

Bridge Cruises

By Jon Preston

Reading Agnes Lee's article on teaching on a world cruise pushed me to write about teaching on normal cruises, those maybe two weeks long with half sea days and half port days. We've taught on seven of these and acquired lots of insights.

First, who are "we"? Caroline, my wife, tolerated my bridge career that started in grad school in Vancouver, continued during our research jobs in Ottawa and Victoria, took a 20-year break, and resumed as retirement neared. It was just toleration, no interest. But when I first tried to get assignments on ships she jumped in, seeing bridge as her route to cruising. Now we work well together. During lessons she watches the door and fills in at tables. With her 40 masterpoints, one or both of us can play as needed so we never have a half-table. Plus, she's pretty good with ACBLscore.

Our schedule is the same on each ship. Beginner and intermediate lessons on the morning of each sea day, and a two-hour duplicate game at 2 that afternoon. No work on port days. Lecturers and art instructors are usually aboard with the same status, which some lines call Guest Staff. We're jealous of them, since we work many more hours, with set-up and lessons and games and clean-up. It can be

taxing, particularly on the 23-hour days on eastbound crossings. And we get the worst cabin on the ship.

My pedagogy follows Audrey Grant. I've seen over and over that putting cards in students' hands is far more effective than lecturing. My lessons, nominally 50 minutes, start with Powerpoint slides lasting no more than about seven minutes, so we can play four hands on that theme. Students love Audrey's color-coded cards for dealing these hands. Some of the decks I travel with were gathering dust in a cupboard at the club that we cleared out when covid forced us to give up the lease. Each deck includes a card indicating that cards with red backgrounds go to North, blue to East, and so on. Since these guide cards are easily misplaced or swiveled, I made 8 1/2" x 11" table mats with the same colors.

Even though most ABTA members will have seen the same, let me present some of the things I've seen teaching absolute beginners. First, they learn what a trick is, and about trump. Audrey does this by having them play whist, which can be a lot of boisterous fun as a daughter trumps her mother's ace, for example. Then we move on to auction bridge and finally contract. Many find the mechanics daunting, stuff

that's second nature to us such as who's dealer, that declarer is not the one who places the contract but rather the first to bid the suit, and who makes the opening lead. I use bidding boxes so the calls are on display as I circulate among tables – most manage those quite well. Early on, the faces of those whose turn it is to make a call or play can resemble deer in the headlights. It's certainly satisfying to see their comfort improve in later lessons in the series.

There's so much in beginner bridge that it has to be a series. Cruise Directors and Activity Managers have song-and-dance backgrounds and usually think that students can move back and forth between beginner and intermediate, as one might with dance or Zumba. I've had to discourage passengers from joining a beginner series after the first few if they're not familiar with trick-based games. It's essential to do this diplomatically – a prime way to not be invited back is having passengers complain about me. The ship's daily program should emphasize that beginner bridge is a series, but they never do.

Audrey's beginner course is four two-hour lessons, or eight of one hour. Teaching locally, I've found that twelve hours is much more comfortable. That's fine on land, but aboard there may be only six sessions of 50 minutes, or even fewer. It's a challenge choosing what to omit. I certainly recommend selecting topics rather than trying to cram

everything into the time available. The passengers are there to have fun and to absorb some basics to take away, not to have their heads stuffed.

I have a dozen or more intermediate lessons prepared, from Audrey's other books or based on them. Topics include overcalls, takeout doubles, defence against notrump, balancing, and 4NT quantitative or Blackwood. I avoid constructive bidding, such as responses to notrump openings and opener's rebids, because some students use strong notrump with five-card majors and others are comfortable with Acol. As with beginners, my lesson plans are quick coverage of a topic followed by cards in their hands. Sometimes experienced players ignore what I've taught, for example raising a response to his/her own minimum takeout double, because "that's what we always do". Just smile, and say that the lesson was from the bridge literature and showed what's done at tournaments.

We think that teaching bridge on cruise ships, and directing the games, is a fantastic retirement activity. We'll do as much as we can while our health holds up. But it's not for everyone. You need to be very keen to cruise and be willing to fly in these covid-confused times.