day on the ship. I somehow found the place where a nice Buffet was spread out. A glass-enclosed space at the front end of the ship, with many tables, and many waiting and helping staff, smiling and easy. My aim is always pointed towards Vegetarian food, and between rice, some cooked vegetables and pasta I had enough variety. That night I just went back to the Cabin and stayed there, watching BBC news being transported ‘live’ on the Television. Among other stories about severe weather somewhere, and wars continuing on, a Prince was being stripped of his Royal Titles. It felt unfair that only one person should suffer such indignity in public, on World News.



The first whole day on the ship went by finding things – mainly, finding the two of its ends. Forward and Backward – known in ship-speak as ‘FWD’ and ‘AFT’. The Cabin was at the Aft, I was aware of that, and my brain (not too dull, at that) knew that I have to go Fwd to reach the Buffet area. One would think, so what, that is just one direction. Right? Well, when one took an elevator to go to that deck, and came out on it, one had ‘lost’ or ‘misplaced’ the sense of direction in the brain. Most people were talking about it, and laughing about it,

as to how they can never find the right direction, and how they have to turn around and walk back through the length of the ship! My experience exactly.

No matter how I had programmed the direction in the brain, it got misled. So on that first day I walked back and forth, between Fwd. and Aft, because I was almost always going the ‘wrong way’ and ended up walking double than I needed to. That first day I also wore a pair of nice, dressy, silver shoes with heels. And I did thousands of steps wearing them. My legs hurt. Later I took half a Tylenol – my preferred dose! – so I could sleep.

This was also the second night on the ship. Somehow it was not as comfortable as the first one. Suddenly there was a lot of noise, filtering up from the propeller below or something, and it shook the bed also – very comfortable as it was. I kept waking up, and falling asleep, to wake up again. In my travels I do not experience sleepless nights often. I am a good sleeper, with peace at heart. But I could recall a bed of Ice and trying to sleep in temperatures that were minus 65/70 F degrees.

That would be on the High Arctic Ocean. Entirely opposite of the one I was passing my days on just now. The High Arctic Ocean, surely made of water, stays completely frozen, from the day the Earth was formed, and this was still the same, when I was on an Expedition to the Magnetic North Pole. Endless Expanse of Ice. It looked Innocent and Beautiful. I would not call it frigid, because it seemed to be ‘talking’ to me also, at times, when the crust cracked under my booted up feet, or heaved what sounded like a sigh, or when it was soft enough to bury me in it up to my knees.

Travelling on the sledge, being open to the extreme temperatures was an ordeal at any time, but during the absolutely White Nights of the Upper Arctic, and lying stuffed in a sleeping bag, mostly ineffective against these temperatures, I came to know the real discomfort of trying to sleep. If I did fall asleep for some time, it was because of the exhaustion from being on very hard frozen surface, perched on a sledge, as it went bumping up and down on the snow, for many hours!

While sailing the sober span of the Pacific now, I did sleep some in that noisy, shaking cabin that second night after all. Still an easier experience than at the Upper Arctic.



3. Is it possible?
Can this be only one wave?
Continuously?

4. Incidentally,
All the waves are chained
together. That forms the Ocean.



Every sailing combines port visits with days ‘at Sea’, when the ship transports the passengers, without distracting them away from their constant ‘search’ for ‘Fun’, further on in their paid direction. Still, most get bored, or restless. On the first ‘at sea’ day, I heard a woman say she was bored already. I heard another say, ‘oh, there is so much time before dinner, I think I will go to the cabin and sleep.’ So then, most people carry the ‘world’ and the worldly activities, and the worldly sense of boredom, with them, even when they have left the world behind, so to say, and have chosen to be on the Ocean.

I liked the concept of being ‘at Sea’ to begin with, and when it started happening, for the first two and a half days, I really loved it – both physically and emotionally. And then, as the ship claims the Sea, for a length of time at a stretch, I tend to feel close and personal with the Ocean. I find it responsive and engaging. My mind might seem to be ‘lost’, but if so, it is lost within the multi-faceted presence all around me. There is wonder and awe in my consciousness. The water is calm and quiet, smooth and silky, a self-contained spread of gorgeous Blue. Its endlessness seems like completeness to me.

I smile at the waves, can’t help it! They seem so gentle and small – although later I saw on the information log that the waves were over six feet high. That is not really small, is it? But the ship looms over the waves, steady with its own height and weight, and lets the waves have this height of their own. An appearance of gentleness? It is all an optical illusion, but even that adds to the charming mystery of the liquid’s logistics.

A memory of an extra-ordinary seascape comes rushing to me. This was in Hawaii. Its five main Islands are Oahu, Maui, Kawaii, Molokai, and the largest one which is called “The Big Island”. The first time I visited the most beautiful corner of America, the State of Hawaii, I would fly between the Islands, and would rent cars there to go around on them. At the Big Island I stopped randomly at a cabin on the road, with a view just to look at the map inside, and to talk to a local person there. It turned out that it was an Information Booth as well as a real estate office. The man working there persuaded me to take the left turn from the main road, and go to the end. ‘It is the Best sight in the world’, he said. I considered it safe enough to take a chance and veered off the road. I reached the end of the road shortly, parked the car at the edge of a muddy red sand shore, got out of the car, and then just stood there transfixed in one instant, and for a long time.

This was called the Keokea Point. It was no beach in the traditional sense, because there was no white sand to soak the sun on, nor any waves that would allow one to frolic in the water. What I saw there – the ‘wild ‘behavior of the Ocean that I saw there, would not let me move, for the longest time. The scene in front of me was truly like an enactment of the fascinating story of the Great Ocean Churning from the Hindu Mythology. In it, all the Gods and the Demons are fighting to capture the pot containing Amrit, the elixir that gave immortality. Both sides churned the Ocean with fierce energy. At the end, of course, the Gods won, and got the Amrit. They had to, right?!

The shore had medium cliffs on the left, and the spread of the Ocean on the right. Dark black lava-rocks, from very large stones to the ones that could be picked up, were in haphazard piles on one side. The earth by the small opening on the landside was red, and was turned into soaked mud. The Hawaiian sky was blue, and the water? It was greatly foamy. Waves that seemed as high as fifteen to twenty feet rose with a roaring sound, rushed towards the shore, hit the cliffs, were turned away with the impact, and met another strong onslaught by the next set of rising, roaring high waves. White froth spread on the water for about half a mile.

There were these colours, and this energy of Nature here. It certainly was the most unusual spot, I thought, and the most virile behavior by any ocean anywhere. That night, in my room at the Inn, as if shaking inside, and shaken up by witnessing this act of divine fury, I made fevered notes about this experience in my notebook. The feeling stayed with me for days, imprinted on the inner core. This real-life Ocean Churning inspired me to write my very first sonnet. I felt that the experience was so intense that if I transcribed it in a Free Verse form, the intensity would disperse. I instinctively felt that it had to be expressed in a very controlled form, like that of a Sonnet. Days later, after reaching home, I wrote about that, in my very first Sonnet, based on a classic Sanskrit meter



The mighty Pacific was very mature here., where I was now, on the ship. It had no need to exhibit its strength on a vessel carrying thousands of hapless ordinary mortals. The Ocean had nothing to prove in these parts. The route had taken us South, down the coast of the Continent. We were passing by the length of the slim peninsula of Baja California. At 775 miles in length, it is the second longest such peninsula in the world. The first being the Malay Peninsula in South-East Asia.

I have seen Baja from the landside. Its hilly landscape and its most attractive beaches. Countless fancy, modern, expensive Resort Hotels line its shores. Its wide white sandy beaches get crowded with hordes of sun-seekers. I had hoped to see the hills of Baja from the waterside. I expected the ship to sail close enough to the land. But at the time of embarking, I had been told that the ship has to sail about two miles from the land, through international waters.

This side of water is known to have many whales passing through, between the sea and the shoreline. But during our passage, these mighty mammals remained elusive. I have seen a few whales frolicking in another Ocean, but this stretch of the Pacific, somehow, did not draw them closer to the ship.

On the other side of this Baja California Peninsula is the Sea of Cortez, also known for whales spotting. I crossed that span once, by boat, going to the Mainland Mexico. I did not get to see any whales, though. My crossing was at night. Nothing outside could be seen. The night was dark, the breeze was balmy, I remember.



It was nice that the Pacific was contained. After all, the ship was in the middle of its vastness, and the Ocean itself was wise and mature. Generally, I am contained too, if not so wise, but during the day I went to the Assistance Counter, mentioned my noisy, shakey cabin and asked if it could be changed. They sent a lady assistant within a few minutes, she accepted my complaint about the discomfort at night, and changed it for me. The next cabin I got was the same kind, on the same deck, but it brought me a gift – that of the library which was almost outside my door now.



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| 5. Water all around.
World has gone away from view.
Also, from the mind. | 6. Is the Sea rushing?
It seems so because I'm still?
Dual mysteries. |
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In the early morning hours, the ship must have made its way to the first port of this sailing. Puerto Vallarta – traditionally pronounced “Pwerto Bayarta”, if one wanted to say it in authentic local Spanish accent. Generally, people’s tongues prefer it easy, and say Port Vallarta, just using the ‘l’ sound.

I did not get up early to see the ship docking, or even before, to see the coastal land, mostly a line of hills. But I certainly made sure to pronounce the name right. And it was exciting to arrive in Mexico. I have visited many places all around in the country, and in regard to my visit to Baja, I did also remember that after crossing the Sea of Cortez into the mainland Mexico, I had taken a narrow-gauge train through the Canones Verdes (Green Canyons), and had arrived in the charming town of Chihuahua.

Not only the waves seem to be connected (to me), lots of Body of Waters upon the Earth are strung together also. How a section of water acquires markings and names is also a mystery. So here, the Pacific stayed behind at some distance, and the ship slid in closer to shore. The Port of Puerto Vallarta is on the wide Bahia de Banderas. It is very popular for boating, fishing, and for Whale-Watching. There are also occasional accidents when boats or passengers get hit by or get impacted with whales. And that results in some deaths also. Playing with Oceans and its enormous creatures is not simple, nor safe all the time. There are occasional hurricanes too, at this coast, and they create a lot of destruction at times. On the days I was sailing, there was a forecast for rain. I am glad it was not raining, because I did not bring an umbrella, not wanting to pack an extra thing.

Puerto Vallarta was my first visit to a town on the Western coast of Mexico. Like any little town in this country, I expect this one, called PV by those in the know, to be the same – charming, with lots of local atmosphere. A few outings were offered by the official planners on the ship – to interior hills and jungles, or coves and snorkling, or Botanical Garden and Butterfly sanctuary. I have done some of this in other parts of the country, and for here in PV, I just wanted to walk on its cobblestone streets.

As one came down the ship, there was an arrival hall. Outside this room, there were many stalls and fast-food eateries. I did not stop anywhere but was not sure of what I wanted to do. When a local man approached offering a tour of the town and nearby places, I started considering. Just then, a group came along, that man approached them, snagged them for a tour, and left me mid-sentence, obviously to fend for myself, which I generally do well enough!

I had opted not to take any four-hour tours from the ship, and adamantly, I did not want to take a taxi to town. As always, I preferred to be like a local and walked out to the main road in search of a bus. That much I knew that there would be a bus stand nearby. There was one, and it would take a U.S. dollar as fare. A bus came in a few minutes. It was full, but when someone got off, I got a seat. It took about 15 minutes to go to the centre of the town. The road was nice and new, flanked with buildings on both sides.

Around the curve of the Bay, South of the Port, at some distance to the left, several newly built, white-painted modern buildings were clearly visible. And a few more, closer to town. This was somewhat a surprise. And now, on the road into town, there were many more hotels lined up. This is certainly a very popular place for Americans, Canadians, as well as rich Mexicans. Many of them keep a second home here in PV.

It was first established as a small village back in 1851. Industries like fishing and mining provided a lot of growth, and in 1918 it was renamed Ciudad de Vallarta, after the name of the Governor of the State of Jalisco. In modern times,

this State and this town have become known for the production and variety of excellent Taquilla. It acquired Hollywood fame, when in 1960s it became the site of the film “Night of the Iguana”, and famous artists like Richard Burton, Ava Gardner, Deborah Kerr, Tennessee Williams, with Elizabeth Taylor in tow, came to town. The house Burton and Taylor bought in PV is still on every tourist circuit.



The town itself has not turned too fancy as yet. Closer to the Centre it still retains its simple ethnic looks. In fact, as the bus left the newer, fancier areas, the look became somewhat run down. The local houses were small and old-looking. The streets were cobblestoned, and there were slopes and steps everywhere. I got off the bus, and stepped into quite a scenario.

Everywhere in the area of the centre of town a lot of preparation was going on for the Annual Parade to celebrate “Dia del Los Muertos” – The Day of the Dead, which sounds ominous, but it is a positive Festival to celebrate Life as well as Death with Love, Joy and Friendship. It is said to be celebrated for hundreds of years In Mexico. It also encourages people not to be afraid, and it is believed that the Souls of the Dead Beloveds return briefly to bless the loved ones in their homes.

And really, many ‘sweet’ and sentimental tableaus were created by families, with artificial flowers, colourful ribbons, small decorative items, and framed photographs of the persons who had departed. When their souls come for a visit on this Day, they will be pleased to see such a loving display. Families had tried their best to make ‘touching’ arrangements on the wide corridor around a government building. Bright yellow artificial marigold flowers were used profusely, and that made the scene cheerful and welcoming for all souls – dead and living.

In the open area by the main square, Plaza de Armas, there were many figures – ghoulish and ghostly – made out of cloth, paper mâché, and light

wood. Faces were painted white, with red lips, open mouths, wide eyes; supposed to be scary, but they were more interesting to see for the creativity of those who formed them. One structure dominated and towered above all – the living as well as all the handmade creatures. It was a 20 feet tall female form, draped in a nice blue gown. There was a crane nearby, to position her head, covered with a wide brimmed hat in matching blue. People waited to see the structure completed. It did look like a fancy lady, just too tall to dance with!



All along the plaza, parallel to the Malecon, more such tableaux were erected. One set of four punk-looking young men was striking. Even more, on the wide walking way, edging the water of the Bay, called ‘the Malecon’, the contemporary sculptures, at every few steps, were rather impressive. Fish playing, a young woman stretching her arms, a set of modern chess-like pieces, and the most notable was a young couple in a dance move, with her long skirt flowing, suggesting movement. With these art works, and plenty of palm trees with swaying fronds, it is a showcase walk, one can say. Malecon continued for a distance, at the end of which is a beach. But the sun was very strong. I could not walk farther.

There were wires hanging, or lying on near the menacing manikins. Surely lots of lights will go on at sundown, and then music and dancing will start till late at night. The next day would be an even bigger celebration, with more music and dancing, and a big parade around the streets of the town. For now, I sat by the Plaza, on a bench in the shade, looked at the town church that dominates the local scene. It was a small chapel in 1903, and was expanded through 1960s. Called the church of Our Lady of Guadalupe, it is topped with a large decorative Crown. I did walk up the slopes to its small compound and inside, where the afternoon service was ending.



A popular 'international' resort now, PV is not just a pretty, sleepy coastal spot any more. It is a showcase for the rich, on the outskirts, while many local people must be struggling to survive in the town itself. Prices must be high for food items, it seems. A cup of hot chocolate cost me five U S dollars. May be, prices are different for the locals.

Walking in the streets of the Municipal Market I was stopped by a young man. He was sitting in a chair under a tree outside his shop. He invited me in. I said no, politely, but he insisted, pulled the chair in for me to sit, and started offering me tiny samples of different Tequila. This State of Jalisco is famous for Tequila. It is made from Agave shrub, which looks like Cactus, but it is not. It takes 15 to 20 years to make good Tequila. No wonder it is a pricey drink.

He said that he just worked there. The owner has a factory out of town where the whole process takes place. Most expensive Tequila can be \$ 500.00 per bottle or even more, and nearly 40 % alcohol. He treated me to 7 or 8 samples. The way it is to be taken is in a small sip, and then to be swirled in the mouth. I tasted tiny portions of Tequila flavoured with mango, tamarind, coffee, blueberry, cream, and the stronger variety that stings! But of course, not that most expensive variety. Still, it was a fun and friendly treat. The market had other shops, but I did not find anything much of interest.

When I was sitting outside a café, under its back patio, I saw that right in the back of it taxis were coming by and waiting for a fare also. It had been hot walking around for a few hours. So, to go back to the ship, I took a taxi, and it was quick. I enjoyed the hours walking in PV. And I always love to be in Mexico.

