

4/20/07 Day 95 – At Sea - Friday, 20 April, 2007: Today the sea was calm and the weather sunny with a slight breeze as we cruised toward the Azores Islands. We are starting to think about the process of sorting through all the stuff we accumulated on the cruise and getting it packed up. We don't see any serious problems but it will require a little organization and thought about how to handle the delicate things.

We will have to declare our purchases and the value of them when we fill out the United States (US) Customs Declaration forms prior to getting off the ship in Ft. Lauderdale. A duty or tax is levied on total purchases exceeding \$800 USD per person outside the US. Another way of saying this is that each US citizen is given an \$800 exemption on purchases outside the US. A married couple traveling together get a \$1600 USD (2 x \$800) exemption. The jewelry shop and liquor store on the Amsterdam advertise themselves as "Duty Free" shops. Everyone traveling outside the US has seen prominent signs advertising "Duty Free" shops in airports and other transportation facilities. Several of our fellow passengers as well as ourselves were somewhat confused with regard to how we treat purchases in these "Duty Free" shops when we fill out our US Customs Declaration. Today we inquired in the Amsterdam Liquor Store to get the straight scoop on how to declare duty free purchases. Here is what we found out. The purchases made in a "Duty Free" store anywhere outside the US are no different from any other purchase outside the US with regard to US Customs duty that may have to be paid upon return to the US. The purchases made in a "Duty Free" store should be documented on the US Customs Declaration form just like any other purchase. If the total of purchases comes to less than \$800 USD then, of course, the goods are "Duty Free". However, if your purchases in a "Duty Free" store and other stores outside the US total more than \$800 USD then you will owe a duty or tax on the amount exceeding \$800 regardless of whether or not it was purchased in a "Duty Free" store. In most cases the stuff a couple will buy while traveling outside the US would have a total cost less than \$1600 so it is duty free because of the standard exemption. Things purchased in "Duty Free" shops must be declared and cost totaled with other purchases outside the US.

There is another rule on liquor purchases that is more restrictive than the \$800 USD exemption from duty that applies to other types of purchases. Each US citizen can bring 1 liter of liquor into the US without paying a duty. There will be a tax on all liquor in excess of 1 liter per person even if the total cost of liquor purchases outside the US was much less than the \$800 USD exemption that applies to non-liquor purchases.

After all these years of travel we have finally stumbled to the fact the "Duty Free" stores can be called duty free just because they are outside the US and purchases made in them have no more tax avoidance status than purchases in any other foreign store. The "Duty Free" name is a marketing tool that should only imply that items in the store that are manufactured outside the US may be cheaper than the same foreign item purchased inside the US. This can be true because an import duty has already been paid on the foreign item you purchase inside the US whereas in the "Duty Free" shop no import duty has yet been paid on foreign items for sale. Some travelers are confused and think purchases in a "Duty Free" store need not be declared to US Customs. As we found out today all purchases must be included in the total of purchases outside the US even if some were purchased in a "Duty Free" shop.

As the World Cruise draws closer to the end we wanted to say a few words about how pleased we are with the service staff on the Amsterdam. The room stewards and food service stewards perform their work in a diligent and thorough manner. This has been the comment of other passengers as well as our observation. There have been no exceptions in the pleasant way the stewards and officers make eye contact and greet us whenever we pass on deck or in the hallways. The room stewards and food service stewards are primarily from Indonesia and that culture may partially explain the accommodating nature they display. However, we believe that the Holland American recruiting program must also take some credit for attracting, hiring and training people with such unfailing good manners and attention to the feelings of the passengers. These men and women, for the most part, have parents or spouses and children back home in Indonesia whom they see only once or twice a year while between contracts. They and their families are making a sacrifice of togetherness to maintain a steady income and hope for a better future. The difference in wealth status between passengers and the stewards is obvious but that never becomes an issue. There is never a hint of resentment shown in their dealing with passengers who are living a life of luxury. We wonder what our feelings would be if the tables were turned.

Tomorrow we are in Ponta Delgada. This port is the replacement for Casablanca in Morocco which was canceled because of the risk of terrorist activity. The Amsterdam person who gives lectures on each port of call is Barbara Haeni. She does an excellent job of letting us know what to expect and how to get the most enjoyment out of each port. Today Barbara gave a talk on the upcoming port of Ponta Delgada on Sao Miguel Island in the group of Azores Islands. She said we would find Ponta Delgada to be a pretty place and we should enjoy just walking around the small town of 27,000 people. More adventurous people may want to hire a taxi and go out sight seeing on the volcanic island that has many lakes that formed in volcanic craters around the island. The Amsterdam excursion department, under the management of Irene Grunwald, hustled around after the last minute decision to go to the Azores and has offered several organized tours of 3 to 7 hours. We have not scheduled a tour but plan to just hike around town on our own.