

Istanbul & Munich 2009



Sept 25-27 & Oct 10-12, 2009

This Journal is the account of our 2009 team's trip to and from Kyrgyzstan. Due to the sensitive nature of our destination, this journal only includes our trip there, and our trip back, which believe me, was plenty exciting on its own. If you want the portion of the journal during our time in Kyrgyzstan, you'll need to ask me.

- Brian

9/25

Our intrepid group of adventurers are: Mark Bomann (doctor), Jen Riske (nurse), Cindy Maxwell (retired city planner) and me (Brian Knitter – semi engineer & academic), and we'll be spending two weeks in Kyrgyzstan with some friends, plus we'll sleep on the way there in Istanbul, and do two days of sightseeing (with debrief) on the way home (Istanbul, Munich).

Nate Hartke was supposed to be our fifth person, and our team leader, but he got a job in Buffalo and had to bow out of this trip roughly six weeks before we departed. This left me in charge of the group, which is not that great a challenge because truthfully, once we get to Kyrgyzstan, our friends will lead things. I'll really only have to do the things I was leading anyway: trip, training & tour. With Nate gone, I am now responsible for debriefing the team, and keeping the team together while on the trip.

I took a picture of Nate yesterday and made a life-sized head (on a paint stick) out of it. Unbeknownst to Nate, he'll be coming with us – at least in spirit.

9/25-26

As per usual, or so it seems, I worked a full day before arriving at our sendoff around 5PM. The send-off was wonderful – about 25 attended. We travelers were in heavy clothing, because it's fall in Kyrgyzstan, but here in California, it was still summer, and we were melting. I couldn't stop sweating. After a pack check, some redistribution of medical supplies, and a big group hug, we were off. The A/C in the van on the way to the airport was refreshing (a big thanks to Ray for driving us!).

When we got to the airport, it was really quiet – no music, no announcements – nothing. As we stood in line, we got to witness something funny – an obviously clueless man had brought six pieces of luggage on his trip; four were overweight. That didn't matter though because you're only allowed to bring two bags, and the flight attendant told him so. Eventually, the man pulled out this huge wad of \$100. bills in an attempt to pay for things (pretty stupid to flash that kind of money around). I'm still not entirely sure he got his luggage on. We got called up, and even though we knew a few of our bags were heavier than the guidelines allowed, we sailed through without paying extra.

At the security check, Cindy was randomly selected to have her items checked. This was quite an auspicious start for Cindy, who has never traveled internationally before; quite the reception. In no time at all though, we were at our gate, or rather above it. We had time to eat and relax at a food place within view of our gate. In a very un-German-like fashion, boarding the Lufthansa plane was done in one big massive pileup at the gate. There was no order at all; still, everybody got on board and got seated with plenty of time to spare. The seats on this new plane looked sterile, efficient... German, but they did include a personal view screen, and, for some reason, a pull-out hook & drop-down cup holder, which I played with the whole trip. The 12 hour flight to Munich seemed to go faster than most. I watched four movies (none worth reviewing or seeing again).

Munich has a funky airport. It's very long, and so is the taxiway to/from the runway. It took forever to get there, forever to walk, and forever to get out of there. We did eat at a hofbrau in the terminal, and the food was excellent. Our waitress was exceptionally nice and patient with us foreigners. She even took our picture.



Our Team at the Munich Airport Hofbrau

The flight to Istanbul was uneventful, but all of us were so tired (yet determined to stay up until we got to our hotel!). Getting our visas and getting through security was no problem at all (Ataturk Airport is nice!). Getting to the hotel was something else though. We couldn't find the guy who was supposed to pick us up, so we eventually tried to get a taxi. The taxis didn't want to take us to our nearby hotel because it wasn't "economical" for

them to drive us there. Once the first taxi driver told us this, he proceeded to ignore us – simply pretending that we no longer existed, which was sort of amusing in a way... well, amusing if you're not tired. The taxi driver who did take us to our hotel complained the whole time that we had too much luggage for a single cab, and that were wasting his time by making him drive on such a short trip (the taxis get \$50. to take you to downtown, but only \$10 to get us to our hotel). We paid him double.

The "airport hotel" (not to be confused with the hotel that is in the airport) was right on the marina, and it seemed nice in the dark. That shower sure felt great. Mark and I went to sleep with the sound of Turkish music being played in the background. I didn't really get to sleep until 3AM local time... about the time I put earplugs in, because a mosquito kept buzzing around me all night. I had been up for 32 hours – not a personal best by a long shot, but also not something you want to do every day.

9/27

Morning came, and Mark & I got up. I figured I slept maybe five hours – certainly not the eight hours I was hoping for, but about as much as I sleep on an average day, so not bad. We took our time getting downstairs, and once we got there, we were given a nice Turkish breakfast of eggs, bread, cheese, veggies and various spreads. We tried to get the girls up at nine, but there was no way that was happening, so Mark and I went for a stroll along the marina. We saw boats (one claiming to be Noah's Ark), fishermen, joggers, cats (everywhere!), distant islands, mountains, and both the Sea of Marmara and the Bosphorus Strait. Afterwards, we went back to our room, talked and read. Around noon, the girls got up.



No, probably not the original one

I still think it was funny that the porter was trying to match us up boy/girl for each room last night. He was so confused! The thing is, Cindy is 10 years older than Mark and I, and Jen is 20 years younger, so who goes with whom? The porter didn't know, so he waited in the first room until two people followed him to the second room (and was surprised that it was the two girls).

With breakfast done (lunch?), we checked out and went for a walk. Mark and I had seen two crosses on steeples, and a minaret on the way back from the Bosphorus, so we headed there. All three

places under those steeples & minarets were disappointing. We then headed to shops for the local rich. As is usual per just about every place in the world, each shop specialized in a product or food item. The bread shop was my favorite. We saw a man exiting from that bread shop balancing a whole bunch of bread on his head to sell along the street. That's just the way they do it here! After the shops came wealthy homes. Some were very nice, some were not. A few homes looked like they might be American. Eventually, we hit the Bosphorus again (and I also realized that we were walking in the very footsteps of the crusaders!).

We took taxis (2) to the airport. When we got there, we discovered that we couldn't check in for another hour, so we had lunch (OK, Mark and I did – the girls had just eaten).

Check-in was easy; lots of security checkpoints though. We had our passports checked near gate 201 at the beginning of the international terminal. Our gate was 304 – the other end of the airport. After what seemed like an eternity, we got there, only to hear announced, and see on the board, a gate change for our flight to Bishkek – gate 201. Two eternities later, we were back from whence we came. Along the long march, I talked to an English guy who was also going to Bishkek. All around me, I could hear Americans. Maybe 20% of this flight was American (probably less, but it sure seemed like it). They were no doubt going to Manas Airbase, the weigh-station for all things going to Afghanistan (the Americans were “renting” most of Manas Airport to move troops and supplies). At least two Americans seemed like spooks – they just had a way about them. One buff guy looked like Special Forces. He was carrying a locked metal box, which no doubt had weapons inside.



Our Hotel (2nd from the left) was very close to the airport

From my middle seat, I could see the plane getting loaded; lots of duffle bags and long metal boxes containing rifles and ammo. I felt pretty sure that no terrorists would be attacking this plane. Three out of four of us had “E” seats. Mark got an aisle seat, but one that was by the bathrooms and galley. None of these seats would be “green” in seatguru.com. Mark’s shoulder got hit a lot, and he could hear every flush. I could hear every flush as well – I was sitting next to him in these non-reclining seats. The cute girl next to me had absolutely no “space” issues – she elbowed me regularly, and slept on my shoulder for a time. Usually, I’d be a big fan of this, but she and her friend in the next row up were obviously sick (or hung over?).

Observations thus far:

- Every plane we got on was a little more exotic: the first flight was all Germans and Americans; the second flight was Germans & Turks; the third flight was Turks, Russians, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, and Americans (but “exotic” military types).
- Jen is really good at navigating airports – better than me, and I’m not to shabby.
- Cindy is slower than the rest of us through airports, but mostly because she is carrying everything she has in a single bag (we needed to use her carry on allotment for our medical supplies). She’s a real trooper and I appreciate her sacrifice. She did pack the lightest of all of us – some reward, huh?

It turns out that the “cutie” next to me and her friend were pulled out of line at security/passport control at Manas Airport because they potentially had swine flu. Great – I hope I don’t get it. Somehow, we managed to be dead-last in line (being at the back of the plane will do that) and we had to purchase our visas before we could go through passport control. It took us a very long time to get to the front of the visa line. By the time we got there, it was just us, the the six who were pulled out of line for having a fever (now sitting on seats behind us), and a whole bunch of security/military people wearing blue masks. The American Military guys either went through a special line, or went straight from our plane to the tarmac where the American planes were. They were gone. The army guy I had seen was walking back and forth through passport control like he owned the place, and none of the Kyrgyz military paid any attention to him. The army guy had obviously been here before – he knew his way around. Rather than getting individual visas (which would have taken a long time), we got a 4-person “group” visa. Since we would always be together, we could do this. Each of us got our own passport control person, since there were four “lines” and four of us... except we were the only ones in line! Hey, our luggage had all arrived, and was still here!



Yeah! We arrived... at 2AM. Group photo at Manas Airport

10/10 (the return home)

I got maybe three hours sleep. My friend's alarm went off late. I was ready in two minutes, but He took about 15 minutes to get ready. Soon though, we were off to the apartments. Mark was definitely ready, and the girls weren't far behind. I think I embarrassed one of my friends by seeing her in her housecoat.

The long drive to Manas was without incident, though the car did get launched at one point when we hit a sudden rise in the road.

At the airport, we were hugged good-bye and then left. It was Mark who got stopped at security this time. And yes, they did accept our e-tickets (we were not too sure).

The flight was predictably boring. I watched "Ice Age 3" and some Turkish film about trying to kill a girl (rape victim) because it was somehow her fault that she got raped. Great cinematography, but depressing movie; it also highlighted the differences between the very conservative interior of Turkey, versus the very liberal and cosmopolitan city of Istanbul and its coast. The movie was about a culture clash that still existed within Turkey. We landed before the movie ended. I don't know if they eventually killed the girl, but she was alive when I last saw her (I later found it and rented it. The movie is called "Bliss;" well worth watching!)

We had no difficulty getting out of the airport, and didn't have too much trouble finding the metro (across the street and down the elevator).

The metro was awesome and air-conditioned. During the journey, I debated between transferring to the tram early or late, since there were two transfer points. I opted for early, figuring we could get a seat that way. Well, it worked great for me, I got a seat, but it worked out less well for the rest of the team – they stood. As I predicted, the tram filled up fast. We probably would not have gotten on at the other transfer point, so it was good that we transferred when we did. This way, at least, we were still near each other. We got off at Sultanahmet with no problem. Dragging wheeled luggage across brick and cobblestone was a problem for those with

wheels. We walked straight to our hotel (Fehmi Bey) without getting lost (Yeah!) We had to stow our luggage until 2PM, but they did offer us breakfast. The breakfast spot was up on the roof – what a view! We could see much of the city. The food was good too.



The view from the rooftop breakfast spot was not too shabby



Obelisk at the Hippodrome

Well, we had three hours to kill before we could get into our rooms, so we did part of what I had planned to do tomorrow today instead (and, as it turned out, probably the best parts... so what will we do tomorrow?). We used Rick Steves' book to navigate the Hippodrome – what a place! Cindy's readings of Rick's commentary made the place come alive. This walk eventually led us to the underground cistern (one of the two places I really cared about). Cindy started reading about the place while we were still in line and was getting so excited about what lie ahead that we had to calm her down. I thought it was cute. The place was simply spectacular. Mark said that it would probably be his favorite spot in the city. He did not realize that this spot where a James Bond move was shot was real ("From Russia with Love"). He was simply blown-away.

After we rehydrated and took in views of the two big mosques while sitting at a park, we entered Hagia Sophia. Again, Rick's book really, really helped. What a place! This was my highlight – I was now standing in a church I had studied and written about years ago when pursuing my Masters. The place was huge (185 feet to the top of the dome), the mosaics were impressive, the team really liked the rarity of the porphyry marble columns (we took pictures of us touching the 1700



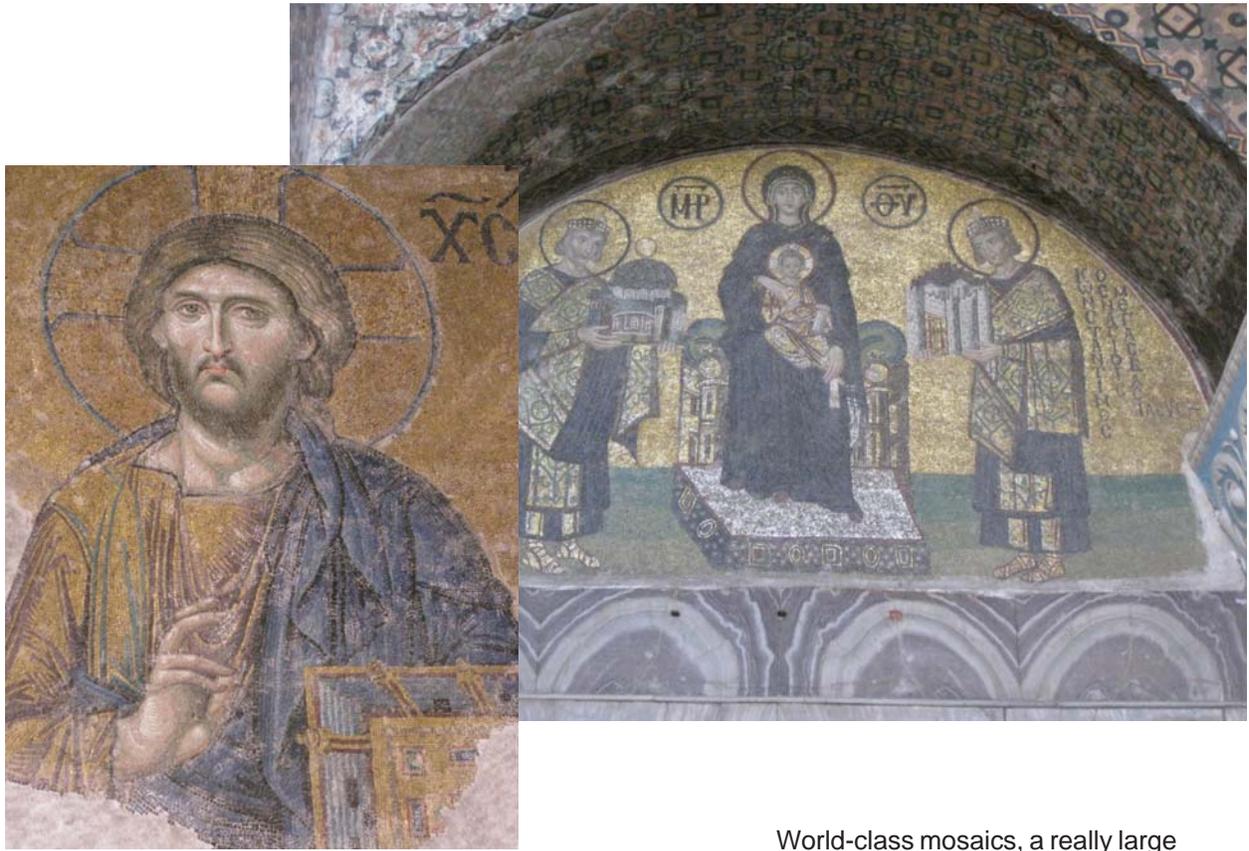
The underground cistern



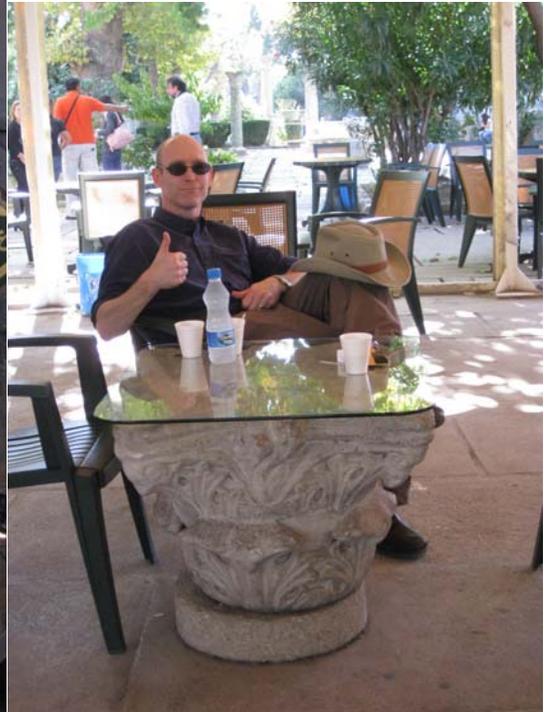
The Hagia Sophia from the outside

year old cistern columns, and the even older porphyry marble columns stolen from another church and placed in Hagia Sophia).

When we got out of the church, we had coffee and ice cream on the church grounds. Our tables were 1600 year old Corinthian capitals from the earlier Theodocian church that once stood on this site (the frieze formerly above those columns had us singing "Midnight at the Oasis" as it showed sheep going to a palm tree).



World-class mosaics, a really large interior and Mark having coffee on a 1600 year old capitol.



It was now 2:30 and we could check into our rooms. We did that, then headed to the Grand Bazaar. We had to hit the bazaars today because they would be closed tomorrow. The Grand Bazaar was HUGE. I was sort of surprised and delighted that none of our group wanted to shop. We opted instead to follow Rick's map, but not read his commentary. It was still a long walk through crowded corridors. Once we got outside, it was even worse. Eventually, the crowd did thin out.



Inside the Grand Bazaar -- imagine, 20 square blocks of this!

We walked along the university, then started a wicked downhill slant towards the Spice Market. Just when we thought we were lost, Mark found it. Initially, we saw no spices, just a mass of humanity – it was really crowded. Kitchen implements were first, then food, then spices. It was nice and all, but too stifling, so Cindy found an exit. This worked out great because we found ourselves in a nice “food court” square facing the new mosque. Also in that square were a bunch of people with leeches – offering “medical services.” They were putting them on people. We all grabbed some water, avoided the leeches, and headed towards the Galata Bridge... or tried to. We went past the bridge but couldn't find a way to cross the street. I think a bunch of people were following us since we had a Rick Steves book in our hands, and did not appear to be lost. They were mistaken. We doubled back and found an underground passage to the other side of the street. The amount of people down there was just incredible (or ridiculous). We shuffled to the other side VERY slowly and eventually got out. There were actually stores down there, but I don't know how you could get into any of them. While down there, I began to feel that we were losing oxygen.



The Galata Bridge

The Galata Bridge has cars and fishermen above and shops below. Before we went on the bridge, we went over to the fish sandwich boats. Rick said that we must try these, but the smell of mackerel really put me off. Only Cindy liked fish anyway, and no one was brave enough to try a fish sandwich, so we went on the bridge.

This was trudging, pure and simple. I was dehydrated, my feet hurt, and my back was beginning to knot up. I was having no fun at this point.

Three fourths of the way

across the bridge, we went downstairs and cut across to the other side. The water was really choppy down here, and the weather was cooling. After a respite, we went back upstairs and walked back off the bridge, down that pit of hell under the street, and back into the square by the new mosque. We were looking for a Rick recommendation, but the place had closed. The place we went to was only OK. It did have beer, never a guarantee in this Muslim country, but also a ton of cigarette smoke. The way back home seemed like it was mostly uphill. After a very long walk, we made it almost to our hotel, but stopped at a sweet shop to get Turkish Delight and Baklava first. Mark tried to call Lufthansa to get seats, but no luck. In the evening, we had a team debrief meeting up in the girl's room. They have a balcony that has a million dollar view of the blue mosque – simply stunning (our view is of an alleyway, and we have no balcony). The meeting went very well. By the time we finished, it was time for bed (9PM “local”, but midnight by our body clocks). We all crashed, extremely tired from our very long day.



Putting our feet up while admiring the view from the girl's balcony

10/11

Cindy's Birthday!

I slept until 5AM, then it was off and on until I got up at 7:30. Mark got up at 8.

Breakfast was wonderful. We took Nate pictures and the Japanese girls next to us thought it was very funny. They took their own pictures of Nate on the balcony. I imagine that Nate's picture will wind up on some billboard in Tokyo somewhere advertising beer or aftershave.

After breakfast, we descended to Sergius and Bacchus church (aka: Little Sophia) – another church I had studied in Art History classes. It's not a tourist destination, usually, but the team was willing to oblige me. All of us liked this authentic part of Istanbul off the tourist path. The church was pretty spectacular as well (once we found it – I first accidentally took them to another mosque, which definitely had a "locals-only" feel). While inside Little Sophia, we spent some time just walking around, soaking things in – we were the only ones there except for the local caretaker. Eventually the local caretaker



Nate and some Japanese tourists

started singing/chanting. It was beautifully haunting; the acoustics were spectacular. The whole experience was ethereal. I even loved how the plush carpet felt on my "sock feet" (until the carpet and socks caused me to slip down some stairs – ouch!). The team really liked this intimate 6th century church turned mosque.

Upon exiting, we grabbed some water, and looked at some crumbling Byzantine structures. On the way up, I was about 45 degrees off from where I thought I was. Fortunately, both Mark and Jen are better navigators than I am. I was really off today! With their help, we went straight to the Blue Mosque, our next stop.

All in all, I thought the exterior of the Blue Mosque far exceeded the interior. The interior, while humungous, simply lacked the zip that Hagia Sophia and even Sergius and Bacchus had (though it was still pretty magnificent). I was sort of happy to get out of the interior so I could look at the exterior again. Marvelous!



The interior of S. Sergius and Bacchus



Exterior of the Blue Mosque

We moved past Hagia Sophia to get to S. Irene, but ran into the old city wall instead. We went along the wall for a long time until we found an opening by the far corner of the Hagia Sophia (gee, next time we go through Hagia Sophia and exit out this side!). We got on the other side of the wall only to discover that S. Irene was closed to the public. We moved on to the Topkapi Palace area, but then decided that a two hour tour might be too long, since it was almost lunchtime. We went to the Archaeological Museum instead. The Museum had a wonderful collection of marble statues and sarcophagi. I would have gotten out of there sooner, but Mark really took an interest in what he saw. Both Mark and Jen were tired of listening to the Rick Steves commentary and simply wanted to go and discover things on their own. They read every placard and saw every bit of marble, where the Rick Steves commentary takes you to the highlights, skipping the unimportant bits. I probably sat on a bench I found for 45 minutes – I was so tired of standing! I was also getting very hungry and wanted to find food soon.

After what seemed like an eternity for me, we got out of the museum and down to where some food was. I wanted something “gritty” and authentic – street food – but the group wanted clean and nice. We went to the clean and nice place. The food was OK, and truly no better than last night, though we paid double. We got ice cream afterwards in a more “gritty” location. It was only OK. I know that the ice cream guy is supposed to toy with the tourists as part of the experience, but I just wanted my ice cream, dammit! I guess I was getting a little cranky.

The Topkapi Palace probably took a little studying to understand. I hadn’t studied, and though Cindy and I tried to read the Rick Steves commentary, Mark and Jen were having none of that. I saw less than I wanted to (quite a change from the Museum), and learned very little in the process. This made me a little sad, but I was also very tired, so I didn’t mind skipping a few things. I was done for the day. We opted not to see the harem before we entered the place – quite alright with me. Even Rick said it wasn’t worth the price of admission, and I didn’t think that the Topkapi Palace was worth the price of admission either. After seeing swords and jewels (which were nice), we sat on the grass for a while, then decided to trek on back to the hotel and rest for an hour. We were a little more than a mile away so this was no quick walk. We also had to dodge these metal posts that separated the sidewalk



Cindy on the lawn of the Topkapi Palace. We all felt this way.

from the street. Because of the crowds, we were in the street a lot. It felt good to rest once we did get to our hotel. I wrote in my journal the whole time with my bare (and tired) feet propped up on an ottoman (how appropriate!).

That hour was up before I knew it. We went downstairs and asked about a good restaurant. It was right around the corner and it was good, tough not great. Still, I was able to try Raki (anise liquor) and I had two beers. Our waiters / owners, were pretty comical, but

we did piss one guy off because he wanted to take us to his expensive shop, and we didn't say no quickly enough (For us, it's impolite to say no immediately; here, it's rude not to.). We shopped for (cheaper) trinkets after that, then went home. We packed, showered then went to bed early – 8:15. Tomorrow, we will get up really early – 3:15, and leave at 3:45 for the airport.

10/12

Today would be a long day – 26 hours from waking up until landing at SFO.

When the alarm went off, Mark and I were ready – we bounced right out of bed. We quickly made it downstairs to the lobby. We chatted with the night clerk for a while, then with about seven minutes to go, the night clerk asked us why we were here so early. We told him that we weren't, and that our taxi would arrive soon. He then informed us that the taxi would arrive in an hour and seven minutes. Mark had set his alarm clock for 2:30 instead of 3:30. Well... we parked our bags, went upstairs and tried to sleep for another hour. I'm not sure I was successful, but I was quite a bit more groggy the second time we went downstairs. The girls came downstairs just as a bus (not taxi) arrived to pick us up.

At 3:45 in the morning, there was no traffic, yet it still took us about 40 minutes to get to the airport. I can only imagine how long it would take during daylight hours. The path was not easy or straight to the airport. No one could possibly navigate their way to the airport in a rental car.

When we did arrive, there was already a line for our flight. This waiting in line was made unpleasant by someone puking nearby (too much Raki last night?) The little "cleaner-mobile" they were using to clean up the mess actually made things worse by putting that acrid smell in the air.

Before long though, we were at the counter. Mark had tried to get us seats for the last two days without success. Even so, we got killer seats on this flight – 16A, B, C & D.

We went upstairs to Burger King for breakfast, but it wasn't open so we had coffee and pastries at the place that was open. Once we got to the other side of passport control, we discovered that there was both a Starbucks and a Gloria Jeans. Oh well. While we waited for the plane, we shopped in the duty free store. I bought Turkish Delight, and I did get a coffee at Starbucks.

The 2.5 hour flight offered no entertainment so I listened to my iPod. I've always liked Fleetwood Mac on airplanes. It was cold and rainy when we landed in Munich.

We stowed Cindy's bag at a lost and found counter, then went to the S-Bahn. My guidebook said to take the S1 because it was much more scenic than the S8. Mark noticed that S8 would have gotten us to Munich 15 minutes faster, but this revelation occurred as the S8 was pulling out of the station. He seemed unhappy that we were taking the slow train. The S1 was more scenic however, especially since it was fall and the leaves were changing color. This may surprise you, but I have never seen "fall colors" in person before. California doesn't change color too much (green to brown), and I'm never back East in the fall. It was beautiful! When we got to our stop, we went straight up the stairs and came out right in the middle of Marienplatz. Cindy gave me the biggest hug. She loved this place (I think she was happy to see someplace Western). Our first stop was to a sausage shop, then we went to the Hofbräuhaus for lunch. Each of us had a liter of beer (Cindy's was a Radler – half beer, half

lemonade), Mark and I also had a second pint. I had the "Crispy Pig" with potato salad and dumplings. Jen went over to a local guy in lederhosen to get a picture. Now thoroughly imbibed, we headed out to the wet and windy weather. The cold wind didn't seem so bad after that utterly fantastic lunch, though my cheeks did begin to get a little cold as we headed to St. Peter's church. We were almost



The beer is really good at the Hofbräuhaus

warm by the time we got to the top of the steeple. Great view! Once we got down, we made it over to Frauenkirche, then to this second floor restaurant that Mark knew about from a previous visit. In just 20 minutes, the time we had left, we all had hot chocolates and strudel.

We took the S8 back (ugly – no scenery). We couldn't find Cindy's bag because we were in the wrong terminal. Fortunately, Munich only has two terminals and they are 100' apart. We got Cindy's bag, then headed for the gate. Our gate was H2 and I was joking that this would be at the far end of the terminal. Turns out, I was right – it was at the far end of this ill-conceived half-mile long terminal.



The view from St. Peter's steeple

We got on the rather large plane as part of a big mob. First class was announced, but there were no subsequent announcements. How un-German!

The flight was L - o - n - g. I think I watched five movies and two T.V. shows. I got really sweaty and stinky. Good news! For the first time in eight years, my bag did not get lost somewhere along the journey home. Checkout was easy and Barb & Ray greeted us at the exit. I managed to stay up until 11 that night, so I was up for 32 hours. I had also lost 11 pounds on the trip.

Next time I go to Kyrgyzstan, I will bring less; I packed for every scenerio, so I overpacked. I do think that stopping half-way along our route in both directions worked, but staying at the airport hotel on the way there would have been easier, and on the way home, one day (not two) in a more mid-point location (Munich, Amsterdam, London and Moscow; maybe even Seoul) might be better, although Istanbul is awesome, and wonderfully "mid-point" culturally between the US and Kyrgyzstan.

It was a great trip -- there was so much to love about it! When can I go again?

