



EUROPE 1994

Our first trip to Europe, 1994

After missing an opportunity to go to Hawaii in 1993, Barbara and I decided that we should go to Europe as a “consolation.” This was meant as a joke, because we were both just starting our careers, had no money, and had no savings. One night though, we said, “why not?” If we could save for one year, we could do it.

My research showed that we would be poor and unhappy if we went on a tour. The only thing that sounded remotely interesting was half a TV show that I had caught three months earlier about traveling cheap and seeing hill towns in Italy.

I was resigned to go on a Cosmos tour, because it was the best out of all the brochures in the travel agency, when during lunch one day, I saw that familiar face on TV. “That’s the guy I was telling you about” I yelled to Barbara. I threw a tape in the VCR and recorded three episodes of “Travels in Europe with Rick Steves.” The pledge drive showed three episodes a day and before you know it, I had both of his series (minus the first three shows, which I later recorded).

I trashed my tour brochures.

After getting on the mailing list, Barbara and I had decided to take the “first series” route by train. A month later, we decided to invite our two best friends, Hang and Jeff, to come with us. I didn’t want to arrange for four, and with four, the train suddenly made less sense, so the Rick Steves Bus, Bed and Breakfast tour (which was the “first series” route) became much more appealing. Since, by that time, I had read every travel brochure known to man, along with several travel books, I felt this less structured version of Rick’s tour would be better for us, and cheaper too. Our foursome added a four day car trip prior to the BB&B trip, so I could try being independent, and so we could come and go from the same airport in Paris; besides, there were some interesting things between Paris and Haarlem, the Netherlands, that we wanted to see. I hope we find Haarlem!

Saturday, 6/11/94

Jeff was a bit frightened in the beginning by the prospect of international travel, but once we hit the airport and started listening to Italian soccer enthusiasts talking in Italian, it got exciting rather quickly. We were actually going to Europe! The two hours of pre-flight waiting was lengthy, but we were too excited to care. We went merrily bounding into the plane, with our “rucksacks,” tucked somewhere in the plane (we had each gone over the 18 k /40 lb. on board weight limit). Hang exceeded the limit too, but she had the little, square boxy thing on wheels that Rick Steves recommended against. We’ll see how well she does up stairs and across cobblestones.

Sunday, 6/12

The flight was too long, as long-haul flights often are. I got 45 minutes sleep on this ten hour flight. The movie was “Grumpy old men.” It was OK.

We got through customs without a hitch... or a stamp. The rental car had not arrived, so we had to wait half an hour. It was still not there so we got an upgrade to a Ford Mondeo, which we called “Mongo.” It drove very smoothly. We got lost and wound up in downtown Paris. Mon Deiu! I now know why the guidebooks say “do not drive in Paris.” I was as sharp and aggressive as I could be. I had to be — these Parisians were trying to kill me! We finally made it out and headed for Reims. We drove through two hours worth of fields at 130 KPH. The hotel was hard to find and very quaint (small), but the owners were very friendly (Hotel Gambetta). We learned: to count starting with your thumb, and that the first floor was above the ground floor.



Our Foursome with Mongo at the reststop

was so windy, it was hard to hit the wall and miss your legs.

Back to Reims. We did a walking tour in the evening. The cathedral of Our Lady was a marvelous example of Gothic Architecture. And HUGE! The Mars gate was not as large as I thought it would be (it was the largest arch built by the Romans).

We decided to eat at a French Restaurant (but aren't they all around here?). It was fun because no one there spoke English, and of course, we didn't speak French. The waiter was saying something about Americans, probably insulting, but he was very patient as we resorted to animal sounds and pictures to describe our menu. It didn't work well, so we each ordered mystery plates. We did learn that "country ham" is raw, cured ham. Not at all to Jeff's liking. The meal lasted two hours or so. We thought the service was slow because we did not realize that this was the norm for French restaurants. We practically had to beg the waiter to give us our check. I was used to this phenomenon in Indian restaurants back in the US, so I surmised that the French system of service might be the same. I later read in my "Europe in 22 days" book that this was the case (dinner was considered the evening's entertainment). We would have to become "un-American" to understand and appreciate these new set of rules.

Monday 6/13

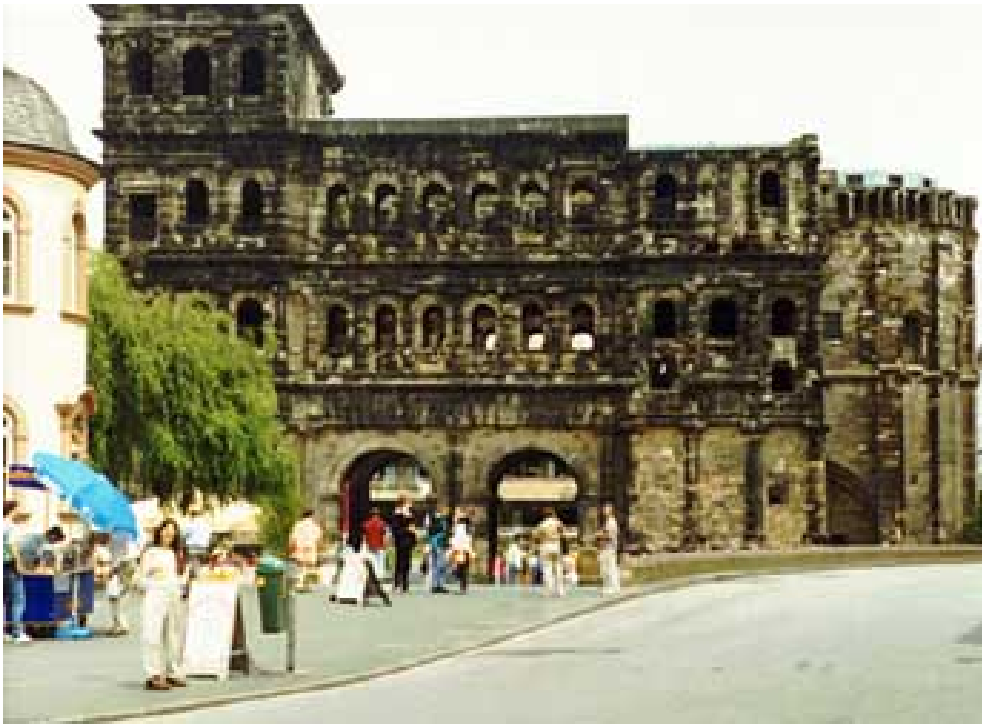
Breakfast was croissants and strong coffee (the best I have ever had!). Rather than spend time and money on the champagne tours, we decided to head straight for Luxembourg. No stamp as we crossed the border. We got lost trying to find Luxembourg City center, where the ramparts were. We found instead, the road that lead to Trier, so we took it.

It turned out to be a good idea because there was lots to see in Trier. We first visited the TI (tourist informa-

Oh, back to the drive for a moment. The best sign on the highway was a sign showing a car blowing up. We spent a lot of time learning the rules of the road by watching the locals. I still don't know what the significance of the left turn signal is when a car is passing, but we learned: it's okay to turn right on a red, walk across the street — even on red, it's mandatory that you exceed all speed limits by at least 20 KPH, and you can do absolutely anything in Paris. The roadside reststops are interesting because the toilets are a pair of footprints and a hole in the ground. Guys also have a wall to pee on in a breezeway. It



Our Lady, Rheims



Barbara (bottom L) and the Porta Negra, Trier

tion office) and got maps, then went to the Porta Negra, which I found to be great fun. We then went shopping (not my forte) in the market square. Jeff needed a screw replaced for his sun glasses. I wondered if there would be a problem with metric screws, but there was not. Mission accomplished. Next stop was the Dom. It had Gothic, Romanesque, and Baroque all rolled into one. I liked it very much. The Baroque cathedral next door was closed. Next we came to the Ba-

silica, which was Constantine's coronation building. It looked like a big barn — not at all impressive to my 20th century eyes, but it was huge. The pink baroque mansion next door was more to my liking, as were the remains of the Roman wall and the bath complex.

After learning that we should have taken that parking ticket with us and paid before driving to the gate (oops), we headed for our evening destination of Zell.

The drive was spectacular, and I only got lost once. It was actually pretty hard to find Zell. At

one point, we felt that we had passed it. Once we got there, we couldn't find the TI so I asked a lady for directions. She dragged me into her zimmer and tried to explain her rates to me and ask us how many nights we were staying and who was sleeping with whom. It was funny. She was determined to explain various concepts to us and we just weren't getting it. After many crude drawings (like the sun and moon



Barbara and I at the pink palace, basilica in the background

and the rotation of the earth to explain “one night” and stick figure drawings of our four-some in appropriate beds and rooms), we reached an agreement and paid \$30 a room. She dragged us into her cellar and we drank “black cat” wine, the local variety. It was sweet and wonderful. I toasted to world peace. She questioned that. It was at this point that her daughter came to visit. She spoke



Me on the Zell bridge with Weinhaus Koch in the background

English so we had many questions for her. Both sides got a good laugh over all our mis-communication. It was now dinner time, so we asked where to eat. The daughter directed us across the bridge to a “wine house.” The restaurant, Weinhaus Koch, was a “meat and potatoes” kind of place so that’s what I ordered — peppersteak and potatoes. Once again, our waiters spoke no English and we spoke no German, but the menu was a little easier to read than the French menu was. Pfeffersteak = pepper steak. Fantastic! The wine with dinner was even sweeter than the one we had just had in the cellar and it worked great with the beef. I really liked the local wine glasses that were used in this region. Towards the end of dinner, the barkeep came over to talk with us. He knew some English and was brave enough to try some out. We really appreciated it. This bunch of waiters were much more relaxed and easy going than the French guy from last night.

Our beds had a single, fluffy goose down comforter rather than bedsheets. It was different for us, but OK, we’d try it. We did laundry and went to bed.

Tuesday 6/14

If it’s Tuesday, it must be Belgium! We’d head there later today but first, we were off to see a castle. After one night with that comforter, Barbara and I decided that we had to have one. They were miraculous!

We left early. The Mosel was glassy smooth, and not a person in sight. It was so pretty. Everyone in the car wanted to reside in Zell for an indefinite period of time. What a gem! We passed more cute villages. The further we went north, the prettier it became.

We found Moselkern, parked, and walked the forest path up to the castle Burg Eltz. Along the way, we greeted anyone we saw with “Guten Morgen.” They replied with “Morgen!” We finally got the hint that things were less formal around here, and didn’t require High, formal German. Everyone around here was friendly and genuine. We finally found the castle. When we got to the gate, we were bold enough to

ask some Germans if they could take our picture. We took theirs as well. In the background, we heard a couple of girls shouting “does anyone around here speak English?” repeatedly at the top of their lungs. I’m sure many people around here did, but no one said anything. Neither did we — they were being ugly Americans. We moved on to the castle interior. What we could see was impressive. There were no English speaking tours of the rooms and the next two German tours were already sold out, so we didn’t go. We hiked back to our car and practiced saying our German numbers and phrases as we went.

Next stop was Brussels. Once we found the Autobahn, things went quickly. We each took turns driving “fast” (albeit in the slow lane being passed by BMWs and Mercedes like we were standing still). I topped out at 170 KPH (106 MPH). I don’t recall what the other’s did. Hang was absolutely thrilled by the freedom of going fast, but her driving was scaring the hell out of us so we cut short her turn. I had set aside five hours to reach Brussels. We reached the city in just under three. I had neglected to consider that we might be driving faster than 60 MPH, like we would be in the US.

The drivers in Brussels make the drivers of Paris seem tame. I seem to recall that my guidebook also said never to drive in Brussels. We got very lost in the city and spent two and a half hours searching for our hotel. Looks like my time estimate was OK after all! I learned quite a bit from this experience: In Brussels, there are no stop lights or stop signs; all intersections are treated as yields with the person on your right having the right of way; the street signs are in blue and white and are posted on buildings; “Centurum” means city center; there is a “ring road” that goes around the perimeter of the city (we were there often); NEVER get on the inner lane of one of those roundabouts — you’ll never get out. We were beginning to see that the Europeans knew all the rules of the road and that they were simply better drivers than we were. The fatality rate, which is high in this city, would be astronomical if Brussels was in the US.

Part of our problem was that the city center was under construction so we kept getting kicked out of the center of town and put back on that ring road. What we didn’t know was that our hotel was not inside the ring road, but outside it. We asked directions several times, but no one knew where the road was. After a near fatal crash on my part, we got a crack in our windshield. Good thing we paid for that extra coverage.

We found our hotel quite by accident. While driving down yet another unknown road in a really bad section of town as the sun was setting, Hang spotted the sign to our hotel. Great, I thought; we’re going to die. Good thing we had our money belts. There was no place to stop so I double parked. I didn’t care, I was tired. The Hotel directed me to a parking garage a couple of blocks back. Apparently, one does not park a rental on the street if one wants it the next day. It was \$20 to park for the evening but every guidebook I had read said that it was necessary and that \$20 was cheap in this town.



The hotel people were friendly and spoke excellent English. I was having a hard time understanding why I was paying \$75 a night to stay in a slum of a neighborhood (the hotel was actually quite nice), but I also knew that downtown was running \$300 a night. One guy explained to us that we were in the Lebanese section of town, so Lebanese food would be our best choice. I asked him if this neighborhood was dangerous, because it looked very dangerous. He laughed and said not to worry. "The people may look rough, but they aren't." Not entirely convinced, we decided to stay in for a while. I taught our gang cribbage. We finally ventured out later that evening and found the restaurant that was recommended to us. Everyone spoke English and the food was marvelous. I had the Belgian version of pepper steak. I especially liked the dessert, which was a flaming Grand Manier crepe with ice cream and whipped cream. Yum! The amount of alcohol from that dessert alone was enough to intoxicate me, and I had already tried three Belgian beers (all excellent, all well above US standards for alcohol percentage). Sleep was not a problem.

Wednesday 6/15

We had to eat breakfast in the bar because a Chinese tour group of 48 beat us to the breakfast area. Good news. Our car was still around. We made it to the Brussels city center with a minimum amount of fuss. Hang pointed out that we did arrive during rush hour last night. Today was a breeze. We parked and walked to St. Michael's cathedral. It was fairly impressive because of its stained glass windows and wood carvings.

We next took a stroll down the grand palace and through the central park, which took us to the museum of "ancient art" (1500-1700). This was a museum of Flemish art primarily. I liked every Bruegel (Jr. & Sr.) that I saw and David's "Marat Sade." Barbara was partial to Rubens. I thought that the temporary display of his work was largely done by his shop rather than by him. Blech! The permanent Rubins stuff was great. After two exhausting hours in this museum, we decided to never see a European museum without Rick Steves' book, "Mona Winks," again. We just didn't know enough about art to be "efficient" in these large museums. Rick Steves had it all figured out, and the book was funny. Hang wanted to go to the TI to get something on Brussels history. Barbara wanted authentic Belgian waffles. We did a search of the city for waffles while singing "do you know the waffle man?" We found the waffle lady in the central train station after ten minutes or so. Belgian waffles are amazing! In another ten minutes, we found the TI. We got maps and stuff and left. We visited the nifty little square that was accented in gold then went on the highlight of our day, the Manneken Pis or "pissing boy." He was in Japanese clothing today.

We saw a couple of groups ahead of us heading towards the statue. We ran around them and got our pictures before they got there. Small groups do travel quicker! Just as we were leaving, a bus filled with tourists pulled up along side. Everyone on the bus ran to the one side to take pictures. I thought the bus was going to tip over. No one got off that bus. They took their pictures and left. This was my first exposure to Japanese tour groups in Europe. They reminded me of "trophy hunters." At least the groups we ran around stopped to talk about the statue and its history.



Manneken Pis

I had not seen a bathroom since we had left the train station and now I had to go. We looked a bit while heading to our car, but couldn't find one. We got in our car and drove out of town. I finally found one in a Megaplex gas station outside of town. It was sure better than that "breezeway urinal wall" or the "hole in the ground toilet" we had experienced along France's roads. We got munchies and exchanged our leftover Belgian Francs for Dutch Guilders.

The drive to Haarlem was mostly uneventful and the scenery never changed — cows, flat grasslands, canals, gray skies. We stopped at a roadside TI, now called a VVV in The Netherlands, and grabbed some maps. We found Haarlem, but had a hard time finding the city center where our hotel was to be. We didn't know that the address was for a town square, not a street. No wonder we couldn't find it on the map. Little did we know that most of the time, we were only one block away, for we kept circling around the massive church that was in the town square. We finally parked and found the VVV. They quickly pointed us in the right direction. We found a somewhat illegal parking space right by the square on the street. I hope our car doesn't get towed!



The square where we stayed in Haarlem

This hotel is where we met our tour group for the rest of our jaunt through Europe. The car would go away tomorrow. Part of that group was already there. We met them, then got our rooms. These were the smallest rooms we had seen to date. Most of our group got together and ate at Stadt Cafe (Dutch food) so that we could meet each other before we all got packed into a bus for three weeks together. The food and fruit beer were both good, the beer better than the food. The conversation was good too. I sat next to a family (father and mother are music teachers, one daughter is going to college to study German, other daughter is 10). We got back to our hotel, wrote postcards and played cribbage as a foursome. Barb and I went to bed. Jeff and Hang went to two other rooms with new people.

Thursday 6/16

Jeff's roommate snored terribly so Jeff walked the streets of Haarlem most of that night. He even went to a MacDonalds and had a shake. He needed a taste of home.

We dropped off the car at Shipol airport after a side trip to Alcamar (that is, we got lost). The train station was right by the car rental, and by the baggage terminal for the airport. This was a very efficient airport. We took the train into Amsterdam (We bought tickets to Haarlem, but you can get off at every train station along the way if you want. Amsterdam was on the way to Haarlem).

We tried to go to the old church first, but it was closed this early in the morning. We walked around a bit then went to Anne Frank's house. It was a very tall and narrow house. You had to turn sideways to get up the staircase. The girls spent an extra half an hour in the house while Jeff and I went on the far side of the canal to take pictures of the house. Jeff's camera battery died, then it started to rain.

Once the girls found us, we hiked two miles to the Rijks Museum. Along the way, the girls stopped in a book store and said that the book selection was "interesting." They didn't know it, but they were in a lesbian book store. We got in to the Rijks and saw a whole bunch of famous paintings. The Vermeers and Rembrandts were my favorite — especially Vermeer's "woman pouring milk." I had never seen Rembrandt's

“Night Watchmen” before and I thought that the little copy in the “explanation room” was the actual painting. Boy was I surprised when I walked into the next room to find His huge 10 x 20 foot real version. Impressive! The “Dutch Masters” around the corner were also impressive.

The next museum we went to was the van Gogh. It was OK - I’m not a big fan. I did like the 3-D effect of piled on paint that you can only see with the real paintings. Maybe van Gogh wasn’t so bad after all. We exited and had lunch.

I guess this is a good time to talk about our group’s food situation. So far, I’ve only talked about dinners because all the breakfasts in the hotels are included. These breakfasts, so far, have consisted of fresh bread and rolls, butter, jam, coffee, sometimes a juice, creamers, meats and cheeses. Milk is only on request, and I was told at one place that it’s only for children. The breakfasts are so large that we have been packing the spare bread, meat and cheese for lunch. We thought that we wouldn’t have anything to eat for lunch, because we’d be too busy running around, so we



Hang and Brian at the Amsterdam train station

brought enough snack / lunch food with us from the US for four days. We still had much of that food. What a stupid idea. On day five, we had eaten maybe one day’s worth of what we had brought. On the plus side, the first night we were in Europe, we each bought a small Evian water bottle. We kept the bottles and have been filling them with a large Evian or Vittel bottle. 1 large bottle equals about three small bottles. Our foursome was sharing one to two large bottles a day (cheaper).

Anyway, we ate lunch outside the van Gogh museum under a canopy because it had really begun to rain. Amsterdam rain is like Seattle rain — misty and constant. The rain had stopped somewhat by the time we finished lunch. We walked through the street flower market then into the main tourist areas where there was shopping. We somehow wound up at the Hard Rock Cafe right in the middle of the red light district. Hang and Jeff bought merchandise there.

The red light district was both fun and funny — not at all scary. There were some great signs and some dirty postcards, but the best part was just walking along the street. Every once in a while, there would be a staircase leading down from the street level. At the bottom of the stairway would be a plate glass doorway with some gal in a bikini inside, viewable from the neck down, either dancing or reading. There were other gals on the street level in windows but they were overweight Latinos in underwear.

We passed a few “coffee shops” next, which were actually rasta bars that smelled of marijuana. Some guy was on a street corner trying to get a match from passers by so he could light a joint. It seemed pathetic and funny. We spent no time in this neighborhood and headed to the train station.

We took the train to Haarlem and on the way, we got kicked out of first class. Apparently, a “1” on the car means first class and a “2” means second class. I guess we should have figured that out, but I could see no difference between the two classes — at least on this train.

Once back, we tried to get in to the Grote Kirche (big church) in Haarlem, but couldn't find the entrance. After a few laps around the place, we found it closed. Dinner was the Indonesian Rice Table. Highly Recommended! This was the first official function of our new twenty-four person tour group. On our evening walk (just Barb and I), I bought a MacDonalds shake where Jeff had last night. It was richer and cheaper than its American counterpart. I was pooped. We went to bed.

Friday, 6/17

Our foursome did a few more laps around the big church this morning, but it was closed. Some of our larger group attended an organ recital in the church last night sometime after we went to bed. I was jealous. We watched some workers rebuild a Dutch road. They still use cobblestones here. Asphalt is too expensive. They flattened the sand, placed the stones, then filled in with sand. Each worker was wearing wooden shoes. We asked them why — if it was for the tourists, traditional, or practical? They said that the shoes were practical. They were carved to match their feet. Sand comes out easily, and they're washable.



Construction worker in wooden shoes

We met our bus, our tour coordinator Margaret, and our bus driver Mark. They were both friendly and genuine. We found out that this was Margaret's first time leading a group and only her second time doing this route (first time was training). Her husband was going to meet us in Munich in a few days. Mark, a "rough around the edges" Belgian, had done this route many times and was actually sick of doing it — and he was driving two trips back-to-back. He would much rather be in Belgium with his girlfriend watching the men's world cup final that had just started. His girlfriend would meet him on a few stops along the way. We found out this morning that OJ Simpson was in jail for presumably killing his wife. That was a bit of a shocker.

It's really nice not having to share a seat — with 24 people on the bus, each person gets two seats. Well, off we go on our bus adventure!

Our first stop was the city of Almeer. This city has an international stock exchange for one item only — tulips. The warehouse that contained the stock exchange and billions of tulips was over a mile long. People rode bikes inside to get to the various locations. It was a very large and colorful sight.

The next stop was the open air museum in Arnheim. This museum (founded in 1909) is a preserve of Dutch buildings and traditions from around the country, prior to the industrial revolution. Our guide showed us farm houses from three different periods, a functioning windmill, and some well to do houses. One house was called a "Goodyear house." Merchants would send ships out for trade. Most of the ships never returned. If one did though, the merchant would be rich. He



Windmill at Arnheim

would then add on to his house. The house we saw had two additions. That meant that “his ship had come in” twice, and he had had a good year. Inside was a painting of the merchant’s wife. She was really fat. This showed wealth because no one was actually fat in those days. Only the rich could afford more than one meal a day. The merchant would pay the artist extra to put a few pounds on his wife.

The farmers would survive the winters (from year 0 - 1700) by spending the winters indoors with their cattle. They would hang meat from the ceiling and cook inside even though there was no chimney. The smoke would eventually get through the thatch roof. The farting, pooping cattle would produce ammonia, which would disinfect the place. The manure would be used on the sandy fields and as wall siding come spring time. It would be a meter deep by then. The smoke that was always around was a preservative — it cured the meat. The result is that the people never got sick, and they stayed warm all winter because cows generate a lot of heat.

The fire, which was always going, had to be covered at all times with a set of bars to keep the cats from walking into it then setting the place on fire. Apparently this was a problem. The Romans tried to take this land in 200 AD, but they built stone forts. In the winter they froze and died. They were always sick. They decided that the natives could have their land.

When dating in The 18th century, every Wednesday night was “stud night.” A boy could come over to date a girl. Not a word was spoken, but if during dinner, the boy got a red cup, he could come back. If he got a blue cup, he was out of there. In this farm of the 1700s, Ma and Pa slept in a wall space with Pa way in the back and Ma up by the door. This way, the woman could tend to the babies and make breakfast while the man slept. by the door was a rope attached to a crib. When the baby cried, Ma pulled the rope and the crib swung back and forth. Well, off to Germany.



11th century interior, complete with hanging meat, manure walls, and anti-cat cage over the fire.

After a long and sometimes bumpy ride, we made it to the hotel Kranenturm, a creaky hotel that was made from an old Roman wall and port gate. The dinner, which was included with the tour, was excellent. Barb and I splurged for the egg custard ice cream thingy. It was marvelous. The beer was bitter — not at all like the Belgian beers, but still better than most American beers. The wine was good, but not as good as Black Cat. Jeff bunked with me because the only other male traveler (an out of work male nurse with a drinking problem named Jim) snored so much that Jeff couldn’t sleep. Jeff had not slept for three days now and was a little ticked off at Jim. Barb and I arranged with Margaret to have Jeff stay with us as often as possible so he could get some sleep. She said that she’d be able to do it about 50% of the time due to room configuration constraints. Barb slept with Hang and two other girls somewhere else during our stay here. Jeff’s and My room had a view of castle Stahleck up on the hill and of the neighbor’s family room across the street. They were watching world cup soccer across the street and were getting excited.

Saturday, 6/18

As an entire group, we rode a cruise ship down the Rhine. We saw intact castles and ruined castles. We saw the Loreli Rock — big deal. In St. Goar, where we finally docked, some of the group took the train to go see Burg Eltz. A few continued cruising. The rest of us hiked up the steep hill to Rheinfels Castle.

Rheinfels is a massive ruined castle with many dark tunnels. After half an hour, the group of 14 became 9. Our smaller group seemed determined to check out every pit and staircase in the place. It became two hours of hide and go seek with lots of dead-end tunnels, slippery stairs, low ceilings, mud and darkness. Flashlights were very important. This was really fun because you never knew where you would exit a tunnel. I found myself exiting into caverns, sheer drops off the wall, and at the bottom of a well. One place, I had to duck walk 10 meters through a 1 x 1 meter passageway with muck on the ground. We ended our exploration with a climb to the highest tower in the castle. It gave us a great view of the Rhine.

Once down in the land of the serfs again, we shopped and ate, then attempted frisbee throwing and kite flying in the waterfront park. We fished for frisbees in the Rhine a couple of times. One time, a local painter used his easel to help grab a frisbee. After we finished playing, THEN we saw the sign saying “keep off the grass.” Oops.

We took the bus back to Bacharach. The Burg Eltz team was still missing. They did not get back until 10:15 and boy, did they have a harrowing story to tell about their train travel and hiking experience. Apparently, the train station is three miles away from the car parking lot we went in days earlier (then another mile to the castle) and the car lot was way up the hill from the station.

The train schedule was periodic at best and the only help was mean, crotchety old man and spoke no English (I met this man while trying to find a bathroom, so I know they weren't exaggerating). There were no posted train schedules that they could find, so they took a mystery train that wound up in Köln. The train station in Bacharach is so small that only the milk run train stops there — once every two hours. I'm glad I saw the place by car.

Those of us who were around had a nice dinner at the hotel which seemed to incorporate German and Filipino cuisine (our hostess, Fatama, is Filipino). Afterward, we tried that ice cream special again. Zer gut! Some of the less tired people, like Jeff, hiked up to the youth hostel that was castle Stahleck. They said that the view was great and that next time they might stay there. I walked the city instead, which had no stairs. I had a terrible sunburn and my legs just ached. Note to self: Don't forget the sunblock next time. Do more stair climbing before the trip — Europeans don't use elevators and everything you want to see is on top of some damn mountain.

Sunday 6/19

Boy, they sure ring a lot of church bells on Sundays! Well, we were up and out on the road pretty fast. We had a lot of ground to cover today. Our first stop was to Rothenburg ODT. Beautiful City! Our foursome was hungry so we found a bier garden just outside the city walls and had a very German meal



Burg Rheinfels

with good beer. We then walked the entire city wall after climbing the tower gate that we had earlier gone through. There were a lot of stairs to get up the tower. Right near the top, they charged a 1DM admission. Pretty shrewd I think — how many people who have just climbed 15 flights of stairs aren't going to pay to see the view they worked so hard to see. After we ran out of wall, we hiked in the moat outside the city for a while.



Rothenburg Ob der Tauber - tower view

Next stop was the crime and punishment museum. It was gristly but interesting. Hang was getting physically sick from the displays — it really disturbed her — so we left. The girls went shopping. Jeff and I went to check out the Riemenschneider carving in St. Jacob's church. I loved it! Once out of our sanctuary, we were forced to shop with the girls until the bus left. I hate crowds and this town was too touristy for me — at least by day. I think this would be an awesome early morning or late evening place.

Three hours after that, we were in Munich. Our hotel was four flights up, 70 stairs. Our room slanted. Blood would be flowing to my head all night. With only one shower for the whole hotel, we had to set-up a morning shower schedule. It was like summer camp! A four star hotel it ain't. Margaret said that this was probably the worst hotel on the entire trip. I hoped so.

The evening's entertainment for much of our group was at the Mathauser's Beer Hall. What a great place! I had a liter "ein mas" beer and half a roasted chicken. We did the "chicken dance" with the oompa band and toasted often. I knew that tourists came to this place because at one point, the band played John Denver's "Country Roads" and everybody sang. The bathrooms had vomitoriums right next to urinals and it was largely unisex. I used the urinal only. A very attractive blonde German girl grabbed Jeff out of his chair at one point and danced with him. He got a hug from her afterwards. I think it made his evening.



Me at Mathauser's

Monday 6/20

Most everything is closed on Mondays. It looks like we landed here on the wrong day for me to see the Pinahotek Museum, old or new. Our tour group took a tour of Munich that was given by a local guide. We saw two churches, a couple squares, the Hofbrau House and the Glockenspiel clocktower. After the tour, we climbed fifteen flights up a steeple to get a nice view (300 steps).

We ate lunch as a group in the market square bier garten. We sent tour members out for different food. Before you knew it, we had a feast of bread, cheese, fruit, olives, beer and strudel.

We discovered that the Deutches Museum was open so we went to it. This is Europe's, or at least Germany's, equivalent of the Smithsonian; six floors of trains, planes, autos, chemistry, physics, mechanics, optics, ceramics, music, mining, etc... It was overwhelming. In three hours, Jeff and I only did two floors. Barbara, who was on her own, got lost in the mining exhibit. Eventually, we all found each other. Jeff and I



Frauen Kirche (church of our lady) in Munich

looked at another floor and a half, but particularly the mining exhibit. That exhibit took half an hour to get through but was the best thing in the whole place.

For dinner, we decided to go regional. I had the weissworst, which was boiled and bland. For “dessert,” we thought we’d try the Hoffbrau House. It was really dull — I have never seen so many Japanese tourists in one place. We went back to Mathauser’s. The evening got decidedly better after that. I had two “ein mas dunkles.” I don’t remember much after that except weaving my way home at some point. Jeff found a “friend” in our group. Her name is Nancy.

Tangent: Tour statistics.

I had a chance to talk to Margaret about tour groups and our group in particular. She said that most European tour groups cater primarily to retired people. Rick Steves’ tours were no exception. The average age of the group is 55 typically. Our group was unique because half the group was below 35. Summer tours tend to have a lot of teachers, families and unemployed people. Off season tours had more single people. Out of 24 in our group, nine were teachers, four were in the medical profession, four were unemployed and we had two families with kids. After a typical Rick Steves tour, a very high percentage of the people who went will quit their jobs and couples will get divorced. This intense travel tends to change people by opening them up to new experiences. They begin to think differently and their values change (editor’s note: I actually tried to get a job with Rick Steves after this tour, chucking a very promising career as an engineer. He said no).

Tuesday 6/21

Half the group spent the morning in the Dachau prison camp. It was very depressing. The ovens were 3' x 6' and weren't used for baking bread. The memorial was powerful. On the way back to Munich, we found one of our group, Mariam, hitchhiking. We picked her up. She didn't get the message that we were to meet at the hotel, not the train station so she was headed in the wrong direction.

Our first stop on the way to Austria was to the Weiss Kirche, or White Church. This church was the height of German baroque decadence. It was a pilgrimage church because of a miracle. A woodcarver was asked to make a crucifix for a visiting dignitary. When he finished, he did not think the carving was worthy so he chucked it and began a new one. A little girl found the scrapped cross and noticed that Jesus (on the cross) was crying. The cross was put back in the church and people, even today, come to see it. I wanted to see the cross too, but we came during Mass and it just isn't polite to be wandering around snapping pictures during service, so we left.

Next stop was at the border. This took a while because busses are taxed for Austrian and German road service. Head counts were taken, odometer readings were made... Twenty minutes later, we were on our way to the Austrian Tyrol.

Austria is awesome. The Tyrol is the prettiest place I've ever seen. The mountains are exceedingly tall and the whole place is green. The rivers and lakes had intense blues and greens. One river in particular was a milky qua blue color.

Our hotel, for once, rated a star or two (the best place we would be staying at). It was a traditional Tyrolian construction and it had all the amenities. It was located outside of Reutte at the base of the Ehrinburg Castle ruins. We had a choice of playing ping pong or going biking. We played ping pong. Once we started roaming around the place, we discovered musical instruments placed all over. The owners were musicians and they allowed us to play with some of our toys. I knew that the two music teachers played, as did I, but we found a few others with hidden talents in the group who could play as well. We all had a wonderful time. Dinner was Austrian, which I couldn't distinguish from German cuisine.

Wednesday 6/22

We got up really early so we could be first in line at Neuschwanstein castle. Rick's book, as usual, said that it was a quick twenty minute hike up to the castle from the parking lot. Rick's descriptions became a running gag with our group because there is nothing quick or easy about a 3km hike up a cliff.



The baroque interior of Weiss Kirche

Note: If you ever plan to go on this trip, get a stair stepper now! Use it every day for at least half an hour, then walk 10km. This describes a typical day on this tour. I now wish I had brought aspirin. Everyone sleeps very well at night around here.

The castle was incredible. I was a bit upset that they did not allow interior pictures. I would have taken many. I did get a few shots outside the window.

After the castle, Hand, Barb and I hiked up to Mary's Bridge for exterior pictures of the castle(s). We saw plenty of the castle down the hill, Hoenswangau, but we never went in. We met some people from Kentucky on the way down. They were amazed at all we had done in 10 days. They liked Carmel California better than anything they had seen in France or Germany so far. They had yet to go to Austria. Maybe that would change their mind.



Neuschwanstein Castle

We got to the bottom of the mountain and we were able to rent a rowboat. We tooted around the lake for a while then had a picnic lunch with the group. On the way back to the hotel, we stopped at a luge ride. The chairlift up was fun but the ride down was even better. I went three times and was, by far, the fastest sled on the course. The next stop was at Ehrinburg castle. It was another grueling hike up another cliff — this time with no pavement. This made the hike up to Neuschwanstein appear ridiculously easy in comparison. Oh, and NEVER drink beer while hiking up a hill. I wanted to die! When we got to the top, hyperventilating and unable to move, we discovered that the castle was closed for repairs (they were rebuilding the ruined castle). There was a picnic area outside the castle with a view that was worth the death march. We were overlooking the entire city of Reutte down in the valley. I now know how this castle survived an attack by 16,000 Swedes — The Swedes got to the top and collapsed. They were easy targets after that.

Some of our group climbed the ruined wall into the castle. My group decided to sneak past the “verboten” sign and go in the main entrance. Bethany couldn't understand why they would rebuild a ruined castle anyway. We heard men working on the inside so we moved cautiously. As soon as Bethany poked her head in the entrance, the workers started hammering on the wall. She got showered with rock bits. We made a quick exit. Meanwhile, her husband, Doug, and his wall climbing group had a great time inside the castle. We were jealous.

Some of the group went to go on a glider but the wind was blowing in the wrong direction so they couldn't go. The rest of us played ping pong and piano all night.

Thursday 6/23

These Alps are wonderful. Every turn as we drove was another beautiful view of some ridiculously large mountain. The Italian Alps were noticeably different but every bit as lovely as their Austrian counterpart. The houses near the Italian/Swiss border still were white stucco Swiss chalets, but the dark wood on the top floor started to disappear. About the time it was gone, the white stucco became beige with an orange tile top. All this happened within a 50km stretch. The weather changed too; from 60°F to 90°F+.

We must have seen six or more Italian castles (very different square towers from the German round ones) along the route to Venice. Once we cleared the Alps, everything began to decay. The houses were falling apart. There were rock piles and rubble piles everywhere. The roads became less and less even. This was the first time not everything was green on this trip. They grew different crops. Everything was different. It looked like I was back in California. This was not good I thought. Fortunately, there was Venice.

As we crossed the bridge, Venice began to unfold. There were a myriad of “oohs” and “aahs” on the bus as we began to see this jewel rise up from the wasteland around it. My personal thought was “My God, it’s real!” I had seen it in pictures and in movies, but I had a hard time believing that it was real. Venice is magical.



Me at St. Mark's square, Venice

We took the vapperetto to the Rialto Bridge. Our

hotel was just a few blocks away. Barbara and I got a huge room with a shower and a bidet, but no toilet. Everyone came into our room to see what a bidet looked like and to see how it worked. The breeze coming in from our window had the distance smell of raw garlic. I love that smell!

As a group, we walked to St. Mark's square for an orientation to the city. We were then told to literally get lost. Venice is an island, so you can't get too lost before you find the sea or the main waterway that runs down the center. We had no trouble getting lost. I recommend it. Every passageway offered something unique. We eventually found a pizzeria by the Rialto Bridge. Barbara and I had cannelloni, potatoes, mushrooms and a soda for 34,000 Lira (\$24). We discovered (too late) that the pizza was large enough for two and only cost 9,000 Lira (\$6.50). Pizza is a good value in Italy. We would have to remember this — all other foods were very expensive here. Barb and I spent the evening walking along the grand canal, occasionally dipping our feet in. Venice IS for lovers.

(End of part 1)