

## THE VAN GOGH COMPUTER CLUB

Looking back in time, the Van Gogh Computer Club really started to take shape one bright and sunny morning in January 2007 as we sailed into the Caribbean Island of Antigua. We were sitting on the forward deck, where our laptop computer screen was shaded from the sun.

In preparation for our first ever world cruise we had researched matters relating to mobile phone coverage, and also how best we could receive our internet signals at ports all around the world. This meant that that we took with us a quad band mobile phone, and our Vodafone high speed internet modem with which we could connect our laptop to the internet whilst at port.

So, here we were, replying to text messages received, and also dealing with emails we had composed and received. Some of our fellow passengers asked us what we were doing, and when we told them their collective reply was "that is impossible" or "you can't do that, you have no wires or aerials" and many other such comments.

At this point we must explain that the only internet provision on the Van Gogh is one computer which is permanently locked onto the ship's own email address, so you can only send emails from this email address, and also receive them in this way only. No, you cannot surf the internet at all, and no, you can not use your own email inboxes or address books. Yes, we were enjoying services that they could not get on the ship!

We now sensed the passenger interest in matters relating to mobile phones, laptop useage, internet provision, as well as camera matters too! With this in mind we approached the Cruise Director Julie, who invited us to give a general talk to passengers in one of the main rooms - The Captain's Bar. Our talk was well attended, many questions were asked, many topics covered, and we quickly established ourselves as the "computer people" onboard. Three days later we received an internal memo asking if we could repeat the talk, as many more passengers wished to attend. Again, the room was full of enthusiastic folks whose company we enjoyed very much.

Now we were fully aware of passenger interest and asked those present if they would be interested in some computer workshops, where we could not only talk but let them be instructed in pc/phone/camera matters, using their own laptops and the one we had brought along - in other words some "hands on" tuition. Julie agreed for this to happen and offered us the ship's Nightclub for one hour for

every day at sea, but we maintained that one hour was not sufficient time, and got this increased to two-hour daily sessions. During the remainder of our first world cruise we conducted 15 two hour computer workshops in the Nightclub, and spent much time talking to passengers at other times too!



On the first cruise we got to know, and like, Tony and Sheila - who have been working on the ship as Bridge Lecturers for a few years now. We first started talking about computer matters, the need for passenger tuition, and how we could be accepted as official tutors. Tony and Sheila told us that they had started to help other passengers when they too were passengers themselves, and that from that point they have been offered contracts direct from the ship. (Most entertainers and guest lecturers are hired through an agency). With this in mind Tony arranged an introduction for us with the Ocean Cruising Manager - Marcus - who listened to our suggestions.

To cut a long story short, on the strength of our initial work on the first world cruise, together with some samples of work we had sent by post to Marcus, we were offered a contract to teach computers to passengers during the first six weeks of both the second and third world cruises. Yes, we were delighted with this, even though we did have more than a feeling that leaving the ship midway through a cruise could cause some problems - not so much for us, but more so the passengers!

So, off we set from Falmouth on 12 October 2007 for a six week cruise up to northern Australia, leaving the ship at the port of Cairns. We already knew when and where we would be running the Van Gogh Computer Club - a comforting thought as we boarded the ship. A new experience for us was to be met with a sea of new faces - a new set of eager passengers, especially at our first computer club meeting. A different story when meeting the staff and crew - they knew and remembered us, and yes, hugs and kisses all round!

The computer club got off to a good start, and as before we had many passengers who had brought along shiny new laptops, eager to get to grips with them. Some passengers were keen to see what was involved, in readiness to buying laptops in the future. We also used the two laptops we have, letting those without their own to get the feel of the keyboard and the touch pad. Yes, we were busily enjoying ourselves, teaching during both the morning and afternoons.



Unlike the first world cruise, the second one was marketed both as a full round the world cruise, and also in "legs" - where passengers boarded and left the ship at various ports. For us, this meant that we had many new computer club members at regular intervals. One such cruise leg saw newcomers board at Fiji and depart at Ecuador - and we have to report that they included some undesirables, loud mouths, and moaners. We later found out that their tickets had been bought as buy-one-get-one-free - yes BOGOF's!

For this second cruise we maintained a single class throughout - catering for both beginners and more advanced users alike. We conducted lessons from 10am until noon, and then again from 2.30pm until 4.30. We also made available our two laptops for those who did not have a laptop with them, which became quite demanding on our time. This worked OK, and we became a friendly group of fellow passengers. We got them involved with creating cruise diaries in their own word processors, maintaining cruise photo albums using their own chosen folders and files, and making personalised stationery items. At least half of our time was involved with digital camera pictures - transferring pictures from camera to laptop, simple photo editing, and taking back up copies onto cd/dvd's. This also led to receiving many questions, and problems, from passengers at all times of the day. At times we felt that we had no place to hide, other than in our cabin, but even then we would get an occasional knock on the door!

A group of passengers who were interested in buying their own first laptops did exactly that when we docked at Singapore. We had planned to go into the town

centre, but as we stepped off the ship a group of passengers asked us to go with them to the first pc shop in the port terminal building. Yes, we spent most of the afternoon in that one shop, and around a dozen new pc's were bought - and showed up at our next set of lessons. More than a few of our club members said that they wanted to be able to catch up with their children and grandchildren, and get to use a computer of their own.



The six weeks flew by, and on our last evening our fellow club members gave us a really good farewell party. We filled one part of a deck, drinks flowed, and cards were given to us, some even manufactured at the Craft Lecturer's classes!



Summer time in Cairns would be hot, so we planned a holiday in a hotel by a beach before returning home to Wales. We have already covered this fabulous hotel stay in another report. On the second day at the hotel we received an email from Head Office changing our contract to full time on the third cruise, and an "invitation" to rejoin the second cruise. We compromised, and completed our hotel stay at Cairns, and instead of flying to Manchester we flew over to Brisbane, then on to Fiji where the Van Gogh was visiting. We left Cairns at 3pm, travelled overnight to first Brisbane and then to Fiji, and arrived at the ship at 9.15 the following morning. The passengers had been told that we were returning, an announcement had been placed on the front page of the ship's daily

paper The Telescope. We enjoyed their warm welcomes - loads of hugs and kisses again!

So, back to the Nightclub for our daily sessions, but now we were told that we would be teaching during the morning only. Our home base, the nightclub, was to be used for other purposes during the afternoon. Business as usual, and we planned the afternoon to cater for jobs we had been given at the morning sessions - cameras to fix, phones to sort out, and laptops to look at etc etc. We worked all day whichever way you looked at it!

We docked at Falmouth early in the morning of 4 January, after quite a rough sea journey from Madeira. We had much work to do, including shopping for computer supplies and equipment for the third world cruise. Yes, Travelscope had gone bust, so we would not get the supplies we had ordered from them. We needed personal supplies like toothpaste, shaving soap and blades etc etc for the next three months or so. We needed to obtain money supplies in £sterling and also \$US to last for three months too. Falmouth was cold, and later turned out very wet too! We raided Argos for cd's and dvd's, memory sticks, card readers, cd pens and printer ink supplies for the three printers we have onboard - all for passenger use. We also bought a new all-in-one printer as we now needed a scanning facility, and also a quick way of photocopying. We made it back to the ship by taxi, with just minutes to spare before our afternoon departure.

On the first night we were invited to meet up with our fellow guest lecturers - some we already knew and some we met for the first time - at the now familiar cocktail party at 7.30pm. Next day we were all introduced to the passengers on the stage of the main lounge in Club Live, and to give a presentation talk - again during the rough seas we had just returned through!

The Van Gogh Computer Club (World Cruise 3) started differently from the first meeting. Now all of the chairs in the nightclub were taken, we counted 42 laptops present, and around 75 people too. Our initial address is always the same - a run down on the work we will be undertaking during the following three months, together with a topics list covering mobile phones, cameras, and laptop computer matters. The topics list is actually our agenda, and we make sure that several copies of this are distributed to those present to keep as a reminder.

The first two or three meetings are always hectic, as we have to establish how best we can organise future lessons, and at what skill levels. For this cruise we initially established two working groups - firstly Beginners who have their own

laptops onboard. The second group is for more advanced users, again with their own laptops too. Each group meets on alternate sea days.

Our "base" - the Nightclub - is situated down on deck 3, adjacent to the cinema. It is a large room which has 18 circular tables each with 4 chairs. One long wall has sofa type seating alongside its tables which accommodate further seating for 24 more people. One corner houses the bar (not open at our meetings!) with fixed stools for another 10 people who can use the bar surface for their laptops. The nightclub also has a disco box in another corner housing the light switches, music machines, and a microphone we use for our meetings. Most of the floor is carpeted, except for a tiled dancing area in the middle of the floor. One feature of use to all of us are the many power points available - a total of 12 individual sockets. At most meetings we have to use a number of gang sockets to supplement supplies!

Being on the lowest passenger deck of the ship means that it is a quiet area, does not have corridors where people can travel along. The nightclub has two large swing doors, outside which are a set of toilets. Yes, we are self contained!

We have never considered ourselves as "teachers", but can quite happily accept the situation we now find ourselves in. You see, we are teaching people of our own age group, and also to fellow passengers who are eager to be here and learn. A good recipe indeed!



A month into this cruise, our Cruise Director Julie discussed with us a matter raised in the suggestion box by a fellow passenger. The request made was for computer tuition to be made available for those passengers who did not have their laptops with them. We agreed that this could be covered, by conducting two afternoon workshops per week, in the night club, of one hour each.

The first workshop saw 35 passengers present in the night club, who very quickly became a happy group indeed! After establishing their expectations, we

were able to outline what we thought they could achieve for the remainder of the cruise. A name was needed to identify this group, and after some lighthearted discussion, and a ballot, they wished to be known as The Laptopless Club. (Owain's suggested name - The Megabytes - came last in the poll!)



Meetings settled down with a talk to start with, when we introduced new topics to them, and answered many interesting questions. (One question we were asked was "What does a computer virus look like?") Following this free exchange, we would set up two laptops at each end of the room, and split up into two groups. Here we could

demonstrate our points to them, and even give them some "hands on" experience.

Among the many items we covered were the making of files and folders, transferring pictures from their cameras to a laptop, simple photo editing techniques, making their own personal greetings cards and calendars, email preparation procedures, simple word processing, slide show presentations, and internet procedures.

Members of all three groups exchanged their pictures with each other quite freely. This gave us the opportunity to organise a great number of these pictures into a single folder, with subfiles. This exercise escalated, and the resultant final folder became impressive. OK, for those with their own laptops we were able to instal this folder for them to take home. For the Laptopless group we copied the folder onto cd's for them to keep.

For us, we are delighted to have been given the opportunity to establish the Van Gogh Computer Club. We did much preparation at home beforehand, and set ourselves up with the laptops and other equipment needed. Our objective was to promote a club atmosphere, where members could come and go as they pleased, and take part in other activities being staged at the same time. We were keen to organise workshops for hands-on experience, rather than conduct a series of lectures. We also were adamant that computer tuition should be fun!