

Christmas 2007

This has been a momentous year for both of us. Kathy has had her dreams of going to Tahiti, Alaska, and Venice fulfilled. Our last trip had 3 highlights: the trip itself, our wedding on Santorini, and the e-mail that Kathy's house had finally sold.

Kathy's birthday is December 22nd, and I received one of my famous e-mails about a Christmas Cruise up the Danube starting on that date. I had just shown Kathy the video about river cruises in Europe from Vantage, and she seemed interested. It is a fantastic itinerary- Budapest, Bratislava, Vienna, Krems, Salzburg, and Passau. Well, I thought it would be a nice birthday and Christmas present for her, so I called her with my usual "pack your bags".

The cruise starts in Budapest and ends in Passau. I have been to a few of the places, but this will be another chance to see these places through Kathy's eyes and to do things I had not done before. There is a beauty in sharing the experiences with one you love that transcends the experience itself.

Our flight to Budapest was uneventful; we had to change planes in Frankfurt again, and arrived in Budapest on schedule. We cleared Customs and Passport Control, and were met by the Vantage representatives and taken to the ship.

When we got to our room, there was a birthday card for Kathy and a beautiful pink scarf, a gift from the travel company. At dinner that night, they brought Kathy a birthday cake with a sparkler in it, which was also very nice.

The temperature for our whole trip ran from a high of 32 to a low of 15! Poor Kathy, being a California girl all of her life, came out dressed in tights, pajama bottoms and slacks! I also brought along a small heating pad to thaw her out when we came back from our tours.

BUDAPEST

Our first stop was at the Hero's Square, which was a monument to Hungarian Heroes. There were 2 semicircular structures with a column in the center.



From there we went to one of the 2 cathedrals in Budapest, St. Mathias. The other one is St Stephen, which is on the other side of the Danube.

It is a beautiful church, and had some interesting altarpieces.



From there we went to the Fisherman's Bastion, which overlooked the Danube. It was an old fish market, but it was so hazy that you could not see across the river.



On the way back from the church, we did some shopping. Kathy bought some bags of genuine Hungarian paprika for us and 2 of her friends. We also stopped in a shop that featured all kinds of antique silver. In one corner of a case I spotted a beautiful silver mezuzah. The shop owner had no idea what it was. It holds a small scroll of scripture and is mounted on the doorpost of a Jewish house. It was fairly expensive, but Kathy in her infinite wisdom said, "Do we need the money for groceries?" It is now on the doorpost of our new home next to a Celtic cross we bought in Passau. We went back to the ship for lunch, and then were taken to the local Christmas Market. In retrospect we should have stopped there before lunch as most of the stalls were closed. There were many still open serving mulled wine and had huge pans of sausages cooking. We could have eaten our way through that place!



Since it was Christmas Eve, a group of us from the boat went to Christmas Eve Mass at St. Stephen's cathedral. We were lucky enough to get seats as it became quite crowded. It was quite dim in the cathedral, but just before the Mass began, the lights came on! It was spectacular, with a huge ornate cupola!



The service was quite interesting, as it was in Hungarian, but Kathy could follow parts by the rhythm of the service. We passed a beautiful side altar on the way out, and as we left the cathedral it was snowing! This was Kathy's first White Christmas! We passed a car whose trunk was snow covered, so I wrote our names in the snow. I did not think about it at the time, but I can imagine the owner of the car seeing that!



We left late that night, and I got some nice shots of the Chain Bridge and the former Royal Palace illuminated.



BRATISLAVA

Our first port of call was Bratislava, which is the capital of the Slovak Republic. At one time it was also the capital of the Austria Hungary Empire. Most everything was closed because it was Christmas Day.

We went on a walking tour of the town, and passed a monument to the Holocaust victims. It was right next to a bridge that had an image of a synagogue. Apparently when the Russians wanted to construct a bridge, the synagogue was in the way so they demolished it. There was also a Jewish museum, but it was closed.



In this town, the street signs were on the side of buildings, and Kathy got a kick out of one, as she is from Ventura. After that we headed up to the ornate town gate.



There were some interesting bronze sculptures around the town, one of a Russian spy, and another called the "Dirty Old Man". It is supposed to bring luck if you rub his head, which is why the patina has worn off!



Later that day, I hiked up to the castle at the top of the hill, and also took a picture of the round restaurant on top of the bridge tower. It is a small version of the Seattle Space Needle, but it does not rotate.



VIENNA

Our next stop was Vienna, which is a fantastic city! We were taken on the Ring Road, which circles most of the city, then to Stephansplatz (St. Stephen's Plaza), which is a huge pedestrian area dominated by the cathedral. The interior was quite beautiful, but I could not get a picture of the entire spire as it was too tall, so I settled for a picture of the model of the cathedral.



The Plaza was also the place you could get a ride in a fiaker (horse drawn carriage). Kathy did not like that name as it sounded slightly obscene. Anyhow, we did take a ride in one through the streets of Vienna. It was too cold to be romantic! I also got a picture of Kathy with a performance artist dressed like Mozart.



The next day we were taken on a tour of Schonbrunn Palace, which was built in the early 1700's. It has over 700 rooms and magnificent gardens. Unfortunately, we were not allowed to take pictures inside the palace. I took a picture of the garden, but as it was winter there was not much growing.



That night we were taken to the Kursalon Concert hall for a private concert. The place was beautiful both inside and out.



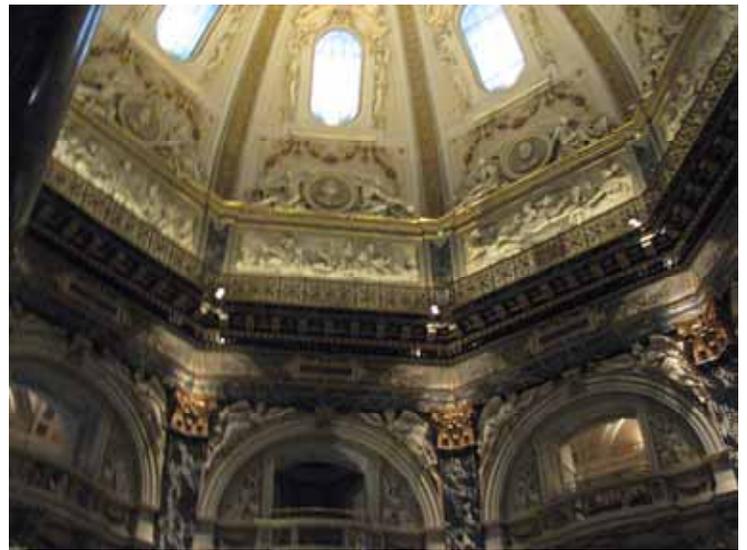
We were treated to a number of musical numbers, including a waltz and a fun piece called the champagne Polka, where the dancer was thrown in the air.



The next day we had 2 optional tours, a tour of the Lipizzaner horses training in the morning, and the Fine Arts Museum in the afternoon.



It was quite interesting to see them put through their paces in the various stages of training. We had a small mishap, though. We left by the wrong door and got totally turned around. Fortunately, we found our way back to the meeting place and the tour guide collected us. That afternoon we went to the Museum, which was quite interesting. It had a cupola that rivaled some of the cathedrals we had seen.



The entrance lobby was and grand staircase was huge. At the top was a statue representing Napoleon crushing Europe.



Around the area of the café, there were some displays of replica jewelry. I asked Kathy if she saw anything she liked, and said she had. I told her I would buy it for her, and she looked at me like I was crazy. The revelation came when we went into the café to buy a couple of sodas. The menu read, 0,5l 2,50 €, and since Kathy was unfamiliar with European notation, I explained that the listing read 0.5 (half) a (l) liter at a price of 2.5 (2 and a half) Euros, or about \$3.75 US dollars.

Kathy started laughing, and explained the earrings she was interested were priced at 49,00 € and she read that at 49,000 Euros and was wondering if I was going to take a loan somewhere. Well all's well that ends well, and she selected a beautiful pair of square cut amethyst earrings.

KREMS

The next day we arrived at Krems to visit the abbey there. Cathy was fascinated by the way the trees were all covered in ice, and it looked like a fairyland to her.



We were invited in to have some hot mulled wine and cookies, and the wine sure went well on such a cold day. We were taken into the church and treated to an organ concert there, which was quite nice. There is a funny story about the church, however, there are 2 towers and each one has a clock on it. The one in the left tower tells the correct time, but the other clock face has the hands painted on it. One of the tour guides looked up at the painted clock and panicked thinking they had overstayed at the abbey!



After leaving Krems, we cruised up the Danube through the Wachau valley, which is noted for its vineyards. We sailed past the town of Durnstein, noted for the castle on the hill, which held Richard the Lion Hearted, and for its blue bell tower.



LINZ

Our next to last stop was in Linz, and we were supposed to go to Salzburg. It was about an hour and a half bus trip each way, plus a 20 minute walk to the meeting place. Kathy and I did a little math, and said we will stay in Linz. We visited both the old and new cathedrals, and I liked the old one better, as it seemed warmer. The new one could hold 20,000 people and was very stark.

We did a little bit of shopping, and then Kathy spied a little restaurant, where we had lunch. They had an interesting menu, and I had a dish served in a skillet that had chicken, onions, dumpling pieces and scrambled eggs in it.

We had also walked down a side street and found an antique shop that had an interesting charm in the window. I bought it for Kathy, and when we got home I researched it. It was a memento from the cathedral of Mariazell in Austria.

The highlight of our visit was New Year's Eve, where everybody shoots off skyrockets. The pictures below are



Of similar displays as I did not have time to figure out how to take fireworks pictures with my camera. It turns out that for 3 days before New Years, skyrockets are sold all over, even in markets.

There was a bridge over the Danube, and it was crowded from one end to the other with spectators. The fireworks started in earnest about 11:30 and continued for about an hour! There were sky rockets coming from all parts of the city! We were standing on the sun (?) deck of the ship and had a glass of champagne to toast the New Year in as the rockets were going all over.

PASSAU

The last stop on our cruise was Passau, about an hour East of Munich. We went to a famous glass museum that had fantastic displays. Kathy pointed out that it was a wonder that some of this old glass survived 2 world wars and heavens knows what else.



The next day we wandered around the town to do some shopping. We came upon a shop called "KL". Well, Kathy's full first name is Kathy-Lee, and is referred to as KL in the chat room, so we HAD to take the picture of her standing in front of the shop.

A funny thing happened at noon that day, Kathy was standing in the park, and I took a picture of her and her shadow. Her shadow was taller than her at noon when it is supposed to be the shortest! I remember that given the date and the ratio of height to shadow, it is possible to calculate the latitude. I found it easier to look it up in an atlas, though.



Our last stop was at the Cathedral of St Stephen's (love that name), where they have the world's largest church organ. Unfortunately, the last concert was New Year's Eve day. I ended up buying a CD of the organ music, however. The next pictures are of the exterior and interior of the church



The next morning we were taken to the airport in Munich for the horrendous 12 hour flight home. One of the best things that came out of the trip was that Kathy said she would like to go on another river cruise. She added, BUT in the spring or fall!

We are home for a while, but will be going to Costa Rica in April. We swore no more trans-Atlantic trips for a year at least!

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