



# eUSTHOMASIAN

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## Personal Journal USTMAAA Cruise of a Lifetime

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It was my first cruise/pilgrimage with USTMAAA. I was not sure what to expect. I had some apprehension. My husband could not come and I was rooming with a stranger for the whole 17 day trip. In addition, delays and missing connections were real concerns for me.

I started my trip in Dayton, OH to Chicago. At O'Hare, while waiting to board, I saw Zita waving at me, and then introduced me to Lito and Evelyn Fajardo, Lita and Roger Liboon and, yes, to my roommate-the warm and friendly Myrlie Casco. My apprehension dissipated and felt I was in the company of friends.

It was a journey of faith, culture, history, food, entertainment, friendship and fun. Most of it has already been written by Primo Andres, Greg Tolentino, Greg Lipat and Boy Abay. I would like to share my personal journal.

At Lourdes I was quite moved by the simpleness, almost bare, Chapel of Sts. Cosmas and Damian. The chapel appeared poor physically but the message of the priest was rich and strong. He said that we go to church not to pray but rather to be together as one body to give thanks to the Lord for all the blessings. To pray one can stay home and be alone with God. He added that to share God's Glory is not cheap or free. One has to follow the way of Christ, be baptized and drink from His cup.



Ladies waiting for turn at the baths



Mary with roommate Myrlie Casco



Cathedral of St. James, Spain



Church of St. Francis, Porto

During this trip, one can admire and appreciate the impressive Romanesque and Gothic styles of Cathedrals. But nothing overwhelmed me more than the lavishly elaborate Baroque style of the Cathedral at Compostela, Spain and St Francis in Porto, Portugal. Visiting all these spectacular churches, one can get lost in the excitement of posing and taking pictures. Thanks to Cora Abundo's example that reminds us that visits to these places are opportunity for us to reflect and offer prayers.

And then there was Zita with a walking cane, assisted and moving slowly, and Oni with a slight limp from painful knees, both ignoring their physical discomfort in trying to trace the foot steps of the pilgrims at El Camino de Santiago. I have never walked a mile without getting short of breath and I was considering staying in the bus. But watching these two encouraged me to join the group to the village. I surprised myself to walk the 2.8 miles. Made it and felt good.



Breaking bread after the long walk

We marveled at the amazing vineyards at the hillside along the valley of the Douro River in Portugal. Its beauty and breathtaking view was surpassed not only by the camaraderie and fellowship of the UST cruisers but also by the talent of our own Thomasian MD'S. Their talent was not limited to science, giving excellent CME lectures, but also to the lighter side of life like singing and dancing.

Jess Chua serenaded/entertained us with his rendition of many songs in Tagalog and in English. My favorite was his solo/duet of "The Prayer" by Celine Dione and Andrea Boccelli, alternating his voice as Dione then that of Boccelli. It was a delightful treat.

And of course, our one and only Tony Gonzales (aka Elvis) dressed in full Elvis costume, shaking it; with the adoring,



Tony "Elvis" Gonzales



Jess "Andrea/Celine" & Marlette Chua

The highlight for me was the bath. In my birthday suit, I was submerged in the icy cold waters of Lourdes while the two attendants were saying prayers. I became a little emotional and felt like I had a sin-cleansing experience.



fainting fans throwing bra and panty at him. One wonders if the real Elvis could have done better. The crew responded with their shows of hilarious skits to the delight of the cruisers..

Bus ride was never a dull moment. The group was either singing or praying the rosary. And who can forget the indomitable Ched. Only she can make collections fun and painless. She also treated us to Zumba lessons with her infectious boundless energy. What a gift she is to the cruisers.



*Ched Gonzales, the levy-collector, and Zumba dance instructor par excellence*



*Kelly & Jess Concepcion*

And Kelly Concepcion a gentleman helping the “old” ladies up and down the bus.

Yes that was indeed a cruise of a lifetime. And we have Primo Andres to thank for it. It took a year of planning and despite his busy practice he found time to organize the trip. It obviously took a lot of hours and hard work but he made it like it was no big effort and was always accommodating and humble. And making sure everyone is in the picture even if he is not.

Primo you have achieved what you intended to do – provide us with a most memorable cruise to remember for a lifetime. THANK YOU SO VERY MUCH.

### Vila Real and Mateus Palace

Day 11 brought us to Vila Real, the capital of the Northern District of Vila Real that was founded in 1289 by King Denis of Portugal, hence its name meaning Royal Town. It housed more members of the royal family during the Middle Ages than any other settlement in Portugal except the capital in Lisbon.

The real attraction though is the *Solar de Mateus* (Mateus Palace) that began construction in the late 18th century as a summer home of the Mateus family that used its vast fortunes in collecting religious and historical artifacts that date back to the Age of Discoveries. Although it did not do as well as a winery, it made its fortune in the more recent history through royalties by having its name and the picture of the Baroque palace on the face of every bottle that *Sogrape*, the largest family-owned wine-producer in Portugal,



sells. They entered the crowded wine industry and systematically studied the competition. They came up with a design of a narrow-necked bottle like a flask similar to the water-canteens of the soldiers of old that occupied the least space yet had similar capacity as other bulkier bottles.

We were greeted by a horse grazing just outside the main gate. After a short walk on the graveled road, we came to an opening in the front courtyard with a large pool with a sculpture of a naked woman laying on her side drawing our attention towards the white Baroque palace in the distance. While one group was



*Solar de Mateus Palace*



being shown the interior of the palace the other group wandered around in the magnificent gardens that were well tended and sculptured and even made more resplendent by the sputtering of brighter fall colors. The demeanor inside the palace was more subdued as the group was splintered into even smaller groups of no more than 10 as we were escorted from room to room to gawk at the marvelous collections with fingers itching to take pictures but were warned more than once not to. While our eyes feasted we do not know whether the art objects would register long enough in our brains without the help of our precious photographs. Oh well, you cannot have them all.

A short ride to downtown Vila Real then followed and we were dropped off in front of the Police Station. There was very little time to shop but we gave it a try anyway as we walked down the square and up a street with restaurants and stores. Guess where most of us went? Taste buds won over vanity.



*The square, shops & restaurants of Vila Real & Ferdinand Magellan in Sabrosa*

Our river ship, MS *Gil Eanes*, had already move farther upstream to the next rendezvous where we were supposed to

meet it for lunch. The trip from Vila Real to Pinhao went by the town of Sabrosa, where *Fernão de Magalhães* (yes, our Ferdinand Magellan) was born. The drive was an incredibly scenic one as the bus wound through Upper Douro Valley wine country that has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site, and now we know why. While stopping on the road was forbidden, the bus made a slow pass as we overlooked the picturesque small town of Pinhao by the banks of the river that looked more like a lake being just above a lock. The terraces after terraces of vineyards that were golden yellow despite the gloomy skies was like a painting on a canvas. Even walking on a steel bridge



*The scenic road to Pinhao over the vineyards of Upper Douro valley*





*MS Gil Eanes waiting at the dock of Pinhao to serve lunch*

to get to our boat took sometime as there were lots of photo ops that needed to be taken advantage of. This is one time when everybody felt lunch could wait. As it turned out it was also an incredible lunch with baked chicken and tender pork, ham, chorizo in a field of peeled potatoes. Just yummy!



*Incredible lunch while cruising the Upper Rio Douro*

The rest of the afternoon was spent either on the top deck or in the lounge admiring the kaleidoscope of Douro vineyard scenery that seemed endless as darkness fell when we finally docked at Vega de Teron. After dinner, four Flamenco lady dancers entertained us with foot stomping and finger snapping



lively music that got us prepared for the following the day when we re-crossed the Spanish border to visit the wonders of Salamanca.



*Flamenco night at the MS Gil Eanes*