

FUNCHAL, MADEIRA

This is the fourth time that we have visited this beautiful island, the last time on New Year's Eve for the fantastic fireworks. We have not booked any excursions here, as we have already toured the whole island in the past. We plan to spend our few hours here simply wandering around the town of Funchal.

The Van Gogh is berthed a good half hour's walk from the start of the town, so we will not be returning to the ship for lunch or dinner. We intend to eat out at one of the many restaurants overlooking the harbour.

Preparations for next weekend's flower festival are in full swing, and the town's gardens and public squares are full of exotic blooms such as Bird of Paradise flowers, Anthurium and Orchids.



During the evening we stroll along the yacht marina, and decide to eat at the same restaurant we ate at exactly one year ago. The evening is warm as we slowly enjoy a drink as we await our chosen meals. Many small private vessels are moored in front of us in the sheltered harbour, whilst in the distance we can see our ship berthed up.

We become aware of a message being given to passengers on the ship over the tannoy system, but as we are too far away from the Van Gogh we do not "get the message", so to speak! The cruise director's voice seems serious though, and our curiosities are aroused. We send a text message to Tony and Sheila who we know are aboard, and soon receive their reply. **THE SHIP IS UNDER ARREST**



Remember that this is 1 April - April Fool's Day - but it is also late into the evening too. The restaurant is in the open air, and we chat and quiz other passengers strolling past, and who say they did not hear the announcement. We proceed with our meal, musing over the possible consequences - do we have to find our own way home - shall we stay here for another week in a hotel - how do we get all of our equipment off the ship and home - are we now criminals - you can imagine our lines of thought!!! We finish our food, and walk back to the ship - and hopefully the truth.

The ship is surprisingly calm, no signs of panic or distress. We soon find out that the Van Gogh has a court restraining order served by the administrators and the former owner of the now failed Travelscope company, who are making a claim for £1.5 million against the owners of the ship - Club Cruise. This strange action means that the ship cannot move out of port, but the passengers are free to go as they please.

We are informed that a court hearing is to be convened on the following day, with the intention of getting the order lifted. Our boss Marcus immediately flies out from head office to take charge of the situation, and calls all of us together for a "public meeting" during the next afternoon. Here we are given fuller details of the ridiculous situation we have been placed in, and his plans to deal with the situation.

So, for the next two days we enjoy the delights, and sunshine, of Funchal. We revisit the town, shops, bars and eating places. During the afternoon of the second day our cruise organisers swiftly arrange a free coach trip of the island for all passengers - a generous gesture too!

Firstly, we travel out of the town of Funchal, and upwards into the interior of



the island. The large modern coaches climb the steep hills with ease, and soon we are in the town of Camacha, famous for its wicker work cottage industry. The air is cooler here, and we are looking over the top of the clouds towards Funchal below. We notice that even in this sleepy town, there is still the free wireless internet access that Madeira is famous for.

The wicker work centre has demonstrations of basket weaving, and quite a few people are tempted by the wares on offer. We buy a basket suitable for carrying wine bottles for only €9.

We now travel even further into the interior, climbing steadily all the time. Our final destination is the second highest point of the whole of Madeira - The Pico de Ruivo. Even though we have been here before, we are still impressed by the fantastic views from the summit.



Towards the end of the day, we are all invited to the Pool Deck, where the atmosphere is a jolly one, to say the least. Free drinks are served quite liberally, before the loudspeaker announcement is made that we are now leaving. Yes, the order was lifted and we are free to go! Many smaller boats are assembled to wave us off, as are many folks on the shore. As dinner is about to be served in the restaurant, all of the wine is "free issue" too!

One or two passengers are heard to comment that they are not able to visit the Chinese restaurant ashore in Funchal tonight, and that they are not now able to go to the flower festival in two day's time - what sad people they are!

