

AROUND THE WORLD IN 4 MONTHS WITH RICKMERS DALIAN



MAY 26TH TO OCTOBER 3RD

131 DAYS

18 PORTS

BEST TIME OF MY LIFE!!!

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Preparations

I had read about cargo ship travel some years ago in a cruise ship magazine and when I decided in fall 2014 that I wanted to travel for a while but hadn't yet decided how or where exactly I suddenly remembered this unique opportunity. A little bit of research confirmed my idea that cargo ship travel could be exactly right for me. You're always on the move but have a safe and private home at any time, you get to see lots of exciting and exotic places, but you also have lots of chilling days on sea with practically nothing to do – sounded perfect to me! So I booked the longest passage I could find: 120 to 135 days, going from Singapore to Hamburg with Rickmers. It's a pearl string service, which means that every two weeks one of the fleet of identical ships starts this voyage. They go from Hamburg to Hamburg but no passengers are allowed through the Suez Canal for safety reasons so you can only board the ship in Singapore. (Unless you want to go from Hamburg to Genoa on board and then fly to Singapore to join them again which doesn't make much sense to me).



On the way to Singapore

Cargo ship travel means there are no guarantees and it's hard to plan anything. When I booked the trip in January I was told it would start sometime during the first half of June. A couple of months later the departure date had changed to May 15th and even when I was already in Singapore it changed by two days again on very short notice. The ports can change too. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. It's possible that you were looking forward to a certain port but then it gets cancelled. On the other hand the Captain might inform you that they added another port you had never expected to visit.

So I tried to do some research at least for the most important cities so I would know what to do and where to go once I got there. As there is no internet on board you can't look up sights or addresses or opening times on the way.

So I quit my job and gave up my apartment in Dublin and moved back to my parent's house in Germany for three weeks to prepare everything. These weeks were filled with quite a few doctor's appointments, shopping trips and dealing with bureaucracy. Check Ups at the doctors were necessary as there is no doctor on board the ship so the shipping agency requires a doctor's notice, confirming that you are fit to do this trip. Every travel agency has different rules though, some of them have age restrictions or only require a doctor's notice if you're over 60 for example. But as my trip would last four months even I needed proof that I was healthy.

Apart from clothes I also bought computer games, a safety vest for the ports, adapters for my Irish and American cell phones as the ship uses German style plugs, medicine to prevent sea sickness, vitamin tablets, sun glasses, puzzle books, food (such as biscuits and crackers) and toiletries.

Bureaucracy was a real pain in the butt. As expected I guess. First I needed German health insurance which already took a bit of convincing the insurance company and no less than three trips to their office and several phone calls. Because it took so long I had to postpone several of my doctor's appointments that I had already made as of course, without the insurance it would have been really expensive. After getting the German health insurance I got the international one, which was really easy. I also had to change my address to my German one again – that was actually the very first thing as without the respective document as proof of residence I couldn't have gotten health insurance. I also had to quarrel with the unemployment agency who didn't like my way of living at all as it didn't fit any of their forms. You also need a couple of other insurances for this kind of trip. While still in Dublin I had already gotten visas for China and the USA and a yellow fever shot.

The travel agency was very helpful in this regard though. They give you all the information you need, such as what kind of shots are required and for what countries you need visas.

Then I downloaded the Wikipedia DVD (seeing that there would be no internet on board I wanted to have as much information of any kind on my laptop), made sure I could borrow my Dad's Kindle and stocked up on e-books. I also downloaded some of his music, but it's hard to decide what kind of music you'll be in the mood for four months in the future. And I also borrowed some DVDs from my sister-in-law. Now I was all set to go!

Singapore

On May 26th, just one day after my 30th birthday, I flew from Hamburg via Dubai to Singapore. I had booked a hotel for four nights and the first thing I did after getting there and checking my emails was cancelling two of those nights as the ship was going to leave quite a bit earlier than I had thought just a day ago. Fortunately that wasn't a problem with the hotel but I still wasn't too happy about it as I had planned to explore Singapore for a lot longer than I now had time for. I had to cross off lots of things from my to do and see list unfortunately. But it was a first glimpse into the flexibility that is required of a cargo ship traveller.

As my hotel was situated at the edge of Chinatown this was my first destination. Lots of stalls aimed at tourists, selling bags, jewellery, shirts etc. but despite this it was a nice atmosphere. Especially as just around the corner of these stalls you suddenly see temples such as the Sri Mariammam Temple which is Hindu, or the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple, which is Buddhist. There's even a mosque in Chinatown, showing the religious mix you get to see here.

Across the street was the Maxwell Hawker Center, which is supposed to be the most famous one of this kind of food centers in Singapore. Inside a building there's a long line of tables and chairs flanked on both sides by dozens of food stalls, offering all kinds of Asian foods. Even though I didn't eat anything there (unfortunately I'm picky with food and prefer western fast food chains over authentic local dishes) I still enjoyed the atmosphere.



Buddha Tooth Relic Temple in Chinatown

After the more traditional part came the modern one – Marina Bay. Such a beautiful sight to see the bay surrounded by skyscrapers and other modern and beautiful looking buildings. The Merlion Park is part of Marina Bay as well, where the Merlion, Singapore's most famous sight is located. It's a white statue, a mix of lion and fish and looks out onto the river Singapore.

Marina Bay looks especially fascinating after dark, when the lights of the buildings and the various illuminated bridges are reflected in the river. The white of the Merlion is shining brightly against the dark night sky as well. A promenade leads around the whole Marina Bay so it's possible to walk all around it and enjoy the great view from every angle. Leading up to Marina Bay is Boat Quay, a pedestrian zone with one restaurant and bar lined up after the

other. They all have tables outside, right next to the river. As it was still around 30 degrees after dark it was buzzing with people.



Merlion in Marina Bay

The promenade around the Bay seems to be a very popular spot for runners. I'd say for every single walking person there must have been 10 runners. Every little open space was used by groups to exercise together as well. There was even a public Zumba lesson going on with easily over 100 participants.

On the other side of the Bay lies the Marina Bay Sands, a modern complex incorporating a shopping center, hotel, casino etc. - it consists of two towers that seem to be having a ship on top of them. Very interesting design. It also has an event plaza and when I got there I happened to stumble onto a water and light show, where the water was used as the canvas. Very cool! I later found out that it's called "Wonder Full" and there are shows every night. But still, arriving there just on time when I didn't even know it was going on was very lucky, I would have hated to have missed it!

From the Marina Bay Sands there's a connecting walkway that takes you to the Gardens by the Bay, that are open until late at night. Normally I probably wouldn't have gone there after dark but my taxi driver had recommended doing that. And I'm very grateful for the tip because it was amazing! Of course you can't really see any of the plants but the Supertree Grove alone is worth the visit. It's a collection of several artificial gigantic trees that are illuminated. And just as I was walking among them a voice announced the start of a show.

Lots of people were lying on their backs to look up into the trees. Accompanied by music they were illuminated in all kinds of colours – such an amazing show!

From there I crossed the Helix Bridge and then had a great view of the Marina Bay Sands, the Science Museum (the building looks like a flower in bright white) and the Singapore Flyer, a huge ferris wheel. Singapore at night really is one of the most beautiful cities I have ever seen!



Helix Bridge, Marina Bay Sands and Science Museum

The next day I went to Little India. Lots of shrines and temples can be found in this colourful neighbourhood. Originally I had planned to go from there to Kampong Glam and Arab Street to explore the Muslim district, but unfortunately I didn't have enough time to see everything. Instead I went to explore the Colonial District. Against the blue sky the mostly white buildings such as Parliament and Court House look especially beautiful, and what a contrast to Chinatown or Marina Bay. I also went to Suntec City, a collection of office buildings, convention centers and shopping malls. From there I went to Fort Canning Park, which unfortunately lies on top of a hill. Climbing stairs in 30 degree weather towards the end of the day was a real challenge.

After dark I walked through Chinatown again, which looked even nicer than during the day. To end the day I walked along Clarke Quay, which is opposite of Boat Quay and even busier. Lots of restaurants, bars and clubs, all brightly lit and the lights being reflected in the Singapore river...so beautiful!



Sakya Muni Buddha Gaya Temple in Little India

Singapore has so many aspects, so many different districts and is absolutely fascinating, I loved it! I will definitely come back one day to see more of this amazing city and it was a perfect beginning to my trip!

Getting to know the ship

On the morning of Friday the 29th of May I was picked up at the hotel by a driver who had been sent by the port agency. His English was almost non-existent but he brought me to the port with no problems. Although we first had to drive to his home as he had forgotten a form that I needed. First we had to stop at the registry office to get day passes for the port. He then drove me all the way to the ship, which was a great help, as a normal taxi wouldn't have been able to do that. Funnily enough he then asked me when he should pick me back up... apparently he wasn't aware at all about what I was doing and that I wouldn't be coming back to Singapore. Some guys from the ship helped me with my luggage, which was actually necessary as I would have never been able to get that up the gangway. Or up the four flights of stairs to my room. When they saw me exit the taxi they greeted me with "Oh, we had expected a man", possibly because in the email communication with the Singaporean port agency they had constantly addressed me as Mr. and I assume this was the info they gave the Captain and crew. Once on board I asked about other passengers because I was wondering a bit why we hadn't been picked up together....it was then that I found out that I would be the only passenger on board. A huge surprise as there are several cabins and I had expected them to be all booked. The ship had had four passengers on the European part of the trip from

Hamburg to Genoa and the Captain said it would be possible that there would be others for the last few weeks crossing the Atlantic but until then at least it would be just me! I would have preferred it if there had been at least one or two more people, as it would have made things easier. We could have shared a taxi to get from the ports to the respective cities for example and save some money or just explore the ship together. Now I would have to do all this alone. Ah well, but I had chosen this kind of trip to get away from people so now I couldn't complain that there were none!

So right from the start there had been some miscommunication, misunderstandings and surprises but I was pumped so full with adrenaline and so excited about everything that nothing could shock me at that point. I just assumed everything somehow would work out - as it did!

After I had settled into my cabin there was a knock on the door: the steward and another seaman picking me up for dinner "chop, chop!".

After lunch another crewman gave me a tour of the ship. At first it seemed quite confusing.... hard to imagine how much at home I would feel on board a few weeks later!

The crew was very nice but distant (at least at first). There were only eight people sharing the Officer's mess (Captain, 1st, 2nd and 3rd Officer, Chief Engineer, 2nd, 3rd and Electrical Engineer) and as you could come and go when you please they sometimes even missed each other. So there were times when I ate all on my own, other times there might have been two or three of us. But there was hardly any conversation. At first I thought they just didn't want to talk to me but they hardly spoke to each other either so I think it had nothing to do with me or my presence. They were just hard at work all day and saw the lunch and dinner breaks as an opportunity to relax and be quiet. Things got better over time though! As it turned out much later they were very anxious not to affront me in any way. Seeing that I was a young woman and the only passenger on board they were doubly careful. Everybody was extremely polite, holding doors open for me "Good morning Mam, good evening Mam", but there was hardly any real conversation at first. Eventually though we got along very well and I always felt very comfortable around everybody.



Officer's mess

The people eating in the Officer's mess were mostly Romanian, some Filipino, one Polish and one Chinese. The Filipino crew was eating next door as there was more room and they preferred different food anyway. But we could always hear them laughing and listening to music and everybody would meet in the kitchen.

They served meat every day, for lunch AND dinner (and breakfast too!). As I mentioned before I'm picky with food plus a vegetarian so I was a bit worried about the food situation. But I got along on the sides (which were potatoes 90% of the time) and the bread (Baguette or Toast) which was served for every meal as well. They had Nutella, honey, jam, cream cheese and lots of sauces as well. I think from a normal person's point of view the food was pretty nice though! There were also a toaster and a microwave in the mess which you could use anytime you wanted (once we had gotten to America I used it all the time for Poptarts or to heat up mac and cheese cups). Tea was also available anytime. And as I was the only passenger I had the privilege of even getting my own water boiler which I was able to keep in my cabin so I didn't even have to walk down to the mess every time I wanted some tea.

I was quite worried about getting seasick but at least during the first couple of days I was completely fine - what a relieve! But of course we hadn't met any rough weather yet! After the second day I even left off my seaband (a band you wear around your wrist and which prevents seasickness using acupressure).

My cabin was very nice and comfortable! It had everything you could possibly need - bed, couch, table, desk, chair, closet, bathroom - even a TV and DVD player (the TV was broken

though but it only would have worked in ports anyway). And it was only one flight of stairs away from the pilot deck which was the deck where I could go outside anytime and enjoy the view. Basically it was a huge private terrace. I was also allowed on the bridge anytime and they even had a special chair for visitors to enjoy the view.



View from the pilot deck – my personal terrace!

The view from the deck or from my cabin windows was always exciting. The ports are always very busy and you can watch ships being loaded and discharged, while other cargo ships are just being pulled from the docks or entering the port. When close to the coast you can see fishing boats and other cargo ships and depending on how close you are to land there are also islands or you can even recognize skyscrapers. And when there is nothing in sight whatsoever, well, that's kinda exciting too! Just water wherever you look!

Laem Chabang, Thailand

I had a horrible jetlag which funnily enough only started once I was on board. In Singapore I was fine!

So I fell asleep during the day and couldn't sleep at night. This way I missed breakfast the first morning (which ends at 8). We were supposed to leave Singapore very early in the morning but when I got down for lunch we were still there. Luckily I didn't miss the very first departure! We only left in the afternoon - perfect timing for sitting in a beach chair on the pilot deck and watching everything. A couple of times the Captain showed who was boss and

blew the horn so all the other smaller boats hurried out of the way so as not to be driven over by the colossus that we were.

That evening I made my first slop chest purchase. The steward has a list of things you can buy on the ship: cigarettes, alcohol, sweets, soft drinks etc....and a couple of hours later he brought everything up to my cabin.

After only a couple of days at sea we reached our first port – Laem Chabang in Thailand. We arrived in the early evening and you could see the skyline of Pattaya which we were passing. Just before entering the port we had to wait for several hours though. So when we finally got to our pier it was already dark. I then got called to the conference room to sign the immigration and customs documents and pick up my passport. The captain had taken it from me after getting on the ship and locked it up with all the other crew member's passports. But I would need it for shore leave. The next morning the captain talked to the port agent who in turn organised a driver for me. For 80 dollars he would drive me wherever I wanted and wait for me too (for the whole day). Probably a lot more expensive than a taxi would have been but it would have been quite hard for me to find taxis everywhere, this way I wouldn't have to worry about it. Apparently the driver was a friend of the port agent's wife - I'm sure it was a rip-off but again, at least it was safe and convenient. Especially as this was the first port and I knew nothing about Thailand I preferred it this way.

At the port gate I just had to enter my name into a form, give my passport number, ships name and time and that was it. First thing the driver asked me was where my husband was. Not being married at 30 is apparently unheard of in Thailand so he found it very amusing that I was travelling alone and had no husband to take care of me. We tried having a conversation but his English was very basic and he kind of antagonised me with his first comment and general attitude so I concentrated on looking out the window and watching life in a typical small town in Thailand. He first drove me to the Sriracha Tiger Zoo. The alternative would have been Pattaya which wasn't too far away but I wasn't interested in visiting such a touristy place. Unfortunately the zoo was a big disappointment. The animals were mistreated and I didn't like it at all. Plus it wasn't really a zoo at all. They had a couple of shows with tigers, crocodiles and elephants and that was it. No other animals and only cages, no wide open spaces as I expect to see in a good zoo. Probably the main attraction is the possibility of taking pictures with the animals. Sitting on top of a giant crocodile, right next to a grown tiger or feeding milk to a tiger cub. At first I was looking forward to that but once I saw the way the animals were treated I decided against it as I didn't want to support this by giving them even more money. At the zoo shop you could even buy crocodile meat - probably from the animals that died of mistreatment!



Possibly the best part of the zoo – the impressive entrance sign

It was incredibly hot and sticky and all I ate all day was ice cream. First thing I did at the zoo was buy a large straw hat to have some protection from the sun. While I was waiting for the driver in the parking lot a bunch of Asian guys actually asked to take a picture with me. I assume they found my red face and huge hat entertaining but I politely declined. After the driver picked me back up (he had given me a card and said to call him whenever I wanted) he brought me to a shopping mall as I was looking for a supermarket and an internet cafe. I had no success in finding the latter though. I asked a couple of people but no one spoke enough English to explain to me where I could find one, not even young people. All they did was giggle and blush. You could see that it wasn't a tourist area as little kids stared at me with big eyes – I was probably the only white person in town, at least I didn't see anyone else.

At least the mall had a nice food court and a big supermarket where I could stock up on provisions, which were surprisingly and rather ridiculously expensive. A glass of Nutella for 12 euros??? The zoo was quite expensive too, which really came as a surprise. I had expected Thailand and actually most places in Asia to be cheap compared to Germany or Ireland.

After that I was driven back to the ship. I was told that we would leave that evening but when I got up the next morning we were still there. The captain said the workers had been lazy and hadn't done anything the last day - „That's Asia“. He was now expecting to leave this evening. We eventually left the following morning, one and a half days later than expected. This shows how little can be planned when travelling on a cargo ship.

Now would come the first longer sea passage, as the next stop would be Shanghai in about 9 days. After that the ports would come in relatively quick succession but now it would be over a week at sea.

A week at sea

Being at sea for several days with only blue in every direction you look is quite interesting. I began to feel like one of the shipwrecked sailors of the adventure books I like to read. You get really excited about seeing a piece of wood in the water or a bird flying around the ship as it means that land cannot be that far away.

During those sea days I got news from the Captain, one good, one bad. Because of a MERS outbreak in Korea with almost 100 fatalities already passengers would not be allowed to leave the ship. So we would be going to Korea but I wouldn't be able to leave the ship. As Masan was, at least to me, the least interesting port of the whole trip I was sorry about missing it but not too much. Especially as the good news was that we would not only go to Kobe in Japan but also to Nagoya and Yokohama. Two interesting cities added to the list! This shows again how little you can plan this kind of trip. I would now go to two cities without any idea what to do there. First stop would have to be a tourist office to figure that out! However, earlier passengers had left quite a few maps, flyers and the like on the ship so for some of the other ports I now had some extra material, sometimes incredibly helpful. For Philadelphia for example I found a detailed explanation about how to get to the city centre from the port gate. Which bus to take, how to get to the bus station etc. - really very helpful!

I had found a couple of jigsaw puzzles in the library that former passengers had left so I spent those sea days (especially after the weather had gotten worse) sitting in my cabin doing puzzles. Most people probably would be bored by now and wishing they had booked a shorter passage but I loved it! I'd rather do jigsaw puzzles for hours than have an animator jumping around me telling me to smile and sing... I'm certainly more a cargo ship than a cruise ship person!



First BBQ on board!

One evening the meal plan only said „BBQ“ for dinner, instead of listing the menu. So at 6pm I went up to the Blue Bar on deck where the whole crew assembled to enjoy a barbecue. Several crew members were working the grill and produced tons of grilled meat, even shrimps. Inside the bar they had bowls full of different kinds of salad, garlic bread and several Romanian specialties (since the Captain and most of the officers were Romanian). After everybody finished eating the Karaoke machine was set up. Filipinos love Karaoke! One slow song after the other was sung. Even the meal had been accompanied by slow songs a la Celine Dion, these guys had a weird taste in music!

A couple of days before getting to Shanghai the weather suddenly changed. So far every day had been very hot and stuffy. Now socks and jackets had to come out. The water had changed as well. It was a little rougher and the colour changed to a darker blue when before it was a mix of bright blue and green. After not seeing anything for several days I now saw several fishing boats and a huge MSC container ship too, obviously coming from Shanghai.



Finally on the way to Shanghai

Just one day away from Shanghai we had to stop and wait for 24 hours for a free space on the pier. I didn't mind sea days at all, as long as the ship was moving. But just lying there, not moving at all, not seeing anything, was quite annoying. It wasn't just us though; dozens of ships were waiting to get into port. Eventually the next day we started to move again and you could see buoys, signalling the entrance to Shanghai port. For several hours we followed these without seeing any kind of land, but the number of ships around us suddenly grew considerably. A long line of ships was entering and leaving the port.

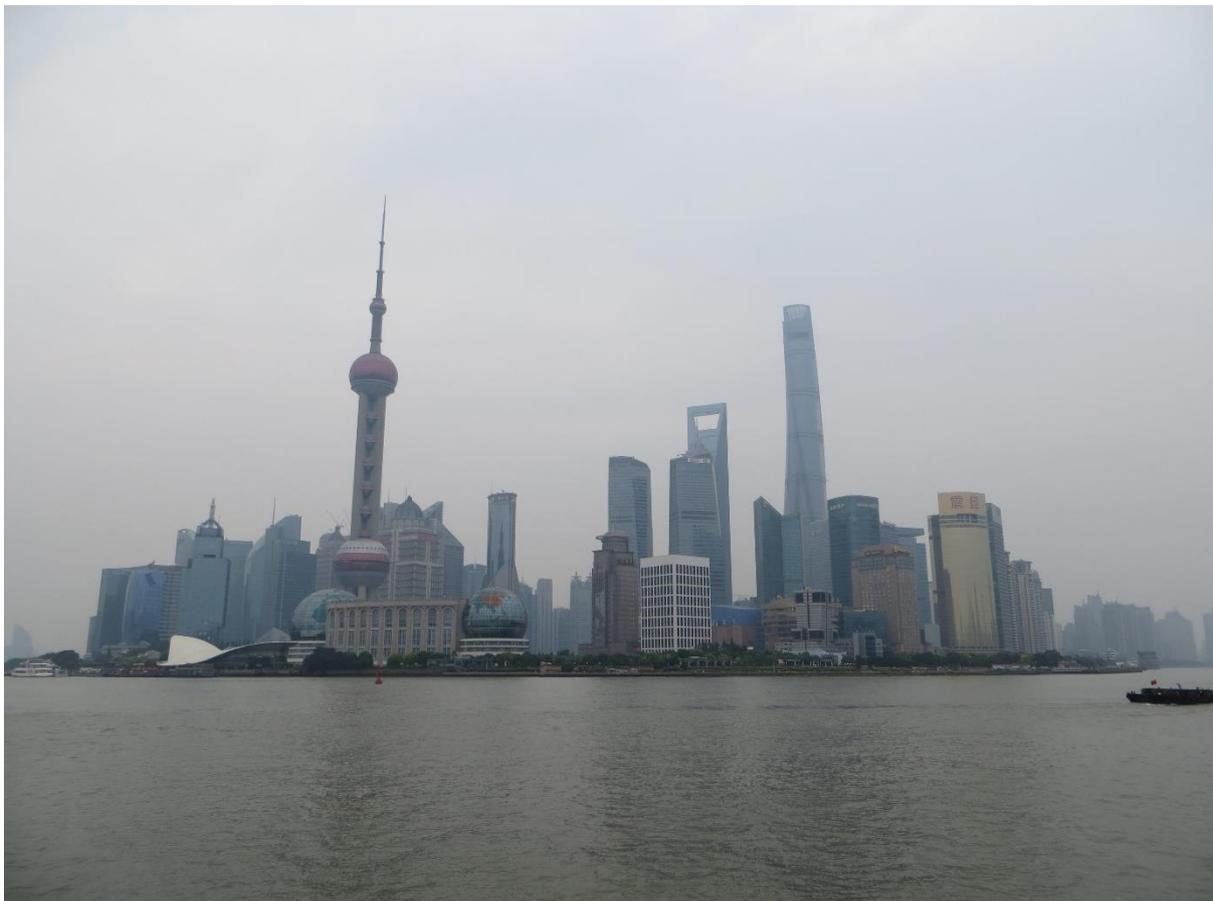
Shanghai, China

Shanghai was quite an experience.... I went to bed around midnight. We had arrived at the pier late in the evening and no one had called me until then to come down for the immigration process so I thought that would be done the next day. Well, I did get a call at 2am, the Chief Officer asking me to come down to the conference room. There he told me to follow a Chinese agent outside. We got into a car, driven by another Chinese, to get to the Immigration Office across the port. There I had to fill out a form and was then driven back. The agent asked if he could take a picture of my passport to show his friend as proof that a young woman was on the ship, he just couldn't believe it as usually passengers are old men, sometimes accompanied by their equally old wives, usually in their 60s and 70s.

The next morning the Chief Officer called a driver who picked me up at the ship. He drove me to a Metro Station as taking the taxi all the way to Shanghai obviously would have been a lot more expensive. Plus I much prefer public transport over taxis anyway. He wrote down

the address of the gate in Chinese so I could show that to the taxi driver for the way back. It was easy to find my way around the station and buy tickets as everything was in Chinese and English. Even the ticket machines. The train drive to People's Square took almost an hour. Unfortunately the port was quite far away from the city (which is often the case when travelling on a cargo ship. The train was super modern though. It was interesting to look outside and drive through the suburbs. A little boy kept staring at me and talking to his Mum about me but once I smiled at him they both smiled back and everybody was left happy.

After I arrived at the station I first wandered around People's Square and People's Park, where I almost fell into a tourist trap. A couple of young Chinese people asked me to take a picture of them and started talking to me, about my trip etc. - it all seemed really nice. But after a while they asked me to go with them to see a tea ceremony and just a few weeks before I had read about that scheme in a guidebook. They lure you in and at the end of the ceremony ask you to pay an exorbitant amount of money. So I declined and went on my way. Several more times in Shanghai I was approached by young Chinese asking me in English to take pictures and from then on I just ignored them, not even answering. After this not so nice experience I walked through East Nanjing Road, a huge shopping street that featured a very funny mix of Chinese and Western stores, such as H&M for example. Fortunately I found an info point that was giving out free maps, as so far I had walked around based on memory. The weather was quite uncomfortable as it was hot and incredibly stuffy. You couldn't see the sun at all as it had disappeared behind a grey wall of smog a few days before we even reached the port. And this never changed the whole time I was in Shanghai (both times) - the sky was always grey.



Pudong, seen from the Bund

At the end of East Nanjing Road I started walking along the Bund, which is the promenade along the Huangpu river. Across the street was a long line of colonial style buildings which looked really out of place in a Chinese city. Across the river were the modern skyscrapers of Pudong. Quite an interesting juxtaposition! At a tourist office I asked for an internet cafe but the guy I asked didn't speak English (in a tourist office!) and his colleague finally understood me but told me that only Chinese were allowed to use internet cafes...well there goes that. There was WIFI at the port but no one on the ship was able to connect to it so now I was hoping for the next port to have any kind of communication (my cell phone didn't work in China either so I was pretty cut off).

From the Bund I walked to the Yuyuan area, a beautiful place full of traditional buildings. The whole area looked like an ancient Chinese town – if it weren't for the Starbucks and McDonalds branches. Still, it was very nice wandering around these streets. In the center of it were the Yuyuan Gardens. They actually had hardly any plants but mostly old buildings, stones and ponds, an oasis in the middle of Shanghai. The Yuyuan area was definitely the highlight for me!



Shopping Area of Yuyuan

I went back to People's Square and inside the station had dinner at a place called, believe it or not, „Ireland's Potatoes“! Here too no one spoke English but they had pictures on the menu.

I then took the train home. After arriving at the final station it was easy to find a taxi, but the driver didn't speak a single word of English. Luckily I had my piece of paper with the port's address in Chinese and off we were. The first taxi driver who ever told me (or rather showed me in pantomime) NOT to use the seatbelt.....

We found the gate alright but unfortunately the officer there wouldn't let me back in. I didn't know what the problem was as he didn't speak any English either. I could almost see the ship from there, it would have only been a 20 minute walk for me to get there but they just wouldn't let me do it. The taxi driver was extremely nice and tried to help in any way he could. He even called his wife who spoke a little English and I talked to her on the phone but she couldn't tell me what to do either. By now there were four gate officers talking to each other and to me in Chinese....Obviously I had no idea what they were saying. Eventually one of them gave me a phone which was a very weird situation. How are you supposed to answer a phone when you don't know who's there and what they want? Anyway, on the line was some guy who spoke English. I told him that I was a passenger on a ship, the ship's name and agency and he then told this to the officers. Finally their faces lit up a little, but they still wouldn't let me through. At that point some other guy came along to enter the port and he spoke a little English so they used him as an interpreter. He told me that I had to wait here and a police car would come and drive me to the ship. So after just a few minutes the police came, had a little talk with the gate officers and then drove me to my ship. To this day I don't understand what the problem was. I find it hard to believe that they were just worried about me walking for 20 minutes in the heat, I had more the feeling that they really didn't want to allow me to do it for whatever kind of security related reason. During the rest of the trip I found out that practically never are passengers allowed to walk from the ship to the gate, no matter how close it is. You almost always have to use a shuttle (if there is one) or call a special taxi service.



Beautiful Yuyuan Gardens

Anyway I made it back to the ship absolutely exhausted and decided to stay on board the next day even though we would still be in Shanghai. I had seen almost everything I wanted on this day and I felt that it wasn't worth the stress to go out again the next day. We would be back in Shanghai, then for four days, in a couple of weeks so I would have time enough to see more of the city then.

So I spent the next day doing laundry and watching hundreds of ships that were anchoring on the river right next to us. They were transporting everything from coal to turbines and it was a really interesting sight. We left Shanghai the following day but it was foggy beyond belief and you couldn't even see the bow of the ship. I went up on the bridge and it was fascinating how we were driving absolutely blind, completely relying on radar to know if other ships were in front of us - an eerie feeling!

Tianjin, China

I was just outside trying to make out other ships in the still foggy weather, when the captain informed me that he had gotten an email from the shipping agency. Apparently my parents were freaking out because they hadn't heard from me in almost a month and had contacted the travel agency, who in turn had contacted the shipping agency. The captain allowed me to send an email from the ships computer, which is usually restricted to the crew. I sent them my diary that I was writing so they would have a lot to read and know everything that's been going on so far.

We had the same problem as in Shanghai. Before we could get into the port of Tianjin we had to wait motionless for almost one and a half days – together with over 100 other ships I could see in our vicinity.



Where are we going? Fog outside of China

But getting into port was really interesting to watch and as it was early evening it was a very nice atmosphere and perfect time. We drove along the main entrance of the port for about half an hour when eventually two tugboats came alongside and started pushing us towards the pier. The port felt even bigger than Shanghai. As I found out later it actually is among the biggest in the world. I was able to enjoy the whole evening in peace as the Captain informed me that I wouldn't have to go through any formalities. Only when leaving would I have to go to the Immigration Office because I was coming from Shanghai so had basically never left China.

The following morning I was picked up at the ship by a private driver. Originally I had wanted to go to Tianjin where my main sightseeing point would have been Walmart. But he said that would be too far away and consequently too expensive. He suggested driving to Tanggu, a smaller (yet still big) city closer to the port. I told him that I was looking for a big supermarket so as long as they had that I was fine. He drove me to a shopping area with lots of small shops. Apparently he had understood that I wanted to buy clothes. Eventually he understood what I was looking for and drove me to a really gigantic supermarket. He said he would wait for me in the parking lot. But when I got out his car was gone.... I hadn't paid him yet though so I didn't just want to take a taxi to get back to the ship. After circling the parking

lot a few times he eventually showed up with two guys. Apparently he had used the waiting time to accept another client. Anyway, he got me back to the port and as he was licenced to enter the port area he was able to drive me back to the ship as well.

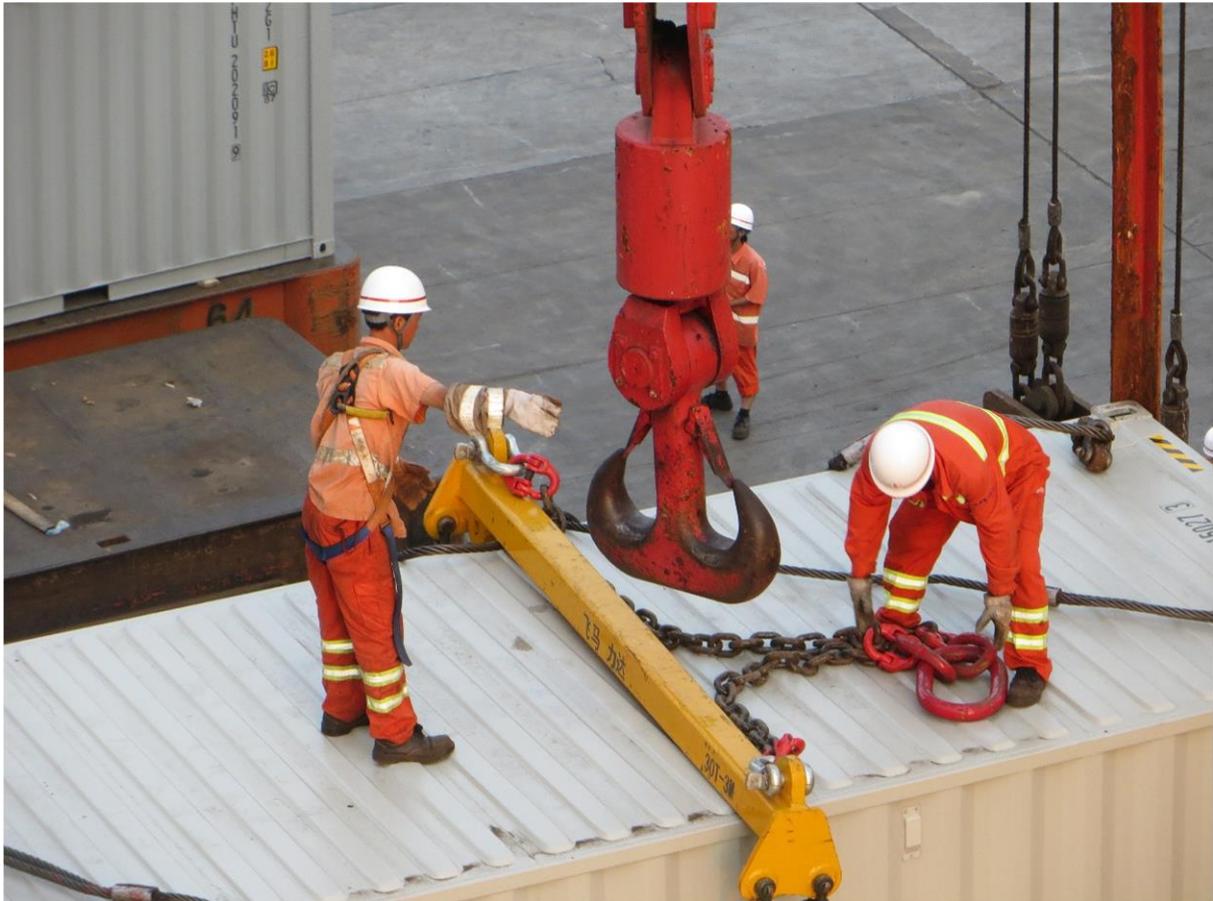


Arriving in Tianjin, one of the busiest ports in the world

Shortly after I got back it started raining. And even though we were in the port the next day as well I decided to stay on the ship. The weather had changed dramatically, from rain and about 15 degrees the day before to stuffy heat and 30 degrees the next day and I didn't feel well because of that. Plus the city didn't have any sightseeing potential. Or at least I hadn't been able to find anything that could be worth a visit when I did my research before coming here.

In the afternoon I was picked up by the immigration officer and driven across the port to their office. After just a glance at my passport we went back, although the driver took a different street and didn't seem to go back to the ship. Just as I was getting nervous the immigration officer looked up and started shouting at the driver. Seems that he had forgotten that I was still in the back and that he had to drive me back to the ship. So he changed direction and we went to the ship. When we arrived I saw that the gangway was not connected to the pier. It was swinging in the air, almost a meter away from the pier. So I hesitated as I wasn't sure I wanted to make that jump and land on the moving gangway. Just as I was wondering what to do one of the crew came down the gangway and hold it in place while I was walking up to the ship.

After dinner I watched the loading for hours. We finally took on some containers and they were swinging just a few meters in front of me. It was really interesting to see how everything works and how the crew members were running around between those containers who were being handled by huge cranes.



Watching the loading of the containers

The following night I was woken up by a fire alarm, at 2am! I had heard this kind of alarm a few days earlier already and then someone had told me it didn't mean anything, at least not for me. So after a bit of listening at my door if something was going on I went back to bed. When I woke up the next morning we had already left Tianjin and were on our way to Korea!

Masan, Korea

Two days later we were getting close to Korea. The port of Masan was tiny compared to the big Chinese ones before but the entrance to the port was by far the most beautiful so far. Lots of islands, completely covered with trees except for the rocky bottom. Some uninhabited, some with a few houses. Lots of boats of all kinds too. First we passed a submarine (apparently the area is used by the military), then we were passed by jet-skis! We then drove under a huge suspension bridge. All very cool to watch!

Unfortunately I wasn't allowed to go on shore in Masan. First the captain had said that the reason was a MERS outbreak but now he gave me a different reason. Korean regulations say that freighter passengers are allowed to leave the ship.... but are not allowed back on. So I guess it was better to not leave the ship at all than to be stranded in Korea.



Arriving in Korea

However I saw that there seemed to be an internet hotspot on the pier as several members of the crew were standing or sitting around a specific container. So I asked the captain if maybe I was allowed to just go on the pier? And yes, I was! So for the first time since Singapore I was able to go online. Not a very stable connection but it was enough to send emails and check some important things.

The weather still wasn't good. It was raining most of the time we were in port. And as the hotspot was in the open this meant I couldn't go out again....

In Korea the steward left the ship and was replaced by a new crewman. I was sad to see him go because he was really nice and had gotten used to my complicated eating habits. By now he knew what I liked and meal times had become quite fun! But as it turned out the new steward was just as nice and we got along very well for the rest of the trip. The crewmen stay on board for 9 months at a time (officers only 3 months) so whenever someone left they were understandably excited to see their families again after such a long time.

The last evening it finally stopped raining and everyone ran out to catch a final 30 minutes online. Unfortunately my laptop hated me again and I wasn't able to get a connection. While we were all out there talking on phones, surfing or (me) trying to get a connection the Chief Officer's voice came over the walkie-talkie "We're leaving, everybody back to the ship....no wait, only two people have to come back now, the others can stay a little longer". But just a few minutes later he called again "Ok, everybody back now, we're leaving in ten

seconds....10....9....8" - everybody was laughing and seemed very relaxed and I felt like part of the crew in this situation.

We were leaving around 7pm, which was a great time. It gradually grew darker, the lights came on...looked very nice! The hills looked pretty much black in the dark and were dotted with bright lit houses, the bridge was lighted as well, we passed a lighthouse on a rocky island.... all very beautiful!

Unfortunately by the time I went to bed the weather had changed and the ship started moving pretty badly which made me feel very sick. I couldn't sleep at all that night, several things in my cabin fell off the table, the bottles and cans in the fridge started rolling around - definitely by far the worst night so far on board! Although as I would later find out it was nothing compared to what was to come!



Leaving Korea again

The next day it was raining so I couldn't go out on deck but after that night I was happy to stay in my cabin, lying down most of the day.

Apparently the rough seas were because of a typhoon that was raging not too far away from us. Interestingly a few days later the sea got even rougher, but the ship didn't roll and therefore I didn't feel sick. By then we had reached wind speed 9, which is a pretty severe storm. It was weird that the weather was worse but the rolling almost non-existent. The captain explained to me that the rolling came from the swell that the typhoon was leaving

behind. So for my stomach it was actually better to have severe weather than a calm looking sea that was moving a lot under the surface.

The wind was so fierce that it was almost impossible to go on deck. It took me forever to just get the door open and the moment I got outside I was pressed against the wall and was only able to move forward clinging to the wall. I had thought I could walk around the deck but when I got to the front I actually had to turn around to get back to the door as I wasn't able to walk against the wind.

Nagoya and Kobe, Japan

The itinerary kept changing. A few weeks before I left home there were no Japanese ports at all on the list. When I left they had added Kobe. A few weeks into the trip the Captain told me we would go to Kobe, Nagoya and Yokohama. Now that we were getting close to Japan I was told we were going to Nagoya first, then Kobe and Yokohama was cancelled again.

As soon as we were on the pier in Nagoya I saw two people going on board who were wearing face masks. The quarantine people were there to check up on us. As they hardly spoke any English it made for an interesting picture. Several people from the crew were assembled in the room that served as an office for greeting immigration officers and the like on board. I was given a fever thermometer. I motioned to put it in my mouth but they pointed towards my arm pit. So I had to open my blouse and sit there with the thermometer under my arm. The steward was sitting next to me and it was quite funny, as we were looking at each other like „What the hell is going on?“. My temperature was noted and then I had to wait for quite some time while the male health officer was looking at the provisions with the cook and the female health officer had a lengthy discussion with the Captain about when we had left China, seven or eight days ago.



Arriving in Japan (Nagoya)

Eventually she asked me to show her to my cabin. She took out the drawer under the bed and shone her flashlight under it. Then she announced „No insects and no small animals, good!“ . Well....I don't know what she expected I have under my bed, rats? After that she went into the bathroom and flushed the toilet. With that her inspection was over...I really don't understand these half-hearted inspections - I mean she didn't check any of the other cabins for "insects or small animals". The Captain was asked if anybody on board was sick. Of course he said "No". As far as I know, everybody was indeed fine, but who would admit having a sick person on board in these situations? But the whole thing made for a very interesting episode and a fun afternoon!

The next morning I was picked up at 8am to be driven to the Immigration Office. However this was the main immigration office of Nagoya, not a port office. This meant that we had to drive quite a while, then wait for it to actually open and go through the whole procedure of finger prints, photograph, forms etc. Eventually I got a temporary residence permit for 90 days, including re-entries. The whole thing took over two hours. But the driver was very nice and spoke good English so at least we could take while we were waiting. He gave me a note that contained all kinds of important addresses in both English and Japanese in case I would get lost - really very nice! After he drove me back to the ship I had a quick breakfast and then was off to explore the city.

Fortunately public transport in the port area was amazing. Just a 20 minute walk from the ship got me to a train station from where I got into the city center of Nagoya in just 15

minutes. And I was actually allowed to walk on my own from the ship to the gate! The security guys at the gate were misreading my passport and mixed up last name and nationality. So they wrote down my name as Mareike Deutsch. I tried explaining the mistake but they didn't understand me. I guess it didn't matter. As long as the same words could be found in my passport when I would get back from the city I should be fine.

At the train station all signs were in Japanese and English so it was easy to buy tickets and find your way around.

I have to say though, I didn't like Nagoya very much. It looked like an average European city, if it weren't for the Japanese signs. Even the main tourist attractions I found unremarkable. Plus I was there on a Monday and many places were closed. But I liked Japan in general. Everybody was very friendly and patient and conversations using hands and feet were always fun and interesting.

On my way back to the ship I stopped by an internet cafe, where again no one spoke English. I had to become a member and fill out a form, which of course was in Japanese. So the guy showed me the field for the name and everything else I had to leave blank as I didn't have a Japanese address or phone number. I showed him my Japanese note with the port's address and ship name so he at least understood my problem in filling it out. The internet café was pretty strange. Even though it was a place for families (it had Karaoke and all kinds of games besides the computers), every computer was surrounded by a small cubicle and there were tissues on every desk and an icon on the screen that very obviously would lead to porn websites. Weird....but well, I was in Japan!

The next day I felt like I had run a marathon. I basically hadn't walked at all for weeks so now my legs were killing me. One of the officers was walking circles on deck almost every day to avoid just this. Maybe I should start doing that too!



One of the many beautiful temples in Kobe

The next morning we arrived in Kobe, unfortunately it was raining. There was no need for another visit to the immigration office or visit by the health officers so I was free to leave whenever I wanted. But I was confined to my cabin, watching the rain. Finally at around 11 am it stopped and off I went. Again it was just a short walk to get to a train station and into the city. However there was no clear direction to get to the gate. I was wandering among containers looking for the exit when a car stopped next to me: "Hi, are you the passenger from the Dalian? I drive you to the station". Well, you're not supposed to get in cars with strangers, but he was obviously a port worker and well, there were still puddles everywhere so I jumped in. Right at the gate there was actually a puddle several meters wide and I would have had to walk right through it in my sandals if it hadn't been for the car - so I was lucky!

Kobe is such a beautiful city, I liked it so much better than Nagoya. Lots of shrines and temples and European style houses in the Kitano district. Tons of shopping streets and a small Chinatown as well. Towards the end of the day I went to the waterfront where there is an Earthquake memorial park. Part of the waterfront area was left as it was after the earthquake from 1995. New pathways were built around it, a very impressive sight. I tried to see as much as possible of Kobe as I really liked the city and had a fantastic time walking around. Consequently it was already dark by the time I got back to the ship but it was still easy to find my way. This was definitely the best shore day so far! Japan is a great place and even though people speak surprisingly little English, everyone was so nice and trying to understand and help. An example of a conversation I had at a McDonalds: "Hi, do you have vegetarian burgers?" -"Yes, this one is with chicken!". "Ok, then I'll take the French Fries please".



The flower clock in Kobe

The next morning I was picked up again for my obligatory visit to the immigration office. It was based in the city center again but it only took a few minutes to get my stamp.

That morning we took on a special piece of cargo. A generator worth 30 million dollars, more than the whole ship! The Captain seemed pretty proud about it. We left Japan in the afternoon and were supposed to reach Shanghai (our final port in Asia) only two and a half days later.

Shanghai, China

It only took two days to get to Shanghai but then we had to wait outside of the port for four more days. Three typhoons were coming in our direction and the sea was pretty rough. The weather was so bad that the port was actually completely closed for a while and no ship could go in or out. Waiting around, especially on a rolling ship, must be the worst part of this trip. Eventually the port opened again and we could go on. After a whole week on sea and most of it in the same spot everybody seemed glad to be moving again and reaching the next port. Traffic around was immense and there was so much to see, on shore as well. Even some of the crew were on deck and looking around. Among other things I saw my first cruise ship on this trip - a big one from Costa.

The first day in port I stayed on board. Even though we would be here several days I only planned on going to the city once because it was so far away and I had already seen almost everything I had planned to see when we were here the first time.



Back in Shanghai – lots of ships to watch on the Jangtsekiang

Staying on board was quite interesting though. A Chinese crew of workmen had come on board to change all our outer doors. So when I went outside all doors were on the floor and there were gaping holes everywhere. Funny sight!

The loading of the new cargo was interesting to watch too. About 200 tanks the size of containers came on board.

The next day I went to Shanghai. One of the door crew drove me to the train station. He didn't speak a single word of English but I showed him the station on the map so it was fine. First I went to see the Jing An Temple which was right outside the subway station. After that I took another subway to see the Jade Buddha Temple, which was harder to find and less impressive. But on the way there I took a detour through a beautiful park (Changshou Park) where old people were doing Taichi and kids playing in little pools - very nice!

Then I went through the Bund Sightseeing Tunnel to Pudong, which is famous for its many modern skyscrapers. The trip is done in a little gondola and there's a lightshow going on while you're going through the tunnel - I found it quite disappointing though and not worth the money. In Pudong I just walked between all the fascinating buildings such as the Oriental Pearl Tower, the Shanghai World Financial Center or the Jinmao Tower. Pudong is the financial center of Shanghai so it was filled with people in suits with some sweating tourists in between.



Beautiful Jing An Temple

After buying some provisions in a luxury supermarket (I couldn't seem to find normal supermarkets in Asia) I went back „home“. At the supermarket I had looked for chocolate bars but couldn't find any. So I made the mistake of asking someone. Suddenly 6 (!) people were trying to help me and figure out what chocolate bars were. They asked me to write it down so I wrote Snickers and KitKat (which I had already seen in China) but they didn't understand. By now I was really embarrassed and told them it was fine and not important. I found everything I wanted later at a 7-Eleven, and for small price too. That chain really was my lifesaver in Asia!

Instead of taking one train directly to the final stop near the port I had to get off in between because suddenly the lights went out and apparently the train went out of service. This was followed by a train that was so full I didn't make it inside and another one that went out of service – the joys of public transport!



Fantastic architecture – skyscrapers in Pudong

Eventually I made it back to the final train station. Unfortunately, unlike the last time, no taxi driver was willing to take me back to the port. They all shook their heads when I showed them the address and drove off. I didn't understand the problem and for a while had no idea what to do. Eventually I realized that they didn't want to take me because it was the wrong direction. I had to cross a 10 lane street with street lights that no one cared about to get to the other side where hopefully there would be more taxis. Miraculously I made it across the street alive and even found a taxi driver there who was happy to take me to the gate. Of course, like last time, I wasn't allowed through the gate. But this time the officers directed me to the main port entrance just a few minutes down the street where I was allowed to enter on foot, without anybody even checking my passport. After walking through the port for a bit (I knew the way to the ship) I came across a shuttle bus that drove to the different docks. It was filled with Chinese port workers who stared at me like I was an alien. Madonna couldn't have looked more out of place in that bus than me!

The next day the port was hit by another typhoon so all cargo operations were on hold. I wasn't even able to go on deck because it was raining horizontally and the storm made it impossible to open the doors safely. I was really glad we were in port and not out at sea during this weather. I spent the afternoon organising the ship's library which consisted of about 200 books. Most people would probably hate this kind of task but I loved it!

The tanks were by now as high as the pilot deck, which was „my“ deck. So when I went outside to film the operations the workmen were level with me only a few meters away.

Eventually during a break one of them took out his phone and took a picture of me – fair enough!

The next day it was about 40 degrees – the Chinese weather really is changing very quickly. We were now loading a couple of yachts and two gigantic cranes. They were just as big as the cranes that were trying to carry them onto the ship. Plus they were not loaded from the dock but from a ship coming up alongside us. So two of our cranes had to work together to pick up one of those cargo cranes from a moving ship. It took all day to get these two cranes on board and was fascinating to see.



Tanks as high as the pilot deck, free view was gone!

In the evening I was brought to the Immigration Office again. The guy who picked me up spoke English quite well and we had a really nice conversation. Everyone else usually just commented on my age and height but this time we had a proper chat. Around midnight we left Shanghai and therefore Asia to start the crossing of the Pacific. It would take about 18 days on sea to reach Los Angeles!

Crossing the Pacific

Right after leaving Shanghai the Pacific showed that it doesn't really deserve its name. It wasn't calm at all. We were following a typhoon and the swell was creating waves under water, so even though the sea looked flat the ship was moving a lot from side to side.

The weather was bad and the ship was rolling for almost two weeks. As we were not going in a straight line but following a northern route it got colder too. On some days the temperature

was just above freezing. And the closest land, even though it was still thousands of miles away, were the Aleute islands of Alaska. Thousands of miles to the south was Hawaii. For about 10 days it was so cold and uncomfortable that I couldn't sit outside at all and only got a few minutes of fresh air every day. Otherwise I was confined to the cabin and on especially bad days hardly left the bed. When the ship was rolling a lot even things like my Nutella glass and a small deodorant fell over. Coca Cola cans were falling out of the fridge as soon as one opened the door. Showering was a real acrobatics act as you always had to have one hand on the wall to prevent a serious injury from falling. Walking around the corridors and especially up and down the stairs was also quite adventurous. When my stomach felt fine I actually liked it as it was just too funny. But of course when I felt sick I just wanted it to stop. I have to say (on the whole trip) there were a few nights when I felt really sick, however I didn't throw up once!

On a visit to the bridge the officer on watch showed me some sea charts, explaining the route we would be taking. Most charts were actually just white and blue with no land on them at all. I learned that we were not going to Long Beach as I had always thought but to the port of Los Angeles. So all the information I had gathered about how to get away from the port and to the city was useless.



A visit on the bridge

And another change: Savannah, Georgia was added back to the itinerary! It was on for a while but had been cancelled so this was a great surprise as I was looking forward to visiting

it. The Captain showed me a weather programme on the computer on which I could see the several typhoons we were trying to go around.

On a Sunday we had another BBQ party. When I was on deck in the morning I saw some of the crew roasting a whole pig over the fire. In the evening it was put on the table together with bread, salad and more meat. Tail, head and all! The party was pretty nice. First they played House music with the actual videos – the Captain wanted to give the crew some half naked girls to look at to boost morale. Afterwards the Karaoke machine came out again. Even the Captain sang a few songs. This night was so much better than the BBQ before. Everybody was very cautious towards me. But after so many weeks together they got more comfortable with me and at the party I had some really good conversations, especially with the Filipino engineer who was extremely nice. I even danced a little with a guy from the crew!

Even though the date line was still a few days away we had shifted the clocks ahead on our own pace so that we would now experience that Sunday twice. This way the crew could enjoy an extra free day.

So the next day it was Sunday again. Weird feeling!



Preparing the pig for the BBQ

A couple of days later I did a photo session with the life vest and the survival suit that I had in my cabin when the camera fell to the floor and broke. I was devastated for the whole day until I tried fixing it again (after dozens of unsuccessful tries) and this time I used enough power to actually bend it back into shape and it worked again...what a relief! Especially as

the next day I had arranged for a tour of the engine room. One of the engineers, the Filipino from the party, showed me around. It's really impressive how much space there is below the lowest „normal“ deck. You go downstairs into the engine room and inside that you can go down two more decks until you are below the water line and standing right on top of the propeller, only a few centimeters under your feet. I also had a helmet in my cabin that I was told I should bring to the tour and I also had to wear ear protection as it is so loud in there.

About five days before we got to Los Angeles there were sights of civilization again. I saw my first ship and bird in two weeks! Hard to believe how exciting this can be!



Tour of the engine room

It had gotten a little warmer every day and sometimes the sun came out so I thought the worst was over but no, a few days before we got to the port the ship's movement was the worst ever and I had a horrible night. Instead of going from side to side as usual it was moving up and down, like turbulence in an airplane.... for 24 hours straight.

On the last day before reading LA I went to the bow of the ship for the first time. A great experience! Sitting on the floor with nothing but open sea in front of you, with the sun in the back. On sunny days I would do that a lot from then on. The best part was finally seeing some animals. Dolphins, a whale, seals and a gigantic and beautiful fish (about two meters long). Even plants looked beautiful in the blue water.

Los Angeles, California, USA

The day we arrived at Los Angeles I got up early to make sure not to miss anything. The morning started out cloudy and not too warm – didn't feel like California at all! Fortunately after lunch it cleared up and the sun came out. I went to the bow again and even though this time I didn't see any animals it was still nice to watch the sailing and motor boats that started to appear. The coast was hardly visible unfortunately as it was still a bit foggy.

The entry to the port was incredibly beautiful! Right behind it on a hill is the suburb of San Pedro with beautiful houses. There even was a beach! Of course there still were cranes and containers but also palm trees everywhere, white yachts, and beautiful buildings. Tourist boats were passing by, some of the people even waving to me. We also went past the Battleship USS Iowa and the pier where the ferries to Catalina Island leave. An absolutely beautiful port and great way to arrive in a new town. Even the Captain was out on deck taking pictures!



Beautiful entry to the port of Los Angeles

We came to the dock at about 3pm but then bureaucracy started and it took several hours to get cleared by customs and immigration. We all had to line up and everybody was asked about their jobs and how long they had been seamen etc.- the guys were really nice and told me to go in first as they knew I was eager to leave but the immigration officer took one look at me and then told me I had to be last as I was a special case (as a passenger).

It turned out that the closest interesting area with shops was actually downtown Long Beach. So it would have been easier had we gone to Long Beach port after all. Cause now it was quite complicated to get anywhere. I had to wait for a shuttle bus to come to the ship and take

me to the gate. There a security officer had to call a taxi for me which then took me to Long Beach. Complicated and expensive. And by the time I could leave the ship it was already 6pm.

I spent the evening walking around a bit. It was not a very nice area though, many homeless people and generally a poor looking area. But, it had lots of fast food opportunities and a Walmart, which was my main reason for coming here. Finally I could stock up on provisions, mainly chocolate and snacks! And I bumped into several guys from the crew. Shopping was more important to them than sightseeing so they loved Walmart just as much as I did.

I also bought a phone as the American phone I had brought with me had been deactivated and my European phone wouldn't work in the US. So after getting back to the ship in the late evening I was able to talk to my parents and grandparents for the first time since I had left in May. I was also able to go online for the first time in I think 33 days, so very successful day!

Shore leave would end the next day at 3pm and as it wasn't easy to get to town and I had gotten everything I wanted to the day before I decided to stay on board and spend time with the phone, using the internet, as that would obviously only be possible for a few more hours until we would leave.

As there were some problems with unloading the two cranes we had taken on board in Shanghai we eventually left at 6pm. Had I known that I probably would have gone into town again but well, nothing you could do about that.



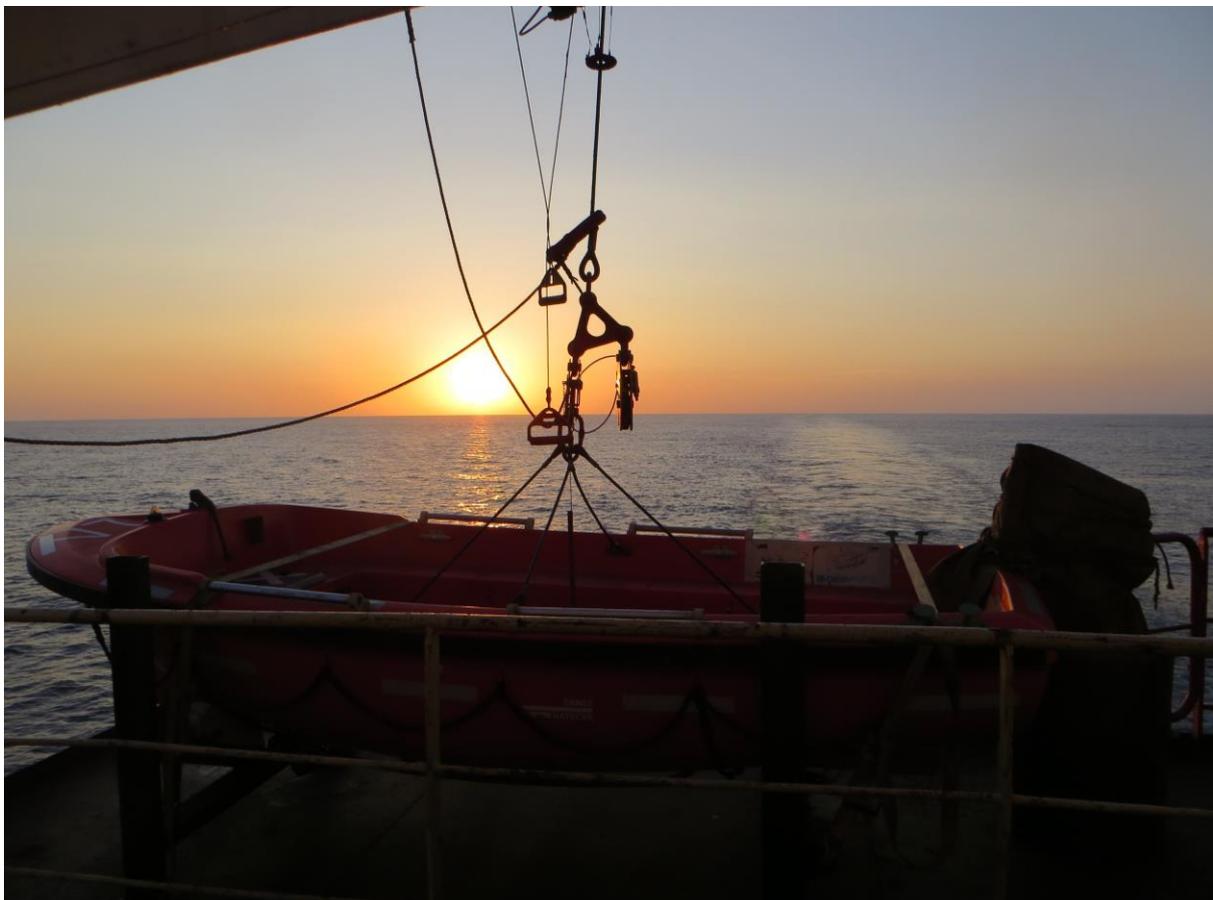
Leaving California in the evening sun

It was actually a very nice time to leave. The restaurants along the pier that we passed were filled with people. We could even hear the music that was blown over by the wind. Lots of sailing boats and tourist boats were still out and it was generally a very nice atmosphere.

Panama Canal

In Los Angeles we had a couple of crew changes. Among others the Chief Officer, the Chief Engineer and also the cook changed. As it would later turn out, I liked the food the new cook prepared much better! Although, funnily enough, we were slowly running out of food. They are only allowed to buy provisions in certain ports, the last one was Masan in Korea, the next one would be Houston. That means they have to shop for two months. And by now you could see some differences. The fresh salad was gone, instead we had canned fruit. The vegetables were coming from glasses and cans as well. And it looked like the cook was trying to stretch the fresh vegetables by mixing them with tons of onions. But I still liked it better than what the first cook had prepared.

You could feel that we were going further south every day – it got hotter by the minute! But after dinner, when I went to the bow of the ship, it was very nice. Some wind, the slowly setting sun....and I saw some great animals. One day when I was standing there I suddenly heard some splashing and there were three dolphins right in front or almost under me racing the ship. They looked so cool, jumping out of the water and just enjoying themselves. Another day I saw several big turtles floating by. Besides that the air was usually full of big birds and dozens of flying fish were jumping out of the water.



Fantastic sunset off the coast of Central America

On a Saturday afternoon, off the coast of Central America, we were having a ceremony for everyone on board who had crossed the Equator for the first time. Although, to be honest, we actually hadn't crossed it, but only got very close between Singapore and Thailand. But anyway, the Captain wanted to do something to lift the spirits and it was a great idea! The Chief Engineer (quite a big man) had dressed up as Neptune and an unlucky guy from the crew was his wife. The Captain wore his uniform (which he never did) and started reading out the names. The crew member thus called was then seated on a chair, cleaned with soapy water and a sponge, shaved with shaving gel and then dowsed with fresh sea water. Then he was presented to Neptune, who accepted him into his kingdom and then got a certificate from the Captain, followed by a Whisky shot, that was half Jim Beam and half sea water. And yes, I took part in that ceremony too! Albeit in a slightly changed form. I kept my shirt on, no shaving and the cleaning was restricted to my arms.

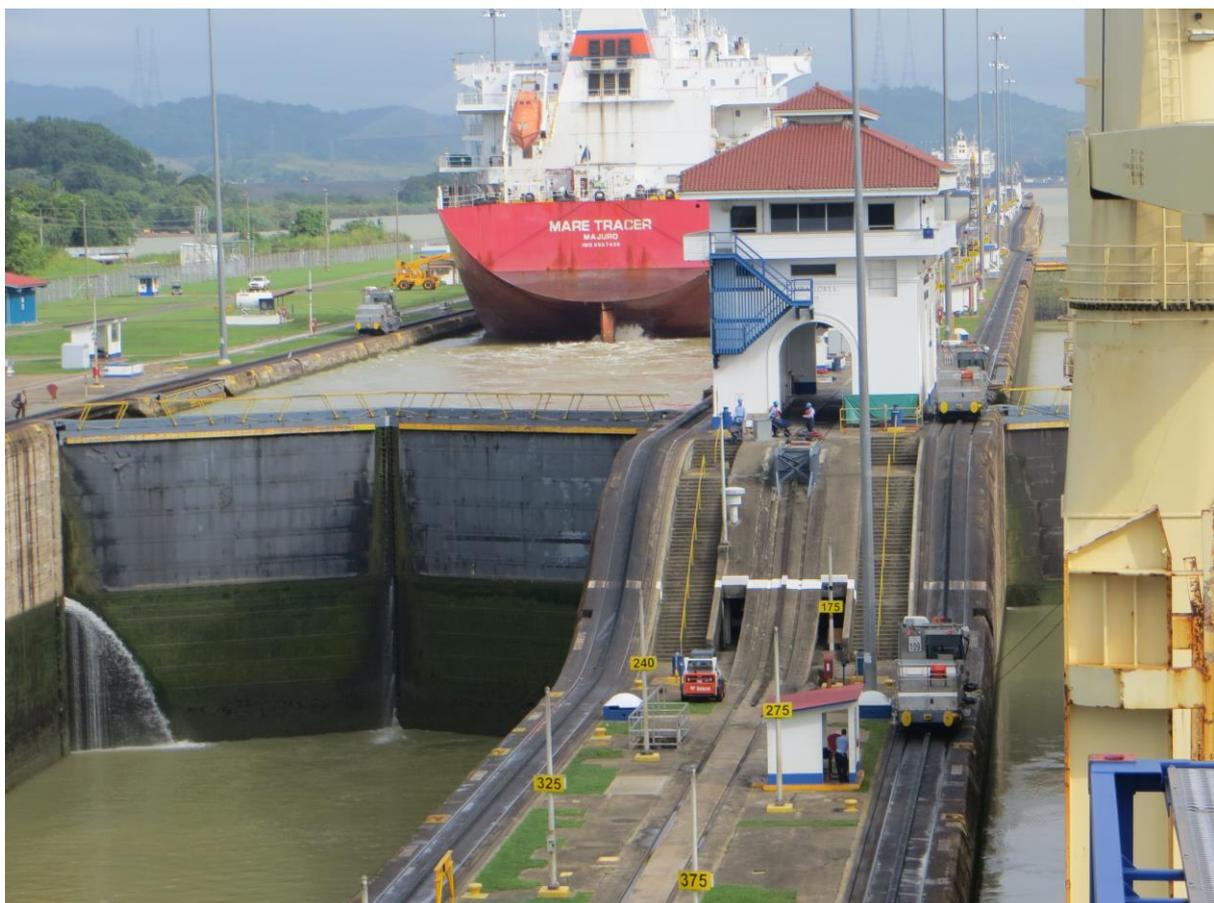
Still, it was great fun, especially as everyone attended, except the one Officer on the bridge. Everyone else was on deck and there was a lot of cheering and laughing. After the ceremony we had another BBQ. I was just about to grab some food when the nice Engineer told me that a single plate was especially for me. It was covered and it say "Inday" on the cover. I had completely ignored it but he told me the word meant something like "girl" in Tagalog. So the new cook who knew I didn't like meat had set aside an extra plate of meat free potato salad for me - so nice!



Group picture after the ceremony

After 10 days at sea with no land in sight we reached Panama. However, it seemed to be a very busy time. Dozens of ships were anchoring around the entrance to the Panama Canal and we eventually had to wait over four days before we were allowed to start the passage. It was a nice view though. You could see the buildings of Balboa (a district of Panama City) and lots of green lush islands and coast.

Eventually after four days of sitting still one morning we started our trip through the canal. It took us about 12 hours to cross the 80 kilometers and it was a very exciting day. At 6am I was on deck to make sure not to miss anything. We were going past the skyscrapers of Balboa, under the Bridge of the Americas and then came to the first locks, the Miraflores Locks. It was fascinating to see how locomotives on each side made sure the ship wouldn't move. Not that there was much room to move, just a few centimeters on either side. All locks are parallel so that usually there is a ship in each direction. On this day however, all ships were going in our direction. After a short stint on the Miraflores Lake we entered the Pedro-Miguel Locks. Those were followed by the Gaillard Canal, a very peaceful passage with the shore just a few meters away and hardly any signs of civilization. Suddenly we came to the tiny town of Gamboa at which point the canal turned into the river Chagres.



Miraflores Locks

And shortly afterwards we entered the Gatun Lake, certainly the most beautiful part of the Panama Canal. This is how I imagine the Amazon! Blue water, green shores, islands everywhere and apart from the buoys no sign of civilization at all! Apparently sometimes it's

possible to see crocodiles here but unfortunately I didn't see any. But still, just sitting at the bow, gliding through this tropical place was fantastic! Eventually we came to the last locks, the Gatun locks. While we waited for a free spot the weather turned and a thunderstorm broke loose. Soon the deck was swimming with water but as it was still very hot it was actually kind of nice. Typical tropical rain! Towards early evening we left those last locks and entered the Caribbean. A fantastic day and one of the highlights of the whole trip!

For the first two days, the Caribbean didn't look or feel like the Caribbean at all! Grey skies, grey water, high waves, rolling ship.... not nice at all. But after a bad start it turned around and looked like you would imagine it. Sunshine, blue sky, blue-green water.... unfortunately we weren't close enough to see any land though. Too bad, as we were passing the Cayman Islands to the east and it would have been nice to see some Caribbean beaches. Shortly afterwards we entered the Gulf of Mexico. After 19 days at sea we would finally reach our next port – New Orleans!



Amazing day in the Panama Canal

New Orleans, Louisiana, USA

The day before reaching New Orleans more and more oil platforms could be seen. Strange constructions of steel popping up in the middle of the ocean. Kind of a science fiction vibe. The water changed from Caribbean blue to Mississippi brown. From reaching the Mississippi delta it took about 12 hours to get to the port of New Orleans. Long port entrances are always the best as there is so much to see. Unfortunately we were taking this passage during the night. The last I saw in the evening were a lot of lights from the coast and when I woke up the

next morning we were about to dock at port! This way I was able to see the sunrise over the Mississippi – fantastic! The city was very close. I called the Seamen's Center and asked about transportation. They would come pick me up at the ship and not only drive me to the gate but almost all the way to the city, just a few minutes walking distance from the French Quarter! What a cool service!



Dawn on the Mississippi

I started my sightseeing tour by walking along the river, some malls, parks and the steamboat Natchez. Then off to the French Quarter. Royal Street was beautiful with its typical architecture and lots of cafes and galleries. Bourbon Street however was a big disappointment. Lots of strip clubs, tacky souvenir places and cheap looking bars for tourists. Completely different from Royal Street. After that I did some shopping and eating at a mall and went to a local grocery store to stock up on provisions. Then I took a short ride in a cable car, called the Seamen's Center again and they came to bring me back to the ship within 15 minutes. Awesome!

I agreed with them to pick me up at 10am the next day so that I didn't even have to call again. This time I went to a museum. I had found out that the official national World War 2 Museum of America was in New Orleans and didn't want to miss this. Entrance was really expensive (30 dollars) but it was worth it. Very interesting place with nicely done exhibitions and an impressive movie narrated by Tom Hanks.



Beautiful architecture in the French Quarter

After that I went to the Casino! Unfortunately they didn't have my favourite poker machines so I just did some random gambling – lost 30 dollars in all. Still fun!

Then I took a bus to Walmart, usually the most popular destination for seafarers on shore! God, I love American supermarkets! They are just so good at this unhealthy but delicious crap. A lady from the seamen's center picked me up from there (so close to the port that I could almost see the ship from the parking lot) and drove me back „home“.

Unfortunately we left around 10pm so again I wouldn't be able to see anything of the long Mississippi passage. But seeing New Orleans in the dark was pretty impressive too! A really beautiful and exciting city!



Goodbye New Orleans!

Houston and Galveston, Texas, USA

When I woke up the next morning we were already back in the Gulf of Mexico.

And on the next day we arrived in Houston. This port had a long entrance as well but this time we arrived during the day so there was a lot to see. After leaving the Gulf of Mexico we went past Galveston (which would be our next port) into the Houston Ship Channel. Lots of cargo ships, sailing boats and motor yachts. And dolphins, lots of dolphins! They were jumping in front of the big ships so I went out front to see if we had some visitors too and sure enough, there they were having the time of their lives! There was also a really cool ship wreck, the SS Selma, an oil tanker that was sunk in 1922. Several small boats were anchoring next to it with people even climbing on it.

We also passed the battleship Texas, which is now a tourist attraction. The further we got down the channel the more industrious the banks got. We passed several refineries and the air smelled very chemical. Fires were burning, clouds of smoke floating above the buildings.... not exactly pretty but still interesting to see.



Wreck of the SS Selma

The next morning I called a taxi to get to NASA Space Center. Unfortunately taxis were the only way to get anywhere. I had to pay 130 dollars (return) just to get to the Center. But I had a great day there! Very nice exhibitions, several movies and a 90 minute tram tour that brought us to the old Mission Control room (it was used until 1995) and the currently used training facility for the astronauts, full of mock-up vehicles and buildings like the International Space Station. Pretty cool!

After just 30 minutes of rest and a quick dinner I joined some of the crew to take a shuttle to the seamen's center. It was only a few minutes away but it was absolutely forbidden to walk anywhere in port. I had brought my laptop to use their WIFI but the stupid thing wouldn't connect. Fortunately one of the crew allowed me to use his laptop to send a quick email. I bought some snacks in a tiny store and took some National Geographic magazines from their library of donated books and magazines. Unfortunately the driver wouldn't take me back to the ship just yet. „I only drive once, so you have to wait until everybody is ready to go“. No comparison to the nice service in New Orleans! I spent quite a while chatting with the cook who also was bored and waiting to go back. Really long day!



Plenty of dolphins in the Houston ship channel

We were supposed to stay until at least the day after the next so the next day I called the taxi for 10am and had planned to spend a leisurely day downtown. When I got to the gangway though I saw that shore leave was expiring at noon – this day!!! For a moment I thought about cancelling the taxi and just staying on board but it was already there so I told him to get me downtown as fast as possible and then pick me up one hour later at the same spot. At least Houston didn't seem very interesting to me and there wasn't anything that I absolutely wanted to see or do (except for visiting the Space Center) so I didn't miss much. I just went to the Hard Rock Cafe, walked among the skyscrapers, through a park and along the Buffalo Bayou (a very brown river floating through the city) and then hurried back to the ship. I got there right at noon. At lunch the captain told me that if I wanted to go on shore I should know that we weren't leaving tomorrow as planned but that night! I almost freaked out, so annoying to find this out just when I was back! At dinner shore leave was again changed to noon the next day. It had rained almost all afternoon which had delayed the loading operations. Eventually we left in the evening of the following day! I could have had two more full days exploring Houston! That's the problem with cargo ships.... you really have to be flexible! Shore leaves can be shortened, ports cancelled.... but on the other hand new ports can be added (as already happened on this trip) so it can go both ways.

We left right during sunset, with the sun right next to the skyscrapers of Houston – beautiful! And driving along the brightly lit refineries at night was pretty cool too. Looked a bit like the apocalypse with all the fire and smoke and us just noiselessly gliding through all this.



Leaving Houston during sunset

The captain left the ship today as his contract was up. The new one turned out to be very nice and open to giving information and chatting with passengers!

Around midnight we arrived in Galveston which is a kind of weekend getaway for Houstonians. The city was very close to the port and I wouldn't mind walking at all but again, forbidden in port! Fortunately someone from the seamen's center came to pick me up the next morning and drove me the few minutes to the center which is right in the middle of town. Galveston is a really pretty place but quite small. In a few hours I had walked along almost every street. The main street (The Strand) was quite nice, old buildings housing cafes, shops and galleries. On the other end of the island was a historic pleasure pier (only open on weekends though) and of course the beach! After travelling ON the ocean all these months I finally took off my shoes and walked IN it for a bit! I walked back to the center through a residential neighbourhood. I love this kind of southern architecture. Wooden houses painted in all kinds of different colours with the window sills and balconies in white. Pretty!

When I had left the ship a crew member had asked the lady from the seamen's center to pick up a group of them at 6.30pm so I thought I stay in town all day and go back to the ship with the car at that time. I spent a couple of hours in the seamen's center, using the computer, watching TV and chatting with the lady who was working there. However it then turned out that they had no one available to go to the ship so they called me a taxi. They even wanted to give me the money for it as they had a specific fund for this but I didn't feel comfortable taking it. I'm happy to use free transportation when it's offered but I don't want anybody to

pay for my taxi. And as it was such a short drive it wasn't expensive. The guys at the ship were already waiting and were reluctant when they saw the taxi. But I explained to them that the center would pay at their arrival and everyone was happy!



Southern architecture in Galveston

I had seen on the news that hurricane Erika was on its way to Florida just as we would be the next day so when I was back on board I asked the captain about it but he wasn't worried. He said it would pass just before us and we might hit some uncomfortable swell but would try to avoid it. Had we passed before the hurricane the next port would probably be closed and we would have to wait right in the middle of it so this was definitely the better option.

He also told me that in Philadelphia four new passengers would come on board for the crossing to Europe! All Americans, three men and one woman (probably a couple and two single guys), all around 70.

But still, could be fun!

We left Galveston in the afternoon, perfect time to watch! But as the town is right on the coast it took only about an hour until we were in the Gulf of Mexico again. Still, watching palm trees, parks and beautiful holiday homes pass by is always nice.

Savannah, Georgia, USA

The new captain was fantastic! He was much more open and interested, not just in me but also in his crew. He was also giving me a lot more information than the old captain did. Also,

there would be a BBQ once, sometimes twice, every week! He even offered to take my picture beside the barbecue grill.

After leaving Galveston we had a big BBQ on the Saturday and then a smaller one on the Sunday. The Captain had told me that he wanted to cancel normal breakfast on Sundays cause nobody was going that early anyway. Instead he asked the cook to prepare pancakes for 10am - what an awesome idea! So the next morning I went downstairs at ten and - breakfast was over because it was already eleven! Funnily enough the night before when everybody was in the Blue Bar listening to loud music the Chief Officer had made the announcement that the clocks would be forwarded an hour again - and noone had heard him so everybody was an hour late to the first Sunday pancake breakfast!

We were going between Florida and Cuba, then past the Bahamas. Unfortunately it was all too far away to actually see land.

After a couple of days we arrived in Savannah. Beautiful port entrance! We drove on the Savannah river, green fields and forests everywhere. Surprisingly we didn't stay at the main port as I had thought but at a very small dock, just big enough for two ships, south of the city. This way we didn't go past the city but we were a lot closer. We arrived in the morning, so perfect timing! The port agent called a taxi which was only ten dollars to get to the city center.

Savannah is a beautiful city with lots of great architecture and most of all parks! The city is famous for its many squares which are basically all small parks. Wherever you are, there is a park just a few minutes away in every direction! And as they are all covered by huge trees the many benches are all in the shade, perfect for taking a break or having lunch outside!

The river promenade was also nice to walk along especially as I could actually see our ship in the distance.



Steamboats on the Savannah river

The city also offers a free public transport bus that continually rides along the main sights and even has WIFI on board. I took this bus to get to Forsyth Park, an especially big square with lots of southern looking trees.

In the afternoon I walked to the Seamen's Center to use their computers and eventually to call a taxi from there as my phone's calling plan had expired and I couldn't use it anymore. However, the center was closed! Maybe they only open in the evening. Obviously there are no pay phones anymore so I went to a tourist office and asked for help. They just asked for the number I wanted to call (the taxi driver had given me his card) and called for me! By now it was raining pretty heavily so it was a good time to go back to the ship!

The next day I stayed on board at first as I had seen everything I wanted the day before. But at dinner the steward told me that he and a couple of others were going to a mall so I joined them. What a fun outing! Six of us piled into the taxi, among them the steward and the cook. Fortunately in the US everything is open late so we had several hours to spend at the mall. I found my favourite clothing store: New York & Company and bought a few things. Then I went to a supermarket and got basically everything I wanted to buy to take back home to Germany with me. This way I didn't have any pressure in Philadelphia as my last chance to buy stuff and could concentrate on sightseeing. At the agreed time we met again to get back to the ship and hardly fit into the taxi with all our bags. Two of the guys had bought suitcases and most of them had Victoria's Secrets bags with gifts for the girlfriends at home. The cook had spent the whole evening in the food court though!

So it was a very successful shopping trip and also very nice to spend some time with the crew!

While talking to them I found out that our schedule was changed: we would go to Philadelphia first and Morehead City would then be the last American port as the cargo wasn't ready on time there.

On the way out of Savannah we passed Tybee Island (I had missed that on the way in because it was too early), a holiday island for people from the city. I knew they offered dolphin tours in this area so I stared into the water looking for signs of them. And sure enough: dozens of dolphins swimming around the ship! What a wonderful sight!

After we left Savannah the cook showed me the storage area below the kitchen. I had asked him as I was fascinated by the logistics of storing thousands of eggs and hundreds of kilos of vegetables and meat.



Catching dinner

The following day we had another big party, the captain's birthday would be while we were staying in Philadelphia so he decided to have a premature party. There was even a big cake! Unfortunately I wasn't feeling well (for the first time on this trip really, apart from a couple of days of sea sickness, that I just wanted to stay in bed) so I just went up for a little food and left soon after.

The next day there was another unofficial crew party. We had to anchor outside of Philadelphia as it was Labour Day and no one would be working in port so they used this

opportunity to do some fishing. The steward even invited me to come and look. I would have done that anyway but still, it was nice that he asked. And they were pretty successful. Several fish were swimming in a bucket full of water and some others were already on the barbecue grill or being eaten. Fresh from the water they were gutted right there and thrown on the fire. Bit tough on my stomach really but still a very cool sight to watch. When I went back out later they had even caught a baby shark! And while I was admiring it suddenly there were cheers as one of the guys had just caught another even bigger one, maybe 50 centimeters long (about two feet). At dinner there had been homemade donuts so I went inside to get one and saw that the cook was sitting in the crew mess peeling garlic and watching TV. So I joined him for a bit while I ate my donut. On the way back to my cabin I stopped at the pool as I had heard that they had put the freshly caught baby shark in there and sure enough: it was swimming in the pool!



A new guest on board

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Morehead City, North Carolina, USA

We arrived in Philadelphia at 3am and even though it was in the middle of the night for the last hour I was on deck, as I didn't want to miss it. Slowly gliding past the city with all its lights was extremely beautiful.

Philadelphia is the most popular port among the seamen and that's because it is incredibly easy to get around. It was possible to walk from the ship to the gate (two minutes away). And then from there to walk to nearby shops and restaurants. Target, several supermarkets and every fast food chain imaginable, all within reach. I spent the first day in this neighbourhood,

getting donuts for everybody and buying some stuff for myself. It was surprisingly hot – almost 30 degrees and lots of sunshine!

The next day I took the bus to downtown Philly, again very practical. No need for a taxi at all! At the Visitor Center I picked up a map that showed the location of a couple of dozen murals, which the city is famous for. Combining that with a map showing the traditional sights I walked around the city for a whole day, seeing everything I wanted to without making any useless detours. I really liked the place! The murals were great to look at and there's so much history. I went to Independence Hall so see the room where the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were signed, to the Liberty Bell, Chinatown, JFK Plaza with the iconic LOVE sign.....and had lunch at Reading Terminal Market. I also saw one of the oldest streets in America and Benjamin Franklin's grave. Very interesting day!



Iconic LOVE sign in Philadelphia

The new passengers had arrived too! It was a very strange feeling for me as by now I felt more like a part of the crew than a passenger and the new ones felt like visitors to „our“ home. But they were all really nice and we got along very well!

Jim from California, Patrick from New York (though with French origins) and Priscilla and Jose from Texas. They all had interesting life stories to tell (about their ancestors, jobs etc.) and we always sat together for quite a while after every meal.

The next day it was raining like crazy. No work could be done and everybody was confined to their cabins. Eventually I went to Target, just to get outside for a while – this port was really great for this! Nowhere else would it have been possible to just go for a walk.

In the evening I wanted to go to the Seamen's Center with some of the crew but we had to wait almost 90 minutes for the van to come pick us up and by the time it finally arrived the driver told us that the center was already closed. So no internet unfortunately.....but I spent the waiting time talking to the cook and the third officer (who was very young and worked as a DJ in his free time), both very nice, so it was a good evening after all.

When the new passengers arrived the third officer gave them a tour. I accidentally met them in the stairway and went outside when they went up to the bridge, so they weren't sure who to follow. So he told them "Oh, we're going upstairs, she doesn't have to come with us. She's been here so long, she could steer the ship herself".



One of the amazing murals

The next afternoon we left Philadelphia and as expected all passengers were out on deck the minute the pilot came on board. It was a very nice passage with lots to see. We went past the city center, under several bridges, saw a ship and a discarded passenger liner from the 50s (the SS United States) and eventually drove right past the airport. Very cool to watch the planes start and land from this close. Plus a beautiful sunset!

The next day we had another BBQ but as the weather was now quite cold and very rainy it wasn't that nice. Also I didn't feel well so I only stayed for a short while.

One of those days I met one of the guys from the crew (I think he was a fitter) who had been on board when I started the trip in Singapore but left soon after as his stint was over. After being home for a couple of months he was now back and when he saw me he was taken aback "What? You're still here?".

We went back to Morehead City to finally pick up that cargo but we had to go to anchorage for a whole day outside of the port. The captain used this opportunity to have another drill – lowering the life boats! (With no people in them though). Both boats were hooked to a crane and lowered into the water, which took almost half an hour and about ten guys....in brilliant weather! Can't imagine how difficult this would be in a serious storm.

The next morning we entered the port and at 7.30am I got a call to come down to the conference room with my passport. It was only the port agent though, no one from Immigration. He wondered at the note in my passport saying that for the past two years they had done this electronically but I convinced him to take the note and hand it in to Customs so they could be sure I had left the country. When we had arrived in Los Angeles I was told that it's very important to do this as otherwise they would assume that I had never left the country and I could get in trouble if I ever wanted to come back.



No more shore leave in America!

Unfortunately we weren't able to leave the ship and explore Morehead City. We would only load six pieces and there wouldn't be enough time. So we all went out on deck to watch the loading. Quite interesting as these were huge plane parts destined for Airbus in France.

Morehead City is a really beautiful place. It's a real harbour town with lots of islands, beaches and boats.

We left just after lunch. After six weeks it was time to say goodbye to America....I could have kept visiting new ports there forever! Now it was about 10 to 12 days on the Atlantic on our way to Europe and home!

Crossing the Atlantic to Montoir, France

The Atlantic crossing was quite boring. I think this was partly because I had seen so much ocean by then that, while it was interesting on the Pacific for example, by then it just kept repeating itself. And there was nothing to see whatsoever, no land, no ships, no animals (apart from a few birds). The first couple of days it was surprisingly warm but then the weather changed and it got quite cold. So another reason to not like it. So I spent hardly any time outside. After about a week we experienced a pretty intense swell, resulting in heavy rolling. Not only did everything in the cabin flew around, but cutlery fell from the table in the mess, apples fell from the table and rolled around the whole room, my suitcase and garbage bin fell over, Priscillas and Joses whole fridge fell out of the closet and during dinner in the mess even we were moving around in our chairs. You were sitting at the table, trying to eat when suddenly the ship experienced such a heavy roll that everybody was sliding around in their chairs, away from the table or being pressed against it. As this was a relatively regular left to right rolling it didn't affect my stomach and was actually very entertaining and we had a lot of fun. However, it was going on for several days so eventually it did get on my nerves. Even though walking in the stairways was still quite funny!



On the Atlantic

One day before we reached France I was outside when I suddenly saw a couple of whales! Very unexpected for me but a nice surprise!

I think everybody was looking forward to reaching Europe and seeing land again. Unfortunately we weren't allowed to leave the ship in Montoir as we were only staying for half a day. Still, being in port was always exciting! We arrived during the afternoon so everybody was on deck to watch the coast appear. It was a short port entrance as it was right on the Atlantic but still some nice things to see. Several beaches, a couple of war ships, a huge bridge and my favourite: the Harmony of the Seas, belonging to Royal Caribbean and the biggest cruise ship ever built! This port (Saint Nazaire) is famous for building cruise ships and this one was just about to be finished.

We unloaded the plane parts that we had taken on in Morehead City and in the evening everybody was excited to watch the loading of a yacht. It took several hours to get it just right.

European ports seemed to be very efficient, tidy and well equipped with cranes and other material compared to American and certainly to Asian ports.



Loading a yacht in Montoir

The next day we entered the English Channel and for the first time in quite a while had a very nice and sunny day and I was finally able to sit outside again. At first the Channel kept feeling like the Atlantic, no land and hardly any ships to see. But early in the morning the

next day we passed the cliffs of Dover, looking white in the morning sun. There were now lots of other ships around us and two ferries going between France and England could be seen as well.

Antwerp, Belgium

Eventually we arrived in the river Scheldt on our way to Antwerp, the banks on both sides belonging to the Netherlands though. There were lots of wind turbines and sailing boats and the scenery in general looked very...well.... Dutch!

It took about ten hours to reach the dock, and we arrived around midnight. It was fascinating to see the gigantic Antwerp port at night. We even went through a huge lock which could take four ships of our size at once.

The next day was a Sunday and I was still pretty tired from the evening before so I decided not to go to the city center yet. Instead I just went for a walk outside the gate. Fortunately it was possible to walk to the gate and from there to walk along a main road. It had a very nice sidewalk which was used by lots of people on bikes. I have never seen such a beautiful and clean industrial area! All buildings looked well taken care of and the whole area felt very safe.

After breakfast three of the passengers left the ship for good, only one would stay until Genoa. It had been really nice to have some fellow passengers for a while!

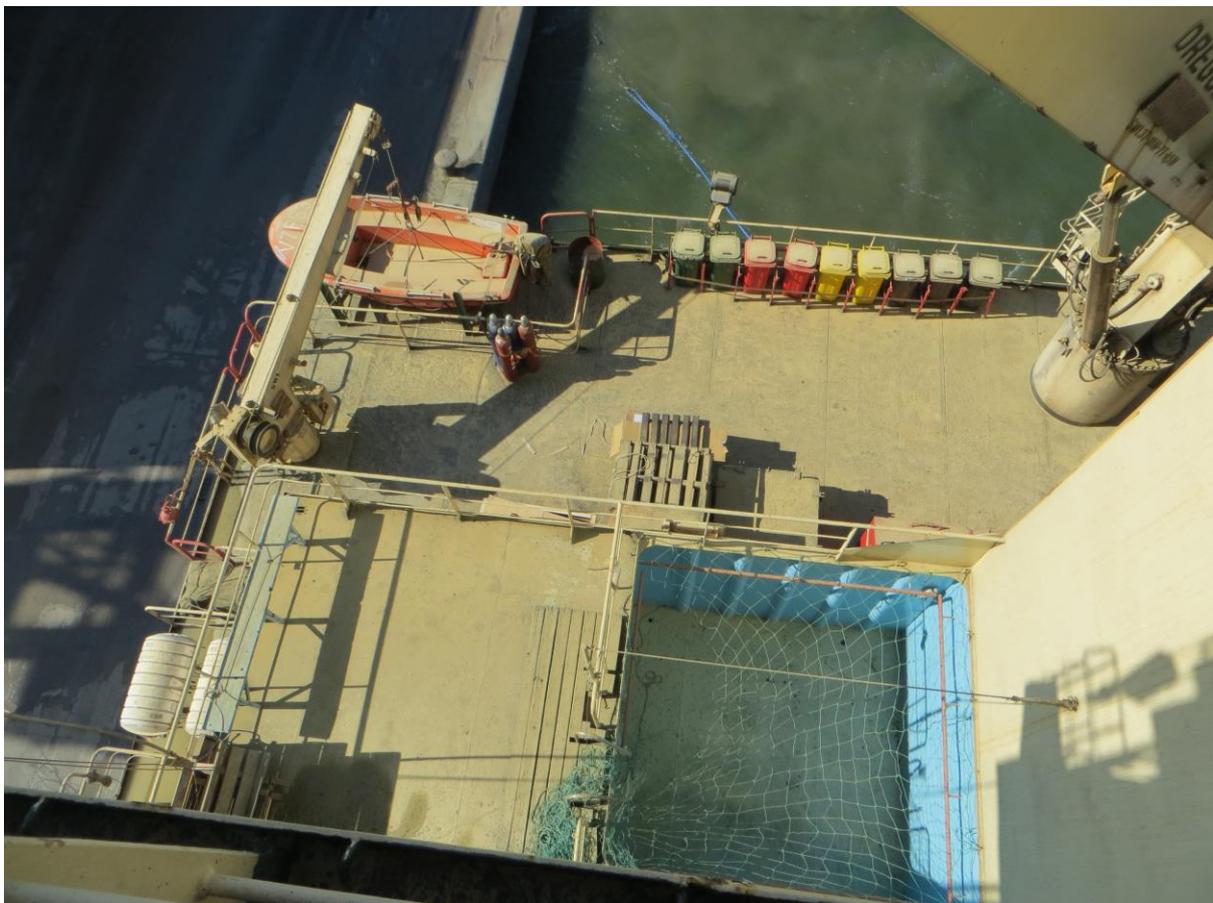


Port of Antwerp

In the evening I took a shuttle bus to the seamen's center together with the fitter (the one who was surprised to still see me on boards after coming back from his holiday at home). The bus drove all around the port to collect seamen from the different ships so we got a free tour of the port as well. The center was located right in the city center so I was able to do some sightseeing, walking around downtown for a bit. The seamen's center was a very nice place! It had a little shop that was being run by some women who even had their children there, the minister welcomed everyone and they had several computers so I could use the internet again properly after almost three weeks. At 11pm two coaches showed up to take everybody back to their ships.

The next day I took a normal public bus to downtown. Antwerp is a very beautiful city! Lots of old buildings (as expected in a European city I guess but still a nice sight after being in America for so many weeks), a big cathedral and beautiful town hall and the port is covering an immense area all the way to downtown. So it was possible to walk along a few smaller docks with old ships and modern yachts. And I really liked the regional cuisine: fries and waffles! Soooo good!

The next morning we moved to another dock. So far we had been loading the usual stuff, boxes and machinery but now we would be loading bulk cargo: lead concentrate! The dirt was incredible! It was impossible to go on deck for longer than a few minutes. As soon as you went outside you could feel the stuff on your lips and in your hair.... every inch of the ship was covered in yellow dust. Plus, it's toxic, so everybody who went outside for longer than a few minutes had to wear a face mask.



Lead concentrate is a dirty business

From Antwerp to Hamburg we had a few visitors on board, coming from the shipping agency Rickmers. One of them was a security inspector who used to be a cruise ship captain and was now working on making ships safer. He was investigating the Costa Concordia accident among others and had some interesting stories to tell during meal times.

While we were in port the Second Officer had an accident. He fell several meters and went to hospital and from there flew home to Romania. The captain was already stressed and now had to deal with insurance and finding a replacement as well. He hardly got any sleep while we were in port and had no time to talk to the passengers. Eventually I did find out that we were supposed to leave Wednesday late evening and arrive in Hamburg Friday in the early morning which I was able to communicate to my parents who were planning to pick me up from the port. As departure and arrival times changed pretty much every few hours it was hard to plan anything though.

We ended up leaving only on Thursday morning, which was actually better. Cause this way both the departure in Antwerp and the arrival in Hamburg would be during the day and as we would travel on the river for almost 10 hours in both cities there would be a lot to see!

So on Thursday I was outside on the still dusty deck almost all day – in beautiful weather too! The port is simply huge and the locks were interesting to watch. Funny how they looked completely different during daylight compared to our arrival at night. It seemed to be a totally different port!

Arriving in Hamburg and final thoughts

When I got up early the next morning we were passing the Dutch North Sea islands close enough to see some of them.... definitely heading home!

All day people were cleaning the deck, getting rid of the toxic lead powder, so it was finally safe and comfortable again to go outside.

Unfortunately we were delayed again. We had to wait in the North Sea outside the Elbe river for almost one day. The pilot arrived at 10 pm which meant that we were driving up the river during the night. Pretty disappointing...



Arrival in Hamburg at dawn

I got up very early the next (and last!) morning to see as much as possible of the Hamburg port but it was so foggy that you actually couldn't see anything, not even the whole ship. During dawn the fog cleared up in some spaces and the orange sky was a very beautiful backdrop while gliding through the port. Our pier was completely buried in fog though and we moved incredibly slowly but eventually around 7 am we arrived!

After a few complications my Mum was able to call me from the gate (she was not allowed inside the port) and it was only a few minute walk from the ship. Fortunately the steward helped me with my luggage. I said a quick goodbye to the Captain and Chief Officer and left the ship.

Somehow it felt that the end was rather sudden and hurried.... probably because we arrived in the night and I didn't have a long arrival passage on the river.



Very foggy morning in Hamburg – our pier was invisible!

It was an amazing, adventurous, exciting, relaxing, interesting trip and I absolutely loved it! I actually would have loved to just stay on board and keep sailing the seven seas for months or years to come! I'm pretty sure I will be back, either doing a similar voyage when I'm maybe in my 70s or going on shorter holiday trips in the near future. If you are able to live without internet and without much entertainment and are able to be happy just being by yourself for a while, then I definitely recommend freighter travel as a different kind of holiday!