



This is how it all Began

Many years ago, in ‘another lifetime’ as it is said, is when this narrative really starts. It really was another life. Coming to America was like being Born Again, as I have started calling it of late. And being in New York City - living and growing there - is like having the Third Birth.

It was still the early phase of my Second Birth, having been in USA just about two years or less, when I started a journey across this land which lasted for three months. I was acutely homesick for India, my physical birth place, and realized the need to see this land in order to acquire any liking for and understanding about this country.

So it was that I took a series of Greyhound Buses. I knew that I had to go by buses so that I could see the landscape of the country. This searching for a cure for my homesickness, as it were, went on for three months, during which time I went to many cities and small towns, and saw a lot of beautiful and glorious places in this land that is America. I did go to the mid-West and North-West etc. during this journeying, but I had actually started this quest from the Port Authority Bus Station in New York City in the East and I went all the way up to Los Angeles in the West. In other words, I had started from the shore of the Atlantic and had reached all the way to the shore of the Pacific.

This, my very First serious travelling by myself, occurred many years ago. From then on until at present, after having travelled extensively and almost 'non-stop' upon this Earth, at last I was about to do something that would reverse that First going across the country. So this time I was starting at the shore of the Pacific, from the Port of Los Angeles, on a ship that went down South by the Western coast of the continent; the length of Baja and Central America; then through the Panama Canal, and finally, entering and sailing the Atlantic, until arriving at Port Everglades, at Fort Lauderdale in Florida.

It seemed to me that, in some mysterious way, I was making a full circle - although not in any exactly definable design-shape. Still, this idea of reversing my very First Journey, after many years, thrilled me superficially, and stunned me in a more significant sense. It may be a popular route for commercial cruises, but for me this Sailing from 'Ocean to Ocean' carried more meaning.

I have traversed the Upper Arctic Ocean, on the Expedition to the Magnetic North Pole, and have been on a ship through the Antarctic ocean, and have felt as if I was taking the Globe in my embrace, symbolically, of course. And then there are countless other Seas upon the Earth - Indian Ocean, North Sea, China Sea, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the Baltic etc. that I have experienced. And still, the Pacific and the Atlantic are the main and mighty ones, like two pods encircling the Earth. Connecting with them on one voyage gave me a sense of some deeper wonder.

I have certainly been on that whole Route by land, by local buses, in several different travels - from Los Angeles to the Border of Mexico and down South to Baja (pronounced Baha), and all the seven countries in Central America. I even crossed the Panama Canal once before, and have been to some of the Islands like Aruba, Cuba, Puerto Rico etc. in the Atlantic. Now I was going to connect all these parts in one swoop. My desire, and hope was to see the whole area from outside now - to see the line of the Coast of the continent of North America, from both its sides, West and South-East.

All these thoughts, long before embarking on the ship, were being tinted with Romantic colours. I am not one to fear a trip, or feel uncertain about it, but I must say, off and on I felt some nervousness about this watery venture. It is because so far I have been on very small ships, with just about, or even less than, a hundred passengers. These days large and larger ships are the desired size, offering non-stop wordly enjoyments and endless ocean-glamour. Moreover, these ships carry 5000-6000 passengers. That felt like travelling with a small town, and did not appeal to me.

It was as if I was seeking empty spaces, like the miles of Oceanic expanse all around. And quiet, in the presence of continuous waves. Fortunately, the ship I would be on is considered 'small', transporting just about 2000 passengers, or a few less. It still seemed like too many people in one place, but I worked on my mind, and in time, felt comfortable with the number. I was sure I would find quiet spots to sit and think, read, write. (Or was it really possible?!)

The way inspiration has struck a few times, I would write a poem, sitting at home, even before I had seen that place; and even in this instance the same thing happened. Excited to be following this route that wrapped both sides of the Continent, I resolved to write one Haiku every day, about the Oceans. Haiku is a Japanese poetic form. I call it a "small poem" for easy explanation. It is, really, just three lines, but it has a strict form which must be maintained. I have written Haiku in English and in my mother tongue Gujarati, and even 2 or 3 of them in Japanese language (called Nihongo) as well! I am familiar with how the Haiku form is to be observed, and the combined excitement - about sailing and about penning - was such that I started writing Haiku even before I was on the Ocean!

As a rule, when I travel, I carry minimum luggage, and only a few things. I limit my needs, and do not pack anything that may be unnecessary. But I realized that on a voyage one may want to, or need to carry a few more outfits. Still, I did not over-pack. One medium-size suitcase would be sufficient, and that too, not very heavy.

I was fortunate to visit and stay with some old-time friends in Los Angeles, before the voyage started. I felt that my trip was having a special start. There was a little concern about the weather, because the forecast was for rain and wind storm over Mexico and Central America. Ships are very heavy and have a lot of balance, but once in a while a ship gets caught in a furious storm, rocking and pitching constantly, and then the Sailing is not comfortable.



I travel by myself through tough places, and difficult situations at times, but there is no fear in my mind. Some may not believe it, and might think it is foolish not to be fearful, but I always remain positive and hopeful for 'safe travels'!

Suddenly I thought of the story of Sindbad the Sailor. He sailed through Seven Seas, faced severe storms and many adversities, but he remained strong and determined, and overcame all impending disasters. This story is taken from an Arabic book of short fiction, called "A Thousand and One Nights". In India, we knew it as "Arabian Nights", and were enthralled by all those stories about some exotic land. A fictional story as it is, readers have drawn positive lessons from the adventures of Sindbad the Sailor, in that he fought evil, stayed confident, believed in himself, and never gave up hope.

As a fiction writer - of short stories as well as novels - I enjoy such positive fiction, and Believe in such characters also. In the same book - "Arabian Nights", there are many other imaginative stories, set in atmosphere that seemed unusual. There are stories about Alladin and his Magic Lamp, and Alibaba and Forty Thieves. Then there is the Khalifa Harun-al-Rashid, the benevolent ruler of Baghdad, wrapped in his black cape, going around stealthily in the dark streets of his city to make certain that no crimes were being committed, and that all was safe for his citizens.

Oh, then, this Oceanic Adventure of my own is sliding me back towards the exotic realm of the fictional world where everything ended well, and happy times prevailed. Ah, to have the feeling of the innocent wonder back!

In real life, I took an Uber to the Port of Los Angeles. The sky was blue, the California air was, somehow, free of pollution, and even the L.A. Freeways were free of traffic that afternoon. A good omen to start with! I had heard about a lot of crowding at embarkation time, and had thought that I may have to line up. But no, there was no crowd of passengers there, as if not many were going! But it is likely that many were already on the ship, and many others were late in getting to the Port.

In the entrance hall, many personnel stood by to help, and to give out the Cabin Number. And then the ship's entrance is right there. Once inside, in a few minutes, the first announcement came to inform the passengers that the cabins were ready to go to. On Deck Eight I walked the narrow inside corridor, looking at the numbers, and walked more, all the way to the end of the ship, and there was my cabin. Must be the very last cabin in the whole ship, I thought. Right outside was a door to the small open deck at the back. Once the shore receded, there was the open sea out there. It was a nice quiet spot after all. My first find on the ship, as the first night on the voyage approached!

