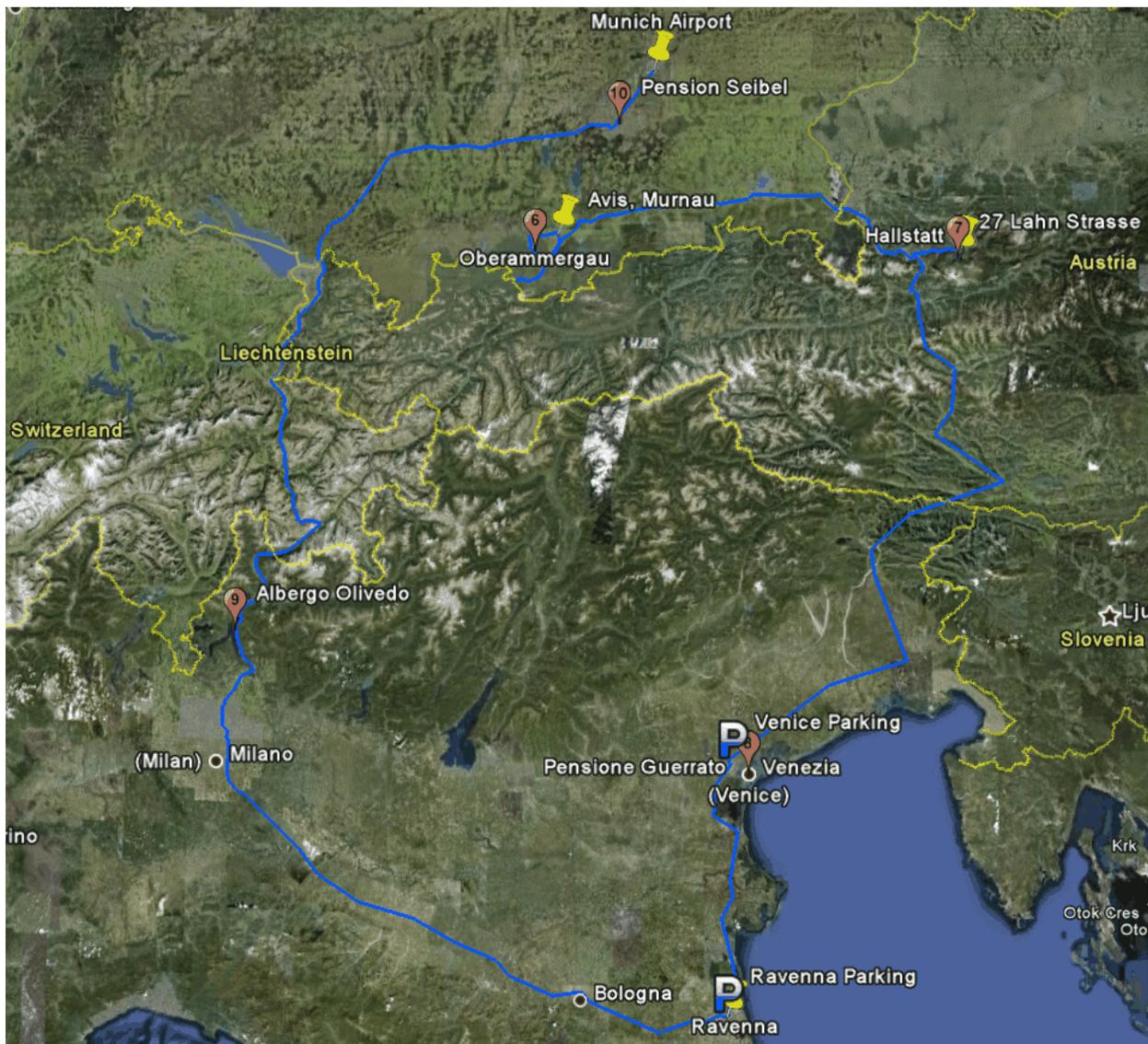


Europe 2010

Austria, Italy, Switzerland,
Liechtenstein & Germany

(The Car Trip, or part 2)



Aug 13 – Aug 21, 2010

Europe 2010 - The Car Trip (or part 2)



On the road in Southern Germany

Friday 8/13

Hmmm, Friday the thirteenth – what could go wrong!

While most of our crew left at 3AM for the Munich airport, Jeffrey and I got up at a leisurely 6AM to go catch the 7:30 train to Murnau where our rental car would be waiting. I had developed a very sore throat last night (thanks Courtney!) and was totally run down... and uncaffeinated this morning. At least it wasn't raining.

We met the rest of the "extended stay" crowd at the train station... which was no longer a train station. It had been torn down in favor of a shopping mall. All that remained was a covered bench and a ticket dispensing machine.

Our train left, and 45 minutes later, Jeff and I got off at Murnau Ort while the other four were off to Munich, and then Heidelberg. Jeff and I walked the mile to the Avis rental place; only getting lost once. When we got there, there was no agent. Fortunately, there was a guy downstairs who knew the number of the Garmisch office who could call the Murnau

guy. The guy was there in two minutes (OK... I had reserved a car at 9AM, so why wasn't the guy there at 9:00? I was.). I left with a Mercedes c180 station wagon, rather than a manual, 3 series BMW, which I had requested. At least the Mercedes was peppy and came with navigation (the other car on the lot was a compact car). When we got back to the house, all the bags were packed and downstairs. Diane needed to get the rooms ready for the next Passion Play guests. Albert told me that the bus to Garmisch would have been faster than the train to Murnau, and the Garmisch Avis was at the bus stop and offered more than two cars on the lot. Oh well, live and learn – at least I got a killer price for this vehicle (50% off).



Near the Austrian Border

We decided to scrap our Dachau plans. It was now raining, I was under the weather, and did not feel like driving two hours in the wrong direction. We went to Garmisch instead. It was pretty, like Oberammergau, but much larger. My actual goal was to see the Zugspitze a few miles south of the city, but there were clouds everywhere. We saw nothing. I let Courtney play in a stream for a while at the bottom of the largest mountain in Germany... which we could not see. Next stop was lunch in Berchtesgaden, but I was so tired that we had to pull over early. I was falling asleep at the wheel! After a few coffees, we were driving onward when we spotted a McDonald's sign. This seemed more attractive (and closer!) than Berchtesgaden, so we went there instead. What a place! It was two stories tall with a massive playground, a castle, a double-decker bus, an arcade, an "MTV" room, and a fitness center.



Big McDonalds

I had the McRib.

After a long lunch, we headed for our Zimmer in Hallstatt. Good thing too, there was terrible traffic a lot of the way there. We finally arrived at 4:30. The house and owner were great, though I wasn't thrilled with being on the third floor – too many stairs for this sick guy, and that top floor was pretty toasty (or was it me?).

We were told not to do our laundry in our rooms, but take it to the camping grounds to have it washed. We did – four loads! Jeffrey's jeans had never dried from the last washing in Prague, and they were now mildewing. Jeffrey took a nap while I got caught up in my journal (three days behind!). The girls went to play in the water – Hallstatt is, after all, on a lake. Jeff got up half an hour later and went out to

roam the town. Dinner was Italian. The place we went to, “Bella Milano,” served the best pizza I have ever had anywhere in the world. I can’t recommend the place enough.

I wrote for a few more hours after dinner to catch up, and then fell fast asleep at 10PM. It had been a long day.

Saturday 8/14

Well, it turned out to be a long night. I could not breathe, I

had a migraine, and I had developed an ear infection. I took care of the ear as best as I could, using hydrogen peroxide and alcohol, and breathed steam every couple of hours to try to keep stuff out of my lungs. I also drank 2 quarts of water over the evening to try to get rid of the migraine. Unfortunately, I am quite prone to bronchitis (thanks to dust and pet allergies), and it certainly felt like I had it already. By 4AM, the migraine was worse. I waited until 6AM to take my migraine medicine, as it is highly caffeinated.



Hallstatt is pretty



Our Hallstatt home and our Mercedes

Within an hour of taking the medicine, the migraine was gone, and I could now expose my eyes to the sunlight that was creeping in the window. Fortunately, it was raining this morning, so the sunlight was muted. I thought that with an overcast day, and some time in a salt mine later on, I might just be OK.

I was not. It was sunny by breakfast and hot by the time we got to the funicular that would take us up to the salt mine. The funicular took us up 1500 feet in a couple of minutes. The view was great, but my ears didn't like the change in pressure. And even though we had already come up so far, we still had to hike another 600 feet



View from the funicular, me as santa, brine cave, kids on a slide



up to get to the base of the salt mine. This is where we put on overalls. Mine was the only red-colored one (colors were based on size, and XXXL was red). I looked like Santa. My kids, dressed in green, looked like elves. Barbara was in maroon. Well, it was up another six flights of stairs to reach the opening of the mine. Once we got inside, the temperature dropped rapidly. My

cheeks were getting cold. The 55 degree cave temperature stayed with us the whole time. We saw several exhibits, slid down two wooden slides (at 28 KPH), and saw a perfectly reflective brine pool. I don't know that I learned anything new (as I had



gone to the Hallien salt mine eight years ago – owned by the same company), but it was fun and I could breathe. Oh ya, the Hallstatt mine is the oldest in Europe (seven thousand years old), and possibly in the world. The train ride out was very fun and the walls were very close. The exit from this cave was a bit of a shock – a 25 degree differential and lots of light. Oh joy, eight more flights of stairs to climb. Why couldn't these stairs be inside the cave?





Once we got back down, ears popping all the way, we headed towards the museum. Hey, this side of Hallstatt is prettier than our side, and more touristic. Each corner offered a new postcard scene.

The museum was nice, though it did jump back and forth through time from room to room. I guess I like my museums linear. It showed, among other things, the “Hallstatt Culture” from which the ever-

migrating Celts and Gauls came from. Funny, I see no redheads in town, but that is perhaps the most distinguishing feature of the Celts and Gauls.

The Catholic Church was up yet another hill. I was sure getting my exercise today. This is the church that only buries its dead for seven years, then paints the skulls with the name and years lived, along with some artistic flair, and then arranges all the bones in a big crypt.



Our host had recommended the nearby Gastehaus Simony, so we went there. Barbara's cr me of garlic soup was excellent, but everything else was only OK, and the service really stunk. The after lunch gelato didn't disappoint though!

It was about this time that my body began to fall apart. I had pushed myself too far with this cold, and now I was wiped-out. I was supposed to drive the kids to a summer luge ride now, but Barbara drove them instead while I rested. They were back three hours later, stating that the luge ride was probably the peak of their European experience (wish I could have been there with them!), and that they were ready to do more stuff (Barbara came back from the luge ride with a huge bruise on her arm – she had driven off the track). Barb and the kids went to the local park, which features a zip-line and other non-OSHA-approved play devices. Barbara did return with some food, and I was able to get some cold medicine from our host. The evening was spent indoors, and all of us went to bed early.

Sunday 8/15

Well shoot, I have bronchitis. I came to this conclusion late in the night when I started to get a temperature. I also discovered that I was allergic to the comforter (probably dusty). I was more or less fine so long as the comforter was not near me.

During the evening, I went to the bathroom twelve times, and every third time, I would spend 20 minutes breathing steam to try to clear out my bronchial tubes. This only offered temporary relief. I got no sleep, and with the sun coming up, I was incoherent with a high fever. I still managed to get down for breakfast by eight, but it took every bit of energy I had.



Yeah, Italy

Barbara drove six hours to Venice while I mostly rested; trying not to be queasy. There were three rest stops along the way, but I only got out on the first one. For the other two, I rested in the ever increasing heat. It actually felt good. The Tyrolean hills were so beautiful and the Dolomites weren't bad either. Italy has so many tunnels, and as always, the kids tried (mostly successfully) to hold their breath in those tunnels. Usually, I would be joining them in this, but not today. It got so I could predict if the kids would be successful based on the length of the tunnel, which was always posted at the entrance. They were good up to around 3 kilometers, or 1:30, as we were traveling around 120 KPH.

At the last stop, the rest of my family went inside a sandwich shop to get some quick food, but there was nothing quick about it. They didn't know how Italian sandwich shops worked (and it didn't occur to me to tell them how they worked) and they got really confused. In an Italian shop, you pay at one place, deliver the receipt to the sandwich guy, and he makes the sandwich for you. Well, Italians don't line up, period, so it's always mayhem over by the sandwich guy. At least they line up to pay... The Italians will tell you that by employing their method, the sandwich guy doesn't have to touch any dirty money, creating a germ-free sandwich. My family eventually figured out the system, but then they couldn't find the exit and wound up going through an alarmed door (with everyone staring at them).

For the first time on our trip, the GPS in the Mercedes sent us on a wild goose chase. It took us an hour to find the train station. Once we did find it, things went well for a while until we couldn't find the #1 Vaporetto (the "city bus" in Venice). Eventually, we did find it, and eventually, we also found our Pension. I was really not on my game today; I'm usually better than this. I was spent from carrying my gear around while sick, so I opted to take a nap while the rest of the family explored St. Mark's Square.



Venice from the vaporetto

To make things more interesting for them, I sent them on a scavenger hunt. They were to find: A building built in 1071 (St. Mark's Cathedral), four horses (on the cathedral), four Roman Emperors done in purple marble, or 'porphyry' (on the side of the building), the Campanile (the big pointy tower in the square, and two lions (on columns at the entrance to the square).

That nap was great – even partially incoherent. I must have gotten me and my bed up to 105 or 106 degrees. Toasty! When I came back to my senses for a brief moment, I knew that I had to get my body temperature down, so I took a lukewarm shower. It was freezing! After that, I sort of felt like maybe I had fried my brain a

bit... probably true. The family arrived just as I got out of the shower. They had mushroom pizza and a sprite for me. This was the first food I had had since breakfast, and although it was excellent, I had a hard time keeping it down (though that sprite helped). My temperature began to spike again. I guess 'fuel' is still bad for this 'fire' that I have. I did appreciate the gesture though.



Venice from the Rialto Bridge

Our kids are so different; especially as bedtime approaches. Jeffrey, who requires tons of sleep, gets grumpy at night. He was in bed by nine. Courtney turns into "super squirrel" at night. Her little ADHD body amps-up and she can absolutely not sit still. She was doing stretches and jumping jacks on the bed – the bed she was sharing with Jeffrey. Courtney requires little sleep.

The kids found half the items in my scavenger hunt. They said that St. Marks was too crowded to search for stuff.

Monday 8/16

Yeah! I slept most of the night! I still had a fever, but I also had some energy. My goal would be to keep an even, yet slow pace and drink more water than I sweated. This would not be easy, as I was already sweating just from moving around (movement causes sweating – not good!), and I was in air-conditioning! What would happen when I got outside?

Courtney and I were up early, as usual. We went to the very meager continental breakfast offered downstairs. It was embarrassing how much I was sweating after going DOWN one flight of stairs. Courtney actually went back down to breakfast later on with Barbara and Jeffrey because she was still hungry.

We got out of our hotel at 8:45, 15 minutes before the first museums opened. We would go to the Correr Museum first, grab a museum day pass, and then avoid lines for the rest of the day.



St. Mark's Square

We got to St. Mark's Square just as the nine o'clock bells were chiming. The Square was virtually empty. The Correr was also empty, which was expected. It was on the second floor, so I was sweating again. Walking seemed to be OK, if in the shade, but stairs require a lot of effort right now – I was sweating so much that I felt like my face was a sprinkler system.

The museum was very nice, and offered many insights into the history of Venice. The kids wanted souvenirs, so we went to the museum store. It was there that we met our first fashion-conscious Italian bombshell. She ran the souvenir shop in the Correr. I know I've written about this in the past, but there really isn't any other nationality that does fashion and beauty like the Italians. This gal was the more buxom type, so no "wispy" outfit that the slimmer Italian women wear. She had on a basic black, tight, square-front skirt with a square-patterned colorful top that featured a low, square "dip" in front; revealing a fair amount of perfectly tanned, round cleavage. She accented her look with conservative square, black glasses and really big, teased hair. This was a woman who dared you not to look at her. She was smart, sexy, and not at all sleazy (as if an American tried to do the same look). No, this was high fashion; she was a goddess with Gucci and fashion mags as her Bible; she was a walking art form.

Anyway... (I love my wife, I love my wife!) we got out the door just as St. Mark's Cathedral opened. I had timed this so that we could walk out of one place and right in to another. Problem is, every tour group on the planet must also have known what time St. Mark's opened – they were all there! The square was now crowded and the line for St. Mark's extended to the sea (to the far corner of the Doge's Palace). As Rick mentioned in his book, we could have simply checked in a bag and walked right in, avoiding the long line (this is one of those "hey, I don't write the rules" loopholes), but we didn't have a bag to check, so my family stood in line while I sat in the breezeway of the Doge's Palace; watching the tourists walk by; occasionally looking at the four frightened porphyry Tetrarchs (the four Roman Emperors from the scavenger hunt). In no time (for me anyway), it was time for me to join my family in line near the entrance.

The interior continues to impress – all that mosaic, and much of it gold. I did pay two euros (x4) to see the back of the altarpiece. The back side was pretty much solid silver and gold with precious jewels. As we were about to exit, Courtney opted to go upstairs and see the four horses, plus the original four in a mini-museum. The thought of seeing the horses again was intriguing to me, but not the stairs. Jeff didn't want to go anyway, so I stayed with him. The girls were gone a very long time. After we snapped a picture of the girls by the horses, we watched the security guards reject line jumpers, people trying to sneak into the bag check line without a bag check ticket, and people taking photography inside (Venice seems to have a no photo policy in every church). I was sad to see one set of girls get rejected after the hour long line because they had on shorts and tank tops. Both are disallowed by any church in Italy, and I guess these girls didn't know that.

Well, Courtney and Barbara eventually did return, and so we went to the far side of the square to try to get pigeons to land on our kids. We were limited in our success, but we sure did try. Problem is, we only had whole rolls, and we were competing with other families. The trick, we discovered, was to have many small bits of bread, or ideally, crushed crackers. The kids stretch their arms out with food in open palms, and then parents toss several rounds of crumbs at the kids. I shredded rolls into tiny bits as fast as I could and then tossed. Each kid did get a pigeon or two on their arms half a dozen times. Jeff asked mom to take a picture of him with the birds but all Barbara wound up doing was turning up the volume of his cell phone. I certainly thought that was funny; Jeff less so, though eventually he laughed too.

Next stop was the Doge's Palace. Having done our homework, we walked past the long line, flashed our museum passes, and walked right in. It's sort of like having a fast pass at Disneyland. except without the rides; only increasingly larger rooms, and a prison. The kids liked the prison, but not so much the palace. I didn't like all the stairs; I was beginning to get woozy from a lack of fluids. I was sweating, but not drinking. My body did not react well to the Gatorade I got on our march to the Accademia, but it was certainly just what I needed.



The girls up with the horses



The kids feed pigeons; below, Doges Palace



We had one hour to see the Accademia before it closed, so we saw it in 45 minutes. The kids have absolutely no interest in art, so they race from room to room trying to find the nearest couch or chair. This museum was very hot, so they were looking for chairs next to fans. At least Courtney took the time to appreciate one of the ceilings.

After the museum, we sauntered towards the Frari Church. It was hot out, but we started to find local fountains where we could keep refilling our water bottles. The kids were hungry so we looked for a place to eat. One place claimed to have air conditioning, so we went in there.

Well, the place, Trattoria Dona Onesta, was conditioned by air from a nearby window. Still, it was out of the sun. Next to us was a couple from Australia. They liked this place so much that they came back today. “OK” I thought, “this bodes well for this restaurant.” And it didn’t disappoint. The seafood “salad” (all seafood) was good. Barbara and Courtney discovered new drinks – mint soda and “gingerino,” which appears to be grenadine, fruit juice and sparkling water (later, we found disappointing bottled versions of gingerino with a bad aftertaste – this one here was hand-mixed). I wish I had liked my pasta better. The homemade pasta was excellent, but the sardine paste



Classic Venician View



Jeffrey gets spaghetti with prawns



Eventually, the kids begin to play with their food.

sauce was too salty for my taste. Good for retaining fluids though... The tiramisu was good, and I discovered a new drink too! After dessert and espresso, I was given a free shot of homemade lemon liquor. Delicious!

The restaurant was only a few blocks from the Frari Church. Though it sure isn’t much to look at from the outside (like a lot of Italian churches), the inside was unparalleled.

Tangent: You know, I actually adhere to this Italian way of doing churches. I keep my house respectfully plain on the outside, but nice on the inside. If I had a decent car, all the investment would be on the engine and interior, and not so much on the body. People should probably be this way too – investing in their heart and mind, rather than on appearances. Having said that, there are exceptions: French Cathedrals are gorgeous inside and out, and if Italian fashion can be raised to an art form, but without vanity, I suppose that's OK too... and I'd love to own a Porsche because it's stunningly beautiful, but also fast, functional and precise. I guess there are some things that are complete packages – beauty inside and out – but these are ideals, not norms.

So anyway...back to the church: This church was in a wealthy district, so it could afford the very best. I just loved the sculpture of the four strong black men holding up the lintel over the doors. In the back was a huge reliquary, and a sculpture by Donatello. At least three altarpiece paintings in this place are to be found in any Art History textbook. I only wish I could take pictures in here!

The walk back to the hotel wasn't far. We rested a little in our hotel, and then went shopping for friends. Courtney, now armed with a new slip of paper asking: "May I pet your dog?" in Italian, pounced on every Venetian pet owner she saw; and there were many. It was always the same: a confused look as Courtney presented her paper, a laugh, then a big smile accompanied by "Prego!" (Please!). She brightened up many people's day, and she was connecting with the locals in a special way.

After fulfilling my part of the shopping experience, coordinating outfits for Barbara, Jeffrey and I returned to the hotel to take a nap. The girls came back an hour later with lots of stuff.

Time for dinner! Tonight was to be a pub crawl from Rick Steves' book (something Barbara and I enjoyed doing last time we were here). Unfortunately, the first place was closed, and the second place had already run out of chechetti (bar snack food). The third place had some, and it was good! What looked like round and square breaded cheese sticks were actually filled with scallops (round) and potatoes (square). We also had a salty tempura-like veggie assortment. The red wine wasn't bad either. The barkeeps looked gruff, but were extremely friendly.





Marco... Polo

We were running out of daylight and bar options on our side of the Rialto Bridge, so we climbed over to take a picture of Marco Polo's home then eat at a cheap sit down place nearby. Mr. Polo's house was not easy to find, and it was very plain on the exterior. It was also occupied and in use by some professional organization (maybe an import/export business?), and not a museum. The cheap place to eat was on the whole not memorable, and the service was terrible. I guess we should have searched for more bars.

The kids wanted to try to feed the pigeons one more time, and Rick's book said that the tourists would be gone by now, so we headed to St. Mark's Square. One of my kids shouted "Rick was wrong!" as we entered the square – the place was packed, and there were dueling chamber groups on each side of the square. Jeff then went on to share a list of items where Rick was wrong. He wanted to start a "Rick was wrong" blog site and print "Rick was wrong" shirts. I must admit that I could not refute a single item on Jeff's list, but I'd still rather

follow Rick's mostly correct advice than no advice at all. He is much more right than wrong, and his books and videos have proved to be extremely useful to me over the years.

We did try to find a pigeon, but there were none in the square. They had all gone to their homes. While walking back, we had some more gelato (3x today). Jeffrey found a sleeping pigeon at a church, so he took a picture of it. Courtney had started singing during our pub crawl about petting dogs, and how long she was on a bridge (how many seconds, how many stairs, etc); this continued until we got home (both my kids sing when they are happy). Somewhere along the route, Courtney saw some thong underwear in a shop window and asked me why someone would buy these and why she didn't own any. Hmmm, how to answer this... I explained that certain outfits – though absolutely nothing she owned, or would ever own... ever... looked better with thong underwear because it gave the outfit, usually a skirt of some type, better flow. Courtney wanted to see an example of "thongs being worn correctly," because I had also noted that Americans tended to wear them with jeans, which really didn't enhance the jeans, and probably only provided chaffing. As it turned out, there were two middle-aged German women ahead of us with such an example. As we walked along, we kept passing these women time and time again. What I found amusing about all this was that they had a map and they were asking for directions from every handsome Italian man they saw. After the third time of passing them, I commented to Barbara: "No one is that lost; these women are trolling." Courtney, like me, sees and hears everything – even things she's not supposed to hear – so she asked me: "Daddy, what is trolling?" I explained that 'trolling' was a fishing term: someone casts a line in the water and moves along slowly until something bites; in this case, Italian men. Courtney replied: "So they're not really lost; they are just looking for men." Ah yes, fun conversations with my pre-teen daughter.

Tuesday 8/17

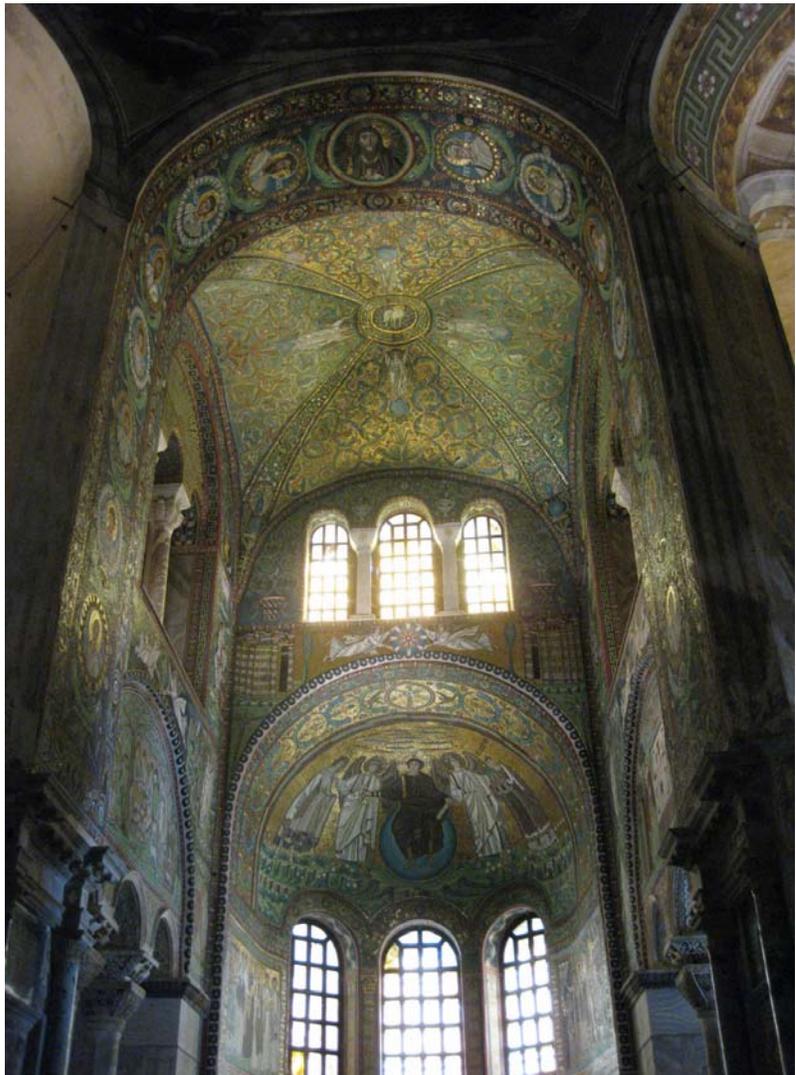
Today would be a big drive day. We could either go to Ravenna or Milan, but there was no way we could do both. We chose Ravenna. This meant that we would have to get up pretty early. My family didn't get the memo. They were wiped-out from yesterday and they were moving very slowly today. Barbara wanted to take Courtney to feed the pigeons. I explained that we didn't have the time. Somehow, we made it on the vaporetto, then train, and finally to our car all before 9AM.

This was good because Google Earth said it was a little over an hour to Ravenna. We'd be there around 10 and have two hours to look at as many as eight churches and then have lunch. Well, it didn't work out that way. Google accounts for speed and distance, but "Lucy" (Courtney named our Mercedes' GPS "Lucy") accounts for current traffic conditions (a very handy feature, by the way). She said it would take three hours. She was right; there was so much traffic that we pretty much crawled the whole way there. We did joke and play word games the whole way there, so time went quickly. We (jokingly) told Courtney that we were finally in Italy. For some reason, she has it in her mind that Venice is a country... or part of Germany.

Eventually, we got there. The Lucy directions were not the best and there was very little signage to point the way. Google Earth showed a parking lot and we accidentally stumbled on it even though Lucy and Greta (our Garmin that we brought with us) were both telling us to go elsewhere. Google won that round.

It was now noon. We certainly didn't have time to see all eight churches (to which the kids said "yeah!"), but we did have time to see the two crown jewels of the city – San Vitale and Gala Placidia; conveniently placed next to each other.

I had written a major college paper on San Vitale, this "Justinian" church built in 547AD which now stood before me, and another paper comparing Hagia Sophia, Sergius & Bacchus & San Vitale; all built by Justinian around the same time. I had seen the other two churches last year in Istanbul. Since I was really up on these churches, I tried as best as I could to explain this somewhat unique building – an octagonal / round church which became the model for the "Greek plan" church – and show my family the spectacular mosaic interior. My family was only semi-enthused. Jeffrey was at least somewhat interested to find that alabaster was used instead of glass for the windows. He wanted to know how light could get through stone.



Interior Apse of San Vitale -- lots of mosaic

Next up was the Gala Placidia Mausoleum; made by Theodosius I for his daughter (Gala). It, like San Vitale, has some of the best Early Christian mosaics anywhere. The light was really dim in this place so it was hard to get the full effect, but the geometric patterning was great, as were all the fine details. I think my family felt they had indulged me enough, but they were being patient. To me, it was time well spent. I had been trying to get here for over 10 years, and I saw this as perhaps my only chance – Ravenna is near nothing!

More driving followed. We were hungry, and we needed gas, so we went to a big gas station with a sandwich shop. This time, I joined my family. We were now pros at this “sandwich shop” thing. We got in and out of there, working the system, getting exactly what we wanted, and we set off no alarms in the process. The people there were quite friendly.

After that, we drove for three hours. Barb and the kids napped and I formed a convoy with two Audi A5s (both had German plates, as did I, and together we formed a triumvirate that marched steadily past all the disorganized

Italians. We drove like Germans: orderly; obeying all the rules of the road save one: the speed limit.). The truth is, we blasted past most everyone like they were standing still. To this day, I have no clue as to the speed limit in Italy – no signs are posted anywhere – but it seemed to me that they were doing 100 KPH and we were doing 160 KPH. We did eventually get stopped by a Swiss woman who was determined to stay at 140 KPH, and not get out of the fast lane. She blocked us – no kidding – for almost an hour. Eventually, I saw a gap in the far right lane, so I slid over and gunned it. It wasn't until then that she realized that we might want to get past her, so she finally scooted over and let the two Audis by. It was at this point that we saw something coming fast from behind us. All three of us, and the Swiss woman, got over because we thought that it might be the police. Nope, it was another convoy – two Maseratis and three BMWs. I joined them, as did the white Audi. The black Audi stayed back with the Swiss. I soon discovered that this wasn't so much a convoy as one Maserati driving fast, and a bunch of car enthusiasts following. They didn't follow for long. The slower Maserati dropped off, then the three BMWs, leaving a new group of three. We were going 200KPH. Someone got in front of us and dropped us down in speed, and then some bozo got in front of me, separating me from the other two. This person would not get out of the fast lane, even with me flashing the European “get out of my way” left blinker. I was now driving so slowly that the black Audi and the Swiss caught up to me! (And no, I will not let the Swiss get ahead of me again! Her cruise control is stuck on 140.). The guy must have realized that he was impeding traffic, so he let us by. Traffic was getting thicker, so I kept to 150. The Audi was behind the Swiss, so of course, he was stuck at 140. At that point, we were just past Milan and headed to the Lakes District. When we got off the Autostrada, the speeds went way down and the curves got tight. This Mercedes goes well in a straight line, but it's an absolute boat around corners. I started getting questionable directions from Lucy – I could see signs for Lake Como (our destination) and she was taking me on other roads...



I love the mosaic patterns in Gala Placidia!

so we turned on Greta. Greta had other ideas on where I should go. Barbara did too for that matter, and Courtney wanted to talk to me about animals. TOO MANY WOMEN TELLING ME WHAT TO DO! What was really funny was at one roundabout, Barbara Greta and Lucy told me to take three different exits off that roundabout (I chose Lucy), then at the very next turn, Greta said, “turn left” and immediately after that, Lucy said (in her proper British accent) “Now turn right.” The whole car busted up laughing. To us, it sounded like Lucy was saying “NO, turn right.” After that, we turned Greta’s volume down, but kept her on for comic relief. She was so wrong so often that it continued to be very funny for a long time. Good thing we didn’t need to actually use her; once we got into the mountains, she kept losing satellite signals and would freak-out in every tunnel. At one point, she had us driving in or on the lake, and then on a hillside where there were no roads. Barbara took pictures to prove it! Lucy got us to Varenna right at 5PM.



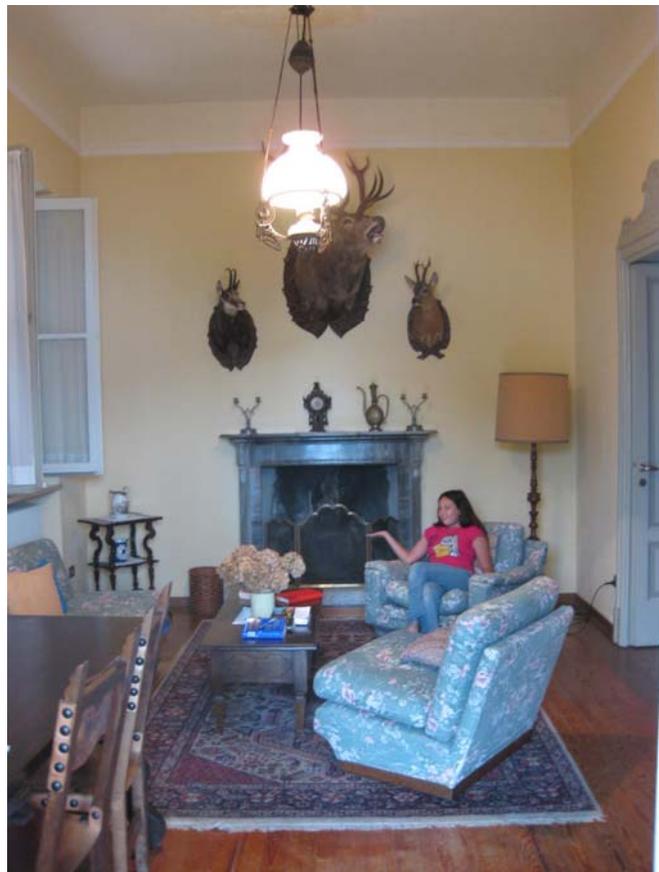
Our submersible takes a drive in the lake.



Wow, now that’s a shortcut.

Our host, Laura, seemed downright unstable, which is pretty much how Rick described her in his book (moody and unpredictable). I think we caught her on a good day, though I’m not sure. She told us that dinner was at 7:15, and she made it seem like it wasn’t a request. She then took our passports and gave us vague directions to our Villa. A good looking young guy with long hair helped us find our place when, I suspect, we were trying unsuccessfully to get into his place.

The Villa was awesome. It had to be Victorian, but with definite Italian flair. The family decided to explore. I did laundry, rested, and wrote in my journal at a table in the “hunting” room. This room was so perfect that I’d like to write a novel here! This was a writer’s room. The place also had the feel of my parent’s New York lake house; same smells, same look and feel, same pace of life, but with really tall Alpine mountains and Italianate structures everywhere. The two lakes, Como in Italy and Keuka in New York, were both even in the shape of a “Y,”



Courtney in the hunting room.

though Como's Y is upside down. At the intersection of this Italian Y is the real Bellagio—the city the Vegas casino is named after. Bellagio is full of rich people and former rich people... hey, just like the Las Vegas casino! George Clooney also owns a Villa on the south side of the lake; accessible only by boat if you aren't a local from what I understand (George was finding it too hard to rest with all the paparazzi and fans driving up to his doorstep).

The report back from the kids was not positive. The place was boring, with nothing to do and the swimming spot was totally unacceptable (Man, these kids are spoiled, though I did talk up the similarities

between their grandparent's place and this place so they did have some expectations about swimming. Como/Varenna has virtually no swimming, water skiing or sailing that we could see. The NY Lake has all these things in abundance.).

Jeffrey sulked all through dinner. I think Courtney even cried a little. They were both so disappointed, and now our 25 euro a plate gourmet dinner was none to their liking, and they so desperately wanted pizza. Jeffrey was downright snappy, and towards the end of dinner admitted that he had a stomach ache, and had had a headache most of the day. Even tiramisu for dessert didn't liven them up.

We took a quick after dinner walk (yup, lousy swimming area), then went back to our Villa (and how cool does that sound! "I'm going to my Villa!") and played cards until 11PM. The kids were in a much better mood by then. At one point, I had everyone laughing really hard. When Courtney recovered, she said: "Daddy, you made me not breathe!"



George Cluny, Bellagio and Varenna on the Y-shaped Lake Como

Wednesday 8/18

“La Dolce far Niente” was the goal of the day – no sites to see, no time we had to be anywhere – just a relax and do nothing day. The locals sure had this down. I woke up late (7AM) and still managed to be the first one (along with Courtney) at the breakfast place outside Hotel Olivedo (which owns the LaTorretta B&B, our Villa). Turns out, breakfast is served from 8-10AM. They don’t expect anyone up until then either. The place was so peaceful – not a tourist in sight; only the sounds of lapping lake water and our happy waiter, flagging down and chatting with everyone he knows as they slowly load their cars on the ferry boat to Bellagio or Menaggio. Many in the town here work in those cities or in nearby Lugano Switzerland. There are few jobs in Varenna.

By the time we headed back, it looked like it might rain.

Courtney accompanied mom down to breakfast; Jeffrey’s goal was to sleep until noon.

A f t e r breakfast, Courtney bought a turtle hat and a “snake” purse (cigarette purse actually, but don’t tell her that) from a local hippie, then the three of us walked the town slowly, admiring the old buildings, staircases (steep staircases!) and



Courtney with hat and purse

scenery. The local flagstone used on the path was metallic and sparkly. We saw the whole town in about two hours. When we got back, Jeffrey was up and was waiting for us. The cleaning lady had kicked him out of the room at 11:15. Barb did a little laundry then we went seaside for lunch. All four of us had pizza (we instituted a no fish rule for the day – all of us were sick of fish). For dessert, I had a crepe that was supposed to have Grand Marnier in it, but it turned out to be apples and ice cream. They messed up the order. This bar and restaurant did serve the best espresso I had had to date. On the back side of their menu was a note from an American astronaut stating that this place had the best gelato he had had since returning to Earth. I should have gotten the gelato!).

After lunch, I rearranged laundry so it would dry faster, then journaled while Barb took the kids to swim. Jeffrey came home first, then the girls. Barb took a nap. Courtney played with her toys. Jeffrey and I went to get cash and a soda. The cash was easy. We went into a bar for the soda. This was fun because it was definitely a locals-only place. The cute, young waitress behind the bar spoke English. As we sat and drank our sodas, we looked around and saw magazines, cigarettes and slot machines. The gal behind the bar asked if we were Americans. We said yes, so she asked from where, so we said California. She just gushed: “I so want to go to California! I want to travel everywhere, but mostly to California!” Funny, we traveled half-way around the world just so we could be here in Varenna.



A walkway; our Villa; view of the lake; Barbara and Jeffrey playing cards out on the patio



It had started raining hard shortly before our exit from the bar, but it quickly died down to a sprinkle shortly thereafter. As soon as we entered the Villa, the girls were on the way out to feed the ducks.

Jeffrey called me from outside to come quick: Courtney had ducks all around her at the boat landing in front of the Villa, and had also amassed a crowd of onlookers. Jeffrey and I watched Courtney feed ducks and Barbara video for half an hour as we sat on the terrace overlooking the paseo / landing area. I journaled some more; Jeffrey played solitaire. Eventually the girls returned and we thought about dinner plans. Someone



Courtney feeds ducks

nearby had a wood fire burning; it reminded me of smores at the NY lake house. In a way, it made me homesick; I wished I could be with my parents, or they with me right now. Funny how smells can do that to you (actually, my parents are hosting most of my siblings and their kids right now. They have their hands full and could use a break.).

Dinner was at the Rick recommended Nilis Bar, which just happened to be next door to the place where we ate lunch. The Nilis bar had better service, better pizza (by far), and better desserts; all for the same price. Maybe their gelato wasn't as astronaut worthy, but everything else was out of this world!

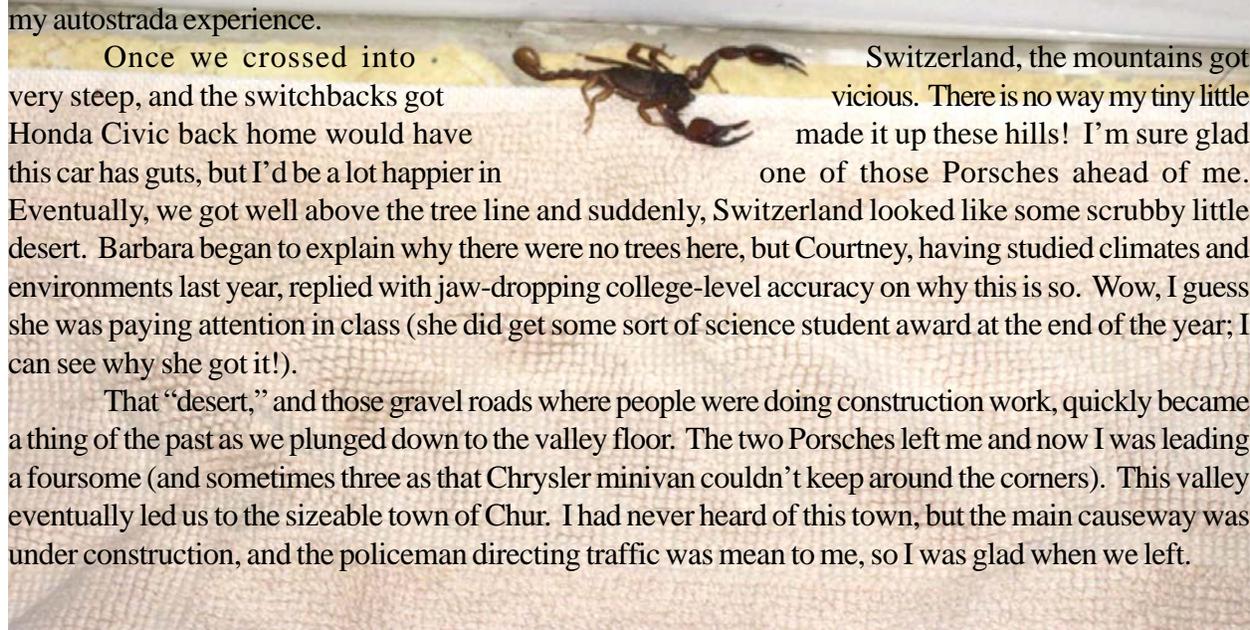
Thursday 8/19

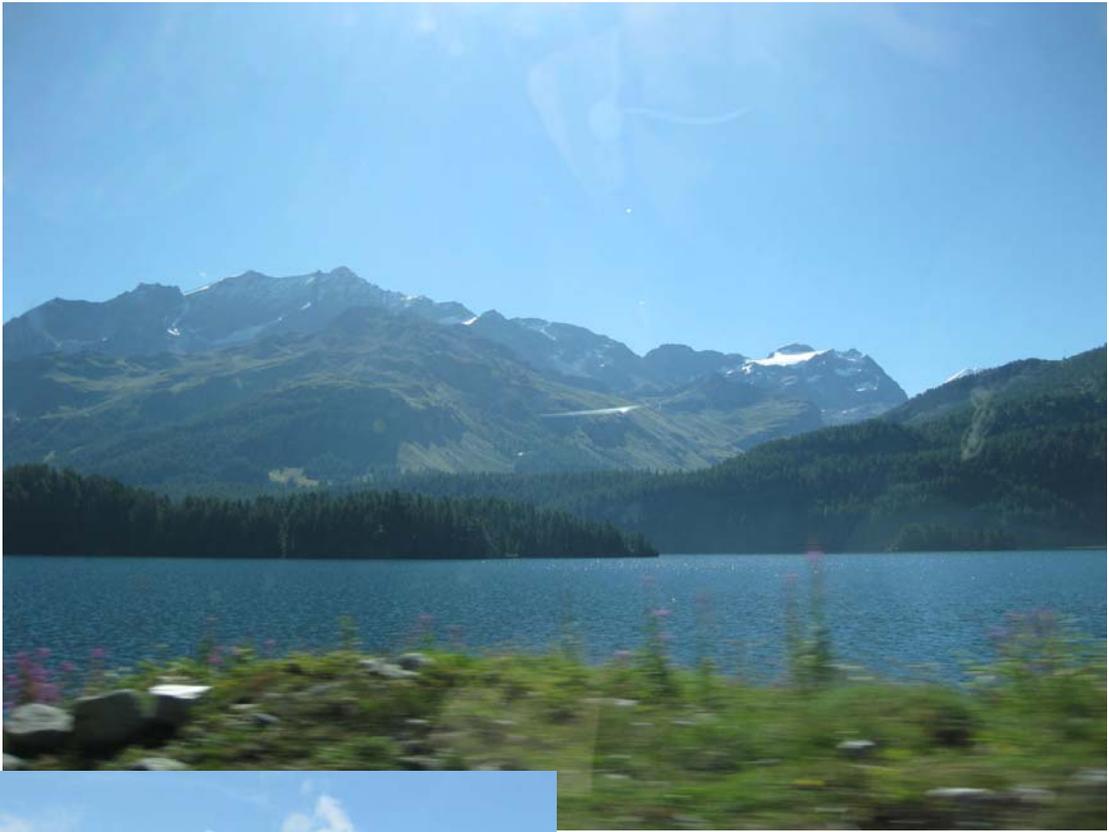
Today was another drive day. I was up early, but I had to force the rest to get up and get packed. There was a scorpion in my bathroom this morning. Wow, that's not something you see every day. All our stuff was loaded in the car prior to breakfast at 8. Once we ate, then paid our bill, we were off.

At first the mountains didn't seem so bad. I was following two Porsche 911s who were not at all serious about taking corners – they were on a pleasure cruise. I wished I could see more scenery. I was trying not to die – that is, not drive off a cliff – and my windshield was absolutely covered with bugs from my autostrada experience.

Once we crossed into Switzerland, the mountains got very steep, and the switchbacks got vicious. There is no way my tiny little Honda Civic back home would have made it up these hills! I'm sure glad this car has guts, but I'd be a lot happier in one of those Porsches ahead of me. Eventually, we got well above the tree line and suddenly, Switzerland looked like some scrubby little desert. Barbara began to explain why there were no trees here, but Courtney, having studied climates and environments last year, replied with jaw-dropping college-level accuracy on why this is so. Wow, I guess she was paying attention in class (she did get some sort of science student award at the end of the year; I can see why she got it!).

That "desert," and those gravel roads where people were doing construction work, quickly became a thing of the past as we plunged down to the valley floor. The two Porsches left me and now I was leading a foursome (and sometimes three as that Chrysler minivan couldn't keep around the corners). This valley eventually led us to the sizeable town of Chur. I had never heard of this town, but the main causeway was under construction, and the policeman directing traffic was mean to me, so I was glad when we left.





Driving in Switzerland is fun and scenic



The castle residence in Liechtenstein.

Before you knew it, we were entering Liechtenstein. The castle, really the only attraction here besides stamps & banking, was just on the other side of the border. The prince lives in that castle, so we are not able to go in, but only admire it from afar. It looks like a nice castle.

We drove the entire length of the country, the long way, in about half an hour. I didn't realize how big the country was; or how beautiful. I could see why someone might want to live here. It looked expensive though – more expensive than Switzerland, and maybe right up there with Monaco (I later looked it up, yup, Liechtenstein has the highest average wage in the world).

We crossed back to Switzerland. We were now in Appenzel country; the most traditional “cow country” part of Switzerland, though I saw no evidence of this on these fast, straight roads. I guess you have to get off the Swiss highway to see it.

It didn't take long to reach Germany and once we did, it was like the Millennium Falcon and the rest of the fleet jumping into hyperspace. The Swiss are very predictable: 110 in the slow lane;

140 max in the fast lane. The Germans are 130 in the slow lane and “whatever” in the fast lane. I did have another one of those obstinate Swiss drivers ahead of me in the fast lane doing 140, but as soon as he moved over, zoom! Man, these roads are silky-smooth! I averaged 160, and hit 200, the car's “governed” maximum (thanks Avis) on many occasions. I'm going to hate driving in California after this. My car back home can't even do 160KPH... unless plunging off a cliff to its doom.

The hotel in Munich was easy to find. We dropped off our stuff then headed off to the Munich HBF (main train station) to drop off the car. Avis was not easy to find. It took three loops around the station, and dropping Barbara off to ask directions to find the place. It was near the HBF, but not at the HBF.

Barbara had been very thorough in cleaning out the car while I was getting our stuff in the hotel room. She had packed my map, and more importantly, the name, address and location of our hotel in her backpack... which I then took to the hotel room on my second trip to the room. We were now across town with no directions. Fortunately, I remembered the name of the hotel and the nearest cross-street, since I had added it to Lucy earlier today. We dropped by the Drei Lowen or hotel from last week, conveniently located near the train station, grabbed a free map, and headed for Marienplatz. The hotel was near the Verkauftmarkt, and I could certainly find that. First up though would be a little shopping, and then the Hofbrauhaus experience.

Shopping was done at random places including at the site of the old Matthäuser's biergarten, which had been my favorite beer hall sixteen years ago the first time I was here in Munich. These days, it's a cinema and clothing store. The only actual purchasing was done by me at the Hard Rock Café, while the family was being entertained by a lively mime just outside.

The Hofbrauhaus was packed as usual. It took us a full lap before we found half a table to share. The food was good, the beer was good, but the place was too hot, loud and packed to be enjoyable. The kids certainly did not enjoy their experience, as neither particularly likes German food, and they are not allowed to consume beer (though both would if they could).

The walk to the hotel was in a bit of an arc rather than in a straight line just so I wouldn't miss the correct street. I was looking for the part of the Verkaufmarkt I had seen as we were leaving to drop off the car. In no time at all, we found the hotel. It was already pretty late, so we went to bed. My bed included a winter comforter, not a summer one, so I was up all night sweating (and coughing – I definitely have bronchitis!). It was a miserable, long night.

Friday 8/20

Today, I would try to take it slow. We would see three museums, which meant a lot of walking already, so I decided that public transportation was definitely necessary. We got a family day pass and took the tram to the Alte and Neue Pinakothek (art museums). That ride was so nice, and saved a mile of walking in each direction.

The Alte Pinakothek is the museum that I had missed in four previous times in Munich. The first time I was here, it was closed for remodeling, the other times, I was either here on a Monday, the day they were closed, or I simply couldn't fit it in due to the brevity of my stay. The place was totally worth it – so much major art! The kids liked Brueghel the best (I had made them pick their favorite artist... from each century, just to keep them occupied). The only downside of this place was in the many stairs I had to climb.

The Neue Pinakothek had a nice building configuration, but its collection was weak – very weak.



Courtney pilots an ocean liner in the Deutsches Museum



The many stairs of the Alte Pinakothek

Still, Courtney got to see some van Gogh's up close, which is always a treat for her – she loves van Gogh.

We took the tram all the way across town to our third museum, the Deutsches. We didn't tell the kids what this museum was all about; and after a small lunch, we went inside. The kids LOVED the place (as do I!). It had planes, cars, hands-on science projects, caves, and a totally awesome mining exhibit, which takes an hour to get through. Even the "kids" place downstairs was pretty incredible. Our kids didn't want to leave... and neither did I.



The kids were up there somewhere, but I couldn't find them.

But leave we did, and rather than take the tram back, we walked towards our hotel in the hopes that we would find a place that sold “Kinderjoys,” those little chocolate eggs that came with a toy. Right by our hotel there was a Walgreen’s-type store and they had them. Barbara bought 18 to pass out as gifts.

Dinner plans were to be at the open-air beer and food place by our hotel (the Verkauftmarkt), but it was a beautiful evening and everyone was out enjoying themselves. The place was beyond packed. My “beer map” from last week showed an Augustiner pub nearby, so we went to go find it. We couldn’t find it, so we ate at last week’s place: the Nuremberger; only this time, we ate inside. I can’t say much for the service (inside – outside had great service last week), but the food and beer were great. I ordered the meatloaf and was a little surprised that my loaf was made of pork. Yes, it’s still meat, but not beef... which I was expecting. It also came with an egg on top and tasted a lot like ham and eggs (no surprise there), which is

to say, yummy. Jeffrey had a steak with herb butter on top that was to die for.

On the way back, we stopped at St. Peters and the kids climbed the steeple while Barbara shopped and I got train tickets for tomorrow’s early morning departure. When the kids returned, we all went to a pastry shop to have dessert, and to have something for morning.

Once we got to our hotel, we packed and watched MTV. We all tried to go to bed early, but it was hard – the place was hot, and those winter comforters weren’t helping things much.

Saturday 8/21

I was up at 3:20, and the family at 3:45. Being sick and all, I was the pokey one of the group this time around, and we left 10 minutes late... and just made the train (S-Bahn) with three minutes to go. Good thing too: had we missed this train, the next one wasn’t due for 67 minutes.

The train ride was 45 minutes long and uneventful, though I was stressing a little because I had forgotten to stamp our tickets prior to getting on the train. Technically, we could get fined 40 euros a piece if we got caught. We didn’t though, and the train led us almost to our gate.

We met Tom and Kathy in the check-in line. They had had a great week on a Disney Adventure Tour; looking at six different castles. They liked the inside of Neuschwanstein the best. Tom, being an architecture guy and all, loved all the intricate details in every room – a man after my own heart.

We were lucky enough to get a nearby gate (nine months ago, I wasn't so lucky – this is a very long airport terminal!), and so we waited and ate breakfast. The first flight was without incident, and sure enough, we had the hassle of another unnecessary security check at Heathrow. What a stupid airport! We said good-bye to Tom and Kathy, who were on their way to LAX, while on the escalator going up to the international terminal. Unfortunately, Courtney wasn't paying attention and got her toe caught in the escalator – she had a nasty C-shaped gash on the bottom of her big toe as a result. This gash was bleeding profusely. We set her on the ground and put pressure on the wound. A nice lady at a candy shop offered to call security for us. Security came and said that they could call a medic, but that we would be charged. It wasn't that serious. When we thought we could move her, Barbara took her to the bathroom to clean up while I went to purchase Band-aids. Eventually, Barbara returned; carrying Courtney on her back. Her toe got patched-up, and then we went to the gate. We still had two hours to kill even after all that excitement, so I rested while everyone else in the family played cards. I also bought chocolate (Galaxy Bars – generally not available in America. They are super yummy!).

The long flight home didn't seem all that bad. The food was good (Mmm, Hindi, my favorite!), and I watched five movies – all good for once. Our fortunes changed once we got to SFO. I was mostly delirious due to bronchitis and a lack of fluids – I also had a fever (hey, maybe that's why the flight went so quickly!). I guess I didn't answer all the security questions as well as I should have, so I got a special mark on my entrance card. We got scrutinized at every step in the process – we even had to stand in the customs line, though we had nothing to declare, and get our bags searched, then scanned. It was a 20 minute hassle that we should have been able to avoid.

Well, we did get out eventually, and in ten minutes, Ray was there with our van ready to pick us up. It was now around 5PM, local time, and I couldn't believe how tired I was getting. I had only been up for 23 hours, hardly a record, but I was feverish and it was 2AM according to my European body clock. I only made it to 7PM that evening and I slept all the way to 6AM the next morning – unheard of for me.

Sunday 8/22

Well, I just hate the thought of unpacking (which might explain why it took me a week to unpack). I hate the thought of going back to work even more. What a great trip – wish it could have been longer! I guess I should schedule an appointment with my doctor for tomorrow. Today however, I'm teaching an Adult Ed class at church – who scheduled that?! What was I thinking?! So much for easing back into normal life; can't wait to go somewhere again... perhaps Viet Nam next year...



