

ADVENTURES IN EUROPE - 2007
31 Days, 9350 km 5 September – 6 October

5 (and 6) September 2007: British Airlines flight 0052 backed out of the gate in Seattle at 5:50 PM (17:50) right on time. Our 777 seemed rather old and bedraggled looking inside but the service was good and an exceptional tailwind shaved the flying time to London's Heathrow to just eight hours, twenty minutes!

Heathrow is a huge messy place- so congested that there was no available spot at the terminal when we arrived. We were forced to deplane far out on the tarmac and bussed to Terminal-4, the same terminal Laveta, Sharon, Russ and I arrived in the UK for our Scotland trip in 2004!

Between baggage claim, waiting for a van and London traffic, it took about two hours to reach our hotel- the *Cophthorne Tara* in *Scarsdale Place, Kensington, London*. Not looking like much on the outside, the lobby, restaurants, bars, shops and rooms were first rate. What's more *Trafalgar*, our tour company had left us a message at the desk about the upcoming tour. Although dead tired and with our clocks eight hours out of sync, we walked into town and ate our (lunch-dinner) at the *Sopranos* Restaurant on Kingston High Street. (only fair fish & chips but great pizza).

7 September (Friday): I managed to sleep from 21:00 until 06:30. As we were eight time zones from home, the day was one of rest and resynchronization. After breakfast we wandered out to Kensington and walked west as far as *Hyde Park*, stopping on the way at *St. Mary's Abbey*, a beautiful old church with an adjacent small cemetery. Some headstones dated back to 1742. It was a wonderfully peaceful spot right in the middle of London. Later that afternoon we walked around looking for a place to eat and found the *Café Rouge* where we enjoyed an early dinner on sidewalk tables in a beautiful courtyard setting. The weather was perfect and the food excellent.

8 September (Saturday): Up at 04:30 for a 05:15 bus to take us to *Dover*. Big mix up- No wake up call. No breakfast as promised and the bus was 45 minutes late. Taking Motorway M2 to *Drover* we passed through lush green English countryside.

But even with our late start, we managed to make the 10:30 ferry to *Calais*. Light fog accompanied our passage as well as numerous ships going and coming in both directions. We did have a good breakfast on the ferry (*The pride of Calais*) which took about an hour and a half for our channel transit. The port of Calais had that well worn look of seaports the world over- places where efficiency trumps beauty every time.

Our tour bus for the next 27 days was waiting for us in Calais and turned out to be a nearly new "Setra" which was wonderfully quiet and comfortable, though (as we would later discover) was cursed with flawed air conditioning control software. Our tour guide was an Italian named *Luigi Saba* and our driver another Italian- *Romolo*.

The first leg to Paris took about four hours and wound its way through a French countryside even more beautiful than I remembered from our 1967 trip when Jim and I were in the army and living in Germany with Laveta and Carol. The fields were green and the farmhouses and towns neat and clean. "Flanders Fields" was so beautiful! Hard to believe it was a famous WW1 killing ground.

The four lane *Autoroute* grew to six lanes as we approached Paris. Our Hotel: the *Renaissance La Dafénse*, located in the modern, western side of the city. The *Renaissance* is a new and beautiful hotel in an extraordinary setting of modern buildings. Ah, but the French do have a sense of style and class.

Straightaway, we headed downtown for a dinner on the *Champs Elysees* just a couple of blocks from the *Arch de triumph*- a great dinner in a great location. Afterwards we motored around the city and over to our boat for an evening ride up and down the *Seine*. The weather was clear and shirt-sleeve comfortable. As the sun set, the lights of the city brightened. The *Louver*, *Notre-Dame*, bridges and monuments were all illuminated... and rising above all, *Le Tour Eiffel*, decorated with thousands of lights. From its top, a rotating beacon scanned the night sky.

Lots of folks, mostly in pairs crowded the restaurants, walkways and river banks, walking, sitting, eating, dancing and romancing in this *The city of light*... surely the most beautiful city on Earth.

9 September (Sunday): Leaving our hotel, we spent about an hour and a half driving around the city viewing highlights and monuments. It was cloudy and the (Sunday morning) Paris streets were nearly empty. What a marvelous place! Around 10:00 we arrived at the Eiffel Tower and understood why Paris seemed deserted- everyone was here. After waiting in line for an hour or so we boarded an elevator and ascended to the second level at about 133 meters (400 or so feet). It was still cloudy but there were great views all around. Later, we walked down a block or so and bought a big sandwich and split it four ways. Then it was off to Versailles.

The town and palace of *Versailles* lies about 70 kilometers or so west of Paris. The town is beautiful and the palace, more so. *Jeanne Jolidt*, our Paris guide escorted us through a couple of dozen rooms that were open to the public- which was enough, since the palace is so large that one couldn't see all the rooms in a week. They were beautifully furnished and glided. Finally turning a corner, we arrived at the "Galerie des Glaces"- the famous *Hall of Mirrors*, 73 meters long with windows on one side and mirrors on the other with two dozen or so crystal chandeliers running the length of the room in tandem. It was like walking through a crystal. Afterwards we strolled around *Versailles's* extensive gardens. We ended the day sharing Pizza and wine in Jim and Carol's hotel room.

10 September (Monday): On the road again-south on Autoroute A-10 through countryside that reminded me of eastern Kansas except the curious absence of fencing and the fact that one seldom sees isolated farmhouses which instead tend to come in clusters of a few to a dozen or so houses (like a small village). Fields of wheat, corn and sunflowers stretched out to the horizon on both sides of the motorway.

After about an hour we came to *Chartres*, both the town and its famous gothic cathedral. The cathedral's size, stone artwork, and most of all its stained glass windows combine to produce a stunning piece of architecture where the bible is told in stone and glass.

Traveling down A10 near *Potiers* we stopped at an "Autogrill" for lunch then continued south to *Bordeaux*.

11 September (Tuesday): It started with Laveta and then hit Carol and Jim. By morning we found out that half the folks on our tour were vomiting and had diarrhea. Consensus of opinion went for blaming the Autogrill but over the next few days we discovered that it was contagious! None of the four of us got any sleep that night, but everyone boarded the bus the next morning. It was a very quiet ride to *Lourdes*. That afternoon only about half of our busmates were well enough to walk through town to the large complex that is Lourdes. Thousands of people were everywhere, walking around with large crosses, singing, praying, lighting candles, saying rosaries- and more wheelchairs than I'd ever seen in one place, all with people in them- I didn't see any empties! Laveta filled some bottles of Holy Water for a friend while I took photos. Jim stayed with Carol in their hotel room. She was weak and definitely dehydrated- For the second night I went to bed worried.

12 September (Wednesday): After breakfast in our Hotel, we took the somewhat improved Jim and Carol on a walk to the *Lourdes Cathedral*. It was early morning and the shops were mostly closed. The sky was clear and morning sunlight caught the surrounding hills. The great plaza was nearly empty- a contrast to yesterday afternoon. Out of time, we hurried back to the hotel before boarding the bus.

Heading west to *Pau* we stopped at its Cathedral, before motoring on to *Bayonne* and then *Biarritz* on the Atlantic coast. A beautiful resort town, *Biarritz* offers surf, sun and stunning views. It made us want to stay a week or so, but our destination was *Burgos* in Spain (Espnaia).

Climbing at first, the motorway flows upward into the mountains while the landscape changes slowly into pine covered hills. Descending, the change was more abrupt, revealing dry, nearly treeless rolling hills. We reached the city of *Burgos* around 3:30 in the afternoon.

Luigi dropped us off at the Burgos Cathedral for an hour and a half. There was a four euro charge to go in- surely the best bargain of the trip thus far. The building's now more of a museum than a church. The outside was imposing but the inside was astounding- with intricate carvings, beautiful paintings and other artwork. There was an incredible amount of gold leaf covering intricately carved altars- And the highlight, under the copula- the tomb of the great Spanish hero... *El Cid*.

Our Hotel, the "Puerto Burgos," turned out to be a four star hotel with five star bathrooms- bathrooms clean enough to use as operating rooms! Shiny black marble with lots of mirrored surfaces. I took lots of photos.

13 September (Thursday): At 08:00 we left *Burgos* and its beautiful toilettes and headed southwest towards *Madrid*. The countryside reminded me of the foothills in California's San Joaquin valley. Finally the road dropped down to the large and growing metropolis. Construction Cranes were everywhere. They should be Spain's official bird- there are so many of them. Our hotel was the *Holiday Inn*, in downtown *Madrid*- fairly new with large clean rooms and good views of the local areas from our 3rd story windows.

Jim was still feeling under the weather, so Laveta and I went to the *Prada* museum alone. Now the *Prada* is Spain's national art museum with a great many original masterworks. We were provided a knowledgeable guide who selected the five best paintings in the collection of over 800, and then spent time explaining why these five were so exceptional. It was a pleasant and educational few hours. I look at paintings differently now.

Later that afternoon Laveta, Carol and I found a Pharmacy just as it opened (after the normal afternoon two hour siesta when everything's closed).

Carol asked for something stronger than "Amodium AD". The pharmacist said "si" and showed us "Amodium Plus". We bought 2 boxes. Over the next couple of days we learned that it does more than just cure diarrhea- it cures going to the restroom completely!

14 September (Friday): The next morning Laveta, Carol and I took a walking tour of the highlights of *Madrid* ending at the palace where we met up with our tour guide and a rehydrated Jim (who was by now bathroom free).

We then left for *Toledo*, the real soul city of Spain. This ancient walled city is perched on a hill-top with its castle and cathedral still connected by a Roman bridge. The narrow streets were busy but clean. The cathedral is most impressive. I'm beginning to run out of descriptive adjectives, nouns and adverbs to describe the beauty of these churches.

Walking the narrow streets we did some shopping before finding a MacDonal'd's for lunch. The drive back to *Madrid* took a little more than an hour.

15 September (Saturday): We pulled out of our hotel about 08:00 and drove east on E-90 (Autovia AP-2) towards *Zaragoza* and *Barcelona* through a landscape that resembled the American southwest- only with high speed electric trains and countryside filled with wind turbines. The weather started out cloudy, clearing only slowly as we drove eastward. The flu-bug that's plagued our bus for the last four days seemed to have departed... Good riddance. As we approached the coast the hills became filled with trees. We stayed in *Barcelona* at another great hotel: the *Princesa Sofia*.

16 September (Sunday): Today we toured *Barcelona* and *Montserrat*. After a really good breakfast at the *Princesa* we boarded our coach. "Maria del Mare" was our local guide. Heading first to the waterfront, she showed us the imposing *Mirador de Colon* (the statue of Christopher Columbus on its tall pedestal). Next was the Cathedral of *Barcelona*- but the highlight was Gaudi's famous

Cathedral- the *Sagrada Familia*, a wondrously strange and beautiful church that's been under construction since the 1920's. Next was Antonio Gaudi's just as strange public park, the weird, exotic *El Parc Guell* with its famous colorful benches- the whole thing supported on classical columns some of which were angled.

Montserrat (the serrated mountain) overlooking Barcelona was last on our list for the day. There were great views north to the *Pyrenees* and into France. The monastery with its famous black Madonna was impressive. The whole mountain though was overrun with people.

We had another great dinner in downtown Barcelona at a neat place called "Monchos". Arriving at 19:15, we were really, early since Spaniards, like other southern Europeans tend to eat no earlier than 20:00. The restaurant was a kind of high class buffet with an extraordinary variety of dishes, especially seafood.

17 September (Monday): We left Barcelona for *Nice* (France) taking C-32 towards *Girona*, then E-15 into *Montipeller*. As we drove East and North the land became more forested with "Cork Oak" trees. We then cut through the edge of the *Pyrenees*, which appeared off our left. E-15 was a good, fast, six lane motorway with light traffic. Back now in France we had a quick lunch made up of breakfast leftovers. Then near Montpellier we crossed the *Rhone River* just north of *Marseille* in the region of *Provenance*.

All the while, we passed time listening to Luigi telling jokes, personal stories and absorbing history lessons on Egyptian, Jewish and Gregorian calendars, summer homes of Renaissance popes, how Plate Tectonics created the Alps and the art of *Gogan*. Luigi can hold us spellbound for long periods. I've never before met anyone with a broader knowledge of the humanities or a better teacher of history- A remarkable personality!

We pulled into *Cannes* in the afternoon and drove around. It was very crowded... some sort of exhibition going on. Walking around, we found it a beautiful, but very exclusive town.

Proceeding next to *Niece*, a larger metropolis but (I think) just as pretty. Driving down the *Promenade des Anglais*, I couldn't help but notice the young and beautiful topless sunbathers. Ah- but the French are so civilized!

Our small hotel, The *Hotel Massena* was right downtown within two blocks of a hundred restaurants. And while not as fancy as others we've stayed, it does have a great location and free Wi-Fi. We walked to dinner near the beach at the *La Gustave-5* (right on the main drag) later walking back through town to our hotel. Though it was around 21:30, the town was alive with people and most restaurants and shops were open.

18 September (Tuesday): We had a break today- didn't have to get going until 9:00. After breakfast we headed for a medieval hilltop town called *Saint Paul de Vence*. The views from the town were beautiful all around and the town itself well maintained and filled with artists shops. The girls bought a few things while Jim and I took pictures. True to form so far on this trip- the weather was perfect. The *French Riviera* is a quaint, modern and classy place (all at the same time) but particularly beautiful as one drives up into the foothills- magnificent villas with magnificent views. Back in our hotel that afternoon the girls did laundry while I download photos and worked on the journal. Jim did internet banking. We walked around town in that evening after dinner- a time when everything comes alive.

19 September (Wednesday): Pulling out of *Niece* we arrived in the *Principality of Monaco*, another crowded and beautiful spot. After parking underground and taking escalators and elevators to the "surface" we arrived near the Maritime Museum and walked from there. We went into the cathedral where Prince Rainer and Princess Grace are buried, and viewed the Palace grounds with its fine view of a harbor filled with monstrously expensive yachts.

We left Monaco, reentering France for maybe 25 kilometers before crossing into Italy, proceeding west and then south on the *Autostrade*.

The four lane motorway cuts its way through the mountains to the port city of *Genoa* then continues tunneling through more hillsides and bridging short, steep valleys with very tall bridges. We didn't count bridges but Carol counted 182 tunnels- some of them a couple of kilometers long!

Stopping in Pisa, we viewed the famous *Leaning Tower* and sounding grounds. But it was late in the day and so crowded that we didn't even try to get tickets for the tower or the church. In any case, all four of us had been there before. Laveta and I had even climbed the tower back in 2004- so the day wasn't a big loss.

Leaving the Pisa our coach edged its way into *Tuscany* proper, arriving at our hotel *Grand hotel La Pache* in *Montecatini* a little after 18:30.

The 127 year old (five star) hotel had hallways wide and tall enough to drive our coach through. For our 20:00 (late for me) dinner we walked a few blocks to a local restaurant where Luigi had made arrangements. The meal was outstanding, but went on and on. We staggered back to the hotel replete but sleepy.

20 September (Thursday): We ate breakfast in the hotel under the frescoed ceiling of the grand dining room. It was easy to imagine Mussolini or his fascist henchman dining in this very room. The drive from *Montecatini* to *Florence (Firenze)* was short but upon arriving we were obliged to endure an obligatory shopping stop, made bearable by the presence of restrooms. Our guide had tickets for the cathedral of *Santa Croce* which was undergoing refurbishment inside. The burial monuments of Galileo, Michelangelo Dante and Machiavelli adorn the walls- great minds that could hardly have imagined that nearly 600 years later their names would reside in computer spell-check programs (which is how I got them right).

The walking tour proper began with *Piazza Della Signoria*, always beautiful but this morning- overrun with tourists. From there we walked to the *Piazza Del Duomo*, where the massive basilica greeted us with its beautiful facade, tower and famous dome. It too was awesome, though plagued with tourists. We then walked to the *Galleria*

Dell'Accademia where we saw Michelangelo's "David". Walking from there, we re-boarded our bus for Assisi. Thankfully Lougi rerouted our coach high into the hills above Florence where we could overlook the whole city. It was a marvelous view! The next stop was *Assisi*, where we arrived in early afternoon.

The *Cathedral of Assisi* is built over the very small church of *St. Francis* which resides inside (protected from everything but tourists). The Cathedral was beautiful but sadly no picture taking was allowed.

Ascending upward a few hundred meters or so, we arrived at the old town of Assisi. Our hotel: the *Windsor Savoia* a charming small establishment with an extraordinary view (our rooms overlooked the valley below). It's located next to the remarkable *Basilica De San Francesco* which we visited late that afternoon. This church "complex" is really four churches- one on top of the other! We started in the bottom one where the tomb of St. Francis resides and preceded upward into ever larger "cathedrals" each one more beautiful and extraordinary than the one before- Never have I seen anything like it!

21 September (Friday): We left the hillside town of Assisi, the road winding down to the plain below where we picked up the motorway south, passing east of Rome to *Naples*, our first destination. Naples is a port town, large, crowded and dirty- at least the parts we saw. Following a labyrinth of roads, crowded with trucks we found the ferries and in particular, the one going to the *Isle of Capri*.

It was only a short wait until we boarded our jet boat which was about 30-40 meters long and had seen a lot of use but proved *very* fast and comfortable. The weather was again perfect as we headed west for our 45 minute trip to the island. *Mt Vesuvius* loomed on our left, thousands of houses dotting its slopes.

Capri approached quickly, green, steep sided with some vertical cliff faces. There was only one town, though it was divided into lower and upper sections connected by a "Funicular" a cable car

that went a couple of hundred or so meters to the upper town. Going up- as we later discovered was the easy direction. The upper town was pretty and reminded me of Greek islands in the Aegean. Lugi took us to a beautiful park having extraordinary views of the island, rocks, sea and sky. The way down however was unpleasant indeed.

Cueing up to the *Funicular* we were herded down stairs, into hallways, rooms and narrow doorways- everyone fighting to keep their place in line. It was an experience none of us would care to repeat.

Survivors now of the Funicular- we found a bar with an outside table near the ferry terminal where we recovered, drinking our beer, wine and cola, amazed at the mobs of people. An hour or so later we boarded the ferry for *Sorrento* (our coach had gone there with our luggage while we were in Cpri).

A small bus was waiting for us at the terminal and whisked us up a narrow, very steep, winding road to our hotel on the outskirts of town.

22 September (Saturday): I woke up at one AM with diarrhea and a knot in my stomach that got progressively worse. By five in the morning I was puking my guts out. That bug that I thought I'd escaped earlier in the week found me. The last bout of vomiting occurred 10 minutes before I boarded the buss for a miserable ride to *Pompeii*. Wanting to see the ruins, I managed to walk half way through before turning back to the entrance where I waited for Laveta, Jim and Carol. Re-boarding the coach we took off for Rome and our downtown hotel just a few blocks from the Coliseum. I was too sick to see Rome that night- the *Pantheon*, *Piazza Navona*, Forum overlook, but I'd seen them three years previously. Laveta said they had a good time and that dinner was great- though it was a long day.

23 September (Sunday): I woke up feeling empty but otherwise fine! It was a good thing since we were off again by 8:00 to see the *Catacombs* and *St. Paul's Basilica*- very, very large and of unusual design with its twin rows of columns. Later, we found the *Coliseum* and the *Roman Forum*

crowded- people, people everywhere. We spent an hour inside *St. Peters Basilica* with its usual overwhelming awesomeness. The crowds seem to shrink inside its massive interior (and anything that shrinks crowds is fine with me). In the evening, we drove to our restaurant for a great meal with lots of entertainment and laughs. Finally, we went to the *Trevi Fountain* where the girls tossed their coins. Again, it was wall to wall people, pick-pockets and illegal immigrants hawking trinkets. The fountain is truly beautiful though, especially at night.

24 September (Monday): We hit the road by 07:00 in order to get to the *Sistine Chapel/Vatican Library* where we were scheduled early. The line was short by Vatican standards. Laveta and I had seen both before but our local guide was better than the one we'd had three years before and even saw some extra rooms. Of course, the Sistine Chapel is a must-see, extraordinary work of art. A couple of hours later, we were back on the motorway north, passing west of Florence and into the *Apennines* where we encountered tunnel after tunnel. Later the mountains slowly flattened into a green plain... farm country.

Crossing the causeway we arrived at Venice around 17:30 and immediately boarded our Gondolas (six to a boat). The early evening was beautiful as we floated through Venice drinking complementary champagne and taking photos, then transferred to water taxies- where we passed under the *Rialto Bridge* then into the Grand Canal. Moonlight and city lights reflected on the canal as we headed to *Lido Island* (about an hour from Venice) and our hotel the *Mabapa* (Momma Bambino Papa) had a strange name but was a wonderful little hotel. Dinner began at 20:00 and lasted about an hour and a half. We hit the bed exhausted but happy.

25 September (Tuesday): 07:50 and we took another water taxi back to Venice proper where we walked and shopped from *Piazza San Marco* to the *Rialto* and back, rejoined our group to do the expected glass blowing tour. Then it was back to the

water taxis for a 45 minute trip to *Burano Island*, where resides a wonderful little multicolored town- much like an un-crowded miniature Venice. We had a light Italian lunch (with wine) that went on and on and on. Indeed, it was so filling that the four of us skipped dinner.

26 September (Wednesday): The end of our good weather streak was announced around 02:00 with thunder, lightening and a downpour, which stopped only for a few minutes as we boarded our water-taxi at 08:40. The storm returned then with a renewed vigor that continued as we transferred to our coach an hour later. Roads leaving Venice were awash in water with cars leaving wakes. Parking lots and fields were flooded. There were accidents galore and the traffic- bumper to bumper. The rain blessedly stopped around 10:00 and the cloud wrapped Alps materialized on three sides. Crossing west of *Trieste* we headed northeast on E-55. A few hours later we crossed into *Austria (Osterreich)*. The sky never cleared but at least the rain finally stopped. By 14:30 the temperature dropped to 6 deg. C.

We slowly made our way down from the mountains. No more tunnels! The temperature warmed to 13 deg. C. and the *Autobahn* straightened out. The countryside is partially wooded farmland, green and beautifully manicured- everything neat with no trash anywhere.

Arriving at our hotel, the *Renaissance Wien* in downtown *Vienna (Wien)* Austria, we had only an hour's time to clean up before we found ourselves headed out of town- deep into the Vienna woods bound for a special "wine village" restaurant. The trip took over an hour. (It was getting dark and we started thinking we might need our passports) but sure enough we immersed from the trees high on a hillside, and in the darkness we could see all of Vienna sparkling on the plains below. And a couple of hundred meters above was an illuminated monument to the Christian victory over the Islamic invaders at the gates of Vienna in 1683.

Our destination: the *Wingut Heuriger Reinperrecht (Winzer des Wahres)* which has been in business for over 300 years. Their white, house-wine

comes from village grapes. The food- especially the Sauerkraut-Potato-Cucumber salad was fantastic! There was music and Luigi sang Italian songs... and of course being full of wine- we joined in. And though we were late getting back to the hotel, it was a great evening.

27 September (Thursday): Rain! We boarded our coach at 08:00 and headed the *Schönbrunn Palace*, the *Hapsburg* family's residence for generations, and one of the greatest royal residences of Europe. And it was quite a residence! Sadly photography was not allowed but we were escorted through twenty one highly ornate rooms. Since it was raining hard, we drove around town rather than do a walking tour of the old city center. Even saw the coffee house that Sigmund Freud favored when he was in town. Crossing the *Danube* we saw the modern city, and then were bused downtown for more excursions. Vienna is a beautiful town with a rich history. Too bad the weather made sightseeing soggy.

Because of the rain, six of us decided to return to the hotel. (It was a good down day to get caught up on laundry, this journal, cleaning up and sleep). Since we were leaving the group, Luigi bought us tickets for the U-Bahn (subway) where we took the U4 line to within a couple of blocks of our hotel.

By 16:30 the sky had cleared and the Drakes were hungry, so we all walked down the street to a local restaurant: *Valenta's* a little family run place. It was empty. (We were early). *Stiegl*, the local beer was good and the food- more than good. It turned out to be one of the best meals of the trip. And the atmosphere was great. We were treated like family.

28 September (Friday): It was raining when we left Vienna, though luckily it stopped after an hour or so. Heading west towards *Salzburg*, we passed through farmland surrounded by mountains, the higher peaks under a dusting of fresh snow. Salzburg itself is a large picturesque alpine town (small city might be more appropriate. Luigi arranged for a local guide to show us around. It was cold (10 deg. C), with a slight breeze and overcast with a

ceiling low enough to block out the tallest peaks. Didn't make for great photo's... but at least it wasn't raining.

Walking around the old town we saw many places used in filming "The Sound of Music," had a great potato soup for lunch then boarded our coach for *Berchtesgarden*. There we had to change busses for special ones to take us to *Obersalzberg*. We proceeded higher and higher up a steep, winding single lane road to the mountain top and the *Kehlsteinhaus* (The Eagle's Nest) Hitler's Bavarian redoubt for high level meetings. His personnel residence was a little lower on the mountain and was destroyed by allied bombing but the Eagles Nest survived untouched and the structure unchanged (the only high level Nazi building to survive the Third Reich).

At road end we walked through a tunnel about 200 meters long, then took an elevator upward for a couple hundred meters more. Like everything else, the elevator was built in 1937-1938. It held 45 people and had gleaming copper walls and ceiling. The building it entered is now leased by the state as a restaurant but the structure, windows, light fixtures and such are all original! There was even a small room for Eva Braun. The view was superlative but the clouds kept lowering, enveloping the peaks and finally ourselves. We took the last bus down at 17:00.

Our middling hotel (in Salzburg) had hard beds and terrible pillows. I didn't get much sleep and 06:30 came early...

29 September (Saturday): On our way out of Salzburg we stopped at the *Basilika zu Lieben Frau* a beautiful "Rocco" style church, gilded and bright. The rain had stopped and the sun was warm again as we arrived in *Innsbruck*. Wow- the town is just gorgeous! It was mostly a day of exploring on our own. Innsbruck was full of musicians, artists and tourists and everyone having a good time. With clear weather the surrounding Alps seemed close and the five hundred year old buildings were well maintained and beautifully painted. We had our "bag lunch" at the "Inn" river and then shopped around. We also spent time

wandering around the celebration party for 100th year anniversary of the Innsbruck fire department. Everyone was having a good time. Our coach met us at 14:30 and we headed for, *Garmish* and our destination- *Oberammergau*.

On the way, we stopped in a very small Tyrolean town by the name of *Seefeld in Tirol* to pick up the rest of our bus-mates. These mountain towns and countryside in general are clean beyond the imagining of North Americans. The highways, farms, farmhouses and towns are spotless- every single one. There are no plastic bottles, papers, shredded tires to be found anywhere. No Junk at all! And everything is neat and organized- farm implements, cord-wood... everything! How beautiful. How extraordinary!

By 17:00 we arrived in the town of *Oberammergau* at the *Wittlesback Hotel*, a small but very nice place right in the middle of this small town. We even had a nice deck with a view. We ate in the hotel dinning room at an early 19:00. Another great day.

30 September (Sunday): We didn't have to board our coach until 10:00. Great! Laveta I and Carol sat off to find the Passion Play Theater but naturally stopped at all the store windows. Lucky for me it was early on a Sunday morning and nothing was open. We met only a few early risers like ourselves. The air was pleasantly cool, the sky partly clear and sun was striking the surrounding peaks.

Our trip to *Lucerne, Switzerland* routed us through many tunnels- one 14 kilometers long. Because it was an especially long one, there were special minimum/maximum speed limits and mandatory (long) distances between vehicles. The Swiss are working on a 50 kilometer tunnel for a new high speed train. It won't be long before you'll be able to take high speed trains between most major cities in Western Europe. In any case the Autobahn was expensive (they bill you electronically) but very smooth and clean. And nearly always, at a respectable distance beyond the roadway- there are paved bicycle trails

The next stop was *Liechtenstein* (*Furstentum Liechtenstein*) a small principality like Monaco but a little larger. It was certainly a pretty place. We stopped for a lunch break a couple hundred meters below Liechtenstein castle. About three minutes after pulling out, we were in Switzerland again. The language stayed the same (German) as did the road signs. The road slowly lost altitude until we arrived in *Lucerne* (population about 60,000) at one end of a beautiful sub-alpine lake surrounded by mountains. Actually Lucerne resides at a surprisingly low altitude of about 500 meters. They even grow grapes nearby. Our hotel is the *Radisson*- right downtown near the rail station. The hotel's only about a year old and we have absolutely gorgeous rooms.

1 October (Monday): We boarded our coach for a one kilometer trip to the old town, where we viewed the Lion Monument also known as *The Dying Lion of Lucerne*, carved into a large natural rock face- a very impressive work of art. Then it was on to downtown for shopping. But instead of shopping we spent most of our time walking around town and taking photos. After a couple of hours we and our bus mates enjoyed a boat ride around the lake. By now the sun was shining brightly and with no wind the temperature was perfect. We motored by Waggoner's (the composer's) home while sipping beer and wine. Alpine peaks covered in snow and ice surround much of Lake Lucerne and the peaks, water, alpine meadows, beautiful city (and wine) combined to produce a memorable experience indeed.

After the boat ride, we were bussed to a cable car station and boarded our lift (4 to a cable car) for a trip up *Mount Pilatus*, 2472 meters in height and just on the edge of town. The first cable car took us about half way gliding just above tree tops and meadows. This area is quite a hiking paradise. It was so quiet we could hear the sound of creeks, waterfalls and... cattle bells. There were many trails and lots of hikers. Then we had to change cable car systems to one that held about 14 passengers for the final lift to the top. Our surroundings became more and more alpine as we ascended.

Near the top there was just rock and a little snow. The view was fantastic in all directions and the temperature about 9 deg C. with only a light wind. In the sun it was quite comfortable. Eating our lunch on a picnic table, we watched hang gliders launching themselves into the air less than a hundred meters away.

The cog train down the back side of the mountain was less steep than our ascent on the cable car but still in places a 48% grade! Beautiful views here also. Our coach was at the bottom to meet us. This was one of the best excursions of the trip. We ate in the hotel dining room around 19:15.

2 October (Tuesday): We encountered fog shortly after we departed Lucerne (around 07:30). More tunnels greeted us. Upon exiting the longest one we found the fog had dissipated and the sun had returned. Taking a 20 km jog on E25, E-60 into France to avoid traffic, we passed through the region of *Alice-Lorraine* before taking E-36 back into Germany. This of course was the location of the famed Maginot Line- and though I looked hard, I saw no remains. The land flattened out as we continued north, mountains of the Black forest hovering on our right-hand skyline- neither advancing nor retreating. The clouds returned.

Stopping in *Freiberg* for a break we took in its gothic cathedral and bought some *Bratwurst and Brochen* in the well stocked farmers market next to the church. It was great- just like we remembered.

Traffic increased as we traveled north on E-35 to *Heidelberg* where we stopped for lunch. Heidelberg's not large but is pretty with the ruins of a large castle looming above the town. Lunch turned out to be a disaster as the meal was so late coming, we were forced to get it "to go" then hurried to meet our bus. It was *Bratwurst and Sauerkraut* in humongous quantity. I thought we wouldn't have to eat again for a week.

Transferring to E-61, our coach continued on to *Saint Goar* for a *Rhine* cruise downriver (north) to the village of *Boppard*. The sky was cloudy and hazy, but (a big but) it was not raining. Our river boat: the "Loreley" was at least 30m long and had

three decks. The captain could (and did) turn her 180 degrees right in the middle of the very crowded river. There was lots of commercial barge traffic and trains ran frequently on both banks. Lugi said that this was the prettiest part of the river. There were castles and photogenic villages on both sides. Although it was late in the afternoon the sky was very hazy; poor conditions for good photography. After an hour or so we docked in Boppard where our coach had been driven ahead was waiting for us.

Continuing another 30 minutes, we arrived at our hotel: the "Mercure" in *Koblenz*. Laveta, Carol and Jim said the buffet dinner in the hotel was very good but I was still full of Bratwurst and just had a salad and coffee.

3 October (Wednesday): The hotel's buffet breakfast was also good, especially the butter beans in tomato sauce! The day started out cloudy as we drove north following the Rhine. At *Remagen*, Luigi pointed out one of the concrete foundations of the famous bridge (miraculously found intact by advancing Americans in 1945). Passing through Bohn, we saw lots of empty embassy buildings- leftovers from moving the German capital back to Berlin after the cold war. Making a stop in Cologne for an hour we saw the magnificent interior of the great gothic cathedral before crossing into Holland around noon.

Arriving in *Amsterdam*, we immediately headed on a walking tour in the old part of town- including of all things the famous *red light district*! Laveta and Carol were amazed. (Hell- I was amazed).

This city is filled with bicycles, so many that there's hardly room to park them all. It seems everyone rides. Maybe that's one reason the population looks so trim and healthy. After the walk we boarded a glass topped canal boat and for over an hour motored through town, at one point passing the wartime home of *Ann Frank*, the Jewish girl who wrote her famous diary while hiding from the Nazis. The building is now a museum

Amsterdam is a water city in the same way that Venice is, though it's not as clean or orderly. It's

seems more a working town with tourists than a tourist town with workers. Graffiti was everywhere as were people, going and coming about their business with seeming deliberation. Our hotel was on the edge of town so we were bused back to the city center for our "going away" dinner. This was the last day of the tour even though the four of us still had two nights in London before flying home. It was a nice restaurant and most of us ate and drank a little more than we should have. There was lots of laughter re-boarding the coach.

4 October (Thursday): Heavy overcast accompanied us on our drive to Calais. Our route took us through *Antwerp, Belgium*. Bypassing *Brussels* we headed west-northwest for *Oostende, Dunkirk* and finally the Ferry terminal in Calais. The sky stayed overcast with limited visibility making for a dreary countryside but at least it didn't rain.

As we approached Calais the sky began clearing, a wonderful development that continued as we crossed the channel. Approaching Dover and the English coast- the white cliffs greeted us, sunlit and beautiful. It took about 2 hours to reach our hotel in London (Jurys Clifton Ford Hotel, 47 Wellbeck St.) not a great location and *not* a good hotel. In the early evening we walked a block to a rather strange pub, "The Duke of York" where we ended up eating upstairs (they had to turn on the lights up on the second floor where there were empty tables) but the beer and food and service was great!

5 October (Friday): We signed up for a half day bus tour of London which began at 08:15 from the hotel lobby. The last bus tour we took of London was in 1968 (when Jim and I were in the army) and the girls went with us. This tour took us to see the standard things- Buckingham palace, Parliament, Big Ben, London Bridge, Scotland yard, Harrods etc. Sadly I wasn't able to go inside Westminster Abbey. Still, we saw a lot and our guide, though a little weird was very adept at getting us to the right place at the right time for good photos.

London seemed the most crowded and busy city of our tour. It's certainly the melting pot of Europe, probably the world. I've never seen anything like it. New York must have been like this a hundred years ago. Now- how does that definition for *Melting Pot* go: "Those on the bottom get burned... and the scum floats to the top". True or not, the UK has a serious immigration problem. I pessimistically wish them well.

The tour ended at *Harrods* and we were on our own getting back to the hotel. We ended up taking one of those red Double Decker London busses- which got us within a few blocks of the hotel. We were confused for a while- but managed (with help from friendly Londoners) to arrive safe and sound... which called for another pint of ale. Of course we also returned to "Duke's" at 18:00 for dinner. By now we're old friends. Ah, but the Brits are friendly folks. And of course our luck held again- the weather on our last touring day was mild and sunny- perfect.

6 October (Saturday): Well, we didn't have to get up early. Our flight (BA0049) was scheduled for 15:05 and we were set to be picked up at the hotel between 11:15 and 11:45. The bus came at 11:30 and took a little over an hour to get to Heathrow. Getting into the airport was easy- getting the plane off the ground- well that was something else again. The cleaning service had left "stuff" on the plane and so we had to wait in the "Jetway" until they were called to remove it- a long 45 minutes. Then ground control halted aircraft movement for another 20 minutes or so followed by crowded runways etc.... we were an hour and a half late getting off. Our old 747 used up all the runway, shaking and rumbling like its tires were out of balance, but finally, with great effort... we were airborne. Time to SeaTac- nine and a half hours- then University Place and home.

Afterthoughts:

This was my fourth time in Europe. Three of those times were within the last five years. Western Europe always leaves me favorably impressed. I like the way its member countries build things for

keeps. Nearly all homes and apartments are stone, brick or reinforced concrete. They use wood for roofs and trim but not for structure. I'd guess that 99% of the telephone poles in Europe are concrete- same for railroad ties. Buildings and infrastructure there *won't* need rebuilding 50 or 150 years from now. It makes damn good sense to me. We saw very large wind turbines in a great many places. Europeans seem very concerned with the environment and evidence that concern by spending money preserving it.

In mountainous terrain their motorways tend to go through tunnels and over bridges, rather than the American way of removing mountainsides to grade the roadway. Roads built the European way don't leave big scars on the landscape as they wind through the mountains- plus they are easier to maintain in winter.

I didn't see any diesel locomotives in Europe. All trains were electric and the rails must have been welded because I didn't hear the click-click of rail joints. High speed trains (started in France) are going in everywhere! We saw new lines under construction in Spain and Switzerland. On two occasions we were overtaken on by an HST that happened to be running parallel to our motorway. It was something to see- since they travel about 300 km/hr (186 mph).

Of the countries we visited, France deserves special praise. To begin with it's a large country (for Europe anyway). It has mountains including the tallest in Europe, two coastlines (Atlantic and Mediterranean) forests, vineyards, farmland and coastline. To those things the French add a quality that's hard to describe- but you know it when you see it. It's an esthetic appreciation and a sense of refinement and *class* that the French build into their man-made environment. Esthetically pleasing appearance, behavior and lifestyle is evidenced to a greater degree in France than anywhere else I've ever visited. Yes, the French are sometimes aloof and disdainful... but they have an excuse. To them the world outside must seem rather crude.

We traveled 9350 km (5780 miles) and saw hardly any evidence of poverty with the exception of southern Italy- particularly in Naples.

In any case there was less poverty than one would expect to see on a comparable road trip in the US.

There is a great deal of graffiti in Europe. The worst by far was in Berlin (previous trip) though Naples is a good runner up. Switzerland, Bavaria and Austria have the least.

While we all had our favorite cuisines, the food was good everywhere.

Watching the Netherlands countryside glide by my coach window toward the end of the trip I began to realize how much time and wealth America has squandered lately. Europe seems to be using new technology everywhere and building infrastructure designed to last.

The motorways, while expensive to use are smooth and relatively un-crowded. And everything seemed well maintained.

America, I believe has been asleep. Much of the world is moving ahead while we're stuck in a time warp- spending our wealth and energy trying to mold the nations of world into our own image (whether they like it or not).

But I digress... The European Union does have some serious problems, Immigration being one of them. Europeans will learn (if they haven't already) that there's a hidden cost for cheap salads, nannies and waiters. Also, the EU regulation engine will go on cranking out more regulations for everything- until the economy chokes on it. Right now its citizens find it easy to give up little personal choices and freedoms for the public good... Of course, that's how it begins.

Finally- *There are not enough toilets in Europe* (and a few of those are just holes in the floor)! Those EU regulators might try regulating that one. An *Empty Bladder Initiative* to install toilets in public places would also solve another great EU problem- high unemployment.

The Tour:

Overall, our tour company- *Trafalgar*, provided very good service. Europe is expensive and coach touring is a cost effective way to see it. But living from a suitcase for thirty-one days isn't easy and the days can be long, some from six in the morning until nine or ten at night. If Trafalgar would cut

the time they allow for shopping, an hour or more a day could be saved. But then there are lots of folks who like to shop.

Hotels charge so much for laundry that it's just as cheap to buy new clothes! But washing clothes by hand in the bathtub works quite well on two day stops (you need time for them to dry).

Our fellow travelers were mostly from Australia and New Zealand with some Canadians and Americans. They were a fun group, courteous and always on time. We got along fine- which was good thing since we were with them every day for a month. Actually meeting people from different walks of life and from different countries is one of the neat things about coach touring.

Our tour director was a sixtyish, British-Italian named *Luigi Saba*. Luigi looked after us like a mother hen. No problem was ever too small or too large for Luigi. In one case a fellow traveler thought they would need to go to the hospital for a day or so to get rehydrated (from the flu). Luigi volunteered to buy their train tickets for them so they could reconnect with the tour at a later stop. Turns out it wasn't necessary but it was normal for practice for Luigi. His energy was boundless- I don't know how he ever found time to sleep. He possessed an incredible memory and his knowledge of today's Europe and of European history was encyclopedic. He spoke six languages and I'm sure he was fluent in all of them. More than once, I'd watch him simultaneously handle two conversations, smoothly shifting from English, Spanish, Italian, French or German. He loved to sing (in any language) and he had a good voice. I've never met anyone more likeable or fun to be around. To be on one of his tours is to experience something very, very special.

C. L. Williamson

October 2007