



**Your on the
Water Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Cruising the Northern Mediterranean
Florence-Pisa**

Cruising the Northern Med Report Six: Florence-Pisa

August 9-10, 2023

Your reporter has had to cancel or curtail some Viking land tours. In a few words: bad spine, bad balance. Too many broken backs, too much inner ear nerve damage.

Those problems are with me whether I am lying in bed or getting around on a cane. Still, a pain in the back to see a magnificent sight---one I have not seen and will likely never see again---is a small price to pay for this experience. Nonetheless, like most of us who are aging, growing old is giving me pause.

Dining and Dressing



Figure 6-1. Port call in Livorno.

We are back on the ship and on the way to Florence and Pisa, as shown in Figure 6-1. A word about Viking’s dining arrangements and dress code. Several years ago, cruises required, at a minimum, coats and ties for the men and appropriate dresses for the women for the evening meal. It was not unusual for the men to wear a tux and for the women to dress in a cocktail dress each evening.

For each evening meal, all diners were assigned places at reserved tables. Dining with strangers happened as part of the cruise, usually resulting in pleasant encounters.

At the requests of their passengers, most cruise lines no longer have this formal setup. We ate at a table for two, but often entered into a dinner conversation with those sitting next to our table. Reservations could be made for larger tables, in case a family or a group was traveling together.

The left photo in Figure 6-2 shows one of the dining rooms. Several other bars and cafes were open for those who wanted a more informal meal with casual dress allowed, one depicted in the middle photo of Figure 6-2. For the evening meals and entertainment afterwards, almost all the ladies were decked out in evening gowns, two examples seen in the right photo.



Figure 6-2. Dining casually or more formally.

Viking stipulated that shorts of any kind were not permitted at the evening meal and shirts with collars were recommended. We welcomed this short interlude where people left their

gym shorts and shower shoes in their closets. Not long ago, I sat next to a woman on a flight in the US. She wore a T-shirt, and yes, gym shorts and shower shoes.

A person's mode of dress reflects the wearer's mode of living, of caring how they look. Granted, until the 1960s, America and the other Western countries might have been considered a bit "up-tight" with the apparel worn by their citizens. But since that time, our society has coarsened, both in dress and in language.

We opted for some formality the last evening meal of the cruise. The Matre'd seated us at a table with a view of the Med, as seen in the left photo in Figure 6-3. Holly, shown in the right photo, was in evening black. I was, too, black trousers and a long-sleeved black shirt. The black-dressing Blacks were outfitted for another fine meal and evening.

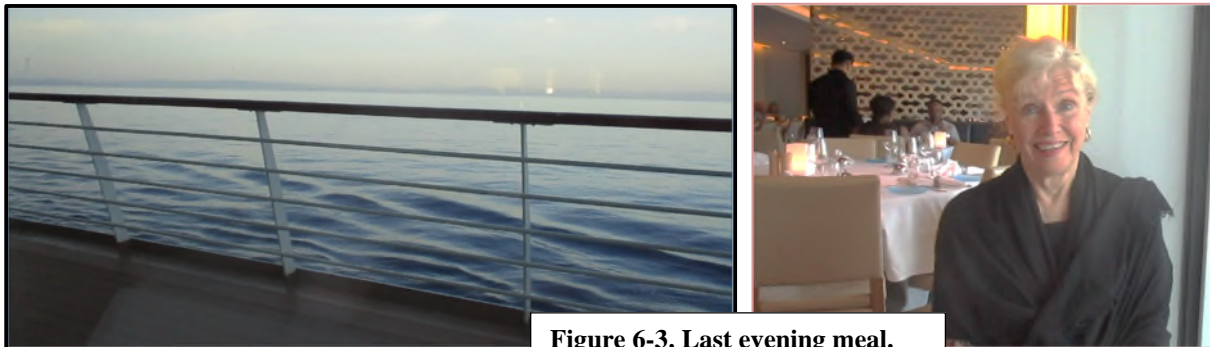


Figure 6-3. Last evening meal.

Although Holly did some exploring alone, my visits to sites in Florence and Pisa had to be cancelled. Both of us took a taxi into the port city of Livorno for lunch and to do some sedentary sightseeing.

On this short visit, I once again ordered a very simple meal: pasta, with tomato sauce and no meat. I had ordered this dish several times during the trip for two reasons. First, I like it and second, knowing we would be spending over a week in Rome, I wanted to compare the Italians' tomato sauce with that of the Americans. A contest: American Olive Garden tomato sauce vs. Italian tomato sauce.

Aboard the Viking and a couple port restaurants, the pasta was accompanied with bread, olive oil, sometimes a salad, and sparkling water; all without our asking. Plus, Viking always furnished wine---red or white---as part of the meal. For the meal in Livorno, I was served a bowl of spaghetti and tomato sauce, with one fork and a paper napkin. Bread was extra, as was water. I had to ask for a spoon. Of course, wine was also extra. This extravagant splurge is shown in Figure 6-4.

The meal was splendid. We ordered some sparkling water to wash it down. We polished-off the meal (Holly had fish) by sharing a bowl of vanilla gelato...another taste test of American vs. Italian ice cream.

As sumptuous as Viking's cuisine is, this simple meal was a nice change of pace. The waiter wore shorts, had no tie, and spoke no English. But the cafe served fine food. Added to the pleasant meal, we enjoyed the outdoor café and its view of surrounding streets and buildings, as shown in Figure 6-5.



Figure 6-4. A minimalist menu...



Figure 6-5. ...with a fine view.

Two of the reasons I wanted to make this trip was to visit historic Florence and to see the leaning Tower of Pisa doing its leaning. It was not to be. But I was up and walking, getting around, overall, pretty well. We all need to take what is available, while it is available, and be thankful it is still available, even if in a limited way.

Club Soda

Returning to the Viking, we spent the pre-dinner time in a salon on the seventh deck, which overlooks the bow of the ship and the Med. The ship was underway, making its way slowly to the port of Civitavecchia, near Rome. Rocking with the gentle waves, we listened to a pianist and violinist play soul-soothing duets, as seen in Figure 6-6.



Figure 6-6. Pleasant times aboard the ship.



A waiter in this lounge, whom I had come to know, went by the name of Jefferson. He told me his parents were teachers and admired Thomas Jefferson. He was Filipino, but spoke better English than I. He put up with my meager Tagalog.

While taking my order a couple days earlier, I mentioned that in America, ordering club soda in a restaurant was the same as ordering water; and usually, with no charge. But waiters in the States often suggested pouring sparkling water or seltzer with a charge associated with it.

Jefferson, "They're different, Mr. Black. Club soda gets its bubbles from carbon dioxide put in its contents. Sparkling water comes from bubbly springs. It's naturally carbonated."

Me, "Carbon dioxide. ... I breathe-out the stuff, and I'm also drinking it?"

Jefferson, "It's harmless, and most club soda brands add minerals to their products to give them a less flatter taste than sparkling water."

Me, "Okay, I'll stick with club soda."

Jefferson, "Club soda has bigger buddles...if you like bubbles."

“Let’s compare, Jefferson. Bring me a glass of sparkling water, along with my glass of club soda.”

He did. First, I tasted the two. I could not tell any difference. Next, I compared the bubbles in the two. I could not tell any difference, “Both look and taste the same to me, Jefferson.”

Jefferson responded, “Maybe bubbles are in the eyes of the beholder.”

Beyond Pasta

The Viking one-week experience was the medicine I needed. I am not speaking of pills. I’m speaking of an ambience that is therapeutic to anyone but the most hardened pessimist. Sailing the Mediterranean Sea, with around-the-clock entertainment, food, and drink in elegant settings. Tough duty.

Each lunch or dinner, we could have lamb shank, steak tartare, fresh salmon, or sea bass. Several varieties of pasta, scores of desert choices...plus, well, on-and-on. In addition, a section of the menu offered local dishes from the country/area in which the ship was visiting at the time. Amazing. I lost weight during this cruise.

On to Rome, the Catholics’ historical oasis.