

***Braemar* Rules the Waves: Trans-Atlantic Tenerife to Barbados**

by

Lew and Susan Toulmin

Braemar is a bonnie ship, British to the core. A trans-Atlantic cruise from Tenerife to Barbados proved that *Braemar* and Britannia still rule the waves!

We planned to meet *Braemar* in the delightful town of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, and arrived several days early to explore. Knowing that our voyage would be very British, we decided to



*A beautiful woman in glass
decorates a classic house in Santa
Cruz de Tenerife.*

investigate the British connection on the island, and discovered an unusual artifact: “El Tigre.” This historic cannon fired the ball that cut off the arm of Lord Horatio Nelson, the most celebrated British naval hero of all time.

Most people think that Nelson was infallible, but in fact he made many mistakes in his love life and even in his naval tactics. In July 1797 Nelson’s forces attacked Santa Cruz with three frigates, a cutter, and 2000 men. After two unsuccessful attempts against the strong ramparts, Nelson personally led the third attack. Spanish artillery fire defeated the British, and a 16 pound ball from El Tigre injured Nelson’s right arm so severely that it had to be amputated. A detailed account of the battle by a Spanish officer makes it clear which cannon was involved in the crucial action. Nelson almost died of gangrene, but survived and had to learn to write with his left hand. Of course he went on to death and immortal glory in 1805 at the Battle of Trafalgar.

The El Tigre cannon can be found in an underground museum below the Plaza de Espana in the heart of Santa Cruz.



Co-author Lew Toulmin and “El Tigre,” the cannon that took off Admiral Nelson’s right arm.

The “Omar Sharif house” on Lanzarote was one of our best finds in the Canaries. Designed by artists Cesar Manrique and Jesus Soto, in 1973 the film star Omar Sharif bought it, then lost it in a bridge game, just 24 hours later! Although he only lived there a day, and never returned, he lent his name to the house, which is carved into the side of a volcanic hill and former quarry. Most of the rooms are small caves cut from the living rock, and brightened with white paint. All have terrific views over a lovely swimming pool and a wide valley.



The fabulous “Omar Sharif house” in Lanzarote, Canary Islands.

We boarded *Braemar* and found our cabin, number 4094, amidships on Deck 4. This cabin was a “superior twin outside,” and was quite attractive. It was about 16 by 8 feet, a generous size. The décor was simple but pleasing, with off-white walls and ceiling, blue carpeting, and light

brown accent wood. The cabin had been recently renovated and felt quite fresh. It had a flat screen 26 inch TV, three by two foot window, an effective shower, three small closets, a safe, two twin beds that could be pushed together to form a full-sized bed, and two excellent reading lamps. (It is amazing how few well-designed reading lamps exist on ships and in hotels around the world!)



The Toulmin's cabin aboard Braemar.

The cabin had inside air conditioning controls, and the AC functioned well and was quiet (another rarity). There was storage for luggage under the beds, and a tiny but tall triangular closet in the bathroom for toiletries. We requested a small refrigerator and this showed up in a few hours, at no charge. It did stick out a bit, so we had to be careful not to stub our toes on it.

From the cabin literature we learned a bit more about *Braemar* and the historic Fred. Olsen line. *Braemar* was built in 1992 at the Union Naval de Levante yard in Valencia, Spain, and has served various lines as the *Crown Dynasty*, *Norwegian Dynasty*, *Crown Majesty* and *Cunard Dynasty*. She was bought by Fred. Olsen Lines in 2001 and lengthened in 2008 by 102 feet at the Blohm and Voss yard in Hamburg, Germany. (This well-regarded yard dates all the way back to 1877.)

Braemar's length is now 643 feet, with a beam of 74 feet and a draft of 18 feet. Tonnage (GRT) is 24,344. This is in our opinion the ideal size for a vessel, not so small that it is subject to lots of rolling and pitching, but not so large that it feels like an anthill, with thousands of passengers.



Braemar alongside the dock in Antigua.

The vessel is registered in the Bahamas, as are all four Fred. Olsen cruise ships. *Braemar* has impressive stabilizers, which kept the vessel from rolling hardly at all on days with 35 knot winds and fifteen foot following seas, and despite her relatively shallow draft.

The maximum standard passenger occupancy is 929, but we sailed with only 710, which gave *Braemar* a nice uncrowded feel. The number of crew on our voyage was 381, giving an impressive ratio of one crew member for every 1.86 passengers.

The Fred. Olsen line was founded in Hvitsten, Norway in 1848 by Fredrik Olsen and his two brothers. Remarkably, the firm is still family-owned, now into its fifth generation. The firm moved its operations from Norway to Ipswich, Suffolk, UK in World War II, to escape Nazi confiscation. Unfortunately, 23 of the firm's 44 merchant vessels were sunk during the war.

The firm's four current cruise vessels, *Braemar*, *Black Watch*, *Boudicca* and *Balmoral*, often sail to or from the Canary Islands. The firm is quite prominent there, with ferries, hotels, a property management firm, an airline, shipyard, electronics firm, and even a street named after the original Fred. Olsen. The line has a tradition dating back to 1901 of giving all its ships names that begin with a "B," after the line's first passenger liner, the *Brabant*.

The ship's deep Britishness is charming, and is reflected in the fact that 90 percent of the passengers are British, with the rest mostly from other Commonwealth countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. About 70 percent of Fred. Olsen passengers are repeat passengers, a very high number, and a testament to the quality of the line and its reasonable prices.

The Britishness comes out in the entertainment and the food. The Great Tea Dance, held about half-way across the Atlantic, was a super British-style tea, at no extra charge, with terrific sweets

such as marzipan cake, choux cake, Norwegian meringue cake, a liquid chocolate fountain for dipping fruit, and dainty finger sandwiches. And “Cool Britannia” night celebrated terrific British music from the 1960s to the present.

On New Year’s Eve our dinner featured haggis, and it was a great treat to see the Food and Beverage Director rear back and give the forceful, traditional 1786 Robert Burns “Address to the Haggis.” This famous, vivid and sometimes bizarre poem includes lines (translated here from the Scots Gaelic) such as:

Great Chieftain of the Sausage Race!
The groaning trencher there you fill, your buttocks like a distant hill
We cut you up with ready slight, trenching your gushing entrails bright.
Mark the Scotsman, haggis-fed: the trembling Earth resounds his tread.
Clap in his ample fist a blade, and there it whistles,
And legs and arms and heads cut off, like heads of thistles.

With an introduction like that, we had to eat it – although with a bit of trepidation! We had tried haggis years ago, and been put off by the recipe of sheep’s bladder or stomach stuffed with offal. We had not liked the taste, either, but gave it a go again on *Braemar*, and amazingly, we loved it! The *Braemar* chefs had created a masterpiece of grains, mild spices, luscious meats and delightful flavors. We even asked for seconds. When done right, haggis truly is the “Great Chieftain of the Sausage Race.”

One of the most interesting speakers on board during our days at sea was top radio commentator Alastair Hignell, who captained the University of Cambridge rugby and cricket teams, played rugby union and cricket at an international level, and then went on to cover rugby for the BBC. As the only Americans on board *Braemar*, we didn’t catch all the rugby and cricket references in his several talks, but we certainly understood his tragic diagnosis of multiple sclerosis in 1999. He spoke eloquently about this awful challenge, which only allows him to stand and walk for short periods, and limits him mostly to an electric scooter. With his determination and positive attitude, he has “turned lemons into lemonade,” and has raised substantial sums for MS research, earning him a CBE – Companion of the Order of the British Empire – along the way. Quite an inspiring fellow.

Some of the fascinating classes offered on board included line dancing, ballroom dancing, singing techniques, mahjongg, bridge, crafts, yoga and Pilates. A high percentage of the passengers walked a mile each day -- four circuits around the ship on Deck 5. I (Lew) went down to Deck 2 to the bridge and games room almost every day to test my table tennis skills against other enthusiasts, and found that my rusty smashes improved rapidly with practice. Good exercise, too.

Two roulette tables on board allow passengers to try their luck, while the library has about a thousand books, mostly novels and some reference items. (Best to dash to the library as soon as you board, since many British passengers are avid readers.) A handy and effective self-service laundry on Deck 2 has eight washers and eight dryers, at a reasonable cost of two pounds each for the washers, no cost for the automatic soap, and no cost for the dryers. Buy the tokens at reception.

Fascinating items with a royal connection for sale in the jewelry shop were rings, bracelets and earrings made by Clogau. This Welsh firm owns the famous St. David's mine in Bontddu, Gwynedd, northwest Wales, which since the local gold rush of 1862 has produced over 78,000 troy ounces of gold, today worth about \$96 million.

While the production has now dwindled and the gold is so rare that only small bits are used in most pieces, years ago the British Royal Family secured its own huge nugget of rare Clogau gold. Since 1923, the royal jewelers have used the nugget to make wedding rings for Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, the Queen, Prince Charles, Princess Diana, Princess Margaret, and the Duchess of Cambridge.

House of Windsor—style wedding bands are available from Clogau on board *Braemar* (and on the Clogau website), and range from 330 pounds (\$508) for a 3 mm nine carat ring, up to 1200 pounds (\$1847) for a wider 5 mm eighteen carat ring. These rose or white gold pieces contain some of the rare Clogau gold inside – hence the royal connection.

After our eight sea days crossing the Atlantic, we knew land was near when we spotted several flying fish skipping from wave to wave. One fishy athlete managed an astounding flight of nine skips covering over 250 feet.

After eight days at sea, it was quite exciting to see our first Caribbean island, Antigua, on the horizon. The highlight was Nelson's Dockyard, the key British naval base in the eastern Caribbean during the Napoleonic period, which is still well preserved and is the home of numerous world-class sailing events including Antigua Sailing Week and trans-Atlantic rowing races.



Stone columns at Nelson's Dockyard used to support a huge sail loft.

At the Dockyard were moored many impressive super-yachts and even a large sail trailing ship, the 173-foot, square-rigged *Lord Nelson*. But to us the most awe-inspiring vessel was the tiny, 24-foot double-ended rowboat labelled "Tiny's Atlantic Row." This boat was rowed solo across the Atlantic in 2005 by "Tiny" Little of the Davenport Trust. It took him four months of hard rowing, eight to fifteen hours per day. Near the end he was intermittently hallucinating, often thinking that he had to dodge an ice-cream stand in the ocean, just ahead of his boat!



This 24-foot rowboat crossed the Atlantic 4 times!

We think we'll stick to cruise ships.

The next day we arrived in St. Maarten, the famous resort and shopping island shared by the Dutch and the French. Rather than take a ship's tour, we sought out a super little café we had found ten years before, the Café Atlantico, at 51 Airport Road. Amazingly, the sweet almond croissants and the manager Natalie were still quite as wonderful as we recalled from our visit a decade earlier.

Braemar cruised overnight to emerald-green Dominica, one of the least-known and most charming islands in the Caribbean. A volcanic island with few beaches, Dominica does not attract any "beach bunnies," and hence is quite unspoiled and undeveloped. We opted for a ship's bus tour of the mountainous east coast, and hiked a mile on the Waitukubuli National Trail along the shore, and up the 80-foot-tall Scotts Head at the southwest tip of the island. From there we had terrific views to the south, all the way to Martinique, 25 miles away.



Natalie runs the super Café Atlantico in St. Martin.



A cheerful young dancer on Dominica.

In St. Lucia we planned to visit the famous Mamiku Gardens on a ship's tour, but were discouraged by some heavy rain, which of course stopped right after the bus left! We did some shopping, then took a vacation from our vacation, and read some nice, trashy novels. Next we thought quite seriously about doing some serious exercise, but took a nap instead.

The next morning we reluctantly debarked *Braemar*, in lovely Bridgetown, Barbados. *Braemar* had brought a bonnie bit of Britain with us all the way to Barbados, and you had better believe that we will be boarding those beautiful "B" ships again, before long!

Lew and Susan Toulmin live in Silver Spring, Maryland. Lew has traveled to 143 of the 196 countries on Earth, while Susan has visited 76.



Passengers on Braemar celebrate "Cool Britannia" night.



Two "royals" have apparently stowed away on Braemar.



Braemar crew hold a tug-of-war in mid-ocean. The officers won.

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