

Never say NEVER

Our lust for travelling is alive and well. Our latest trip was brought about by the fact we could fly from Sydney directly with Finn Air. As it turned out this was not the case but we decided to visit some of the Scandinavian countries. We preceded to our travel agent and found that we could get to Narita airport in Tokyo, have a four hour break there to stretch our legs and then fly on to Helsinki with Finn air. This worked out quite well remembering that we had a four bus trip from Canberra to Sydney first. It was a long day and night. We were quite impressed with Finn Air and found the route quite direct. Only 10 hours to Europe.



We did not exactly get off to a good start as the airport bus driver took us to the wrong hotel and we had to drag our bags about two hundred metres to the right hotel which fortunately had a bar and something to eat after which we just crashed into our beds. The "Sokos" hotel is a chain and we stayed in another one in Turku later. We were quite impressed as it is a mid range hotel, very close to shops and the railway.

Sibelius Monument Helsinki

The next day we took a tour of the city in the morning checked out the shops and had an early night.

The following day we took a ferry to Sveaborg (or Suomenlinna in Finnish) which was a fortress, and a UNESCO world heritage site, which was very interesting. Cities have a certain ambience and we enjoyed our short stay in Helsinki.

The following day we were off to St Petersburg for an organised tour. I was really excited to be going to Russia as we had heard about the magnificent castles, churches, museums and palaces. This trip was an organised tour as it was just past the end of the tourist season. We were met at the station with our own driver and tour guide (Anna) who really looked after us well. We arrived at about 11.30 am and immediately were taken on a city tour, visited a church (Peter and Paul Cathedral) and after about 4hrs were returned to our hotel, tired but full of wonderment. The hotel was very adequate, had a restaurant and bar and good facilities and the staff spoke good English.

For the next four days we were visiting palaces and were amazed at the incredible lavishness of the nobility and how they lived. So much gold, so very much opulence, so much beauty going back hundreds of years. We learnt a lot about history which included stories about the various wars Russia had fought over the years and were more familiar with the siege of St Petersburg by the Germans in the last war. We were surprised to find a lot of the palaces had been destroyed and rebuilt. At what cost we wondered.

I have lost count of the number of stairs I climbed and my level of fitness could have been better but it did of necessity improve.

The tour included an evening show 'Feel yourself Russian' full of singing and dancing, some nibbles, would you believe caviar were. included in the nibbles at interval.

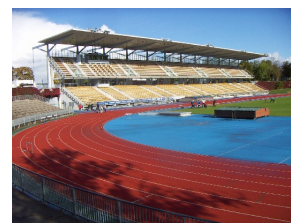
We had a little time at the end of each day to wander around the city and we did not stray too far because there was little English spoken and we do not speak Russian. In a way the commercial parts of cities are similar all around the world, but it was interesting. I consider myself very fortunate to have experienced a small part of Russia and all of it was good.

After leaving St Petersburg we travelled by train to Helsinki and then onto "Turku" in the south.

We spent a comfortable night at the 'Sokos' Hotel in Turku and a good meal at the hotel. My husband was keen to see Turku and the athletics oval where John Landy ran the four minute mile in 1954. He thinks he found the right one, but we spent a pleasant day

wandering around the small town which is also known by its Swedish name "Abo" We then took the ferry that evening to Stockholm.

There is always a nagging worry when travelling by ship if it is a rare occurrence, but we needn't have been concerned as we were hardly aware of the rolling movement of the ship. We had a pleasant evening and a reasonable good sleep. We were woken quite early and the ship was quickly made ship-shape for the passengers on the return trip.



Turku Athletics stadium

We took a bus to the railway station and then set out on foot to find the hotel which we had booked. It took us a little while to find the hotel named Freya but we found this to be a charming place to stay.



Once again a short bus trip around the city, and a bit of a look at the shops.

The following day we visited museums including the Vaasa and the Titanic exhibition which later moved to Melbourne. Both the Vaasa and Titanic sank on their maiden voyage.

Model of the Vaasa

Another day, another train trip another change of currency. This time we went to Oslo. I found it quite difficult to work out the cost of everything, but even with my vague calculations I realised just how very expensive everything was. The hotel was being renovated and the restaurant was not so we had to go out in the pouring rain and forage. We managed to find a café 'the Kilimanjaro' which was full of students mostly Africans but the meal was OK.

The next day another tour and some more looking around. Day 2 we used our rail pass to go to Lillehammer and visited a very interesting art museum and then took a bus to the Olympic Ski site. A really good day, - we ate at the Railway Station that evening and had a good meal. The railway station is like a mini city with shops all kinds of eateries etc.

By this stage we were becoming rather weary as we had set ourselves quite a pace. We were able to use our railway pass to get us to the airport (saved a lot of money) for the flight to Birmingham in Britain via Copenhagen. We spent a couple of hours in transit and I have since found out that the Airport was designed maybe is owned by an Australian Company. Copenhagen is even more expensive than Oslo, at the airport anyway. \$16.00 for a beer!

We had found a cottage on the Internet called "Maxmills" had booked in for a week for some R&R, much needed. The cottage was located in Winscombe in Somerset and we had a good set of directions and found it easily. What a delight!. The cottage was the traditional 2 up 2 down and contained everything we needed including a most useful washing machine and access to a dryer. We had views of a mill pond from the bedroom where we could watch the ducks swimming. The farm was a working farm with cattle and lush green grass. As Australia has become very dry over the past few years we thought we were almost in heaven. The countryside was full of narrow lanes, minor roads which took through small villages with lots of stone walls, stone houses, and churches castles and the wonderful English Pubs. "Oh to be in England" any time I say.



View from our bedroom window

Our host was very friendly without being intrusive. I heartily recommend this cottage if you are looking for something quite special.

We chose Somerset as we have a very dear friend who lives near Wells and we spent a whole day with her, eating, talking, laughing and generally catching up with her. Such a day-priceless.

For the remainder of our stay we meandered through the countryside, had a day trip to Salisbury, ate couple of times at the local pub had coffee in the local village where we could check our e-mail at the local library and generally thought it was the best of times.

When it was time to go after a few tears we set off early to Heathrow (easy driving on the m5 and m4) with a stop for breakfast) returned the car and the train to Paddington Station to stay at the " Novotel" hotel which was within walking distance of the railway station. The hotel was close and even closer when we discovered the best way to go.

London is as always a fascinating city, shopping at Harrods (not everything there is expensive) and in Portobelo road was interesting. We visited friends in Walthamstowe and the next day Terry went on a tour of Lords cricket ground. As usual the London Underground was the most effective and easy way to get around. We wanted to see Ronnie Scotts Jazz club in Soho, so embarked on a trip to get there. It was not close to our hotel and the show was booked out. But we did have a drink and a snack there. Maybe the next time, if there is a next time. We had to make our way to Stansted Airport to pick up an Easy Jet Flight to Ljubljana in Slovenia. A friendly and honest London Cabbie took us to Liverpool station for £20.00 and provided some interesting conversation on the way, he had spent a few years in Sydney and was interested in Australia.

From London we flew to Ljubljana in Slovenia, it was our first time flying budget airlines, but we had to factor in the cost of a taxi to Liverpool Station and the train fare to Stansted and wondered how budget it was. The flight itself was quite good, a short delay but on the whole we had no complaints. We took a bus to the city and were told we had a short walk to our hotel (its always a short walk but with bags to drag along it always seems longer). We were most grateful when we were helped by fellow passengers to find the hotel and we may still be looking for it if we had been left to our own resources. The hotel was part backpackers and part hotel but we were quite comfortable and indeed it was only a 'short walk' to the city. We loved Ljubljana , even though it was small in comparison to some other cities we had visited and it had a certain happiness. about it. Amongst other things there a beautiful Dragon Bridge and Castle.

The following day we took a local bus to "Bled". This was one of the highlights of our trip. The scenery is spectacular! We wandered around the park near the lake and took in the delights. We were out of season and there were only a few people around and it seemed most of these were locals. A special day indeed.

Time to move on. We boarded a train to Zagreb. My thanks to the gentleman who helped me carry my bags up and down the many steps to the station.

Arriving in Zagreb late in the evening, the rain pouring down we made a beeline for the hotel across the road. We should have pre- booked. The hotel was however quite good and next morning we only had time to walk up the main boulevard to the cathedral which was very impressive. In the park nearby there was a very interesting timepiece.

Clock and weather station Zagreb



We boarded another train in the afternoon on our way to Belgrade in Serbia. We enjoy train travelling as we can see a lot of countryside and people going about their daily living. Very interesting! As we approached the border we were a little concerned as we did not have a visa and were unsure whether or not we needed one. The border control officer came into our compartment, looked at our passports and with a friendly smile said "Welcome to Serbia".

We heaved a sigh of relief.

The train arrived in Belgrade , once again late evening without a hotel. We eventually found one but it was a bit daggy, Smoking is a still popular in Serbia and Hotels don't have smoke free rooms and the smell of smoke was omniscient throughout the night. The same applies to restaurants. Belgrade is a big city and full of bustle, it seemed to Terry as though he was in Mexico. Why I don't know as he has never been there. On the Saturday while walking to the station Terry noticed some buildings in a state of semi demolition: however, he then realised that they had been hit by cruise missiles in that war when Serbia was fighting for its territorial integrity.

We had to get to Bucharest to get a flight back to Helsinki, this meant a long overnight trip from Belgrade. We decided to book a sleeper.

Our last train trip. We were glad we arrived in plenty of time at the station as there seemed to be a problem with our tickets and the language barrier did not help but once again an angel came to our aid to interpret for us. We had only booked a sleeper for one person and needed to pay more money, not that much.

The overnight trip was great.

We slept quite well but we really did not have much food with us and nothing to buy. Half a sandwich some water and a piece of fruit helped us survive. We slept quite well and arrived in Bucharest very early in the morning.

We had pre booked a Hotel and it was great. It was good to be back in Bucharest. We had been there before in 2001; although due to some stuff ups we were only there overnight. It is quite a delightful city with some beautiful parks and gardens. We had a city tour with a guy organised by the Hotel. He took us around to all the sights including the spectacular Parliamentary palace (commenced by communist dictator Ceausescu), plus a lot of other fascinating buildings. Romania now a member of the EU seems to be making progress but Bucharest's CBD, in an attempt to catch up with modern communications, is blighted with huge amounts of overhead cables.

After that it was onto the Airport and back to Helsinki, then back home to Australia via Hong Kong.

We spent a few nights in Hong Kong. Romania might have finished with communism in 1989 but Hong Kong embraced it in 1997 when it become part of the Peoples Republic of China. Although you would hardly know it. Shops and malls, factory outlets and fancy hotels all make it a razzle dazzle town. Huge apartment blocks accommodate the millions who live there. Years ago you'd go there for cheap cameras and "trannies" - no more, you'd do better at Harvey Norman.

It's good to be back in Australia. We know the lingo, the money and the culture but there is always some sadness that our roaming around the world is over, maybe forever. I hope not. I would not advise anyone in their right mind to undertake such a trip, but if your just a little mad, GO FOR IT!

