

**Final Preparation for the Cruise (9/23/09-9/27/09):** With only five days left before we fly out to Los Angeles the check-off list of things to do was getting shorter, thank goodness! The following items were being accomplished with increasing anticipation of finally closing up our home and throwing ourselves into the vacation and cruising frame of mind.

**Early Christmas Card Drafting:** When we return home on December 3<sup>rd</sup> the Christmas Season will be rapidly approaching. It normally takes us about a week to return to our normal routines after these extended cruises so there won't be much productive time left for Christmas preparation. With this prospect in mind Barbara spent some time before the cruise in preparation of Christmas cards. Our tradition is to make our own card with a photo of the two of us, usually taken while we were traveling during the year. She tentatively selected a photo of us taken in Iceland during the Voyage of the Vikings cruise earlier this year. Then she selected some complimenting artwork and Christmas message. The sample printout looked good. If we get a better photo during this 63 Day Australia New Zealand Voyage we can easily substitute that when we return home. A Christmas letter (one page – 12 point font) summarizing the year's activity will be written during the cruise on the way from Hawaii to Los Angeles. If everything comes together according to our plan we should be able to get the Christmas cards out during the second week of December.

**Home Security Notification:**

Just to make sure the home security situation is as safe as possible we called the alarm monitoring service and let them know the house would be vacant for the 65 days we will be traveling. Our son, Steve, is the contact person for the monitoring people while we are gone. We just hope and pray that all goes well in this department. Here is a photo of Orlin happily telling the Security People that we are going to be “outta here” for the next two months.



**Stateroom Upgrade:** As mentioned previously in the Initial Preparation blog entry we had signed up for an outside cabin on the Main Deck in the DA category. It had a large “Ocean View” window but no outside verandah which we have had on prior cruises. While we would like a Verandah Suite we liked the price of the Ocean View Room even more so the decision was made. Nevertheless we let our TA know we would gladly accept an upgrade to the Verandah Deck if that were possible. Wanda made numerous inquiries with HAL over the intervening months but no complimentary upgrades were offered. Then on September 23 Wanda called with the wonderful news that HAL had seen their way clear to offer us an upgrade to a Verandah Suite. Barbara took the phone call and could hardly contain herself with glee as can be seen in this photo on the right. It’s hard to tell what triggered the HAL decision but we give major credit to the persistent diplomatic inquiries made by Wanda, at AAA Travel of East Tennessee.



**Winterization:** Even though it was hot and humid outside we thought it would be a good idea to “winterize” the beds so that when we get back on December 3<sup>rd</sup> the shock of returning home won’t also be accompanied with a chill during the night. Flannel sheets and the winter bed spreads came out of the closet and were duly put in place in the guest and master bedrooms. While this change was definitely ahead of the normal seasonal adjustments we will appreciate the advance planning on the cold December evening when we show up after a day of flying home from Los Angeles. In this picture on the right, Barbara is putting the finishing touches on a guest bed with a red white and blue quilt and Alaskan moose.



**Grandson Birthday Celebration:** Our grandson, Andrew, turned 13 years old on September 24<sup>th</sup>. This was the “BIG ONE” where he turned into a teenager. We were glad that the cruise didn’t interfere with our celebration of his birthday. Here are a couple photos we took during the high point of the evening.



A little cash hits the spot with Andrew!



**Local Gasoline Prices:** As we cruise and stop in foreign ports we like to check the price of gasoline because that is a ubiquitous commodity that can help to put the local cost of living in perspective for most people. The highest price we can recall seeing was in the Faroe Islands and it was about \$7 per gallon of gas. However, more typical prices in North Atlantic and European countries seems to be in the \$4 to \$5 per gallon range.

As part of the preparation for storing our car we usually fill up the gas tank to minimize the amount of moisture drawn into the tank with the expansion and contraction of air as the temperature around the car changes each day. A couple days before leaving for Los Angeles we stopped at our local gas station and filled the car’s gas tank. The price of gas has been slowly decreasing over the last month or so and we were pleasantly surprised to see it at \$2.229 per gallon for regular gas as shown in the picture we took of their sign.



This price \$2.229 per gallon is less than half of what can be found in most countries but it still seems high relative to prices just 5 years ago. Since the price of a barrel of oil is about the same around the world, we suppose that differences in the price of gasoline between countries are a result of differences in the efficiency of refining, distribution networks and the ever present taxation.

On a related subject the cruise line companies have provision in the booking agreement to allow the addition of a surcharge to the price of the cruise if oil exceeds a price of about \$70 a barrel. Recently the price of oil has been in the neighborhood of \$70 a barrel. However, imposition of a surcharge does not seem likely in the near future because with the current slump in the economy the cruise lines are actually having to lower prices to attract passengers.

**Christmas Tree Set-up:** With a couple days left before we fly out to Los Angeles our adrenalin level was pretty high so we decided to go ahead and set up our artificial Christmas Tree. This way we won't have to face that task in the first few days after return on December 3<sup>rd</sup>. That would be tough to take along with all the other things that crop up and need attention after we have been away on a long trip. We found the box containing the 7 foot pre-lit tree from the basement and lugged it up to the family room. It was hot and humid outside and not much like the Christmas Season. However, after putting on a CD of Christmas music by the Oak Ridge Boys and retrieving our Santa hats we started to get into the spirit. Some of the family room furniture had to be moved around but we soon had our traditional spot for the tree ready for the grand event. The tree comes in three sections with the limbs folded up to form a compact furry mass. The sections are not too heavy but kind of unwieldy when you try to delicately handle them without damaging the wiring and lights that are installed on the limbs. Here is a picture of Orlin carefully getting ready to put the first section onto the tree stand.





After the first tree section is in place the others go on without too much hassle, but then comes the moment of truth when we plug it in to see if the lights will come on. We have had the tree for about 5 years and after the first two years all of the prewired lights on some individual limbs would not light up. After unsuccessful attempts to find the problem and fix it, we punted by just getting a short string of Christmas lights and putting them on the limbs with the unlit lights. Each year when we plug it in to the wall socket we are hoping there are no new limbs that refuse to light. Again this year with the tree assembled and a with a good deal of trepidation we plugged it in and stood back to observe. Hurray, no new unlit limbs for another Christmas season!

With all of the final preparation tasks behind us we still have a couple days to go before we leave. We have trouble believing it is all done. The next couple days will be dedicated to trying to logically pack our bag for the day of travel and a second day of sightseeing in the Los Angeles area before we check in to the Amsterdam on September 30.

If all goes well we will post a blog entry on September 29 covering the trip to LA and the day of sightseeing with friends Dave and Elsie.