

## Our European vacation - May 2015

Day 1 (May 9th/10th): We woke up at approximately 5am. Way too early, if you ask me.

I guess it's a good thing that we got up so early. A few minutes after we got up, Kim noted a text message with a dire announcement. Apparently our flight out of Chicago (The flight to London) had been cancelled. After a brief bit of investigating, she also discovered that the travel agency had booked us on a new flight out of Miami, Fl. That's no good! The travel agency did not re-schedule our Chicago flight.

After a bit more investigating, Kim discovered that the flight out of Chicago was once again open for booking. She quickly began the process of rebooking us. We got back on the original flight (she thinks they must have changed planes), but we lost our preferred seats. We were still booked with extra leg-room, but we lost out on some money as we were originally scheduled to have six inches of extra leg-room.

We were the lucky ones. Unfortunately, Kim's parents were re-booked on a flight out of Green Bay to Chicago, and then Chicago to London. They won't arrive until tomorrow evening; some time around 11pm. Kim wasn't able to re-book them on the re-established flight 86 (same flight number, date, and time). By the time she tried to get them re-booked, the flight was already full.

Our trip to the airport was uneventful and customs was a breeze as we were both in the TSA pre-check line. That saved us about thirty minutes of waiting in line.

I was a bit worried about my 'Anker E6' battery pack. It's a 20800mAh juice pack for the iPhones and iPads. When you check in online, there's a 'warning' about things you can't bring on the plane, and lithium-ion batteries is one of the things that they say you can't bring on board. Thankfully they didn't make me throw away my ~\$200.00 juice pack! I did a little research after we got through security. It turns out you can take lithium-ion batteries on the plane, so long as none of them is more powerful than ~27,080mAh. That 'warning' is ridiculous, as every iPhone, iPad, laptop, android phone, many cameras, and most modern electronics have rechargeable lithium-ion batteries in them. Most people don't know they're lithium-ion batteries, but they are nonetheless. Imagine the millions of travelers who are unnecessarily worried about their devices...

The flight was more comfortable than usual, because kim had booked us first-class! The extra leg-room, better food (coach got

a snack, but we got a meal), and more attentive crew all makes for a better experience. Even if the flight was a bit bumpy due to the weather. Speaking of the weather, the last few days in Aurora have been extremely wet, and today was no exception. With severe weather warnings and a forecast of SNOW for this evening, Kim and I are lucky to get a break from the dismal spring showers. Europe should be a bit brighter than the recent spate of cloudy days in the Denver area.

Our flight arrived in Chicago at approximately noon. At the airport we had a few questions about customs and security. The gate agent had no questions so we headed straight to the next gate in our trip. This particular trip through O'Hare was the easiest I've ever experienced. In the past, O'Hare has always been a hell to avoid. Unfortunately for reason not explained here, our travel plans took us through O'Hare. We went to our gate, bought some drinks, people watched for a couple of hours, and continued on our way around 1400 local.

After boarding our next flight (The leg that led us to London), we settled in for a long and uncomfortable trip. With the phones and iPads in Airplane mode, we found that we couldn't listen to our audio books. One must remember that most audio books contain the dreaded security and authentication software; something that audio tracks (Music) used to contain. Instead we watched a few movies and television episodes.

I watched a brand new movie 'Jupiter Ascending' (w/Milla Kunis). I give it a 4 out of 5. It's a bit too much of a Chick Flick to get an honest to goodness 5 out of 5. Kim watched 'Big Bang Theory' and who knows what else. ...added later (In the Woods (whatever that was))...

Eventually the plane made it's way across the big pond, and our 9+ hour journey came to an end at Heathrow airport.

The bus/shuttle ride to the hotel was a new experience. We haven't experienced sheer terror like that since we last visited the six flags park in Downtown Denver. The driver showed great courage as he sped through parking garages, down the M4 and around round-a-bouts.

Thankfully we arrived at the airport intact, checked in with the tour operators and were left to our own devices until tomorrow morning when the first of the guided tour begins. The hotel is a special kind of 'tourist trap' - Seemingly specializing in the Russian tourist, our room is comparable to others I've occupied while working in England. Nothing special, but priced in the 'Five-Star' category.

We checked in extremely early (at 0800) - and thank you for that - we took a short break as we attempted to unwind after that amazing tight and cramped plane ride... The wi-fi here doesn't work, but we're told that it does. We now have four devices which cannot access the internet. Thank you hotel Novatel! (Not!). Thankfully the 'handy man' was able to restore the power to all the outlets in our room. All we have to do now is manage another day here.

After a brief hike about the hotel - That took four hours, and left us quite exhausted - we had lunch at the lounge in the hotel. The restaurants in the hotel serve breakfast and dinner. If you want lunch you have to eat in the lounge. The club sandwich (Kim had it) looked good (Kim says it was o.k.), but the fish and chips was typical. Deep fried gooey cod with mushy peas and no vinegar. I had to ask for the vinegar, and then I got balsamic vinegar (for salad). I thought that a bit odd considering other places I've had fish and chips. They also served it with the obligatory mushy peas, but no spoon. Paying for this overpriced meal came as a surprise as well. Despite the fact that I offered a chip & pin credit card, the server used a standard swipe and sign machine... which over charged me on the conversion - I'm sure.

After the meal we took a nap... something the hotel couldn't exactly screw up. I know we weren't supposed to. We were so tired. Hopefully the two hour nap won't completely wreck our sleep cycle.

We now have evidence that text messaging works. I was even able to send some photos as attachments (i think?), but the connected wifi will not let us browse web pages with our devices... I guess the wifi access must be used for something else?

Now we're in the hotel, basically waiting for dinner time, so we can eat, then come back to the room to sleep - Until Kim's parents get here. When we go to dinner, I'm going to insist on the chip and pin charge card machine. I wonder how that will go over?

Kim's parents arrived around 1200pm. They go the room next to ours. They woke us up when they got to their room, and we talked for a half hour or so.

We sleep for another four hours or so... Eventually we'll get some sleep!

Day 2 (May 11th) We started the first day of tour activities

with a great breakfast. Thankfully the breakfast was included with our hotel stay, and it's a full British breakfast buffet. I was the only one who dared to try the "Yorkshire Pudding" (made with blood?).

After breakfast we headed down to the lobby for our first guided bus tour. The first tour of the day was 'Morning sight-seeing tour of London'. Some of the hi-lights included 'Westminster Abbey', 'Buckingham Palace', "St John's(?)" cathedral, and 'The changing of the Guard'. London is a very large city. Approximately 10% of the English population resides in the London area. No time for lunch; we went back to the hotel and had a drink in the lounge.

The second/afternoon tour was a tour of "The Tower of London & the Crown Jewels". The Tower of London is actually a large complex of buildings consisting of more than one 'Tower'. We learned all about all the nefarious murders committed by the former Kings of England. The Jewels (ornamental items of state; including actual crowns, scepters, and orbs) were very impressive. After the tour we did a little shopping and had some ice-cream.

The final tour of the day was the 'Taste of London' tour. We ate dinner at a traditional English Pub - The Butcher's Hook and Cleaver (building used to be used to sell butcher's implements). I skipped the usual 'Fish and Chips' as I find it to be a horrid example of cuisine. I had a glass of "Fuller's Ale" with my meal. The meal was actually quite good. We didn't get home until after 2300gmt. Another long day.

Day 3 (12 May) Today was primarily a day of travel. We departed England by way of bus and ferry. We took a bus to Dover, saw the 'White Cliffs', got on a ferry, and made our way across the channel to Calais France.

Once we were in France, we got on a bus and drove out of France into Belgium, straight across into the Netherlands, and finally made our final stop in Amsterdam in the middle of the Holand region of the Netherlands.

The new Hotel is twice as nice as the British Hotel - Thank you. This was another extremely long day. We left around 0800gmt, and I'm just finishing this entry at 2319gmt-1. Wake up is at 0600, so it's time to call it a night.

Day 4 (13 May) Today was a day of touring in Amsterdam. We started with a short drive down to the harbor, where we boarded a low (on the waterline) canal boat. We enjoyed a tour of Amsterdam via the canals. We had a special local tour guide, a

local who knew the area very well.

Our tour from water-level was very informative. After the canal tour we headed back to the city center for a tour of a 'Diamond Factory'. Here a guide gave us a very brief introduction to the diamond cutting operations, the three "C's" (Carat, clarity, cut) of diamonds, and then they tried to sell us some diamonds! So much for the 'tour'. This 'tour' was simply a pretense for their sales pitch - Yes I got sucked in when the pitch worked on Kim. She wanted me to buy her a diamond ring with a sapphire in the center... U'm we didn't come all the way to Europe just s I could spend more than \$1,000.00 on a ring...

After the tour of the "Diamond Factory" (where the employee/person giving the tour had never heard of 'DeBeers') we took some time to ourselves. We explored the Amsterdam down-town district. We strolled through a pedestrian only shopping area that ran through the streets of Amsterdam. It was a lot of fun and we even bought some tourists items.

Once again our day ran late into the night as we didn't stay another night in Amsterdam. We boarded the bus and drove late into the night. We drove south into the heart of Germany. Finally stopping for a late dinner in the town of Koblenz.

Day 5 (14 May) Another day of driving. Once again, we got up early and headed for the port. This time the port was inland. We started our day with another river tour. This time it was a cruise down the Rhine river where we viewed the Lorelai hills, Rock, vineyards and castles.

The afternoon of our 5th day was a very long drive through the German and Austrian mountains as we made our way to Innsbruck, Austria. We stopped a couple of times in the mountains and I got some nice pictures of the Alpine vistas.

We finally arrived in Innsbruck around 8pm, ate dinner in the quaint hotel restaurant, and hit the hay around 2230L. Tomorrow is another long day with the wake-up call starting at 0600.

Day 6 (15 May) Today starts just as early as all the previous days. We got up around 0600, and hit the road by 0730. Departing Austria, we made immediately for the Italian border. The drive to Venezia was interrupted by a couple of 'Pee-Pee' breaks, including a lunch break at a 'motor-restaurant' above the autostrada, Pressed for time (we pressed on).

We arrived at the port of Veneto and boarded a boat to Venezia. Venice (as Americans call it) is a series of islands off

the coast. The islands are connected to each other by a series of bridges and canals. Slowly sinking into the ocean (The Adriatic Sea), we arrived just in time to take a whirlwind tour of Venice.

Our tour included a tour of the city by boat, followed by a tour of a glassblowing factory. This turned out to be another one of those 'guided sales pitch' tours. We saw how they make the 'Murano' glass works. They're definitely beautiful and the glass blowers are very skilled, but the whole point of the 'tour' was the sales pitch - Oh and there are No Photos allowed (I'm not sure why). Perhaps they're selling stuff that's cheaper than their competitors? Perhaps the use of cameras upsets the glassblowing spirits?

After the glass-blowing tour, the four of us (Myself, Kim, Ted and Sharon) enjoyed a gondola ride through Venice while we listened to accordion music and were serenaded by a young Italian singer. I wish this part could have lasted longer.

After the gondola ride, we did some shopping in Venice. Up and down the main part of the main island. We tried to avoid the cheaper, crappy canal side vendors, who sold 'Made in P.R.C.' as if it were authentic Italian hand crafted goods. That should be just as much a crime as the Libyans trying to sell fake Gucci and Louis Vaton.

After returning to the hotel, we enjoyed another included 'Buffet' style dinner. We're really getting tired of the hotel quality buffets. Hopefully we'll get some opportunities (outside roadside restaurants) to sample some authentic Italian cuisine.

Unfortunately, I'm coming down with a cold (I've got a sore throat and I'm on the verge of fever as I type this), so that might ruin the whole trip if I can't shake it soon. I wish I'd brought the Zicam!

Tomorrow starts just as early as all the other days, so its time to sign off for the night.

Day 7 (16 May) I fell behind on our journal, because I got sick on the 16th, I caught some sort of virus, that started with a sore throat and quickly became progressively worse.

On the 17th day of our vacation, we journeyed to Rome in the morning. We drove southward, cutting across the Po plains and through the gentle Umbrian hills to Assisi, where St. Francis was born in 1182. We saw some of the sites in Assisi (Basilica, monastery, gift shops and the apothecary where I bought some medicine for my virus. Decongestant and anti-inflammatory/pain

-kiler.

After the visit to Assisi, we drove all the way to Rome, where we checked in for day the night before our two day stay in Rome.

Dinner that evening was the best meal we've had so far. It wasn't buffet, but it wasn't anything you wanted. You had to choose from the set courses. The room was cramped, but every-one had a good time. There was live musical performers in 'our room'. They played the guitar, the flute, and they sang. It was quite good. If only my head wasn't ready to crack completely in half. I was also nauseous and only ate a small portion of the meal. Skipping two course completely.

We finally got back to our rooms after 10pm. I unpacked some, and informed Kim that I could not continue on the tour with tomorrow's sight-seeing activities. I was running a fever, had a killer headache, was nauseous, and had a sore throat so bad that I couldn't speak at all.

The night did not pass well for me. That night I threw up three times, and was glad that I'd decided to opt out for day one of the Rome sight-seeing.

Day 8 (May 17) The first day of sight-seeing in Rome was a very busy one for Kim and her parents, but no so for me. I spent the day fitfully falling into and of a fever-induced delirium. Skipping breakfast completely, I didn't attempt to do anything meaningful until 1300, when I dressed and order some room service. By 1400 i'd eaten half a bowl of minestrone soup and half a cup of fruit salad.

The tour for Kim and company consisted of many sights that the two of us (Kim and I) have seen before, although that was many years ago.

This ay tour of Rome included sightseeing with a local guide which started at a Roman forum and the Colosseum. Apparently they skipped breakfast due to traffic issues.

They also so the Catacombs where the early Christians tried to evade the persecution of the Romans (Not the same catacombs we saw beneath the Vatican). They also visited the St. Paul's outside the walls.

When Kim and company finally got back around 4pm. She said it was a very grueling day of non-stop walking in very hot conditions. The temperature got up to 93 degrees F. and the humidity was 84%.

The day wasn't over for Kim and her parents. The met again around 7pm for a light dinner before retiring.

Day 9 (May 18) Day two of the Rome experience. We packed up and left the hotel for another daytime excursion of the big city.

Our tour include a tour around the Vatican museums to admire the beautiful tapestries, painting, friezes and mosaics. We also visited the Sistine chapel, which was closed on our previous visits to Rome. We saw the masterpieces of artwork created by Botticelli and Signorelli. We learned all about Micheangelo's "Last Judgement".

In the evening we drove towards Florence (Firenza). A Renaissance city once rule by the Medicis. This part of the tour occupied a large portion of the day.

Our tour of Firenza included a walking tour of the city with a local guide which featured most of the city highlights. I could have done without the tour of the 'Leather Factory', which was just another soft sell pitch to entice you to buy things.

We saw the Piazza Santa Croce, the Piazza Signoria, Palazzio Vecchio, Loggia dei Lanzi, and the the Piazza del Duomo and it's cathedral.

Finally we drove through the evening to arrive in Montecatini for dinner and an overnight stay. It was late when we got here, didn't end until after 10pm, and typing this kept me up until 2300.

Day 10 (May 19th) We started the day at 0600. Just as early as usual. After showering and packing we set our luggage out and marched off to breakfast. Another disappointing buffet breakfast. This time it was the eggs that needed berating. They might have been less raw if they had actually cooked them after scrambling them...

Our tenth day of the tour started with a drive to Pisa to visit the square of miracles. A large area featuring the Leaning tower of Pisa, and a couple of other buildings. Of course we really didn't have time to go on tours of those. So we wandered about, took some photos and 'shopped' amongst the various street-side vendor stalls.

Afterwards we drove northwards across the Po plain to Milano to admire the majestic Duomo cathedral in the center of the city. We thought (were told) that it was free to tour, but it wasn't. It was €2 per person, and you had to stand in two different lines. One to purchase tickets, another to get inside.



It would have taken at least 30 minutes to wait in line. We had no guide, so it would have been painful to figure out where to go or what to look at. Instead, we wandered around the city center - including the huge mall nearby. Kim and Sharon avoided purchases of any actual luxury goods.

Afterwards we drove straight through to Lake Como for dinner (with a set course (and no options)) and no a/c. With rain coming down, the hotel explained that the guests prefer 'heat' at this time of year. Even though the temp in our room was 27 degrees C. That's approximately 80 degrees F. and the humidity was 100%. Needless to say, we weren't happy.

Tomorrow's another day and it's 11pm now. Time to sleep.

Day 11 (May 20th). Today is a day of sightseeing in Switzerland. According to our tour guide (Mariella), Switzerland would be more expensive than the other countries we've visited so far (England, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and Italy). We prepared ahead of time by purchasing some Swiss Francs because we didn't know whether they would accept Euros. They do, but change is always given in Swiss Francs. Apparently, the Swiss Franc and Euro are considered to be at parity in Switzerland, even though we paid considerably more for the Swiss Francs.

We started the day by leaving Lake Como (where we had a room with a fantastic view) and driving across the border into Switzerland. The customs/border inspection consisted of.. Nothing. The Italian border inspectors just waved us through, and there was no one stopping or inspecting vehicles/persons entering at the Swiss side of the border.

The drive through the Swiss alps was rather uninspiring, because it was raining heavily and we really couldn't see much or take many photos; because of the rain and condensation on the bus's windows and the many tunnels we drove through.

We made a pit stop in Lugano (Italian speaking city in Switzerland) where we had an excellent lunch (at a truck stop (An Agip station)) before we continued on through the Gotthard Tunnel.

Eventually the rain cleared up (a bit) and we saw more of the Alpine scenery as we descended towards lake Lucerne for an overnight stay in the city of Luzern.

We skipped one side excursion; up to a mountain top (Mt. Stanserhorn), because of the rain and poor visibility conditions. We'll have to get a refund for that portion of the trip.

In the evening (around 2000) we ate dinner at a tourist place where we enjoyed some typical Swiss fare, music, and folklore. The food wasn't too bad, and the music, yodeling and dancing were exceptional. Especially since the performers worked other members of the audience (tourists) into the act. We had a good time.

Tomorrow we have more to see in Switzerland before we continue our European tour. It's appx 2300. So it's time to sign off on another long day. Thankfully I got a one hour nap in before our dinner.

day 12 (May 21st) Today started out a little later than usual. We enjoyed a typical European breakfast. This time the eggs were cooked! After breakfast we had a small amount of time to ourselves before our first excursion. We spent our time exploring the city of Lucern Switzerland.

It was cold and rainy but I managed to get plenty of pictures and see the historic buildings and monuments of downtown Luzern. After some coffee and hot chocolate (to warm up) we headed to the meeting point.

From the center of Luzern, our group headed out on a cruise around lake Luzern. An hour long guided tour would have worked out better if it hadn't been so foggy, overcast, rainy, cold and humid. The conditions prevented most attempts at pictures.

After the lake tour we boarded the motor-coach for a long drive across this small Alpine country. We traveled from the South through the center to the far eastern French speaking part of Switzerland. We stopped once in Interlaken and got a good view of lake Thun.

The remainder of the drive brought us to Lausanne, Switzerland where we spent the night, and more than 90\$ on dinner for two. I never thought we'd be happy to spend a night in the Novotel hotel, but after our mixed results so far, the consistency of Novotel and well run precision of this Swiss branch made us feel assured of a good experience.

Well, it's after 2200 and we have to get up at 0600, so its time to turn-in.

Day 13 (May 22). Our 13th day of vacation was a ay primarily composed of travel. Vistas of famous vineyards slid past us on a sleepy Friday morning. Everyone was quite tired, and I spent much of the day struggling with the poor wifi reception on the bus.

Part way through the day we stopped in the Burgundian town of Beaune for a short lunch break. This large city had some excellent food.

Back on the bus for the trip to our hotel. Arriving late, we checked in, got to our rooms. Did a bit of unpacking, and headed for the dining room. With a Cabarat show scheduled for later in the evening, we need to get dressed, get dinner out of the way and head out for our night out.

We paid for our own meals as the days of all inclusive dinners were over. The food was quite good, and we waited in reception after our dinner. A bus took us to the Cabarat in downtown Paris.

We waited in line for a few minutes, and were soon seated (like sardines) around a narrow table with complimentary drinks as we waited for the adult entertainment to begin.

The show was singing, dancing and some variety acts (jugglers, acrobat, and a mime). The dancers were both sexes, but the women were frequently topless, while the men often wore long sleeved shirts with collars up to their chins...

The main singer wore a forced smile and lip-synced her way through the entire act. I wasn't all that impressed by her lack of enthusiasm. She even led a contrived 'dance contest' that was transparently arranged to give the least sexy of the male participants the 'grand prize', a blushing French bride who stripped off her wedding gown and led the winner (Steve) away behind the curtains.

Overall, the Cabarat experience was something we had to do in Paris, but this particular act seemed a bit forced and touristy, as if it could only survive on the frequent visits of a trapped audience such as travelers visiting Paris for the first time.

We didn't hit the hay until approximately 0130.

Day 14 (May 23rd) 0600 came a bit early after yesterday's late night excursion, but Kim and I did our best to sally forth into a full day of Parisian tours and shopping.

The day started with a rather anemic breakfast. This hotel, the 'Tim Hotel' seems to have the smallest rooms of all we've encountered while simultaneously holding the record for the worst 'included' breakfast.

After breakfast we headed out to the reception area in order

to board the bus for a sightseeing tour with a local expert. Our first go-round included a drive all around Paris. The guide showed us all the best-known Parisian sights; including, La Sorbonne, Arc de Triumph, Opera Madeleine, the Eiffel Tower, the Pyramid near the Louvre, the Invalides, and Champs Elysees.

We had a couple hours to ourselves just after noon, but kim's feet were killing her, so we just had a couple of capucinos while we waited for our next tour.

The next 'tour' of the evening was a 'Going Away Dinner'. As many of our group are staying over in Paris or flying out of Paris tomorrow morning, this would be our last opportunity to get together as a group. Approximately two-thirds of our group opted-in for the 'Going Away Dinner'.

Dinner was a Fixed Course meal (with some allowed choices) with four courses and all you could drink beverages. The food wasn't bad, but it wasn't the best Paris has to offer.

The best part of the meal was something I didn't order. French onion soup. Unfortunately, I only got a small sample of the soup (thank you kim). The drinks (other than Coca Cola) were the cheapest available. The red and white wines were cheap 'generics', with Roseau and Blanc on the labels, but no year of vintage.

I drank enough to make up for the bland food (we were in Paris, I was really hoping for some good food, but the low cost tour package had to cut costs somewhere, and catering/meals are one of the places where they can do that.

On our way home, we made a short pit stop at another local site, where we able to get some awesome photos of the Eiffel Tower. We too our photos and headed back to the hotel.

After arriving back at the hotel, Kim went down to the bar for some drinks, while I slaved away with this journal entry.

Day 15 (may 24th) Our last full day in Europe. It started as usual, with an 'O so early' wake-up call and a continental breakfast. The breakfast at the Tim Hotel (in Paris) is nothing to write home about, but we were more concerned about our luggage and the schedule than we were the missing salt & pepper shakers.

Today was a day of travel. No sightseeing at all. Well none to speak of. We relaxed as the countryside sped by on the road to the coast.

By noon we had boarded the Channel Ferry on our way back to England. The Kent transported us from Calais, France to Dover, England and another long drive led from the port to London.

A long day started at 0600 and we didn't get to our hotel (The Novotel London - West) until after 1530. We spent a little bit of time weighing our luggage and checking in (with the airlines),

For dinner we started with drinks at the bar, carried it over to our dinner (for all four of us) in the hotel's 'Artisan' restaurant; which had excellent food, but a rather steep price tag. £110.00 pounds lighter on the wallet, but 10# heavier on the gullet.

We turned in around 9pm, and await that final wake up call tomorrow morning.