

EUROPEAN RIVER CRUISE +BALTIC CRUISES 2010

Kathy and I took a cruise from Budapest to Passau, Germany in the winter of 2007. She loved the cruise, but wanted to take another river cruise in the summer. We found a cruise called, "Castles on the Rhine and Danube" that fit the bill. The cruise goes from Budapest to Amsterdam, and I checked the Princess Cruise catalog to see if we could connect with a Baltic cruise.



Kathy has always wanted to go to St. Petersburg, and I wanted one that also went to Oslo, so we could go to Frogner Park to see the Veigeland sculptures. Well, we found a cruise that would meet these requirements, and booked it. The river cruise ended in Amsterdam, and the Baltic cruise started in Copenhagen, so we would have to get there on our own. We will spend 2 full days in Amsterdam, and we can visit the museums and take a canal boat ride. We also wanted to lay over both ways in New York, as the 13 hour flights were getting to be too much at our age.

Well, as luck would have it, we got a call from Vantage Travel Air Desk, and the lady was a genius! We had planned to fly to NY on our own, for about \$400 each, and to fly from Amsterdam to Copenhagen for about \$150 each. Well, the lady worked her magic, and for the mere cost of \$100 each, we will lay over at Dulles overnight both ways, and the flight to Copenhagen is included!

In checking our reservations with United Airlines, the agent offered us "Economy Plus" seating at a nominal charge. We had taken the "World Traveler Plus" seats on British Airways, and they give you about 5 more inches of leg room and the seats are very comfortable. We opted for that on the LA-Dulles legs and Dulles to Frankfurt leg.

We also received a notice that our flight would not leave until 10 PM, so we plan to go into Washington and sightsee for the day.

We would be flying back to Dulles on SAS, so I called them to see what their upgrade would cost. I was referred to another website, and when I finally got in, they wanted over \$250 each for that one flight! That was much more than the total cost for the other 3 legs on United, so we declined.

The last link in the travel chain was the hotel in Amsterdam. We checked a number of sites, and found that hotels.com had the best deal. Our hotel is about 3/10 of a mile from both the Van Gogh and Rembrandt museums, so we can visit on each day. The hotel is also located on a canal, and there is a landing where we can book a canal cruise. The hotel is also located right next to where the trams run, so we can take one from the hotel to the museums.

Since we had been to Budapest and Vienna previously, we plan to do some sightseeing on our own, not "following the yellow umbrella" as Kathy calls it. I am interested in seeing the synagogues in both Budapest and Amsterdam, so we plan to do that independently.

Here is what really happened:

The first thing that happened was on the Friday before we were to leave; our doorbell rang at 7 AM! It was our next door neighbor, who was pointing at her watch! Bless her heart; she was worried that we would miss our pick up! Then we told her we really appreciated it, but we were not leaving until Sunday.

It is really wonderful to have neighbors like that.

I started to check the weather, and came across an article that the Danube was flooding and may be closed. As far as we are concerned, that is something the ship will work out. Some years ago I had the same problem, and we were bused from place to place and put up at hotels. In fact, in Cologne, we were referred to as the "boat people"!

The other concern we have is that Washington is forecast to be 93 with rain! Talk about a steam bath! We got to LAX in plenty of time for our flight, and since we were not going to be fed on the flight, I walked over to a restaurant at the airport to get some sandwiches. It was 9:45AM, and I was told I could not order the sandwiches until 10 AM. So I sat around until 10:05, and then ordered the sandwiches with a few minutes to spare before our flight left!

WASHINGTON DC

Kathy had not been there since she was 17, and I had been a number of years since I was there. We planned to leave our luggage at the hotel and take a taxi into the capitol. When we got to Washington, the weather was unbearably hot, so we just stayed at our hotel until it was time to catch our flights to Europe.

Our flight from Dulles to Frankfurt was delayed because someone did not show up and their luggage had to be located and removed from the aircraft. This delayed us enough to miss our connection to Budapest. When we got to Frankfurt we were rebooked on a later flight, and a nice lady at the Lufthansa desk let me call the ship to give them our new arrival time.

Well, the aircraft was delayed coming into Frankfurt, and by the time we got everyone on board, we missed our departure window, so we had to sit on the ground another half hour. We finally got to Budapest, and our luggage was there too! We were met by a tour manager from the ship and were welcomed aboard.

BUDAPEST

Budapest is a beautiful, baroque capital draped over several hills on a gentle curve in the Danube, with a city center that has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. On the Buda side of the river, we visited the storybook Fishermen's Bastion, which offers stunning views of Pest. When we were there in the winter, it was so foggy we could not see the Danube, let alone the view of Pest.

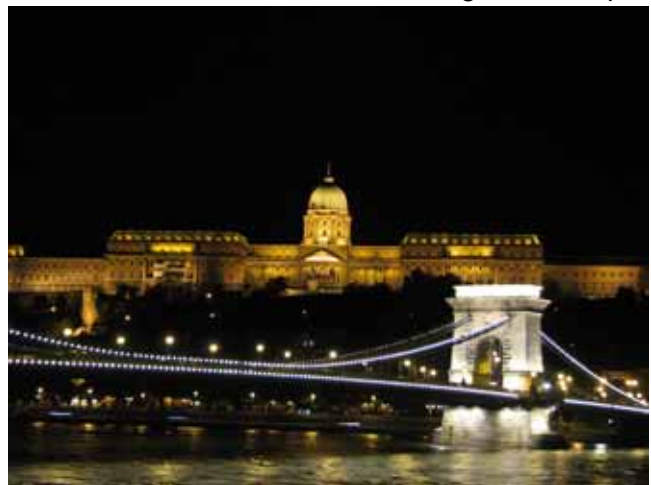


Christmas 2007



June 2010

We had to move the ship in the late evening, so we got some nice shots of the Chain Bridge and the palace.



The next morning I set off to visit the Budapest Synagogue, one of the largest in the world. This stunning temple was constructed between the years 1844-59 according to Ludwig Förster's plans. The second largest synagogue (the largest stands in New York) in the world can take in 3,000 people. Its Byzantine-Moorish style is fascinating and remindful of monuments in the Middle-East. Two onion-shaped domes sit on the twin towers at 43 m height. The towers symbolize the two columns of Solomon's Temple. The spacious interior has equally rich decorations. A single-span cast iron supports the 36 foot wide nave. The seats on the ground-floor are for men, while the upper gallery has seats for women. In the courtyard behind the synagogue there was a beautiful metal sculpture called the "Tree of Life".



On our way to Vienna from Budapest, we had to make an unscheduled stop at Estergom to pick up some passengers who had been delayed by their airline. The cathedral at Estergom is the final resting place of Cardinal Mindszenty, who was best known for his opposition to the Communist regime in Hungary.



VIENNA

After picking up the passengers we sailed up to Vienna. We attended a talk about Europe's rivers, and their important role as ancient "highways" and their continued prominence in daily life and commerce. After lunch, we arrived in Vienna and took a tour of sites associated with great classical composers who lived in Vienna. We went to the Vienna concert hall, and visited the Brahms room and the main concert hall.



In the evening we took an optional tour to one of the most famous "Heurigen", or wine taverns. The Wolff opened in 1609, which was before the Pilgrims landed! The food was great, with all kinds of "wursts", and we sampled some of the local wines. We were also entertained by a singer and an accordionist.



The next morning we took a tour of the Ringstrasse, which are a series of streets that circle (ring) the city. Our first disaster happened that morning. Kathy wears a pair of gold dolphin earrings her late husband bought for her, and leaves them in a glass in the bathroom overnight. When she went to put them on, they were nowhere to be found! She was very upset about this, so I went on eBay and ordered a replacement set.

We toured the National Library, which was quite impressive, and reminded me of the library in Melk Abbey.



While touring Vienna that morning, I had a thought. When we got back on the ship for lunch, I requested that someone from maintenance check our bathroom sink trap for the earrings. We left for a tour in the afternoon, and I left a note for the maintenance person to tell him what to look for. When we came back from our tour, there was the note, and atop the note were the earrings!! Well, now Kathy has 2 sets of earrings, so I asked her what she would do. In a Solomon-like decision, she said she would wear one of each-from the two men that loved her.

In the afternoon, we did what we like best- tour on our own. We had a light lunch, so we sort of ate our way through Vienna. After walking by the palace, our first stop was at a sidewalk café where we had a pannini sandwich and some unusual iced tea. We sat and people watched for a while, then headed down to Stephansplatz (St. Stephen's Plaza), which is a huge pedestrian area dominated by the cathedral.



Our next stop was at a stand that sold bratwurst, and our final stop was at a restaurant for a Sacher Torte. The altar triptych in the cathedral was very detailed. Most people

In those days were illiterate, so the pictures told the stories.



As we were sitting in the square, the heavens opened up! Of course our umbrellas were in our cabin on the ship, so we decided to wait it out. When it became obvious it was not going to let up for a while, I ran across the square to a shop and bought a cute white umbrella with musical notes all around it. It will make a nice souvenir of Vienna.

That evening we were treated to a classical concert at the same hall we had gone to on our Xmas cruise. The hall is beautiful and the chandeliers were quite elegant.



The orchestra played a number of pieces by Mozart and Strauss, and there were some arias performed as well as a couple dancing. They danced a classical dance, and one cute one of the "Champagne Polka"



WACHAU VALLEY

After Leaving Vienna, we cruised the picturesque Wachau Valley, known for its wines. We passed a number of small towns, each with its own charm. One of these was Durnstein, known for its blue bell tower. We also passed the huge Melk Abbey, with its enormous library.



PASSAU

Passau is at the junction of 3 rivers; the Danube, the Inn, and the Ilz. Inside St. Stephen's Cathedral — beautifully decorated with frescoes and has the world's largest pipe organ. The organ has 17,388 pipes and 231 registers. When we were here last time, the concert season was over.



We were there on a Sunday, so there would be no concert as mass was being celebrated. There was a high mass at 9:30 AM, and we decided to go to. The high mass is celebrated as a more formal mass, and would include the choir and the organ.

Even though the cathedral was built hundred of years ago, they had a digital readout near the altar to indicate the page in the hymnal that was being sung. At the end of the mass, the organist treated the congregants to a 15 minute recessional concert. Kathy told me that the purpose of the recessional at the end of a high mass is not for entertainment purposes, but in this case we were treated to an organ concert of the highest caliber. I bought a really neat Bavarian hat in Passau, and wore it that night as we were featuring a Bavarian dinner complete with roast suckling pig!



DEGGENDORF

The next morning, two funny quotes came to mind- "God willing and the creek don't rise"; and "don't raise the bridge-lower the river". It seems that because of all the rain on the Danube, our ship could not get any further that the town of Deggendorf because there was a railroad bridge we could not get under. Deggendorf is a tiny jewel of a town that ships normally bypass. However, we were stuck there for two days waiting for the Danube water level to drop.

I had great faith in the Tour Managers, because I had a similar experience in 2002, when I could not get from the Main River to the Rhine. At that time alternate arrangements were made so we did not miss what we had planned to see. There was a rock shaped like a keystone next to the dock, and I used that as a measure of how much the river had fallen.



REGENSBURG

We were taken by bus to our next port, 2,000-year-old Regensburg, which was virtual living museum of European architecture. On our walking tour we crossed the medieval Stone Bridge. It is difficult to wrap one's mind around the fact the bridge was built hundreds of years before America was colonized.

For lunch today we went to a restaurant that has the oldest bratwurst house in Germany, being 850 years old. They were delicious, especially washed down with a good German beer.



From the bratwurst house, we had a good view of the cathedral in one direction and the old Roman Bridge in the other.



On the way back to the ship, the second disaster struck. I had bought a neat Bavarian hat in Passau, but with the rush to get off the bus, I forgot it! The bus went back to Passau that night, and I told the tour manager about my problem.

STRAUBING

Since we could not go any further, arrangements were made for us to visit a quaint little town named Straubing. One of the features was a stained glass window of Moses by Durer in St. Jacob's church. The church was quite large, and had two rows of stained glass windows on the walls. As I was looking for the window, a bell was rung, signifying the beginning of mass. I left the church so as not to disturb the service. Outside the church, I ran into another couple from the ship, and saw they had a map that indicated there was a synagogue in the town. Armed with my map, I set out to find it, and finally locate it. Unfortunately, like most synagogues, it was closed. I took a picture of the outside and headed back to St. Jacob's church. The mass was over, and I finally located the window. It was in the upper bank of windows, and was quite spectacular!



NUREMBURG

The tour managers arranged for a bus to take us to Nuremberg, and fortunately, the buses came from Passau! As one bus pulled up, there was my hat on the front seat!

On our city tour of Nuremberg, we visited the Documentation Center and the Rally grounds as we explored the city's World War II history. The Documentation Center had displays of how the Nazis came to power, and the atrocities committed by them. Up until some years ago, German history was taught up to the end of the Weimar Republic, with no mention of the Nazis. Now, all the history is taught, and school children are taken to the Center as an educational lesson.

We were then taken to the main square, where there is a magical fountain. The story is that if you rotate one of the rings on the fence around it and make a wish, it would come true.



We also found a stand that sold some of the local gingerbread, and bought some. We were driven past the courthouse where the war crimes trials were held and the pictures below are of the actual room where the trials were held.



In the afternoon, after we returned to the ship there was a beer tasting (whoopee!). We tasted a number of beers, both light and dark, but there was a wheat beer offered that smelled like bananas and tasted awful!

BAVARIAN FOREST MUSEUM

It is an ill wind or a rain swollen river that blows no good, as we would have missed the charming towns of Straubing and Deggendorf, as well as the fantastic open air museum. It resembles Skansen Park in Stockholm, where wooden buildings from all over the country have been reerected in this park.



The most unusual thing in the museum was a collection of death boards. It was explained that if a person died in the winter, when the ground was too hard, they would be place in the unheated attic of he house until spring!



Well, Kathy took a look at them and commented that they looked kind of short. She then got the giggles and said, "I guess grandma's legs had to hang over the bottom".

FREE AT LAST!!!!

The river level had fallen enough in the two days we were stuck to allow us to get under the bridge! An announcement was made that we would pass under the bridge at about 5 AM. Kathy and I got up and looked out our French Balcony. All up and down our side of the ship, heads were popping out to see. It looked like the "whack a mole" game. As the ship passed under the bridge, a cheer went up from passengers on the upper decks who were sitting on the deck to clear the bridge. We cleared it by 8 inches!! The captain had the wheelhouse lowered and peeked out through a hatch on the top. He looked like he was driving a tank rather than the ship!



As we sailed past Regensburg to enter the Rhine-Main-Danube canal, we passed two imposing monuments on hillsides.

The Befreiungshalle ("Hall of Liberation") is an historical classical monument upon Mount Michelsberg above the city of Kelheim in Bavaria. It stands upstream of Regensburg on the river Danube. King Ludwig I ordered the Befreiungshalle to be built in order to commemorate the victories against Napoleon during the Wars of Liberation that lasted from 1813 to 1815.

Walhalla is an imposing temple in Greek style on a Danube hillside. The Doric marble temple was built for King Ludwig I by Leo Klenze taking the Parthenon on the Acropolis as his model in honor of famous members of the German-speaking world. He chose a hillside overlooking the Danube to erect this edifice.



As we started up the canal, we were struck by the sight of a castle perched on a high cliff! We found out by looking at a map I had, that it was called Schloss (castle) Prunn. It would be a typical small German castle, relegated to relative obscurity, save one thing - its location. The castle has been perched for nearly one

thousand years on an outcropping of rock towering more than 300 feet above the Altmuehl River near Riedenburg in Lower Bavaria. The sheer beauty of the location rivals the seaside castles of Dunluce in Co. Antrim, Ireland and Dunnottar in Grampian, Scotland. The castle, thus protected on three sides by sheer cliffs, is first mentioned in 1037 as being owned by Wernher of Prunn, and then 8 years later by Adalbert of Prunn. In 1147 Herr von Laaber of Praiteneck is in possession of the castle. The castle, consisting of the old Bergfried [donjon] and surrounding buildings, was held by the barons of Laaber and Breitenbrunn until 1288, when the castle is sold to Duke Ludwig [Louis III] of Bavaria. In 1672 the castle passed to the Jesuits, who added rococo ornamentation to the interior. With the dissolution of the Jesuit Orders in 1773, Prunn became of property of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem (Hospitalers). With the dissolution of the Hospitalers, Burg Prunn became the property of the state of Lower Bavaria in 1822. The white horse painted on the side of the castle is to commemorate the risky ride by a young knight of circling the castle to win the hand of the princess.



ROTHENBURG

Since we had been stuck in Deggendorf, arrangements were made for us to go to both Rothenburg and Bamberg by bus the same day.

Rothenburg is a charming medieval town, and there is a story that the town was once under siege, and the may was told if he drank a 3 liter pitcher of wine the town would be spared. He did that, and then slept for 5 days after.

The event is commemorated by figures that come out of the town hall windows every hour between 10 AM and 5 PM.



We went past the former Judentanzhaus (Jew's dance hall), which was converted to other uses after the Jews were expelled in the 13th century. Here were a number of Jewish tombstones incorporated into the wall outside

the house. There was also a memorial plaque dedicated to those who lost their lives in the Holocaust.



Our first stop was at the St. Jacob's church, where there was a magnificent wood carved altar done in the 1500's. The altar pictured the Last Supper, the entry into Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives.



After the church, we had lunch at a delightful restaurant located above the street and shaded by trees. We both ordered a bratwurst platter and got 3 different styles of bratwurst. They were all delicious!



We visited a Christmas store and museum in town, and it was enormous! There were 3 floors covered with anything and everything to do with Christmas.



BAMBERG

Since I had visited Bamberg previously we did not opt for the walking tour, especially after walking all over in Rothenburg in the morning. Bamberg is the center of a rich Bavarian beer-brewing tradition, and their specialty is "Rauchbier" or smoky beer. The hops are roasted over a smoky fire sort of like the malted barley in Scotch whisky. It did have somewhat of a smoky nose and taste, but was quite good. I found the store that sold it, and bought a 4 pack.

On the way back I took a picture of the city hall, which is in the middle of the river. The reason for this dates back hundreds of years. The clergy wanted it built on the cathedral side of the river, and the laity wanted it built on the other side. The compromise was to build it in the middle, which is the king's territory.



There was a huge open air market, and we browsed through it, marveling at some of the produce. They had fresh chanterelles for sale, but I knew we could not bring them into the USA. I jokingly suggested we buy them, put them in a mesh bag, and run them through the laundry drier on our ship.

On our stroll back to our meeting place, we stopped for some ice cream. There was a bakery across the street, and since the bread served on our ship was small, I went to buy some fresh bread. Well, there was a small language barrier, and I ended up with a 2 pound loaf of fresh baked delicious dark bread! We took it back to the ship, and shared it with the folks at our dinner table.

I had check the map of Bamberg, and found there was a small synagogue near our meeting point. I finally found it, tucked behind another building, but it was Friday and it would not open until close to 7 PM, which was after we were scheduled to leave.

Well, the Lord works in mysterious ways-it seems that lightning had struck the lock we had to go through, so we were delayed a couple of hours. Our tour managers made arrangements at a nearby winestube for us to have a glass of wine or beer while they fixed the locks.

This gave me time to return to the synagogue and go inside. It was a small modern one, quite a difference from the one in Budapest.



WURZBURG

We went a tour of the grand Würzburg Residenz, a baroque gilded palace preserved as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The pictures below of the main staircase and the mirror room give an idea of the opulence of the palace.



After our guided tour, we visited the Residenz's own wine cellar for a tasting. We had to negotiate about 30 feet worth of steep stairs, and the whole cellar was lit by hundreds of candles. The cellar was enormous, and easily accommodated the 150 or so from our ship.

We sampled wines made from four different grapes: Muller-Thurgau, Sylvaner, Reisling, and a dessert wine.



We finally caught up with our ship, which was sailing to meet us after our tour. As we looked across the river, a speedboat pulled up at a Chinese restaurant and the lady picked up her dinner through the window!



HEIDELBERG

We set off from Frankfurt for a full-day excursion to Heidelberg, home to Germany's oldest college. Arriving in this exquisite town, we toured the 15th-century Heidelberg Castle, an imposing Gothic-Renaissance ruin of red stone, followed by lunch at a local restaurant and some time at leisure to explore the charms of Heidelberg on our own.



Parts of the interior had been restored, but a lot of the castle was in ruins.



The pictures below are of the town of Heidelberg



We found a funicular that went from the town to the top of the mountain, but the round trip was an hour, and we did not have that much time until we had to catch our bus, so we just took it half way up.

While on our cruise, the Soccer World Cup matches were on, and everyone in Europe was following them. While on our bus going back to the ship, Germany was playing England. Our bus driver fiddled with his radio to see if he could get the score while he was driving. We are driving along at about 60, when the bus driver suddenly stands up, puts his hands above his head, and yells out, "2 to nothing". He was really excited!

THE RHINE FINALLY!!

Because of the delay due to high water, we had to bypass the town of Rudesheim. The last time I took this cruise we were stuck on the Main River 3 bridges short of the Rhine. I had purchased a book on the castles along the Rhine on my last trip, but had not seen the castles.

I brought it with me to help identify the 40 odd castles we would see and give some of their history. Some are still ruins, but some have either never been damaged or have been rebuilt. Below are some of the more interesting ones:

The first two are the "Mouse Tower", which acted as a lighthouse until 1974. It was used to collect tolls from ships going up and down the Rhine. The name is derived from the German "maut", which means toll.

Ehrens castle was built in 1211 and was partially destroyed by the French in 1689. The view of the Rhine from the towers is said to be the most beautiful in the Rhine Valley.



Gutenfels Castle was built around 1200 and controlled the Rhine to extract toll from passing ships. In 1807 it was auctioned off and restored.



Schonberg Castle was built around 1149. It was destroyed by the French in 1689 in one of the many wars between the German city-states and the French. It was purchased in 1885 and was restored by a New York banker whose family came from the area. In 1950 the castle was purchased by the city council, and is now a hotel and restaurant.



The picture on the left is the famous Lorelei Rock which is on a bend in the river. It marks the narrowest part of the river between Switzerland and the North Sea. A very strong current and rocks below the waterline have caused many boat accidents there. Until some of the rocks in the river were blasted away, it was very hazardous to navigate. Lorelei is also the name of one of the beautiful Rhine maidens who, according to a modern legend, sat upon this rock and lured passing navigators to their doom with their alluring singing.



Due to our delay on the Danube, we did not have time to stop in Cologne. I did get a picture of the cathedral as we went by, and of a beautiful sunset marking our last night on the Rhine.



On our last night onboard, we were invited to sit at the captain's table. There were 4 other couples invited, and we had previously become friendly with all of them, so it was really a nice dinner.

AMSTERDAM

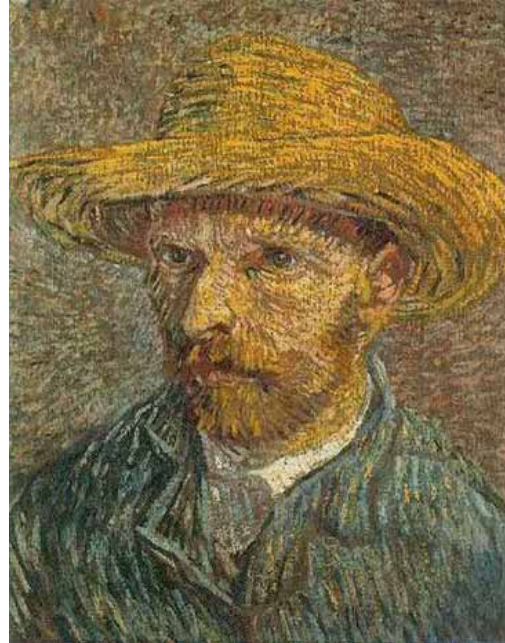
After debarking from our river cruiser, we planned to spend 2 nights in Amsterdam. During that time we plan to visit the Rembrandt and Van Gogh museums, the Sephardic Synagogue and take a canal boat ride at night, as we had done in Venice.

We selected our hotel, Eden America Amsterdam from hotels.com, and it was perfect! Our room had a balcony overlooking the canal, and we were just off a main square which had tramlines running through. A block away was a street just filled with restaurants of all types-talk about lucking out!

We wandered the streets checking out menus, and we found the Dutch equivalent of the Automat. As a youngster, I remember going to the Automats in New York City, where the food was behind a series of glass doors. You put coins in, turned a knob, and the door opened and you got your food. They have been gone in New York for many years.

Since we had arrived early, we had the hotel store our baggage and we took a tram to the Van Gogh Museum. Kathy, in her wisdom, suggested we get the audio guides. It helps as you do not have to fight your way to get close to each painting to read the little description. I wore my Van Gogh t-shirt with the image of “Starry Night” on the back. Unfortunately, that painting is in New York, and his painting of “Iris” in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

Two of his most memorable paintings are “Sunflowers” and his self portrait.



While on the river cruise, we became very friendly with a Dutch couple, who now live in the U.S. They told us about a tradition called the “New Herring”.

In the old days, the arrival of the Hollandse Nieuwe (new herring) in late spring was awaited with joy tempered by concern. How large would the catch be? And what would be the quality of the green herring? Would the fish be big and fat, and provide enough nutrition, or small and lean? As soon as the boat was moored, the new herring was offered for approval to the authorities and traders gathered at the quayside to welcome the fishers. In the fishing town of Vlaardingen, Holland's traditional herring town, just downriver from Rotterdam, this ritual is reenacted every spring. Perhaps the photo on the right, taken last June, can convey the humor and excitement of this age-old event.

I had seen there was a Dutch oyster sampler on our hotel’s menu, but when we sat down at the outdoor café to order them, we were given a menu featuring the New Herring! Well, as opposed to the picture on the right, we were served it restaurant style with all the trimmings!



That evening, we wanted to go on a candle light canal cruise, so we got one that left at 8:30 PM. The problem is that at that latitude, the sun does not set until 10 PM! In any event, it was quite enjoyable, drifting through the lighted canals. There were all manner of boats plying the canals in the evening, all having a good time.



The next day we decided not to go to the Rembrandt Museum, as there were more of his works at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Since all we had to eat for dinner the previous night, we stopped at an outdoor café that featured pancakes with all kinds of filling, like an omelet. We each ordered one, and we were surprised at how large they were! Each was the size of a pizza, but we were hungry enough to finish them. We then took a hop-on-hop-off canal boat through many of the canals of Amsterdam. We got off near the City Hall, and discovered a huge outdoor market nearby. We explored the stalls, buying a few souvenirs, and sat down at an outdoor café to have a glass of wine.

One interesting fact was that some of the houses were sinking on one side, only supported by the house next to them!



I found that the Portuguese synagogue was only a few blocks away, and went to visit it. Unlike the Budapest synagogue, which was constructed in an almost Oriental style, this one was basically a rectangular brick building.

The interior of the Portuguese Synagogue is of the longitudinal Iberian-Sephardic type. The striking wooden Ark and the pulpit (bema) are found at opposite ends of the interior. The bema became a standard fixture in Jewish synagogues from which a selection from the Torah is read. In Orthodox Judaism, the bema is located in the center of the synagogue, separate from the Ark. In other branches of Judaism, the bema and the Ark are joined together.

Seating is divided into two halves facing one another. The women's gallery is supported by twelve stone columns, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. During service 1000 candles in two enormous brass chandeliers light the synagogue.



We got back on the canal boat and motored past the main railway station. There was a multi floor parking structure there strictly for bicycles. It looked like hundreds and hundreds of them! We got off the canal boat at our hotel and freshened up before going to dinner. Our first stop was at the hotel outdoor café where we shared a plate of assorted Dutch oysters and a glass of wine. We love dining outdoors, as you can eat and people watch at the same time.

We then headed down the restaurant-lined street until we saw a sign for an Argentine grill. We checked out the menu and saw the following on their menu:

“Mixed grill (10 oz per person) consisting of entrecote, sirloin steak, lamb chops, chorizo sausage Argentine, and corn on the cob served on a table grill”

Well, that did it for us-we sat outside with the grill full of meat and a bottle of wine and thoroughly enjoyed dinner.

The next morning we finished repacking and caught a taxi to the Amsterdam airport.

Our third disaster was that our flight from Amsterdam to Copenhagen was considered to be an intra-Europe flight by SAS, and we were only allowed on bag each! We had to pay over \$400 for the excess baggage charges. Well, this confirmed my “balance in Nature” theory, as we did not have to pay for the airfare, so we got stuck with excess baggage charges!

COPENHAGEN

After an hour and a half flight from Amsterdam, we landed in Copenhagen and were taken to the ship. We had booked a minisuite that was identical to the one we had on our Australia cruise.

Our next day was a sea day, so it gave us time to decompress from the flight and the river cruise, and take care of laundry. I had brought a sack of quarters with me, but they were not enough as we had 4 loads to do. We were wondering if people thought we brought our dirty laundry with us!

STOCKHOLM

We Sailed into Stockholm passing numerous houses sprinkled on all the little islands, which were summer houses. When you are this far North, you must make the most of every summer day.



When we got off the cruise ship, as we were touring the city, we were lucky enough to catch the parade for the changing of the guard at the royal palace!



Since Stockholm, like Venice, is situated on a number of islands, we felt the best way to sightsee was on a tour boat. We passed by the beautiful Nordic Museum located on Djurgården in central Stockholm, displays the cultural history of Sweden from the 16th century until today. We also passed the Stockholm City Hall, which is where the Nobel Prizes are awarded.



We discovered that all of Stockholm is granite, so there are no sandy beaches. The two pictures below show what the Swedes consider a beach! Kathy said she would never again complain about sand on the beach.



One funny thing that happened on our cruise was that we had to pass through the locks connecting the Baltic Sea and freshwater Lake Malaren. There is about a 3 foot difference between the lake and the Baltic, so they made a big deal of it. They were not aware that Kathy and I had to go through 69 locks between Budapest and Amsterdam, where the deepest lock was 86 feet.

As we left Stockholm, we passed by a very interesting fountain and a cute little steamboat that had trees on its bow that was actually blowing smoke rings out its stack.



HELSINKI

We boarded our private launch along with our guide for the approximately 90-minute scenic cruise. We sailed past the old Yacht Club, a city landmark, and the diplomatic district, located on a peninsula that juts into the bay.

We cruised past Suomenlinna Fortress, the "Gibraltar of the North" built by the Swedes to protect Helsinki from Russian attack.



After the cruise, we had some free time to explore the local open air market down by the pier. Unfortunately, there were a number of food stalls and tables, and the seagulls were thicker than pigeons in St. Mark's square in Venice.

On our way back to the ship, we passed the huge Lutheran cathedral in Senate Square and the Uspenski Orthodox cathedral. The Cathedral is set upon a hillside on the Katajanokka peninsula overlooking the city.



ST.PETERSBURG

One of the real highlights of our cruise was the visit to the Hermitage, the Tsar's former Winter Palace and four other buildings which house one of the world's premier art collections. Our guided tour visited the display rooms, which contain over three million art works, including paintings by DaVinci, Rafael, Monet, Rembrandt, Renoir - to name a few. Designed by Rastrelli, the Baroque Winter Palace boasts patterned parquet floors, ornate staircases, molded and decorated ceilings and gilded appointments. Unfortunately, the grand staircases were undergoing restoration, and we were crowded into a small space going up the stairs. The pictures below, taken previously show the staircase in all its glory.



We were taken through room after room, but there were 5 cruise ships docked, and it appeared that all the passengers were in the Hermitage with us! The tour groups were so tightly packed that they were actually overrunning each other.

Two of the most spectacular views were of the throne room and a long hall that rivaled one in the Vatican.



We passed works of a number of great masters, but it was difficult to get close to them. Many people had these tiny cameras with only a viewing screen, and it took them forever to get the picture framed properly. Kathy was annoyed by this, as she rightly felt she had as much right to have a turn at viewing a painting as someone else waving a camera around. At least in the pre digital days, people had the camera up to their eye instead of waving it in other people's faces.

I took a photo of 2 paintings that struck me, and yes, I use a viewfinder on my camera. One was a Rembrandt depicting the return of the Prodigal Son and the other a Monet titled Woman in the Garden at Sainte-Adresse

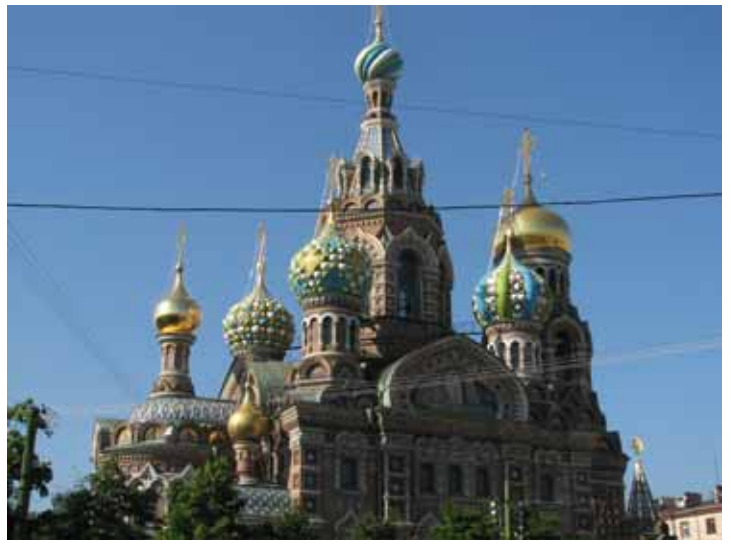


On our way back from the Hermitage, we went by the statue of Peter the Great and then stopped at St. Isaac's cathedral. The cathedral's massive central gold dome - one of the largest in the world - dominates the city skyline.



We also stopped at the cruiser Aurora - Now a museum on the west bank of the Neva, the armored cruiser Aurora fired her guns to signal the beginning of the Bolshevik Revolution.

We also stopped at the Church of the Savior on the Spilled Blood - This recently restored church sports a fantastic and ornate "Russian-style" exterior and is built on the site of the assassination of Tsar Alexander II.



After viewing the Aurora and the church, we drove past the 2 red rostral posts and the Peter and Paul fortress. The rostral posts were used as beacons for ships and they are still lit on occasion.



We took a 60-minute journey by small open-air boats travels the Fontanka River, the Moika River and the Neva River. Peter the Great conceived the Neva as the main thoroughfare of the city and from the beginning the river was included in the whole architectural ensemble.



TALLINN

Old Tallinn is closed to motor coaches, so we drove around the Old City's medieval walls, gates and watchtowers. We walked around the city walls and then walked up the road to visit the Alexander Nevsky



Cathedral. It was a typical Orthodox cathedral, with beautiful icons behind the altar.



That afternoon, I went to a wine tasting on the ship. One of the reasons was they were offering a taste of some very expensive Cabernet Sauvignons among others. We were first served champagne from Veuve Cliquot that a number of us agreed was lousy, and it was \$79 a bottle! We then tasted 2 Chardonnay wines, one from Napa Valley and the other from a prestigious vineyard in Burgundy.

The Napa wine was clearly better, and was also \$21 a bottle less expensive. Then we tasted the “big guns”; a Silverado Cabernet and the Opus I from the Mondavi-Rothschild vineyard. They were both nice wines, but the Silverado was a third the price of the Opus I. We were then told there was a “fire sale” on the Opus I, and we could have it for a mere \$129 a bottle instead of the usual \$169. What a deal!!! NOT!!!

After dinner, Kathy and I were sitting out on our veranda on our ship, watching the sun set over the water, and were quite surprised to see a rare event called a “green flash”! Green flashes are actually a group of Optical phenomena that occur shortly after sunset or before sunrise, when a green spot is visible, usually for no more than a second or two, above the sun, or a green ray shoots up from the sunset point.

The reason for a green flash lies in refraction of light (as in a prism) in the atmosphere. Conditions must be perfect and it’s rarely seen. It happened so quickly that I was not able to get a photo of it, but I have downloaded a picture from the internet that clearly shows the spot. We had seen this twice, once in all places in Ventura, California, and in Australia. This one was the brightest and longest lasting of the of the three we have seen. It was at 10:40 PM because we were so far North.



GDANSK

On the way to Gdansk, we stopped at Sopot, the summer capital of Poland this seaside resort featuring miles of beaches and the longest promenade pier on the Baltic. There was an interesting lighthouse on the beach there. After Sopot, we passed by Oliwa and its 13th-century cathedral.



Our guide led us a short walk to the Main Town's Green Gate. From the Gate, he pointed out sights of interest including the Long Wharf with its crane, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque buildings, and the Long Market. The oldest documented mention of the wooden port crane on the right was in 1367. What we saw, however, was reconstructed in the middle of the 15th century after a devastating fire devoured the original structure. The large crane was used to place masts on ships and to load cargo.



The buildings were very reminiscent of Amsterdam, and we wandered through the Long Market "window shopping". On the way back to the ship we you passed Gdansk Shipyards and Solidarity Square with its monument to the striking workers slain by the regime in 1970



There were some tables set up near our ship selling jewelry, and Kathy found a beautiful amber pendant and matching earrings.

We had a little excitement as we left port, and the passage we had to go through was 150 feet wide and the ship was 110 feet wide. The problem was that there was that the wind was blowing against the side of the ship pushing it sideways. The captain solved the problem the same way airplane pilots do. He headed for the upwind side and let the wind push the ship through the center of the channel!



SEA DAY

Today was a sea day, and we received an invitation to a special luncheon for long time Princes Cruise passengers. Unfortunately, a number of guests were no-shows for some reason. We had our picture taken with the captain and were given a copy. We sat with the hotel manager and 2 other couples and it was a very nice event.

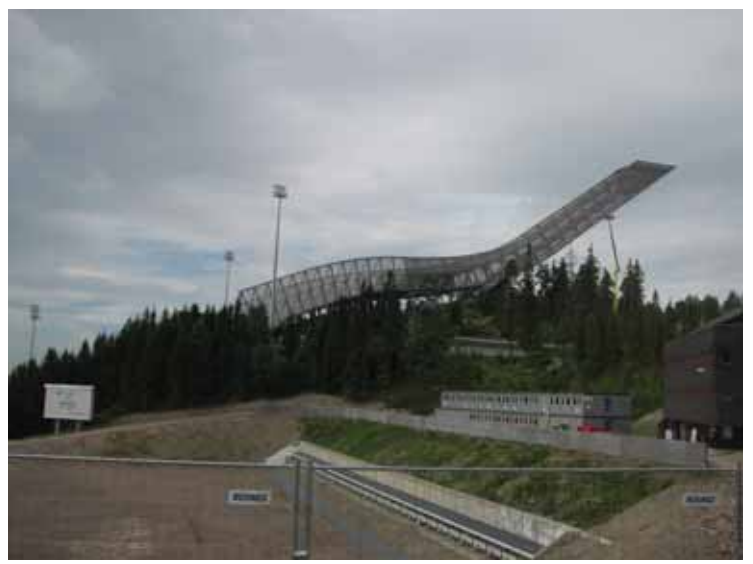
OSLO

We sailed up the Oslo fiord and docked at the edge of town. From our ship we could see the ski jump in the distance and also the small castle of King Oskar I.



Our first stop was at the Holmenkollen ski jump. Perched high above Oslo, Holmenkollen is the cradle of ski jumping and the site of the 1952 Olympic ski jumping competition. It is in the process of being rebuilt for future Nordic ski championships.

At the base of the ski jump, an enterprising person had installed a simulator similar to the ones used to train airline pilots. It had 2 axes of motion-roll and up and down. It simulated a ski jump off the hill, plus an Olympic downhill ski run. Watching from the outside, I could see how the people inside were getting bounced around!



Our next stop was at Vigeland Sculpture Park, Once considered controversial; the park is now one of Oslo's favorite attractions. Our guided walk visited the stone, iron and bronze sculptures of Gustav Vigeland. The sculptures depict a complete human life from birth to death. Fortunately, we started at the highest point, so it was easy to walk down as opposed to climbing all the stairs. Below is a classic picture of the “yellow umbrella”, although this one is orange. The sculpture at the right symbolizes the cycle of life.



There was a funny quote in a travel magazine about the pace of some tours. “Plainly we cannot keep up with joggers or speed walkers. The guide holding the umbrella with the duck’s head for a handle quickly disappears in the crowd when walking at a pace that must have been set by a marathon planner”.



The most striking sculpture is the Monolith which towers 46 high and is composed of 121 human figures rising towards the sky. This is meant to represent man's desire to become closer with the spiritual and divine. It portrays a feeling of togetherness as the human figures embrace one another as they are carried toward salvation.

The Monolith Plateau is a platform made of stairs that houses the Monolith totem itself. 36 figure groups reside on the elevation bringing with them the "circle of life" message



Below the monolith plateau is the Fountain which was fabricated from bronze and adorned with 60 individual bronze reliefs. Portraying children and skeletons in the arms of giant trees, the Fountain suggests that from death comes new life



There are 58 of the park's sculptures reside along the Bridge, a 328 foot long, 49 foot wide connection between the Main Gate and the Fountain. All are clad in bronze and contribute to the "Human Condition" theme of the park. Here visitors will find one of the parks more popular statues, the "Angry Boy as well as father and child playing



Kathy and I were really entranced by the sculptures, and could have spent the entire day in the park just looking at them.

After leaving the Vigeland Park, we visited the Viking Ship Museum. The museum is home to three Viking long boats uncovered during 19th-century, and early 20th-century excavations near Oslo fjord. In addition to the superbly crafted ships, the museum exhibits sleds, carts, jewelry and other artifacts found aboard the vessels.



As we left Oslo, we cruised down the fiord past the Oscarsborg Fortress. This gun battery was responsible for sinking the German cruiser *Blücher*. The ironic part of the story was that the guns were made by Krupp, a German company. The rest of the flotilla, seeing the explosions, mistakenly believed that the *Blücher* had hit mines. As a result, the flotilla reversed out of the narrows, thus ensuring that Oslo would not be invaded at dawn as intended. This delayed the invasion long enough to allow the Royal Family to escape. They also took all of the Norwegian gold with them to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Germans.



HOMEWARD BOUND

Based on our experience with SAS in Amsterdam, I was a little leery about the weights of our 4 checked bags. We brought a handy little luggage scale, and we juggled things around to get the weights down.

When we got to the airport, SAS just checked our bags through without even looking! We were glad we had printed out our boarding passes, as the check in line was quite long.

When we boarded the SAS flight to Dulles, I was surprised to see that we were in 2 seats-aisle and window. For some reason I thought we would be window and middle. The flight was not bad, but announcements were made in 3 languages. The funniest one we heard was "passengers should not sleep on the floor"!

The flights home and the layover at Dulles were uneventful, and we are now home for about 3 months to recover. This was the longest we have ever been away from home.

Even with the trials and tribulations along the way, which we always accept as part of traveling, it was a fantastic trip.

Kathy has now 8 more countries visited to her list, and I have 2 more.

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