

## Travels Across Europe

I have always dreamed of traveling to Europe to experience both the incredible history and beauty. Over the years my husband Terry and I had talked about such a trip and finally, in early 2004 decided we had talked enough and that it was time to take action. The destination for this trip would be Northern Europe and we decided to visit via cruise ship. Having cruised before we liked the idea of a “home base” as you’re not constantly moving from hotel to hotel, and you have the choice of booking tours or going out on your own. We christened our adventure a “sampler tour” where we could get a sense of many different places and plan future visits to those we wanted to see more of.

For both of us it was a chance to explore some of our past. Growing up as part of a career Air Force family Terry had been born in Germany, and lived there again for three years in the late 1960s. A highpoint for him would be the visit to Berlin where as a child he had witnessed the divisiveness of the Berlin Wall at the legendary Check Point Charlie. With the transformation of the last 15 years he was anxious to see how Berlin had fared under reunification. For my part, my father’s relatives were Germans who had gone to Russia by invitation of Catherine the Great in an effort to teach better farming methods. They stayed around 150 years and the two-day stop in St. Petersburg would offer insights into my own heritage.

Seventeen days in Europe is just barely grazing the surface but it’s a start. We immersed ourselves in history that spans hundreds of years, saw places of breathtaking beauty, and met fascinating people from all over the world. Even such a relatively short trip changes your perspective, as you become acutely aware that history affects all of us and that as people, we share more similarities than differences no matter where we call home. It was a glorious experience and Europe will most certainly be a return destination.

### July 15: Day Before Departure

With the combination of Terry’s meticulous organization and lists, plus many conversations with cruise groups on the Internet, we are packed and ready to sail. Even better, we’ve been so stringent about bringing clothes that mix and match that we have plenty of room to spare. We won’t have to lug stuffed suitcases through airports like over-burdened saddle horses *and* we’ll have room for the treasures collected in our travels. As the sun sets on our last day at home, the excitement of new discoveries and adventures are beginning to build.

### July 16: Friday

We’re off! Much to our surprise, going through airport security in Minneapolis/St. Paul is far easier and faster than when I left for Providence, RI in June. Our luggage is checked clear through to Copenhagen, meaning we won’t go through Customs until we arrive in Europe. Sitting in the airport people watching is always fascinating, particularly observing people’s various choices in clothing. You see everything here from flip-flops, T-shirts, and shorts to the more formal attire of business suits and ties. Today will be a *very* long day for us, so in the name of comfort we’ve dressed in loose-fitting slacks and tops. I imagine some of these people are comfortable, but I just don’t see how that can be possible for any woman tromping through an airport wearing kitten heels. Watching a number of women barely able to walk or even keep their shoes on, I’m amazed at their choices.

In the news today, Domestic Diva Martha Stewart was sentenced after being found guilty in March of lying to prosecutors about whether her stock broker had provided her with insider information to sell her ImClone stocks. Martha’s sentence includes five months Federal prison time, followed by several months’ home confinement and probation. As we wait in the lounge for our flight, the media replays Martha’s speech to supporters outside the courthouse every half hour and it’s the topic of the day here at the airport.

### July 17: Stockholm Layover

It’s odd how awake we both feel after little or no sleep. Departing both Minneapolis and Chicago the flight was delayed due to heavy traffic. The concept of “rush hour” applies to air travel as well, which meant cueing up behind 20 jets at O’Hare and sending us off about an hour behind schedule.

SAS (Scandinavian Airline System) is quite the airline, offering customer service American airlines could learn from. Complimentary cocktails were served before dinner, followed by a chicken entree, and winding down with a round of liqueurs and coffee. The Airbus plane was equipped with cameras in the nose and underbelly, and we were able to observe our soaring takeoff on the video screens in each seat. Crossing the Atlantic we had a view outside the cabin that is truly a “bird’s eye perspective” of flight. If you’re not interested in that, there were enough movies, music, games, and programming to keep one occupied for the entire 8-hour flight.

Sleeping on airplanes (at least for me) is akin to what jail must be like – someone’s *always* talking, moving around, or bumping past. A candy bar wrapper being opened three rows up crinkles and crackles like it’s *right* next to your head. Two little boys across the aisle from us argue and play video games the entire night, so sleep is fleeting.

Then it was up for breakfast – orange juice, yogurt, and a sandwich, which is apparently the European equivalent of a continental breakfast. We arrive in Stockholm at 8:00 a.m. ( 1:00 a.m. Minneapolis time) under sunny skies – a perfect Velkommen to Europe ! In the starkly modern Stockholm airport, employees zip through the corridors on bright, lime-green scooters. One more flight to Copenhagen awaits. [\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

### **July 17: Copenhagen**

We’ve arrived safely but we’re both starting to feel the drag of extensive travel and minimal sleep. The Scandia Hotel is in the heart of Copenhagen and after a seemingly endless wait for a room, we’re off to explore the central city.



*Nyhavn District of Copenhagen*

We walk the main shopping district, which is packed with Scandinavians enjoying the first good weather in weeks and then toward Nyhavn, a small quarter of cafes, bars, and restaurants. The focal point of Nyhavn is the long row of brightly colored buildings lining the canal. We settle on Fargekno, a restaurant specializing in herring. We’re anxious to try the local cuisine and order sampler plates of herring, smoked salmon, brie, and fresh baked bread.

Winding our way back to the hotel, we follow the Holmens Kanel where outdoor dining abounds, and boats full of tourists cruise up and down the canal. Stopping at Trivoli, the oldest amusement park in Copenhagen we take in the sights and sounds of people enjoying the rides and the music that envelopes the plaza. At night Trivoli Gardens is

ablaze in lights, but daylight pictures will have to suffice. By now, exhausted from nearly two days travel and our walking excursion, bed and a good night’s sleep is a top priority. With a great view from our Danish-modern hotel, it is well before sunset and people are still relishing the spectacular weather when we take to bed at 7:45 p.m. Very early indeed, but the long night’s sleep is well deserved. [\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

### **July 18: Sunday**

It’s cloudy and raining this morning, so we are grateful for Saturday’s gorgeous weather. Breakfast proves a fantastic smorgasbord of fruits, cheeses, pastries, meats, cereals, juices, and the traditional American fare of eggs and bacon. Next up will be a three-hour tour of Copenhagen before ending at the dock to board our ship, Holland America’s brand new MS Westerdam.

## Copenhagen Bus Tour

After checking out of the hotel we board buses for the city tour. I find it somewhat disappointing, as we have covered many of the sites on our walking tour the previous day. Highlights include visiting the Royal Palace where the current Queen, Margrethe II resides when in town, colorful palace gardens, and The Little Mermaid statue, in homage to Hans Christian Andersen's story of the same name. This is *not* the Disney version in which the Little Mermaid saves her prince, falls in love, sacrifices her voice for legs, and all is righted in the end with Mermaid and Prince living happily ever after. In this much darker version there are complicated family relationships, heartbreak, and a not so happy ending. The statue is of the Little Mermaid perched on a rock, staring longingly out to sea, waiting to be reunited with both her family and prince. Very sad!



*Stockholm from the harbor*

## The MS Westerdam

Registering in advance via the Internet is clearly the way to go, as we are checked in and onboard far ahead of others, who take a number and wait their turn in lengthy lines. The Westerdam is decorated in an Oriental motif of gold, cream, burnt orange, yellow, and muted red. Above the main staircase is a moving crystal chandelier that has as its centerpiece an example of the old mast ships and is quite spectacular. Our cabin is wonderful – a nice size stateroom with glass doors that lead out onto a balcony. Terry learned from experienced cruisers that a cabin with a balcony on the ship's Aft (back) was one of the best kept secrets. It's smooth, quiet, and offers an impressive view of where we've been. We're three decks from the top of the ship, comfortably situated in cabin 8133. Terry did a great job and I'm afraid a balcony will have to be a

part of every cruise from now on! Plenty of privacy too and a spot to just sit and watch life at sea.

## Dinner:

We have an early seating, our preference. We're part of a small table for six with three couples. Besides Terry and me our dinner companions include Jack and his wife Ruth of North Carolina and Ole and his wife Carol, who split their time between homes in Southern California and Arizona. Jack is retired career Army, having enlisted in 1947 and serving nearly 30 years, and he and Ruth are probably in their late 70s. Ole is also retired, having been the Controller for Hughes Aircraft, which became Raytheon, the company Terry's brother Tim now works for as an engineer. Both couples have traveled the world extensively and spent time living abroad – Ruth and Jack in Okinawa and Ole and Carol in Tehran. Although Terry and I are by far the youngest, our table looks to be a very interesting and lively group.

Our first full meal onboard is excellent. Terry orders steak and I have pork tenderloin. We both enjoy a superb spinach salad and for dessert, New York cheesecake. The bad news about cruises is that every dinner is a five-course meal and if you choose, one can eat all day long. A big part of this trip is walking on tour, so hopefully our waistlines won't expand too terribly much.

## July 19: At Sea

We're sailing on the open sea today so it will be a quiet and relaxing Monday. I'm getting my exercise by walking laps on the Promenade Deck, taking in the sea's panorama as I make my rounds. Another great aspect of sailing is the feel of a sharp breeze across my face and the sound of the churning wake as the ship cuts through the water. Today's weather is very dark and gray making it impossible to separate water from sky, but perfect for sailing.

Our first formal night is this evening and black is always a good choice. Pictures are another huge part of life on a cruise ship and many formal portraits are taken. Both Jack and Ole sport elegant black tuxes, something

we haven't invested in yet. For dinner surf and turf on the menu and we again have a great time getting to know our tablemates.

### **July 20: Stockholm**

Terry was up at 5:45 a.m. to take in the view from our balcony as the Westerdam navigated treacherous straits before pulling into the harbor. On a picture-postcard morning, Terry shot footage of red tile roofed homes dotting lush green islands. Too early for me, but Stockholm is a truly beautiful city. Overlooking the harbor, high-rise apartment buildings mix with old churches, museums, and other landmarks.

We tour Stockholm by boat taking in the Royal Palace , Parliament, the Museum of Modern Art , embassies and other sites. The apartment buildings that surround Stockholm 's waterways come in an almost endless palette of colors: pink, cream, goldenrod, gray, terra cotta, blue, and wheat, spectacular against the clear, sunny skies. As with any large city, property on the waterfront is pricey, with units selling for millions of Swedish crowns (or Kroner).

We learn that Sweden , like Denmark , is really a series of islands. When we leave port at 3:00 p.m. , we'll be sailing through the Stockholm Archipelago, some of which we passed through yesterday. On Sweden 's Eastern coast where Lake Malaren enters the Baltic Sea the capital city pulses with activity. Stockholm is the shortest stop on the tour, and both Terry and I agree we would definitely be interested in a longer stay here.

### **Departing Stockholm – 3:00 p.m.**

Ferries, sailboats, and even speedboats skim the water as the Westerdam departs the harbor. People wave from other boats and along the shoreline. The guide narrating the sail-away notes that even though the port of Stockholm is part of the Baltic Sea it does not contain saltwater. As we glide along she also points out the obvious – that Stockholm offers one of the most beautiful harbors in all of Europe .

As Stockholm fades into the distance behind us, the densely wooded landscape becomes more rural, and the traditional red wood and white-trimmed Swedish vacation homes appear. Some are a color scheme of yellow and white, and two stunning modern examples nestle among the trees overlooking the water. It's easy to understand what attracted so many Scandinavians to Minnesota – bountiful water in the many rivers and lakes, with close similarities in terrain and climate made for a perfect new home. [\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

### **July 21: Helsinki**

One of the many great things about a trip like this is that you actually get to see some of the places you've studied in history class and that past begins to make sense. In Europe every country we visit was affected by the specter of World War II and had consequences that continue to shape the world-view. Our day in Helsinki and the surrounding Finnish countryside is about as perfect as a tour can be – glorious weather, a very knowledgeable guide, good food, incredible scenery, and excellent shopping.

We begin the day at the center of Helsinki viewing the Senate Square , where at the center perched atop steep steps is the white Lutheran Cathedral. While the population was once Catholic, only .01% is today. Our guide (whose name I unfortunately can't remember) notes that an important architectural style, at least in Helsinki , is known as the National Romantic and is influenced heavily by Greco Roman with columns, sharp lines, and muted colors. About a block away an open-air market where vendors sell fruits, vegetables, and crafts is thriving and we get a glimpse of Helsinki 's extensive trolley system that runs throughout the city.



*Porvoo, Finland*

Then it's on to the small city of Porvoo, the second oldest city in Finland dating to 1346. Cobble-stone streets, wonderful local shops, and the scenic countryside make for a great visit. I purchase a lovely dark blue wool jacket, accented with light blue embroidery, which I'll wear with fond memories for years to come. We also purchase truffles at a candy shop our guide stops at for her two children, so we can't go wrong.

Just outside of Porvoo we stop for lunch at the Kiala Manor. It's actually a farm where they raise white cattle, vegetables, flowers, and other produce. We enjoy lunch by candlelight in the cavernous brick Distillery building, dining on fresh greens, beef, and tarts of custard and fruit. Everything served comes from the rolling green acres of the

farm and it's a wonderful meal. Our four luncheon companions are from Canada and this being an election year they're curious what the mood is in the U.S. We respond that because of the controversy surrounding the election of 2000 the country is quite divided, and right now the race appears extremely close. I want to know if Canada has the problem of apathy regarding voting that the U.S. does and am surprised to find that the answer is yes. Everyone comments that the Canadian government is extremely worried about low voter turnout but not sure how to remedy the problem.

After walking the manor grounds, it's on to our next stop of Sipoo to visit one of the oldest granite churches in Finland. Built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, it offers paintings and very unique architecture. Also of interest are the stocks, used to punish those accused of various sins and transgressions. Part of the punishment included humiliation, as parishioners hurled insults at the unlucky victims as they passed into church.

Our last stop of the day is back in Helsinki where we view the Rock Church, a structure blasted out of granite and literally craved into the rock. I find that it reminds me of something out of *The Flintstones* and not terribly attractive.

Our guide was so knowledgeable that I regret not being able to take notes. Some of the highlights we learned include:

- Finland was part of Sweden for over 800 years, before becoming part of Russia in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- While under Russian rule, Finland still had its own government, currency, and language. Finland declared its independence in 1917, shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution.
- Because Finland was a part of Sweden for so long, Swedes and Fins had separate schools, churches, theaters, languages, etc. Fins were considered the peasant class and Swedes the upper class. Even today with a small minority of Swedes living in Finland, there are aspects such as newspapers and schools that cater to each group. Children in Finland learn both languages, but there are still reminders of cultural differences.

All in all, a perfect day. We leave port this evening, arriving in St. Petersburg, Russia in the morning where we'll dock for our two day stay. In the real world, my brother John Schleich celebrated the milestone of turning 40 today. [\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

### **July 22: St. Petersburg**

The Russians still believe in lots of red tape (no pun intended) meaning everyone has to carry their passports on them at all times. Going through Customs Control we get our passports stamped and are issued a red and

white card which we must return at the end of the day. This is essentially a day visa, granting us permission to be in the country.

Once outside the shipping yard, the first thing you notice about Russia is that the former Soviet Union is a second-world country, possibly bordering on third-world in some areas. Communism may be dead, but Russia has a long ways to go before realizing a true democratic state. While St. Petersburg is full of great beauty in the forms of parks, palaces, museums, and churches, there is also a great deal of decay, filth, congestion, poverty, and other pressing issues. Most buildings are old and poorly maintained, the streets are littered with trash, and the majority of transportation such as the trolleys and cars are patched together from various parts. Sometimes the only splash of color on an otherwise drab gray block is the graffiti sprayed on the walls of buildings and sidewalks.

We have two guides today – Irina who is a citizen of St. Petersburg and Theresa who is an employee of the ship. Because of the serious crime here, Theresa’s job is to help keep our tour group together by following behind rounding up stragglers, and keeping an eye out for loitering gypsies and pick-pockets. Our plan is a common sense approach of enjoying our visit but being cognizant of the activity around us.

Our first stop is not on the itinerary, just a small church across from a St. Petersburg park. It’s unlocked so we go inside and find it in disrepair – boards covering holes in the floor, paint chipping and peeling. But the sanctuary is pretty so Terry takes a picture. As soon as the camera flashes, stick-welding Russian women wearing babushkas appear and chase us from the premises. Nothing in Russia is free, and in this case we have not paid the required fee for taking photographs, which we will do at all the other stops. In any case, we pour out of the building and run back to the bus, our visit in Russia off to an interesting start.



*The Palace of Peter The Great*

The first major stop of the tour is the grand Summer Palace of Peter the Great, situated in the Russian countryside in Peterhof. Peter the Great was the first Russian czar, after winning Russia’s independence from Sweden in 1703. He named St. Petersburg not after himself, but rather after St. Peter. Waiting in long lines outside the sumptuous yellow and white palace, vendors selling Russian stacking dolls, replicas of Russian military caps, calendars, and other souvenirs work the crowd looking for buyers. I’m not a big fan of stacking dolls and to my surprise and amusement, several people purchase sets of Harry Potter stacking dolls for their grandchildren.

Once inside, we’re instructed to slip special booties over our shoes and begin the tour. The palace has dozens of rooms, most so opulent it’s hard to comprehend. Gold-leaf paint, marble and porcelain, parquet wood floors, silk fabrics, and jeweled chandeliers adorn the various chambers. One thing we notice is that almost every room has in a corner an elaborately painted blue and white porcelain furnace. During the tour, our Russian women clap their hands and yell, “Nyet! Nyet!” at those who get too close, or worse, dare to touch anything. Because groups are packed in so tightly it’s sometimes difficult to avoid brushing against something as we pass.

Back outside amid the lush gardens and 150 fountains designed to the czar’s specifications, we have quite a long walk through the gardens to the waterfront where we will board a hydrofoil that will return us to St. Petersburg. During our walk we have several encounters with gypsies. All are children and they swarm the back of our group before Irina speaks harshly to them in Russian, chasing the pack away. They don’t look anything like the stereotypes of gypsies in billowing blouses, earrings, and scarves, but wear baseball caps, t-shirts, and jeans. They loiter at tourist attractions, looking to steal wallets, money, jewelry, and passports.

Terry has researched the problem extensively and with each encounter we are more on guard, constantly glancing over our shoulders even though our money and passports are hidden in our clothes. Irina will chastise at least three groups before they finally leave us alone, but what this demonstrates for us at least, is the amount of abject poverty here.

The hydrofoil trip back to St. Petersburg is the first chance we've had to sit in hours, and everyone is ready for a rest. Once back in the city, we've also noticed that driving is quite the risky proposition. Tour buses and small cars essentially play a game of "chicken" honking at one another until one either dares to go or backs down. There have been numerous close calls as our bus either barely misses pedestrians crossing the streets or has only inches to pass between vehicles. Half the time I am simply too terrified to look.



*Church of the Spilled Blood*

After lunch at the Grand Hotel Europe, we move on to the Church of the Spilled Blood, now known as the Church of the Resurrection. Built on the spot where one of the Russian czars was assassinated, it is made entirely of mosaics inside. The scenes throughout the church depict key stories from the Bible and Christ's life. The brilliantly colored mosaics are breathtaking, some almost 3-dimensional. Irina tells us that after the revolution the church served as a warehouse and during World War II as a morgue.

As with other countries we've visited, much of what we have seen today was heavily damaged during the war. For example, the Palace of Peter the Great was literally blown up by the Germans and meticulously reconstructed. Irina also mentions the Siege of Leningrad (the city's name under Soviet rule), during which the Germans surrounded the city for 900 days. Although St. Petersburg was never occupied by German forces, half the city's population of 3 million people perished during the siege, a loss of staggering proportions.

We then spend time at an area known as the "Black Market" where vendors sell more souvenirs.

Across from the Church of the Spilled Blood is the tightly packed marketplace where vendors hawk their goods on either side of the aisle, in the same way carnival barkers vie for your attention at the fair. Terry looks at Russian Orthodox icons and comes close to purchasing one until he and the Russian woman selling the icons can't agree on a reasonable price.

Looking around it is clear that life here is still very difficult. Irina is apparently an out of work teacher, leading tours to bring in desperately needed money. After working 9 and one-half hours with our group, she will lead yet another tour this evening to a Russian Gala Evening at the Yusupov Palace. Only 30, she is bright, articulate, and a most knowledgeable guide. One only hopes that she and others will have a better life as Russia continues its transformation to a more open, democratic society.

By the time our bus returns it is well after 5:00 p.m. and we are quite tired. Tonight we've made reservations to dine in the ship's private restaurant, The Pinnacle. We have an elegant dinner and a quiet evening. I'm exhausted after our long day and fall into bed shortly after dinner.



*Catherine's Palace*

### **July 23: Friday**

Our tour for today is the Glories of St. Petersburg covering Catherine's Palace in Pushkin and The Hermitage back in the city. Unfortunately, I have been up most the night with some type of stomach ailment and won't be going anywhere. I am of course; very disappointed as it was Catherine the Great who issued an invitation to Germans to come to Russia and teach better farming techniques. "Germans From Russia" as they are called were Dad's ancestors and I wanted to experience a part of my own heritage that until recently was not possible.

Around noon I'm feeling well enough to check e-mail for word on the birth of our newest niece.

Joslyn Karol Schleich arrived via c-section on

Thursday, July 22<sup>nd</sup>, making her entrance at 8:09 a.m. The proud dad, my youngest brother David, has sent pictures and Joslyn is adorable, dark haired like her older sisters Lauren and Katrina. So, our blonde sister-in-law Mary will probably never get that fair-haired daughter!

I'm still pretty queasy, and the ship's chef gets me started on some crackers and yogurt. He's so knowledgeable I wonder if he isn't a medical professional too, but I am starting to feel better. This afternoon's in-room movie is *Miracle* based on the true story of Minnesotan Herb Brooks coaching the U.S. Olympic Hockey Team to a stunning victory over the mighty Russians at the 1980 Winter Games. There is something a bit strange in watching a movie about Americans defeating the Soviets while in St. Petersburg. A particular line jumps out – watching game films of the Russians an American player asks, "How come the Russians never smile?" to which another player replies, "Because they shoot you." It occurs to me that one of the things we've noticed in our time here is that the Russian people rarely do smile. Even with the end of Communism life remains difficult and most Russians live quite simply. Irina noted there are still communal apartments where several families share kitchens, bathrooms, and other space. The majority of automobiles are small and outdated, and the streets, buildings, and monuments were often in dirty and in disrepair. Our experience in Russia has made me intensely aware of how fortunate we Americans are.

Terry returns around 5:30 p.m. and tells me he almost asked to be let off the bus before it left the shipping yard because he wasn't feeling well. This leads us to the conclusion that the culprit was most likely some suspicious looking smoked salmon at lunch the previous day. He decided to go ahead and of the two main stops he enjoyed Catherine's Palace in Pushkin the most. Lines were short and the Palace less crowded, so there was room to actually move around and see things. Contrary to popular belief, Catherine's Palace was not built by Catherine the Great, but by Peter the Great for his second wife, Catherine (apparently disliking his first wife, Peter had her killed). Only later did Catherine the Great build onto the palace, adding her own style and personal touches.

Terry's group then dined at a restaurant known for its Russian cuisine before heading to The Hermitage. We've heard many differing statistics on how long it would actually take a single person to cover every Hermitage exhibit, but suffice it to say that it's mammoth in size. As it was, Terry's 2 and one-half hours inside only brushed the surface.

In the early evening as we sail out of St. Petersburg, a group of Russian youths are enjoying the glorious sunshine on the sloping shore. They've set up a volleyball net and look to be planning a cookout as well. After what we've seen, I watch them frolic on the hillside and for the first time see Russians actually enjoying themselves. [\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)



*The Old Town section of Tallin, Estonia*

### **July 24: Tallinn , Estonia**

The capital city of Estonia is a major Baltic port and naval station. Old Estonia is within walking distance, so we choose to sight see on our own, spending about four hours in this vibrant village. Tallinn 's Old Town dates to medieval times, and much has been preserved. Narrow, cobble-stone streets wind up and down hills, offering spectacular panoramas. The Palace Square is encircled by brightly painted shops, restaurants, museums, and outdoor cafes. Again, we have picture perfect weather.

We step into the Russian Orthodox Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, hoping to take some pictures. However, no photographs are allowed but we catch

the end of an Orthodox Mass. There are no pews in Russian Orthodox churches, so everyone stands for the service. Women still cover their heads and people cross themselves opposite of how Catholics do, making for an interesting perspective. Outside beggars hold out plastic cups and bowls hoping for some small change from tourists and church-goers.

Tallinn was acquired by Sweden in 1561 and subsequently annexed to Russia in 1710. Estonia had a brief span of independence from 1919-1940 before being annexed a second time to the USSR during World War II. Having already become a naval base for the Russian Baltic Fleet, Estonia remained part of the Soviet Union until 1991.

Looking for something cool to drink, we stop at a restaurant called Olde Hansa which pays homage to the city's medieval past. All the servers are dressed in period costumes and everything from the furniture to the dishes are replicas. Sipping beverages from clay mugs, we observe the many nationalities basking in the sunny weather or leisurely meandering through the square.

Comparing Tallinn to St. Petersburg we note that the standard of living appears to be quite a bit higher. In Tallinn there are newer and more expensive cars, the streets are clean, buildings and roads are better maintained, and the people appear more content. St. Petersburg was also a huge commercial sea port, full of barges, tugboat traffic, cargo ships, fishing boats, and other cruise ships. Nothing terribly pretty about that, but its prime location is one of the main reasons Peter the Great chose to build a city there. Tallinn , on the other hand, is a much smaller city with picture worthy vistas and a harbor more akin to what we've seen in the Scandinavian countries. Tomorrow we head back to Sweden for a stop on the island of Visby .

### **July 25: Visby , Sweden**

The harbor off Visby is too shallow for the ship, so we make our way to shore by tender. Our stop here is a short one, from 7:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. in the afternoon and we want to make the most of it. We concentrate our touring to Old Town , a short walk from the harbor. Being a Sunday morning the winding cobble-stone streets are nearly deserted. A crisp breeze blows off the water and the skies are again sunny and clear, making for a perfect day to take a walking tour.

Visby 's street plan dates to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and we make our way through the twisting streets (done on purpose to confuse and thwart would be attackers) toward the Krettornet – a powder tower that is the oldest structure in Visby . From there we make our way to parts of the enormous stone wall surrounding the city. One of Europe 's oldest the wall was built to afford protection, particularly from foes coming via the sea. We then stop in the Cathedral of St. Mary's (parts of which were built in 1225) where they are preparing for services. What's interesting is that it can be extremely difficult to discern the difference between a Catholic and Lutheran Church . Within the cathedral there's a statue of the Virgin Mary and Sacred Heart, Stations of the Cross, and other aspects more closely associated with Catholicism, but the church is Lutheran. Because

these churches were in fact Catholic prior to the Reformation, they incorporate elements of both faiths which provide another unique perspective.



*The panorama of Visby, Sweden*

Climbing dozens of steep stairs behind the Cathedral, we come upon what is surely the most breathtaking view of the trip so far. High above Visby we look down over the red tiled roofs of stone homes and shops, the skeletal ruins of churches that still stretch skyward, and out across the deep blue of the Hanseatic Harbour to the horizon, where the Westerdam stands majestically anchored. The panorama is spectacular and Terry shoots video taking in a 360 degree view of the horizon.

By the time we make our way back down to street level, the sleepy village has awakened. Now vendors are setting up fruit, vegetable, and craft carts to sell in open-air markets, the smell of breakfasts cooking fills the air, and restaurants and

shops are opening for business. From peaceful seaside village to bustling center of commerce, Visby's transformation takes less than an hour. Had we more time, we would linger at an outdoor café over coffee and freshly baked rolls.

We also experience a quick lesson in discrimination. We've known that Europe has many pay public toilets, which keeps the facilities clean and tidy. In Visby we find public toilets, however; women have to pay 5 Swedish Kroner to use such facilities while men pay nothing. A Swedish woman gives me the necessary coinage which I gratefully repay with a U.S. dollar. However, none of us can get any of the stalls to open once we've deposited our money. We end up being discriminated against and still out of luck.

We spend about two hours in Visby, but agree the largest island in the Baltic Sea was very beautiful and another spot we would love to see more of. The sail-away from Visby's coast is spectacular, the colorful buildings looking as if they belonged in a medieval painting.

The rest of Sunday will be spent sailing the open seas and tonight is our second formal dinner. Then it's off to bed early, as we need to be up at 4:15 a.m. to catch a 6:30 a.m. train into Berlin. In the news today, American Lance Armstrong won his sixth Tour de France, setting a new record. We get a much abbreviated edition of the *New York Times* each day and Terry relishes keeping up on sports, particularly baseball. For the record, his beloved St. Louis Cardinals lost their first extra inning game this season.

### **July 26: Berlin**

The ship actually docks in the lovely port town of Warnemünde, Germany. The train departs for Berlin right on schedule. This is an old passenger train chartered for the day, and when we pick up speed the cars sway back and forth as we rush along the tracks. Each car seats six so we are joined by two men and an older woman and her daughter-in-law. During the 3-hour ride into Berlin we are served a "snack" by our German escort, Franziska. This consists of a banana, apple, turkey and cheese sandwich, apple juice, and a chocolate bar. Having eaten a hearty breakfast, I can only manage the chocolate bar later in the morning.

A lovely blonde in her early 20s, Franziska grew up under Soviet rule in East Germany and someone asks if the quality of life has improved since the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989. She replies very much so, but notes that not all generations have found reunification easy to accept. Franziska tells of hearing via the government that November that East Germans would suddenly be allowed to travel to the Western sector, an idea previously unheard of. She relayed a simple but poignant story of the delight she took in being able to buy something as ordinary as a Barbie doll for the first time.



*Kaiser Wilhelm Church in Berlin*

Travel to surrounding countries took longer, but that too has opened up. Franziska tells us that while her own life is much better, there are both good and bad aspects to an open, democratic society. For example, while she has more choices in education and career opportunities than her parents ever did, Franziska relates that her father had lost his job and was unemployed for a time, a situation that never would have occurred under the old regime. Franziska also notes that her grandparents and people of their age have had the most trouble making the transition, but despite new problems such as a jobless rate close to 20 percent most former East Germans relish their new freedom.

Riding through the countryside of small farming villages, gold and green fields, purple wild flowers, and dense pine forests one cannot help but notice the graffiti. Sprayed on buildings in every town, it is most obvious on the pipeline that snakes alongside the tracks. Bold and often colorful, graffiti covers almost every inch of the pipeline all the way into Berlin. Because we are traveling in the former East Germany, I wonder if this might not be an outlet of artistic expression, suppressed for so long under the Soviets.

Once in Berlin, we leave the train for buses that will drive us through the city for a “snapshot” of this vibrant metropolis. Our guide Robert, tells us that much has changed in the last 15 years and that Berlin is a “young” city, populated by twenty and thirty-something’s looking for the excitement of a burgeoning artistic community, career opportunities, plentiful shopping, and pulsating nightlife.

As we drive down the wide boulevards in this city of 3.4 million Robert points out former Soviet government buildings, most built to resemble palaces that are now apartment complexes. There is much renovation going on and at times it seems as though all of Berlin is under construction, but there are also many highlights. They include:

- Brandenburg Gate –The only surviving gate from the old city walls built in 1791 and modeled on the entrance to Athens’ Acropolis.
- Reichstag - This glass-domed building was the first permanent headquarters for the German government.
- Tiergarten – Berlin’s 630-acre park in the city’s center.
- Olympic Stadium – The site of the 1936 Olympics and Jesse Owens triumph over Hitler’s supposedly “superior” athletes. The stadium has been refurbished for the Soccer World Cup in 2006.
- Kaiser Wilhelm Church – The bombed-out tower with its gaping holes is all that remains of this once beautiful church and stands as a haunting reminder of the horrors of war. The accompanying photo exhibit details the devastation of the city during World War II, noting that fifteen percent of all destroyed German buildings were located in Berlin.
- Checkpoint Charlie – the most infamous crossing between East and West Germany. The gate was dismantled with the majority of the wall; what remains is a replica of the watchtower at Friedrichstraße 43. Signs on either side warn you are entering or leaving the American sector.

Reminders of the wall come in cobble-stone strips, indicating where the wall once divided the city. I photograph Terry standing where the wall stood at the checkpoint, the gleaming buildings of the new East Germany behind him. This is a far cry from the pictures Terry’s mother took of he and his sibling posed at the Berlin Wall, surrounded by barbed-wire and heavily-armed guards in the late 1960s. Sections of the cement wall have been preserved, but Robert notes that it’s taken great effort to do so. Much of what remains is painted with graffiti and detailed artwork.



*Checkpoint Charlie heading  
into the Russian sector*

Berlin is so full of history that it would be easy to spend days here just touring museums. As painful as Berlin's history has been from the seat of Nazi power to Soviet occupation and division, the German people seem to be coming to terms with their past and moving forward.

We are late getting to the train station as Berlin traffic crawls one block at a time backing up at every stoplight. Once we finally board and head back toward Warnemünde, Franziska serves us a dinner snack which is again enormous. Everyone is tired, but the bar is open in the catering car and as our train rolls along the tracks many German beers are consumed. Getting back to the ship takes a good hour longer than the trip in, as our train must stop at least four times to make way for regularly

scheduled trains.

It's well after 9:00 p.m. when we return to our stateroom and I collapse into bed, fast asleep. Terry stays up to watch the Westerdam lit up by twinkling white lights make its departure from the harbor. The townspeople of Warnemünde gather along the dock playing music, dancing, and waving as the Westerdam followed by the Grand Princess both set sail under clear night skies. [\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

### **July 27: At Sea**

After an exhausting day in Berlin we sleep in and relax. We listen to a lecture on London for sighting seeing suggestions as we'll stay in the city three days after the cruise ends. Terry reads, I catch up my journal, and walk numerous laps around the deck. Tonight will be our last formal evening at dinner, which is capped off by the staff entertaining diners and presenting the grand finale – Baked Alaska.

In the news, the Democratic National Convention got under way in Boston, where Senators John Kerry of Massachusetts and John Edwards of North Carolina will be formally nominated for President and V.P. At home another John – my uncle John Dale – celebrates his 64<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### **Tuesday Night**

Our dinner companions Ruth and Jack have a special announcement. Ruth, who enjoys the casino, has been playing in a slot machine contest and this afternoon was declared the winner making her \$500 richer. Jack and Ruth have ordered a celebratory bottle of wine and when Ole and Carol arrive, there are toasts all around. We proclaim Ruth “Queen of the Slots” and she decides her next gambling pursuit will be learning the finer points of poker. A great time is had by all.

Sitting on our balcony before bed, a luminous pearl moon shines above the Baltic Sea, the light shimmering across the water. It is a truly glorious sight and Terry manages to capture a perfect picture, another end to a wonderful day.



*Overlooking the harbor in Oslo*

### **July 28: Oslo , Norway**

Directly across the street from the harbor where the Westerdam is anchored stands the Akershus Castle and Fortress, built as a means of protecting the city. Known as Akershus Slott, this renovated 13<sup>th</sup> century castle looks out across the harbor and branches of the Norwegian military still reside here. During World War II the Germans ran their military operations from this site. Adding to the castle's architecture are the different bricks and coloring which changed as the building was expanded over time.

Also on the grounds is the Resistance Museum which chronicles the Nazi occupation of Norway from April 1940 through mid-1945. We decide this is of great interest and take a self-guided tour which alludes to the harrowing years of occupation by its

very design. Signifying the beginning of the war the museum slopes downward, then gradually begins to slope upwards as the Norwegian Resistance and Allies succeed in defeating the Nazis. Believing the Allies would need Norway to launch attacks against the Germans, Hitler eventually deployed 400,000 troops here during the war. The museum is a fascinating look at human resolve and endurance under the most difficult of circumstances.

Strolling down spacious, tree shaded boulevards on our way to the Royal Palace certain areas have been designated for pedestrians and cyclists only. When we reach the palace, I'm surprised to find that there are no guards or barriers. Unlike many other monarchies, there is no fence or gate surrounding the palace; people are free to walk the expansive gardens, have a picnic, or simply take in the passing scenery.

On our way back to the harbor we stop for a picture at Radhuset – Oslo 's City Hall and clock tower. While Stockholm presents the four Nobel Prizes in physics, chemistry, medicine, and literature, it is here at Oslo 's City Hall where the Nobel Peace Prize is presented. Walking along the waterfront later in the afternoon, we come upon the Eternal Peace Flame which commemorates this impressive event.

For lunch we head to the waterfront and a renovated warehouse district alive with restaurants and shopping. The choices of eateries are numerous and we finally settle on *Louise's* a busy seafood restaurant. We dine outside in what again is perfect weather – cloudless blue skies and a cool breeze. For lunch, Terry indulges his taste for shrimp and orders what turns out to be an enormous platter of the pink peel and eat delicacy. I opt for the Fish Chowder – potatoes, vegetables, salmon, shrimp, and herring in the largest soup bowl I have ever seen. The Fish Chowder is quite good and Terry washes the entire plate of shrimp down with frosty Norwegian beer. Before heading back to the ship, Terry snaps my picture by the restaurant's sign as a surprise for my mom, Louise.

Back onboard after our leisurely lunch and day in Oslo we learn that Wednesday has been the warmest so far this year. After a very chilly start to summer throughout Europe , the high today was a pleasant 82 degrees.

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### **July 29: At Sea**

Our last full day aboard the Westerdam. We are packed before noon so we relax and enjoy this final day of our cruise. One thing I have always liked about cruising is that rarely do you realize how many hundreds of people you're sharing space with. For example, the Westerdam has the capacity for over 1,850 passengers and a crew of 800 plus. Often when I walk my daily laps on the Promenade Deck, I do so in blissful solitude particularly in the evenings. Having a balcony has afforded us a great deal of privacy and a room with a most

spectacular view. Every sail-away has been savored from our balcony and each evening we sit outside reading, taking photographs, or simply relishing the ever-changing scenery. Some people complain that the new cruise ships are getting too large – the Westerdam rises more than 11 stories above the sea – and that there are far too many people, long lines, and crowds in tight spaces. But for the most part this has been wonderful – the very adventure we had hoped it would be.

### **Thursday Afternoon The North Sea – Medical Emergency**

Early this afternoon the captain came on the ship's PA system to say that due to a medical emergency, we will be arriving in Harwick, England about six hours early to get a patient medical treatment the ship cannot provide. About an hour later he announces the situation has worsened and that the Dutch Navy is en route to transport the patient via helicopter.



Nothing prepares you for the drama of a navy helicopter hovering over the bow of a massive ship on the open seas attempting to lift someone off. Strong, gusty winds make the situation even more dangerous. The front portion of the ship has been cordoned off and passengers are lined up along the railing on the top deck watching the rescue unfold. The green navy helicopter hovers off the side of the ship, and a paramedic in a neon orange jump suit clutches the basket as he's lowered by rope to the deck. We wait and watch – hovering extremely close to the ship the helicopter resembles a giant green insect.

Several minutes later the paramedic is raised via the rope alone and flips back up into the helicopter. It's clear that the wind is posing serious obstacles and that another evacuation strategy will need to be

implemented. The apprehension is taut as the helicopter swoops up and away, and it's apparent to everyone that these maneuvers involve a high risk and that a lot can easily go wrong.

Minutes drag by and the helicopter begins making another approach. Only this time the chopper positions itself over the bow and, we think, hovers mere feet from the deck for a better chance at loading the patient into the basket. There is a tremendous amount of skill involved on both sides, as the ship has to be steady enough for the helicopter to move in this closely while the chopper pilot maneuvers around very cramped quarters. This time the waiting is even longer – we can hear the constant thump-thump-thump of the helicopter's whirring rotary blades but can't actually see it.

Finally, the helicopter lifts off the deck and pulls away from the ship. Once it's safely off, a loud round of applause goes up in both appreciation and relief. Terry has captured most of the evacuation on film and I'm amazed we were allowed to observe as much as we did.

### **July 30: Harwick, England**

We're some of the last passengers to disembark the ship because we're not rushing to catch a plane home, just driving into London. The town of Harwick is the major sea port for England to Scandinavia, but beyond that distinction it is a small farming and fishing community. Driving towards London, rolling green hills and amber fields of wheat dotted with the occasional village make up the countryside for the first hour or so.

Then the traffic starts to thicken, there's more industry (a huge Ford plant dominates the skyline, for example), and high-rise apartment complexes become more common than single family homes. And suddenly the bus is in a swarm of traffic, almost at a standstill. The Hilton on Park Lane is across the street from Hyde Park at the very center of London. Our driver informs us that from here on it will be slow going but he'll direct our

attention to points of interest. He's quite funny and it's here that we get our first taste of anti-Tony Blair sentiment. Pointing out 10 Downing Street, the driver dryly refers to the Prime Minister as "the Assistant President of the United States."



*Big Ben and Parliament*

For me there is something thrilling about being to a site you've heard about or seen only on television. When Big Ben comes into view it's even more majestic up close and we learn that the bell and *not* the clock tower is actually named Big Ben, but over time the name came to mean the entire tower. Westminster Abbey is more regal and glorious than I could ever have imagined. It is also massive and I am simply in awe of the Abbey's size as it looks to cover blocks.

With essentially 2 and one-half days in a city of 7 million people, Terry and I agree we must have a strategy. To get a sense of all the wonder and history London has to offer, we begin our stay with a 3-hour tour in one of those double-decker open air buses. It's a great start as we pass the Tower of London, Big Ben, Parliament, cross over the

Thames on the Tower Bridge, and glimpse the Millennium Ferris Wheel, Westminster Abbey, and Buckingham Palace. We also see the famous London Bridge, which we learn is in its ninth incarnation and our guide explains, the inspiration behind the nursery rhyme, "London Bridge Is Falling Down." Terry gets some terrific pictures from our perch on the top level of the bus, but now comes the really hard part - deciding which of these wondrous sites we want to visit. After dinner we begin formulating our plan of action.

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### **July 31: Saturday**

We start our day of sight-seeing by hopping back on one of the tour buses heading towards Westminster Abbey. We have learned that the Abbey closes at 3:00 p.m. on Saturdays and is closed for services on Sunday, so if we're going to experience the grandeur of the Abbey it needs to be today. Lines are surprisingly short and soon we are inside the massive walls of Westminster Abbey. The first thing that strikes me is the sheer number of tombs here, and unfortunately, I'm not familiar enough with British history to know who exactly all these people are. I do know of the two monarchs Elizabeth I and her half-sister, Mary Tudor who are buried side-by-side in one tomb, even after a very acrimonious relationship. However, the tomb bears only the effigy of Elizabeth, her eerie face modeled on her death mask.

The raised space in front of the High Altar is where coronations occur and also where royal funerals are held. Recent royal funerals include that of Diana Princess of Wales and the Queen Mother. My favorite part of the Abbey is the magnificent Nave, dominated by the glorious stained-glass of the west window that fills the building with light. At the opposite end of the aisle lies the Grave of the Unknown Warrior, forever encircled by red poppies as a constant reminder of the great sacrifices of war.



*The Tower Bridge in London*

Our next stop is the Tower of London, a structure that has dominated the city of London for over 900 years. Both a royal palace and fortress, the Tower of London is home to some of the most memorable symbols of British history: the Crown Jewels, the Yeoman Warders, and the black ravens. The tower is a massive compound of over 40 structures encircled by a stone wall, and it would be easy to spend at least a full day here. Since we can't, we concentrate on viewing the Crown Jewels and the White Tower, the oldest building on the site.

The Crown Jewels have been housed in the Tower of London since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and are on exhibit today in the Waterloo Barracks. As much as we would love to take pictures of the exquisite jeweled crowns, scepters, and hand-crafted dishes on display, no photographs are allowed. While

waiting in line a film clip of Queen Elizabeth's opulent coronation is played so you get a sense of these jewels' historical significance. They are actually displayed in a massive vault and we view the jewels on a moving walk-way. Most of the jewels on exhibit are those used at the coronation of a sovereign and much of the collection dates from 1660 when Charles II ascended the throne, reclaiming the monarchy. Among this jeweled splendor, I'm taken with a diamond tiara worn by Queen Victoria during her reign.

The White Tower is next, the most historic building within the fortress. Built sometime around 1078 the enormous rectangular castle served as both a fortress and residence. The sometime white building is constructed of stone and is just what a castle should be with narrow winding staircases between floors and large, expansive rooms. Comprised of three floors and a basement the first and second floors are the focal point housing the Chapel of St. John the Evangelist, along with a great hall and living quarters.

The Tower of London also served as a prison and place of execution. Many were imprisoned in the Tower particularly under Henry VIII and Mary I. The Tower's most famous prisoner was the sister of Queen Mary, Princess Elizabeth, who later ascended the throne as Elizabeth I. Several spots were designated for executions, the most notable being the Scaffold Site, erected for the executions of seven note-worthy prisoners. Today the spot is marked only by a plaque and ghoulish though it may be, Terry and I both thought a replica of the Scaffold would have been more interesting. Two of the most famous executions here were the beheadings of Anne Boleyn (1536) and Catherine Howard (1542) the unlucky second and fifth wives of Henry VIII.

After immersing ourselves in so much history it's time for lighter fare and we head to Harrods, the world-famous department store. Upon entering this seven story wonderland one immediately experiences sensory overload as there is so much to see, hear, smell, touch, and taste that it's difficult to absorb it all. Ole and Carol had been here before and told us of a saying, "If you can't find it at Harrods, then it doesn't exist." They may well be right as Harrods boasts 330 departments and every one is a work of art – no racks of clothing crowding aisles, merchandise stacked haphazardly on tables, or grumpy sales associates. At Harrods, aesthetic beauty goes hand-in-hand with sales and customer service.

Besides offering material goods for every taste, an array of services, and numerous restaurants – Harrods offers a grocery store. Somehow that term doesn't quite sum up the Harrods concept of food as an experience to be savored vs. necessary commodity. Food displays tantalize and tempt, the artistry so breathtaking no photographs are allowed (competitors are desperate to imitate). There is frosted foods, fromagerie, charcuterie, traiteur, succulent fruits and vegetables, prime meats, fish, and poultry, pantry items, teas, coffees, and chocolates.

A chocolate lovers dream, this sweet delicacy has its very own department. The intoxicating aroma of cocoa is everywhere but it's the displays that make me salivate. Dark chocolates, white chocolates, milk chocolates, truffles, creams, toffees, nuts, liqueurs, and fruits – every possible combination you could think of, tiered in case after glass case. Beautiful gift boxes tied with satin bows stack in perfect pyramids. This is heaven and I don't want to leave. But we do, and sadly empty handed as prices are just too steep for us to afford.

We visit every floor, each one divided into expertly appointed rooms that would make many an interior decorator covet such artistic aplomb. Two other features stand out at Harrods. At the center of the store is the massive Egyptian Escalator that spans all floors, a nod to owner Mohamed Al-Fayed's heritage. And on the Lower Ground Floor is the Memorial to Dodi Al-Fayed and Diana Princess of Wales , a grieving father's tribute to his lost son.



*The quaint street behind our London hotel*

After walking back to the Hilton in early evening we need to make plans for dinner. The prices in England are decimating our budget, with a U.S. dollar worth approximately 53 cents. We've heard that English pub food is far more reasonable and tasty, and we set out on our search. Behind the Hilton is a very narrow street which leads through an archway into another world. Here brightly painted doors adorn neat row houses along with offices, shops, restaurants, and pubs. The narrow street barely accommodates two cars and is more like an alley but alive with activity.

We settle on the Kings Arms Pub at the end of this short but very busy street. It's exactly how I pictured a British pub should be – dark wood throughout, rough-hewn beams across the ceiling, and a comfortable, friendly atmosphere. Terry opts

for traditional fish and chips, but it's the choice of garden vs. mushy peas that stymies him. Our lovely waitress Barbara pegs us as Americans right away teasing, "You American guys always have trouble with the peas." She gently coaxes Terry to try the mushy peas and I order broccoli and blue cheese soup. Pubs of course, aren't just known for the food but lagers, ales, and beer. Barbara offers excellent advice on the various selections and Terry isn't disappointed. Food portions are huge, it's good, and less than half of what we've been paying. And Terry finishes his peas.

### **August 1: Sunday**

Our last full day in London . Our timing is very fortunate, as we have been able to book a tour of Buckingham Palace . Every summer Queen Elizabeth hosts a Summer Opening of the State Rooms at the palace while she and her family are on holiday. We have scheduled a tour for 11:00 a.m. hoping to avoid the biggest crowds.



*Buckingham Palace*

Buckingham Palace is a short walk from our hotel and even before getting in line we are treated to a special event. As we stand outside the palace gates, a whistle suddenly blows and a woman on horseback motions for onlookers to stand back. Then they appear – a group of ceremonial guards of some sort, clad in gold helmets sporting red tassels and smart black uniforms. They ride to the palace on gorgeous, ink black stallions and disappear through the gates as quickly as they had come.

Unlike St. Petersburg where you stood in line for everything, here we sit in comfort under white tents set up on the palace grounds until our time is called. With great efficiency we are ushered through a security tent to the palace entrance, where we are provided with a self-guided audio tour on players worn around our necks. Of the 429

rooms in Buckingham Palace we will have the opportunity to view 19. We begin in The Entree, an entrance hallway that takes us to magnificent Grand Staircase.

The Grand Staircase is one of the principle architectural features of the palace. The staircase itself is made of Carrara marble, the steps covered by red carpet. The intricate gilt bronze balustrade is embellished with detailed Grecian foliage and all these elements come together in a stunning contrast against the white and gold walls of the staircase.

Each and every room is spectacular, and this is truly a highpoint of our trip. Along with the Grand Staircase, my favorites include The Picture Gallery where an arched skylight of etched white glass fills the room with light; the crimson and gold Throne Room with its centerpiece of a bronze and cut-glass chandelier; the White and Gold Drawing Room, where a secret door tucked in the corner lets the Queen slip in and out; and the enormous Ball Supper Room, completed for the young Queen Victoria in 1855. In reality they are all stunning, and what's truly amazing is that we tour at our own pace, spending well over an hour inside taking in the great beauty of the palace. Then the tour leads us out into the Queens Garden, where we get the chance to walk past the lake built at the center and along garden paths before leaving the palace grounds.

After our palace tour we spend the rest of Sunday walking through London. We head down to Piccadilly Circus, London's version of Times Square where musicians and other groups perform. From there we walk over to Old Bond Street hoping to do some shopping. Bond Street turns out to be the couture fashion center with every major designer represented. To our surprise most of the stores are closed, so we work our way back along Oxford Street, a much more moderately priced shopping enclave. Here the streets are tight with people and as we walk, we listen to the incredible number of languages being spoken. There is one other thing I want to accomplish on this trip. The traditional red phone booths that are such a familiar part of the London cityscape are gradually being phased out and replaced with black ones, which aren't nearly as interesting. We are able to find one in front of which Terry takes my picture.

We then decide to take pleasure in the beauty of Hyde Park due to its close proximity. "Sunday in Hyde Park with London" would be a perfect title if this were a painting as there are all types of activities underway on this warm, sunny afternoon. Two young, muscled black men entertain crowds dancing to rap music on rollerblades and we dub this activity "Rollerblade Dancing". Lots of Londoners sprawl on blankets eating, reading, chatting, and sunning themselves. The ice cream and gelato pavilion is busy serving up creamy cones to visitors looking for a cool treat. There's a horse riding path that rings the park and a riding club in full gear trot out beautiful horses, as others ride bikes or rollerblade. About three-quarters of the way around the park

we encounter what looks like cement tubes for water. We later learn that this is the new Princess Diana Memorial dedicated weeks earlier and that when turned on it's a lovely fountain.

Having enjoyed the Kings Arms Pub so much we decide on a return visit. Barbara is working again and we get a chance to know her a little better. A native of Hungary, Barbara's halfway through college studying public relations and communications. To get a break she's taking a gap year off, working in London and saving up money. Barbara's boyfriend is from Australia and at the moment, they're apart. We talk of how expensive it is in London and Barbara tells us that in Hungary the exchange rate is even worse. She's smart, witty, and full of life.

Having tried Terry's chips from last night (what we Americans call French Fries) I want my own and order a burger and chips. No matter what you call them, they are absolutely the best I have ever eaten. We linger over desert and from our second story window view wandering minstrels, shoppers, and diners enjoying a summer evening. For the first time in nearly three weeks we actually see people driving SUV's and it's particularly amusing to watch them navigate these narrow streets, get stuck at a dead end, and have to turn around.

Another perfect end to a perfect day. [\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

### **August 2: Monday**

We are leaving out of Gatwick International Airport and even in early morning it takes a good 1 and one-half hours to get across London in the dense traffic. We board our flight an hour ahead of departure, but it actually takes that long to get the DC-10 loaded. Flying home on Northwest I pine for our SAS experience – the video doesn't work so there will be no movie, all of the magazines are in Japanese, the audio is sporadic, and no one seems to have a copy of the Northwest Airlines in-flight publication the flight attendant's keep referring to. As long as the plane holds together that's all that matters and we both have our own reading material. Terry is seated next to a nine-year old boy traveling alone from London to the U.S. who is quite talkative and they quickly strike up a friendship.

Fortunately, it's a non-stop flight and we arrive in Minneapolis a half-hour early. Going through customs is smooth and before we know it, the airport limo is pulling into our driveway. This has been a remarkable trip and we would definitely visit Europe again and hope to do so. But as Dorothy Gale tells her friends and family after her many adventures in *The Wizard of Oz*, "There's no place like home!" [\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

**Kathryn Schleich © 2005**  
**10220 Country Club Curve**  
**Woodbury, MN 55129**  
[kathrynschlei777@yahoo.com](mailto:kathrynschlei777@yahoo.com)