

TRIP TO NORTHERN EUROPE (ICELAND, FAROE AND SHETLAND ISLANDS, NORWAY, NETHERLANDS, AND BELGIUM) JUNE 11 TO JULY 3, 2012

This is a much anticipated trip. We'll fly nonstop to Reykjavik, Iceland, where we'll board a Regents Seven Seas Cruise Ship for a twelve-night journey that will first make port at two cities in Iceland (Isafjordur and Akureyri); we'll then sail to Tórshavn, Denmark (Faroe Islands) and on to Lerwick, Scotland (Shetland Islands); from there we'll explore the Norwegian fjords in Ålesund, Geiranger, Flåm, and Gudvangen, before proceeding further south and visiting the large cities of Bergen and Oslo. From Oslo, the ship sails to Copenhagen, which we had visited two years ago at the start of our travels through Denmark (see my Baltic-Denmark travelog <http://web.utk.edu/~rmagid/Europe2010.pdf>). From Copenhagen, we'll fly to Amsterdam where we'll rent a car and spend three days exploring Netherlands and four days in Belgium before flying home from Amsterdam.

At least that was the plan. What caused some revision, however, is that first I and then Lee came down with a nasty chest cold/flu/whatever that featured considerable coughing, sneezing, congestion, and fever; because Lee bore the brunt of it - and wound up spending nearly a full day in bed when we were in Den Haag - we had to cancel our plans to take a train to Amsterdam where we were to visit the Rijks and van Gogh Museums. On the other hand, Lee's malady did give us the opportunity to learn about pharmacies (*apothek* in Dutch and Flemish) and to get an appointment with a Belgian doctor after 5:00 on a Friday afternoon! We also had to revise our plan to go to the magnificent Kröller-Müller Museum near Otterlo, but having visited there in 1995 and not wishing to miss it, we made alternative plans that required a rather lengthy round-trip drive from Gent, Belgium. One other disappointment was that Mauritshuis (in Den Haag), home to paintings by Rembrandt, Brueghel, Steen, Holbein and, above all, to three of the very few extant Vermeers, was undergoing renovation - its collection was distributed to distant museums across the globe, but we did get to see one of the Vermeers at a different museum in the city.

Readers of my France travelog (<http://web.utk.edu/~rmagid/France2011.pdf>) will recall my griping about leg pain (from sciatica), leg numbness (axonal neuropathy, whatever the hell that is), and frequent nosebleeds. The good news is that surgery relieved the sciatica pain; and discontinuing a daily aspirin regimen (even at 81 mg) stopped the nosebleeds; but as for the numbness in the lower legs, a regimen of Vitamins B₁₂ and B₆, along with folic acid (at the urging of a neurologist) has not made things better, nor has it made them worse.

[An aside: at my annual physical exam on May 29, my primary care physician opined that my frequent nosebleeds were exacerbated by the climate of Western Washington state. He suggested that I might really benefit by spending some time in a hot, humid climate such as Hawaii's. I replied that I despise hot weather and had no plans to visit Hawaii ... ever. "So where are you going on vacation this year?" he asked. "Why to Iceland," I replied. End of conversation.]

In the course of the trip, I took some 1500 pictures!! I considered uploading *all* of them to my Picasa account but finally decided against it: some of the pictures were awful; others were poorly lit; some were very very very very repetitious; and some showed the two intrepid travelers in a less than flattering light. At this point, I don't know how many I'll upload, but by the time this account is "published" you'll be able to view them at <http://picasaweb.google.com/ronmagid>. (To put the five Northern Europe picture albums in the order that we visited the sites, click on *upload date* at the top of the Picasa page.) [Oops - upon transferring these images from camera to hard drive back home in Gig Harbor, I noticed that instead of setting the resolution at 1 Mb, all of the pictures are 250 kb in size. Can I use that as an excuse for those that are of less than museum quality? You betcha!]

Monday, June 11 to Tuesday, June 12

It is a beautiful early summer day in Gig Harbor (the predicted rains have stayed away) and it seems a shame to leave this region but the tickets have been purchased and so there's no other choice. Steve, my ever-reliable Brooklyn homeboy, arrives at our home at 12:25 and whisks us to the airport in under 45 minutes. (I wasn't to learn until he met us at the airport on July 3 that he had sold Harbor Taxi and was moving to Florida. Not only will I miss his promptness and careful driving but I despair that the Brooklyn population of Gig Harbor will be reduced from two to one. Perhaps there are others here but I don't know them.) On the drive, there are spectacular views of Mt. Rainier with a sharpness that we don't see more than a few times a year.

Check-in at Icelandair* is fast, but passage through TSA security is slow (ca. 30 minutes). Nevertheless,

*At the business class check-in line next to ours, there is a woman whom one might describe as "difficult" (if also funny, at least to us if not to the agent). She has an attitude - and while searching desperately for her passport, which she was certain she had packed, treats the agent to her life history, including her career as a teacher (one feels for her poor students!). When she finds the passport, the agent informs her that she hasn't signed it, which leads to an additional tirade plus an emptying of the purse to "prove" that she is a very responsible person. Were I a TSA agent assigned to profile her, I would conclude that her nervousness indicates "definite terrorist - and probably armed" - on the other hand, one could feel safe in knowing that even if she has a bomb, she'd never be able to set it off. As Icelandair has but one flight from Seattle, it is clear that she'll be on our plane. We can only hope that she'll not be sitting near us (she isn't) and that she isn't signed up for our cruise (she isn't).

we get to the British Airways Lounge (used by Icelandair and others) in the S satellite at 2:00, well ahead of our 4:30 departure. (I suppose it's better to be very early than very late, especially since one never knows what sort of traffic we'll encounter and how slow security can be. Also, it's nice to have a business class lounge in which to relax before boarding the plane.) At 3:35, we leave the lounge, but find the gate area very crowded and the boarding very confused (not helped by the fact that a nearby gate is boarding an Emirates plane). While standing on line, we hear people whom we assume are natives of Iceland - their English is impeccable and has the same lilt and intonation as Swedish.* Most people in the

*What do I know about what English with a Swedish accent sounds like? Well, nothing! But I do contend that the Icelandic accent sounds a great deal like the "Swenglish" spoken by the gifted actors in the Ingmar Bergman spoof, *De Döva* (the Dove). If you've never seen it, invest 14 minutes of your precious time in watching it: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=3803584387889303730> You'll be pleased that you did *and* you'll get to see the film debut (1968) of Madeline Kahn.

gate area are, alas, loud Americans (including our teacher-friend from the check-in counter). But somehow or other, everyone gets on board the Boeing 757 that has some years on it. We are sitting in bulkhead seats 2F and 2D, which means no opportunity to stash our goodies under the (non-existent) seat in front of us and also means that there is no tray table that can be lowered from the (non-existent) seat in front of us. All announcements are made first in Icelandic and then in English. The captain's English is very rapid and the P.A. system is not so good, but I do hear that the anticipated flying time is seven hours; with the Iceland time zone's being seven hours ahead of PDT, this would mean arrival at 6:30 tomorrow morning. One wonders if our hotel will be able to accept such early arrivals. (We'll find out that they won't.)

The doors close promptly, push-back is at 4:32, and we are air-borne at 4:45; the flight takes off to the north, thus denying us a nice view of Mt. Rainier. But it is interesting to fly directly over downtown Seattle with excellent views of the two floating bridges across Lake Washington. The flight path follows I-5 out of

Seattle, but eventually (as it must) changes to a northeasterly direction. And even though we don't see Rainier, snow-covered Mt. Baker is a worthy substitute.

The dinner menu is printed in Icelandic and English. I'm delighted to learn that a shrimp cocktail is translated as *Rækjukokoteill* (with no guidance for pronunciation). We have a choice for our main course: I opt for braised short ribs of beef. Dessert is tiramisu cake which in Icelandic is *tiramisu kaka*, but I'll try to ignore the second word. (Actually, I've misspelled the first word. I needed a u with a small circle over it, as in the Swedish å, but this is not offered by WordPerfect's multinational symbols. Shame on them.)

The meal is served at 6:15 PDT; by this time, we are well over Canada but we are also above the clouds, so there is little to see through the window. After dinner, I read *TIME* and *New Yorker*. By 8:30 we are heading nearly due east and are passing over the northern corner of Hudson Bay; there is daylight throughout the flight. Flying conditions are very smooth until about 8:30 PDT when there we encounter considerable turbulence. We leave Canadian airspace and head toward Greenland. I finish yesterday's Sunday *New York Times* crossword puzzle without understanding the clue! (A few days later when I have the chance to read the newspaper's puzzle blog, I discovered that the clue was not only not helpful - after all, I solved the puzzle without it - but also truly obscure in its meaning.) At about 4:00 am (Iceland time), I try to sleep but sleep does not come (as is the norm for me on these overnight flights). And of course one reason that I'm having trouble falling asleep is that my body is convinced that it's only 9:00 in the evening.

The most recent *New Yorker* is their fiction issue, with pieces written by such stars as Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Lethem, Junot Diaz, and Sam Lipsyte, all of whom have written novels that I've enjoyed (some more than others) but these short stories in the magazine leave me cold. Even the sci-fi pieces by Ursula Le Guin, Ray Bradbury, and William Gibson are sterile - maybe it's because I know that I should be sleeping, but perhaps it's really because these authors and I are just not on the same page (literally and figuratively). Well, I had brought several months-worth of *The Atlantic* with me, so I start in on the Jan-Feb 2012 issue.

At 5:30 am (Icelandic time), a small breakfast is served: fruit juice, croissant with ham, and coffee. It's wheels down in Reykjavik at 6:47 (a shocking two minutes late!). We navigate through passport control and customs rapidly, get our luggage, and give it to the Regents agents who are guiding arrivals to the buses. We are all onboard by 7:20 - all, that is, except for four passengers who are expected on this flight but are nowhere to be found. Miraculously, all four show up (two had lost their luggage - more precisely, the airline had lost their luggage). It is a cloudy and decidedly cool morning, quite reminiscent of May and June mornings in Gig Harbor.

The airport is a full 45 km from downtown, but even so we would arrive at the hotel well before check-in, or so the Regents representative informs us. Although I imagine my fellow passengers are all as tired and grubby-feeling as I am, we are given no choice: we will be "treated" to a grand tour of the countryside and, when we arrive, of the capital city, a tour of it as well. The road traverses stark and rather uninteresting terrain, punctuated by the "boulders" created by lava flow from one eruption or another; in fact, there is concern that if a particularly active volcano were to blow, it would cut the city off from the airport. (We breathe a sigh of relief when that does not occur during our drive.) The towns through which we pass are, in a word, grim.

We learn some interesting facts: the population of the island is about 320,000 of whom about 120,000 live in Reykjavik (which, at latitude 64°08' N, is the most northern capital in the world and not far from the Arctic Circle at 66°33'44" N). The population is quite homogeneous, about 93% Icelandic. Because the entire country is "blessed" by thermal activity, homes and office buildings are heated by geothermal power. According to Wikipedia, "Renewable sources - geothermal and hydropower - provide effectively all of Iceland's electricity and around 80% of the nation's total energy, with most of the remainder consisting of imported oil used in transportation and in the fishing fleet."

Wikipedia also informs us that "the settlement of Iceland began in AD 874 when the chieftain Ingólfur Arnarson became the first permanent Norse settler on the island. Others had visited the island earlier and stayed over winter. Over the following centuries, Norsemen settled Iceland, bringing with them thralls (slaves) of Gaelic origin ... From 1262 to 1918 Iceland was part of the Norwegian and later the Danish monarchies. The country became independent in 1918 and a republic was declared in 1944 ... Iceland is a representative democracy and a parliamentary republic. The modern parliament, Alþingi* (English:

*A word about the Icelandic alphabet - it consists of 32 letters and uses the Latin alphabet with which English writers are familiar, but with these changes: A, E, O, U, and Y appear as themselves (both lower and upper case) and, separately, with an acute accent (which changes the pronunciation); English language letters C, Q, and W are absent; and there are these new characters: Ð and ð (pronounced Eth), Þ and þ (thorn), Æ and æ, and Ö and ö. (It's a shame that the small font does not allow for a proper display of the lower case Eth - when enlarged, it looks like an inebriated Greek delta that has been cleaved by a sword swipe. A good view of it can be seen below in an enlarged font. Sometimes these are combined into extremely lengthy and, to a non-native, unpronounceable words such as the name of the volcano** that erupted in 2010, nearly halting air traffic between the Americas and Europe: *Eyjafjallajökull*.

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**Before traveling to Iceland, I decided that I needed to listen to the CD of the only Icelandic composer in my collection, Jón Leifs (1899-1968). It is a compendium of tone poems, one of which is entitled *Hekla*. Hekla, it turns out, is one of Iceland's most active volcanoes, having erupted at least 20 times since 874 at the start of recorded history. One of its most memorable episodes took place over more than a year (March 29, 1947 to April 21, 1948). When it finally ended, the lava flow had covered 40 km² to a maximum depth of 100 m. In a truly unpleasant and cacophonous work lasting some 12 minutes, Leifs tries to convey the immensity and intensity of the explosions - what I can report is that the music is loud, very loud, but not something that one wants to listen to too many times.

Althing), was founded in 1845 as an advisory body to the Danish monarch. It was widely seen as a re-establishment of the assembly founded in 930 in the Commonwealth period and suspended in 1799. Consequently, it is arguably the world's oldest parliamentary democracy."

The Icelandic language is almost unchanged over the millennia, in contrast to Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish that have been subjected to foreign influences. Our bus guide alleges that Icelanders can read the ancient Norse texts that are found in libraries and museums, but that other Scandinavians cannot. This will be confirmed, later on the trip, by our tour guide in the Faroe Islands.

The country's economy had been based on fishing, but in the early 21st century Iceland refashioned itself as banker for the rest of the world. This worked beautifully ... until it didn't; and the banking system collapsed in 2008. Wikipedia describes it this way: "Before the crash of the country's three largest banks, Glitnir, Landsbanki and Kaupthing, their combined debt exceeded approximately six times the nation's gross domestic product of €14 billion. In October 2008, the Icelandic parliament passed emergency legislation to minimise the impact of the financial crisis. The Financial Supervisory Authority of Iceland used permission granted by the emergency legislation to take over the domestic operations of the three largest banks. Icelandic officials, including central bank governor Davíð Oddsson, stated that the state did not intend to take over any of the banks' foreign debts or assets. Instead, new banks were established around the domestic operations of the banks, and the old banks will be run into bankruptcy. On 28 October 2008, the Icelandic government raised interest rates to 18%, (as of August 2010, it was 7%) a move which was forced in part by the terms of acquiring a loan from the IMF. After the rate hike, trading on the Icelandic króna finally resumed on the open market, with valuation at around 250 ISK per Euro, less than one-third the value of the 1:70 exchange rate during most of 2008, and a significant drop from

the 1:150 exchange ratio of the week before. Iceland appealed to the Nordic countries for an additional €4 billion in aid to avert the crisis. On 26 January 2009, the coalition government collapsed due to the public dissent over the handling of the financial crisis. A new left-wing government was formed a week later and immediately set about removing Central Bank governor Davíð Oddsson and his aides from the bank through changes in law. Oddsson was removed on 26 February 2009 in the wake of protests outside the Central Bank. Thousands of Icelanders have moved from the country after the collapse, and many of those moved to Norway. In 2005, 293 people moved from Iceland to Norway; in 2009, the figure was 1,625. In April 2010, the Icelandic Parliament's Special Investigation Commission published the findings of its investigation, revealing the extent of control fraud in this crisis."

Back to our bus "tour": when we get to the city, we park near an office building and are ushered to the 20th floor where we are served a free breakfast (just a couple of hours after our large breakfast on the plane). The bus then winds through city streets, but the only item of real interest (where the bus stops to allow closer looks and picture-taking) is Höfði, the unimposing white house on the northern coast where Reagan and Gorbachev held a summit in 1986. From there, we drive to Perlan ("The Pearl") with its gift shops, café, observation deck (too damned cold and windy to stay there for long), and Saga Museum for which Lee buys a ticket while I snap pictures of some of the interesting sweaters and T-shirts sold to tourists who have too much extra cash. One T-shirt "explains" that we way to pronounce *Eyjafjallajökull* is *AY-uh-fyat-luh-YOE-kuutal-uh*; I hope that that helps. Another T-shirt has the legend *ég tala ekki íslensku*, which (as everyone surely knows) translates as "I don't speak Icelandic" (see the Picasa pictures). There's a shirt showing an exploding volcano and the legend "Don't mess with Iceland. We may not have cash but we have ash." And, finally, another has a picture of an erupting volcano - beneath it, in English only, are the words "Don't Fuck with Iceland." Good advice.

Finally(!), the bus delivers us to the Icelandair Hotel.* Lee charges to the front of the check-in line at the

*In her journal, Lee describes it as "a truly ugly brutalist architecture white/green building." I agree.

reception desk while I corral the luggage and try to wheel two large suitcases and assorted carry-ons from the vehicle to the hotel entrance. Well, we get the key but are severely disappointed in the spartan room: it resembles an old-style Howard Johnson, with crummy furniture and two single beds, for chrissakes! Also, there's no A/C (although it's not needed today), a small bathroom, no tub (but at least a shower), and minimal lights. The hotel is also adjacent to the domestic airfield, but (blessedly) there are very few flights to disturb the peace. Not none, mind you, but still very few. The only good thing is that it's free - well, more precisely, the fare for the cruise includes the airfare, transportation to the hotel, the hotel, and tomorrow morning's breakfast. We are relieved that all Icelanders, with whom we come into contact, speak perfect (if sometimes heavily accented) English. And it's a good thing because, after all, *ég tala ekki íslensku*.

I take a brief nap (to compensate for not having slept on the plane), brush my teeth and wash my face, and relax for a while. We ask Regent Services in the lobby to suggest a restaurant for tonight. Lee had already decided on a couple and our choices were affirmed; we ask the clerk to reserve for us at 6:00 at Grillmarkaðinn (Grill Market Inn). Then, rather than taking the free shuttle to downtown (which runs from the hotel only at 11:15 am and 6:15 pm - not too convenient for early afternoon, eh?), we take a taxi at 4:30 to a square near the restaurant, then walk around to explore the city and see what we can of the sights. Most interesting are the vivid colors (psychedelic greens and blues and yellows) with which the houses are painted. We walk along the main shopping street (Laugavegur) and then along Skólavörðustigur, eventually reaching the spectacular Hallgrímskirkja, the main Lutheran church of the city and an architectural masterpiece. We pay a few króna to take an elevator to the observation deck, some 70 m high, for a panoramic view of the city (including a sighting of the cruise ship that we'll board tomorrow). On our walk, we notice numerous satellite dishes on the sides of buildings, all of them pointed slightly *down*. Well, ya see, the telecommunication satellites are stationed over the equator at an altitude of about 22 miles (so as to be geosynchronous) - and line of sight, this far north, means that one looks slightly downward, not upwards to the skies.

We arrive back at the Grill Market for our 6:00 reservation. The restaurant is furnished imaginatively and the food is superb. We both start with a seafood soup (a huge bowl with a spicy tomato broth containing shrimp, mussels, lobster, and who knows what else). For her main, Lee chooses a lamb T-bone whereas I opt for "seafood gourmet" (salted cod, salmon, monkfish) plus a "fried"(?) salad, and regular salad, and curly French fries. The fish is excellent except much too salty for my taste. The presentation is lovely: everything is served on wooden planks and the soup is in wooden bowls.

We find a taxi and return to the hotel at about 9:00. It is, of course, still daylight. Sunset is, in fact, just two minutes before midnight, and sunrise is at 2:59 am. After all, we are just a couple of degrees of latitude south of the Arctic Circle. On June 15, when we will be in Akureyri (on the northern coast of Iceland, at latitude 65.68° N), sunset will occur at 0:45 and sunset at 1:43 - that's 23 hours and 2 minutes of daylight!

We go to bed early, but as so often happens on these trips I find myself unable to sleep more than a little. Thus, I get up at 1:00 and finish reading *The Atlantic* issue that I had begun on the plane. Part of my difficulty in getting to sleep is the large amount of commotion right outside our window as a couple of buses bring tourists from flights that have just arrived. One large bus sits idling, its doors and luggage bay open, waiting for passengers but nobody arrives, so it drives off to ... where? And of course, the daylight at this ridiculous hour is another contributing factor. Following the magazine, I do some Sudoku puzzles and return to bed a little after 2:00. And, *mirabile dictu*, I manage to sleep for a few hours before waking at 6:00. I read some more, then rouse Lee at 7:00. If this follows the pattern of other overseas journeys, I will feel the sleep deficit tomorrow and will "crash" rather early.

Wednesday, June 13

Breakfast is buffet style in a large meeting room, populated by many people, most of whom are not Regents Seven Seas passengers. At least I hope they're not. As I go to get juice or cereal or coffee or whatever, I am bumped, jostled, knocked about, folded, spindled, and mutilated by little "ladies" with very sharp elbows. "These people must be French," thought I. And indeed I do hear French being spoken. Given that my prejudices are confirmed, we can't really call them prejudices, now can we?

At the large table where we seat ourselves, there is a French group, but they seem quite refined. They are in Reykjavik for the start of a two-week land tour of the island. The man to my left speaks excellent English, but we also chat a bit in French (I hadn't lost everything that I had learned in preparation for last year's trip to France). Fortunately, most of our conversation is in English. He's retired, but had worked in the U.S. in various places (Dayton and Orlando, for example).

Upon returning to our room, I try to turn on the TV but am foiled: neither the remote control nor any of the buttons on the TV set have any effect. When we checked in, we received an information sheet that instructed us, among other things, to have our pieces of luggage with their Regents tags outside the door by 10:45 so that they could be transported to our room onboard the ship. We are also instructed that the bus from the hotel will take us to the ship at 2:00. Excellent! My good friend Bob Kargon had told me that Reykjavik has some excellent museums, so Lee and I planned to walk the short distance to the National Museum which opens at 10:00. I begin reading *The Tao of Pooh* by Benjamin Hoff, a thin volume that has graced one of our bookshelves for years.

Before heading out at about 9:45, we stop at the Regent desk to ask if we need to reserve spaces on the 2:00 bus. Surprise!!! The woman says that the bus leaves at 12:30 and that we need to be on it. So much for the museum, but it's a good thing that we stopped to ask. (We checked the three-page information sheet. We were right, it did say 2:00. But clearly "the facts on the ground" have changed.) Because we had already checked out and asked the desk to stash out carry-on items, we are forced to sit in the very crowded lobby along with the multitudes who are also waiting for the bus.

The bus ride to the dock is a short one. We are invited onboard and directed to the large Constellation Theatre where we have our pictures taken and are issued ID cards and keys for the room. We are familiar with this routine, as we sailed on this very same ship, the Seven Seas Voyager, for the Baltic cruise in 2010. What is different, this time, is that we are required to surrender our passports. Gulp!

Because there's considerable time before we're allowed to go to our room, we take advantage by doing the following: (1) we go to the Pool Grill on Deck 11 to drink coffee and to enjoy the partly sunny day; Lee also has a light snack; (2) we go to Club.com on Deck 5 to arrange internet connectivity for the laptop and iPad (ordinarily there is a charge for internet usage, but given that we will pass the 21-day entry level for "silver" status during this voyage, our internet usage is free); this takes considerable time, despite the expertise of the Ukrainian IT guy (who was also on our Alaska cruise last year) who is trying to help us and others; (3) we go to Destination Services, also on Deck 5, to inquire about the tickets for the excursions that we had reserved; they'll be delivered directly to the room; and (4) we go to the main restaurant, *Compass Rose*, on Deck 4 to ask if we can change a reservation from the French restaurant *Signatures* to *Prime 7*; everyone is allowed to make one reservation at each of these, but in 2010, although we liked the food in *Signatures*, we were turned off by the excessive display of the wait staff; here's what I wrote at that time: "Dinner, tonight, is at *Signatures*, the French restaurant on board. The food is excellent, but the service is (to put it mildly) pretentious. Regardless of whether the table has as few as two people (ours) or six (one near us), all of the main courses are delivered at once, each covered by a metal dome. As many serving people as are needed surround the table and, at the count of *un deux trois*, all of the covers are lifted simultaneously. I should be impressed, but I can't help giggling" - the new reservation at *Prime 7* is made for June 15, although we'll need to share the table with another couple; and (5) we go to the library on Deck 6 to allow Lee to see if books that she could not get from the Gig Harbor library might be found; none that she looks for are available, but she does find some others.

At 2:00 we get permission to go to our suite, 921, which is two levels almost directly about 729 which we occupied in 2010. The rooms are identical (as are all of these suites), so there's no need for me to describe their elegance and ample size nor to take new interior pictures. If curious, you can refer to my 2010 travelog: <http://web.utk.edu/~rmagid/Europe2010.pdf> Our luggage is delivered, not all at once but piecemeal over a 45-minute period. Nevertheless, we and it are reunited before too long. We unpack and then it's back to Deck 11 for some ice cream.

At 5:15 there is a mandatory life jacket drill in the Constellation Theatre where the assistant cruise director gives information about emergency procedures. In contrast to 2010, we are not required to assemble on an outside deck near the lifeboats. We return to our suite where I snap some pictures as we depart from Reykjavik. There is an enrichment lecture about Iceland by Hugh Neighbour, a retired diplomat from the U.S. State Department, which we decide not to attend. Neighbour spent 38 years as a naval officer and a diplomat; his last assignment was as Chief Arms Control Delegate at the Organization for Security and Co-operation meeting in Austria. We will, however, go to his next three lectures over the following days - all are excellent - and we will have several opportunities to chat with him and his wife, Swedish and a chemical engineer!

At 6:30 we go to dinner at *Compass Rose*, where Lee has bream for the main course and I have hen.*

*I have made an editorial decision *not* to invest time and effort into describing each meal that we will eat during the three weeks. To give you an idea of just how elaborate my descriptions could have been, here's what Lee wrote about our meal: "Lee has soft-shelled crab, fried; then Boston lettuce with bleu cheese and fig-balsamic dressing; sea bream with squash stuffed calamari wrapped in prosciutto; peas with onion and bacon; pea puree. Ron has tiger prawns to start; then the Boston lettuce; Cornish hen with a barley risotto and cranberries. The intermezzo for both of us was a passion fruit sorbet. There was a nice Australian chardonnay ... The gourmandise were delicious as always. Ron had strawberry cheesecake and Lee had milk chocolate tart with sorbet for dessert." Now you'll have to admit that my description is more efficient, even if not as informative.

The service is as impeccable as ever and the portions are moderate in size. There is an opportunity to order *seven* courses (although we never do), and I make the resolution not to indulge in the tray of small chocolates and cakes that is brought to the table before dessert. (Lee says it's called *gourmandise*, but the definition that I find for that word is that it's an adjective, meaning "A taste and relish for good food" - nevertheless, who am I to criticize my family's acknowledged expert on all things comestible? However, let the record show that I think that these little confections should be called *petits fours*.) As I've noted on earlier occasions, after the cruise ends, one could easily become accustomed to getting up from the table at a restaurant and leaving without paying, something that would definitely be frowned upon. In the evening, we repair to our suite where we find that while the internet may be free, it is very very slow. Sigh. I finish reading *The Tao of Pooh*. Well, I did say that it's a slim volume. I enjoy it, mainly the parts in which A. A. Milne's writing and the accompanying pictures are faithfully reproduced.

Thursday, June 14

Last night, I did manage to get to sleep, but awoke at 4:30 (bright daylight) and got up to finish the March issue of *The Atlantic* and to begin reading *The Art of Fielding* by Chad Harbach. In contrast to the 135-page *Tao of Pooh*, with its small pages, large print, and many drawings, this book is over 500 pages long - nevertheless, I'm looking forward to it, as it has received some excellent reviews. I wake Lee at 6:15; after bathing and dressing, we head to *La Veranda* (on Deck 11) for breakfast, prior to this morning's excursion which begins at 8:30. The USA News (that is placed on the door each morning) provides two pieces of good news: the Arizona congressional seat held by Gabby Giffords goes to the Democratic candidate and the Mets beat the Rays by a score of 11-2. A good start for the day, I'd say.

We arrive at Isafjordur (properly spelled Ísafjörður, population 2600) on the northwestern tip of Iceland at about 7:00; clouds are covering the tops of the hills that line both sides of the fjord. Despite its small size, the town boasts a school of music, a small university, and a hospital. It is also the home of an annual festival for alternative music. It is about an eight-hour drive from Reykjavik, but many people prefer to travel by plane

It is a cool, dreary morning as we board the tour bus at 8:25. Our guide is Sarah, an English woman, who came here as an anthropologist, decided to stay, and next week will marry a local fisherman. We drive through the city and through a tunnel (5 miles long) to a neighboring town of Bolungarvík (population 900), which was first settled in 924. We pass shacks along the road that are used for the drying of cod. The climate is unforgiving: snow starts in October and lasts nine months; the last bit of snow melted just three weeks ago. Iceland is a land mass (about 12 million years old) and has been populated for a very short time. We stop at an old Lutheran church, Sóknarprestur Einkastöð, where a young woman named Katrina, half Greek and half Icelandic, is playing the piano. Sarah introduces her and tells us that she's a music student in town. She then sings three Icelandic folk songs, *a capella*.

We drive a short distance to Ósvör, a small fisherman's hut, where a fisherman (who's really a farmer named Johann who enjoys posing for pictures) demonstrates the clothing (whale skin coat, Sou'wester hat), fishing implements, and type of boat that are used to fish for haddock, cod, and occasionally shark in these waters. Although he's undoubtedly fluent in English, he speaks Icelandic and Sarah translates for us. Among the curiosities of his outfit are mittens with two thumbs so that when one side gets worn out, one can just flip them and get some more wear out of the other side.

Sarah continues her lecture about life in Isafjordur after we re-board the bus. There is a strong sense of community and family affiliation here; the children are not particularly religious, although confirmation at age 17 is a big deal. The older generation remains very religious but the younger generation is not. The diet is largely fish and vegetables, very little meat.

We drive to NEDSTKAUPSTAÐUR (which translates as "buying/trading place"), a folk museum in Isafjordur. Inside are various farm implements and artifacts from home life, along with a group of young

people who sing for us and, later, dance outside. Inside, we are offered either (or both!) of two delicacies: dried haddock ("like chewing straw," Lee says) or fermented shark,* followed by a shot glass of a strong

*Some guide books call this "rotten shark" which, in retrospect, may be a more apt name.

Icelandic schnapps. What is one to do? Rather than foment an international incident, I quell my reluctance and opt for the shark. I should have known better when the toothpick broke as I try to stick it into the meat, but I do manage to get a piece into my mouth. Not only is the taste indescribable (words*

*I actually can think of several words, but they're not suitable for this G-rated family journal.

do not exist that would do this "thing" justice) but it was almost impossible to chew. I try to wash the flavor down with the drink, but this doesn't help matters at all. Oh, well, different strokes for different folks, eh?

From there, it's on to a beautiful waterfall called SKUTULSFJÖRÐUR where we get to taste some of the very pure water. I wish that I could say that it removes the shark taste from my mouth, but it doesn't. On the bus ride back to the pier, I talk with two Green Bay Packers fans who own shares (which have no monetary value, of course) in the team; the man had been to the 1967 "ice bowl" championship game vs. Dallas. He and I agree to disagree on which NFL team is better, the Giants or the Packers, although I do feel honor-bound to remind him of who is the current Super Bowl Champion.

Back on the cruise ship, we opt for a light snack at the Coffee Connection (on Deck 4). I take a banana back to our suite, but I still can't get rid of the taste of you-know-what. (Brushing my teeth also is without effect.) Following this, we do a fast walk on the jogging track (Deck 12), about 3/4 mile. Ah, the life of creative unemployment! Following the walk, we return to the cabin to use the computer and read email, do some reading, then go to Deck 11 for ice cream - while on this outside deck, we can finally see some blue sky and the tops of the hills not obscured by clouds. It also is windy and cold, unpleasant enough that we barely last long enough to finish our ice cream before we retreat to the indoors. We choose to skip the "Captain's Welcome Reception" in the Constellation Theatre at 6:00, despite this enticing promo: "Mix and mingle with friends, fellow guests, and members of the ship's company as cocktails and canapés are served, ahead of Captain Gianmario introducing the Senior Officers from the main stage." Yes, it's a difficult decision to forego the booze and munchies, but it's a decision that we make without regret. Besides, we know that there'll be an opportunity to meet the ship's captain later on - whoopie! (It bothers me that the ship leaves port at 6:00, exactly when the entire staff is partying - so who the hell is driving?)

Dinner, tonight, is at *La Veranda*, which is featuring a French bistro menu: we go to the buffet for salads and *hors d'oeuvres*, then order from the menu for the rest of the meal: onion soup for both of us, coq au vin for me and lobster for Lee; then back to the buffet table for dessert. As with *Compass Rose*, I appreciate the modest-sized portions that are served, although (truth be told) one *could* (if one were so inclined) gorge on the *hors d'oeuvres* and dessert. At a nearby table is a group of Americans, one of whom is a lawyer from New Orleans. How do we know this? Because he is very loud and very wordy, to the point that not even his wife can get into the conversation.

The sky is cloud-free at 8:00 and there is still bright sunlight. Lee suggests that we stay up all to see the *aurora borealis* but I reject this. Nevertheless, if she wants to do it ... Do you recall the Robert Burns line "The best-laid schemes o' mice an 'men Gang aft agley"??* [English translation: Murphy's Law always

*This line comes from the poem "To A Mouse, On Turning Her Up In Her Nest With A Plough" It is almost always misquoted as "The best laid plans oft go awry." The internet has as many entries showing the latter as the correct version. Go figure, you "Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie" you!

holds.] Well, at around 10:00 it becomes very cloudy, so any hope of seeing the Northern Lights is dimmed, so to speak. As we round the Northern shore of Iceland, we come close to crossing the Arctic Circle - we'll actually do so tomorrow night after we leave Akureyri.

Friday, June 15

The ship arrives in Akureyri at 7:30 am, about 30 minutes ahead of schedule. There are broken clouds and stiff winds, although not as cold as yesterday; rain is not in the forecast. This is Iceland's second largest "city" with a population of about 18,000. It is located at the southern end of a long fjord, and thus is considerably south (latitude 65°41'N) of the Arctic Circle (66°33'N). The site was settled in the 9th century by a Norse Viking named Helgi magri* Eyvindarson.

*This translates as "the slim," undoubtedly a result of his trying to gain sustenance from eating fermented shark meat.

A disturbing note: according to *Passages* (the daily information sheet provided by the cruise line), at 6:30 tonight there is a "SABBATH EVE SERVICE: Guests are invited to gather for worship and fellowship, conducted by fellow guest Robert Russock." Now it's certainly the case that I've abandoned my childhood religion, as well as any others that might have come along, but I'm pretty damned sure that the Sabbath is supposed to begin at *sundown* on Friday. Sundown is NOT at 6:30 in these here parts. Rather, it's around midnight. So ... do you suppose that some learned Talmudic scholar has given dispensation to begin the Sabbath around dinner time if one finds oneself in a very northerly latitude? And, then, what happens on December 21 when sunrise in Akureyri is at 11:39 am and sunset is at 2:43 pm?

We have breakfast at *Compass Rose* where one orders from a menu rather than helping oneself at the buffet. I prefer *La Veranda*. Following breakfast, Lee and I stroll through the town, taking pictures and (of course) making a purchase: a jacket for Lee. The weather remains cool and cloudy, but rain-free. At 12:15, we board the tour bus, whose departure is delayed because one of the passengers has taken a nasty fall on her way to the bus - help arrives from all directions and she is put on an ice floe and sent into the cold sea. (Sarah Palin was correct when she warned about "death panels.") The bus takes us to the old town (where we'd already been) and from there to Laufás, an ancient farm whose records go back to the 11th century. We wander about and take pictures of the construction of the walls, the turf-covered roofs, the interior living quarters,* and the simple Norse church. From there, it's on to *Goðafoss* which

*I take a picture of a small bed which, our guide says, would sleep three or more adults. Supposedly, this was to stay warm, although I suspect that if one checked the birth announcements of the time, one would see interesting trends some nine months after the coldest days.

means "Waterfall of the Gods," a spectacular sight to hear and see (and to approach, as one must traverse difficult-to-establish-footing on rocks). As we cross the countryside, we see lots of sheep* in the hills, but

*Our guide tells us that if one's vehicle strikes and kills a sheep on the roadway, the driver must report the event to the police, pay the farmer for the dearly departed, and pay a fine to the government.

I'm too slow to snap any pictures. Baaa Humbug! Finally we drive to a rarity in Iceland: a botanical garden *Lystigarður Akureyrar*, but to jaded folk like us who have seen fabulous gardens in other countries, this one is relatively unimpressive. Nevertheless, the Icelanders are really proud of it, so we wander up and down the paths, nodding knowingly and approvingly. Our tour guide, by the way, is Ragnheiður Ragnarspottir which, I'm sure, is easy to pronounce ... if one is fluent in Icelandic.

We return to the ship at 4:30 at the same time as several other tour buses arrive - thus there is a long line to go up the gangplank and into the ship. The winds have turned fierce and are blowing cold, so some of the crew walk up and down the line of chilled passengers with hot wash cloths that provide momentary relief until evaporation (as every school child knows, this is a cooling process) sets in.

We stay in our room until 6:30 at which time we venture to *Prime 7*. Because we had changed our *Signatures* reservation to this restaurant, we are obligated to accept a table with two other guests. Our partners turn out to be June and Ray. He is a retired optometrist from Altoona, PA and (as he tells us several times) is 84 years old. She is a retired accountant and a bit younger. (This is the second marriage for each of them.) Did I mention that he's 84? Ray graduated from Erasmus Hall (in Brooklyn!), the high school that my mother attended. The conversation is a bit strained, but by our avoiding any mention of politics, religion, literature, etc. and letting them do much of the talking, we survive without too much trauma. Oh, yes, and by the end of the dinner he is still 84.

The ship leaves Akureyri at 6:00 pm. At 10:30 this evening, there's a ceremony on the outside pool deck to celebrate our crossing the Arctic Circle - despite the promise of hot toddies and nibbles, we choose to eschew (gesundheit!) the "bluenose" ceremony. (Maybe they throw you in the pool? Or overboard?)

Saturday, June 16

It is a long trip (449 nautical miles) from Akureyri to our next port, Tórshavn (Faroe Islands) and, in fact, we'll spend the entire day at sea, not arriving until Sunday morning at 8:00. The day is cloudy, windy, and cool; and the waters are a bit choppy.

Early in the morning, I take advantage of the free laundry (washer, dryer, and soap all available) to wash a load of my "delicates" - the room is very busy, so I'll have to plan my next encounter more carefully. (I also screw up - I mistake which soap dispenser is which, so I wind up adding extra soap to someone else's wash and none to mine. I'll re-do these clothes, along with the newly soiled ones, on June 19.) Following breakfast at *La Veranda*, at 10:15 we go to one of the enrichment lectures given by Hugh Neighbour. As mentioned on p. 7, he is a retired naval officer and U.S. diplomat. It also turns out that he's an excellent and well-informed lecturer. I try to take notes on his topic, "The Faroe and Shetland Islands - Is Remote Realistic?" but he speaks rapidly and the slides do not stay on-screen long enough. Nevertheless, here's what I came up with, supplemented from Wikipedia when I couldn't read my notes. If you're not interested in these details, feel free to skip to p. 13, at the end of this 9-point font section:

Called *Føroyar* in Faroese and *Færøerne* in Danish, there are 18 islands, 17 of which are inhabited. In total area, they are about eight times larger than the combined Washington DC and Fairfax County VA.*

*What a strange comparison, but I suppose that he's using places that he knows for the reference points.

The population (about 50,000) is mostly descended from Norsemen who came around 850. The Islands remained under Norse control until 1380 when a treaty ceded them to Denmark. Following the invasion of Denmark by Germany in 1940, British troops occupied the Faroes to strengthen their control of the North Atlantic. At the end of the war, a referendum was held on whether to secede from Danish rule. Although adopted by a slim majority, the parliament could not fashion a path to independence and the effort collapsed. The Faroes are now self-governing but remain part of the kingdom of Denmark.

To say that the islands are in the middle of nowhere is not an exaggeration: they lie about halfway between Iceland and Norway, some 450 km from each. Some 90% of the exports and about 50% of the GDP comes from fishing. There is no oil or gas, so these need to be imported. Unemployment is about 5.8%. According to custom, puffins are not only culturally important to the Faroese but are also caught and eaten.* Legend has it that elves live in the woods.

*Eating a cultural icon is a strange thing to do - it would be akin to Americans' killing and eating bison and buffalo. Oh.

The Faroes are not part of the EU, thereby keeping other members from fishing in their waters. The standard of living is close to Denmark's. The króna is a version of the Danish krone, which is pegged to the euro. The capital, Tórshavn, has a population of about 13,000. [Pictures of the city, people, lighthouses, etc. whisk by rapidly, without much comment.] Most of the islands are connected by bridges or tunnels.

Some 370 km southeast of the Faroe Island are the Shetland Islands, which are closer to Oslo than to Glasgow, and are also "in the middle of nowhere" - they are 360 km from both Aberdeen and Bergen. The population is about 22,000, many of whom are immigrants from the British Isles. Of approximately 100 islands, 16 are populated; the largest of these has the imaginative name Mainland.

The islands were populated by Vikings in the 8th and 9th centuries. Then, according to Wikipedia, "The islands were Christianised in the late 10th century. King Olav Tryggvasson summoned the jarl Sigurd the Stout during a visit to Orkney and said 'I order you and all your subjects to be baptised. If you refuse, I'll have you killed on the spot and I swear I will ravage every island with fire and steel.' Unsurprisingly,*

*This is not unlike the mafia's making an offer than you can't refuse. It's too bad that there are no photographs of Sigurd the Stout, nor of the Island Beardies mentioned below.

Sigurd agreed and the islands became Christian at a stroke ... In 1194 when Harald Maddadsson was Earl of Orkney and Shetland, a rebellion broke out against King Sverre Sigurdsson of Norway. The Øyskjeggs ('Island Beardies') sailed for Norway but were beaten in the Battle of Florvåg near Bergen. After his victory King Sverre placed Shetland under direct Norwegian rule, a state of affairs that continued for nearly two centuries." There was much warring and toing and froing, but finally "In 1468 Shetland was pledged by Christian I, in his capacity as King of Norway, as security against the payment of the dowry* of his daughter Margaret, betrothed to James III of Scotland. As the money was never

*Take my daughter. Please. Oh, hell, take the Shetlands as well.

paid, the connection with the crown of Scotland has become perpetual." During World War II, the islands were known as the "Shetland bus" for serving as a base for numerous raids and covert operations on the coast of Nazi-occupied Norway.

Until recently, the economy was based on agriculture and fishing (mainly mackerel, here, as opposed to cod in Iceland). With the discovery of offshore oil in the 1970s, the economy received a boost, and there was substantial immigration from elsewhere in Britain. The Shetlands are now the most prosperous region in Great Britain. Taxes and leases from the oil have been plowed back into the economy and have been used to build infrastructure and provide social services. The local dialect is difficult to understand, even by Scots and other British - it is closer to Norwegian than to Scots/English. The flag has a white Nordic cross on a blue background; white and blue are also the colors of the Scottish flag which consists of a white Saint Andrews cross on a blue background. [For the uninitiated into the arcane world of heraldry, the Nordic cross is a huge PLUS sign, slightly to the left of center, and the Saint Andrews cross is a large X.]

The capital city is Lerwick (population about 7,600). It is a vacation town and is prosperous, clean, and relatively crime free [this sounds like a plug from the local Chamber of Commerce]. The people take advantage of the long and mild summer days by spending time outside, but in the equally long winter nights they take to the indoors (although it never gets very cold - the average highs in January and February are 1°C). Although not a crown colony, it is also not independent - it remains part of the United Kingdom and the EU. As Scotland prepares to become independent from Great Britain, the Shetlands and Orkney are considering separating themselves from Scotland so as to strike a better deal with the EU. A vote on this has been deferred to 2014. A key question will be: are the islands too small to survive as an independent nation?

Puffins are common in the islands, but unlike the practice in the Faroes they are not eaten. Nor are the

Shetland ponies, which are bred more for the tourists and children and fairs than to serve as work animals ... or as dinner.

Back to descriptions of the cruise ship. We observe that there are many more people with canes, walkers, and oxygen tanks than on the 2010 Baltic Cruise and, correspondingly, many fewer children. Good! Maybe we're witnessing what Melissa Melchior (the daughter of neighbors in Gig Harbor and a purser/cruise director from a rival cruise line) told us: instead of placing their elderly parents in nursing homes or retirement communities, some people put them on world cruises (which this one is). It's hard to believe - and the economics seem out of whack, but that's what we've heard.

The outside temperature at noon is a brisk 45°F. We go to the German buffet on the outdoors (brrr) pool deck, but cowards that we are we bring our plates indoors to *La Veranda*, as do many others. After a while, the sun does come out, but it doesn't provide much warmth. Nevertheless, we do seven laps (about a mile) on the jogging track (deck 12); the wind and cold are not too bad during this time. At 5:30, we are invited to a *Virtuoso* reception in the Constellation Theatre; about 70% of the passengers on this cruise got their bookings through *Virtuoso* agents, and the place is very crowded. We meet our "hosts" from a Dallas travel agency, but they seem more eager to talk to the well-heeled cruisers than to us - which is fine. Alas, we find ourselves seated next to the Green Bay Packers fans (see p. 9) who do not see eye-to-eye with us on football teams and politics. We escape at 6:30 and have dinner at *Compass Rose*, then retire to our room to read. We dutifully set our clocks one hour ahead for our arrival in the Faroes.

Sunday, June 17

The ship arrives in Tórshavn at about 7:30, a little ahead of schedule. The sky is thick with clouds; and the weather is cold and very windy. We have breakfast is at *La Veranda*, then meet the tour bus on the pier and are on our way at 8:35. From our tour guide, a young man named Jógvan, we learn (although we also learned it yesterday) that the Faroe Islands consist of 17 islands and 45,000 people.* We also learn

*Huh? In Hugh Neighbour's lecture, the numbers were 18 and 50,000. Grade deflation at work?

that the people have their own parliament and their own language; they elect two representatives to parliament in Denmark, but the Danes cannot pass laws for the Faroese unless ratified locally. The local parliament was established on a peninsula of Tórshavn in about 850, but the capital was not populated until the 16th century during the Reformation. A series of roads, tunnels, ferries, and bridges connect the islands. Fishing is the main source of income. And if you have no other plans, Wikipedia tells us that "A total eclipse of the sun will be visible from the Faroe Islands on 20 March 2015."

We are on the largest island (Streymoy) and are driving to the second largest (Eysturoy); the two are connected by a bridge. According to Wikipedia, "This bridge is humorously referred to by islanders as the only bridge over the Atlantic." Power is generated 70% from burning oil, 30% from wind power - the problem is that the winds are often so strong that windmills and turbines have to be shut down. Sheep were brought to the islands, presumably by St. Brendan in the 6th century, who traveled for two days and nights north of Scotland to get here.

We encountered St. Brendan during our Wales-Ireland trip in 2009. In a town called Quin, just east of Ennis, there is an open-air museum Craggaunowen. Quoting from the 2009 travelog, " There is even a reconstruction of the leather-hulled boat that St. Brendan the Navigator (6th century) is alleged to have sailed on voyages to France, Wales, and Scotland ... and in some tales to America! Here's how his most famous (and fictitious?) journey is described in *The DK Guide*: 'This story tells of a shipload [Ed: that's shipload with a P!] of monks who, after seven years of all kinds of strange encounters designed to test their faith, found The Land of Promise.' Wikipedia tells it this way: 'Many versions exist that tell of how he

set out onto the Atlantic Ocean with sixty pilgrims (other versions have fourteen, plus three unbelievers who join at the last minute) searching for the Garden of Eden.' Whatever the details, Brendan is one of the most revered of Irish saints and is a charter member of the Saints Hall of Fame. (I made that up.)

Our tour guide tells us that there are 49,000 people* and 80,000 sheep which are free-range but are

**WTF??? So, now it seems that the population has suddenly grown by 4,000 - either that, or my handwritten notes have become nearly completely illegible.

marked on their ears. All of the sheep are a single genetic species even though they come in a variety of colors (and flavors???) . The wool is excellent for making water- and wind-proof garments that are exported to Scotland and New Zealand. According to Wikipedia, "Mutton is the basis of many meals, and one of the most popular treats is *skerpikjøt*, well aged, wind-dried mutton, which is quite chewy. [YUM] The drying shed, known as a *hjalur*, is a standard feature in many Faroese homes, particularly in the small towns and villages." Our guide elaborates on this: the animals are skinned, rinsed with saltwater, and hung whole in sheds that have wooden sides with spaces to allow the wind and salt to penetrate (no place in the Faroes is more than a couple of km from the sea). Over time, a penicillin-like mold grows on the surface; we are told that it tastes like blue cheese. A native sheep is never cooked in the traditional manner (i.e., using a stove or oven); rather it is eaten directly from the carcasses in the sheds. If one wants cooked food, one eats mutton imported from New Zealand.*

*This gives my entrepreneurial-minded wife a brilliant idea for *my* post-retirement career: selling gift packs of fermented shark (from Iceland) and fermented sheep (from the Faroes).

If I'm deciphering my scrawled notes correctly, the GNP of the Faroes (based mainly of fishing and, recently, information technology) is 82 billion USD; the average income is \$50-60K and unemployment is low. However, the cost of living is very high and taxes take some 40% of income. In exchange, citizens get free heating, education, and medical care.

Our tour takes us past a whaling station* and on to the village of Eiði,** where we visit a working farm

*Our guide says that whaling is no longer practiced, but Wikipedia relates quite a different story: "As many as 1,000 endangered long-finned pilot whales are brutally killed in the Faroe Islands each year. The killing occurs mainly during the summer months during so called "traditional" communal hunts that locals refer to as *grindadráp* or simply, 'the grind.' This *grindadráp* is legal and provides food for many people in the Faroe Islands." So, what say ye to a repast of fermented shark (from Iceland), fermented sheep (from the Faroes), and whale? Burp!

**Fun fact: the letter ð is silent in Faroese but is sounded in Icelandic. The Faroese language is very similar to old Norse. Jógvan tells us that the two languages are similar enough that if an Icelander slows down and the Faroese speeds up, they can understand one another.

and see turf-covered houses, and then to Gjógv, where we see sea stacks named, appropriately, The Giant and The Hag. In the village is a monument of a mother and two children: the daughter is facing toward the sea, the son toward the village, a memorial to the many fathers who lost their lives on the dangerous waters. In fact, during WW II the Faroes lost more people per capita than any other country, most of them at sea: this was because the Faroes were a major supplier of food to England, thus making their merchant ships fair prey. Looking down from our hillside, we see the Gjógv Gorge which serves as a natural harbor for fishing boats. I compliment Jógvan on his excellent English. He explains that languages are taught throughout the school curriculum: Faroese is taught for the entire curriculum; Danish study begins in the 3rd year, English in the 5th, and German and French in the 7th. Just like in the good old

U. S. or A., eh?

The following is, somehow, missing from my own notes, so here I'll copy what Lee has written: "Jógvan explains that we're driving on the only main road back to Tórshavn, and it played a key role during trade union unrest in the 1970s and 1980s. During a general strike, the unionists hired a local with a crane to instal two boulders to block the highway. After doing so for pay, the man and his machine were on the Tórshavn side of the blockade. He opened his thermos, drank coffee, and waited while the trade unionists laughed at him about how he'd get home. After a few hours and a miles-long car queue, the police noticed his crane and asked, 'Can you move those boulders to open the road?' He says, 'Certainly, but only for money.' So he gets more cash for clearing his way home."

As we return to the ship, we stop above the village of Funningsfjørður. Then, back in Tórshavn we drive through downtown and get to see two of the grand total of only four traffic lights in all of the Faroe Islands. We're onboard the cruise ship by 1:00 whereupon we repair to the Pool Grill for a hamburger and ice cream. A small container ship (Eimskip Maersk) has docked behind us; from our veranda, we watch the small loaders, grabbing containers (with magnets) and moving them from the dock to the cranes that will lift them onboard. One of the "packages" is a helicopter, wrapped in white shrink wrap.

We have accepted an invitation extended to "frequent cruisers" to tour the ship's galley at 3:30; we had expected to be shown around by Executive Chef Jonathan Smid, but instead are in the loving care of an assistant, who speaks softly and has a heavy accent, so much is lost. Nevertheless, food preparation is an impressive operation, as this enormous galley (with refrigerators, storage cabinets, ovens, stovetops, etc.) feeds meals to the 700 passengers and 400 crew every day.

One of the other passengers on the galley tour is a man who looks very much like former major league pitcher John Smoltz.* The man has Smoltz's face, hair (or lack thereof), beard, height, and muscular

*For the uneducated among you, Smoltz was one of the great pitchers of the last half-century. He was a starting pitcher for the Atlanta Braves from 1988 to 1999. He injured his arm and had "Tommy John surgery" which forced him to miss the 2000 season. When he returned to action in 2001, he became the Braves' closer out of the bullpen. In 2005, he returned to the starting rotation. In 2009, his final year in the majors, he split time between the Red Sox and Cardinals. By the time he retired, he had won 213 games and saved 154 more, a record of achievement nearly unmatched in baseball history. In post-season play, his record was a stellar 15-4. He won the Cy Young Award in 1996 when he went 24-8, compiled an earned run average of 2.94, and struck out 276 batters. He was part of perhaps the most dominant trio of starters in recent memory, along with Tom Glavine and Greg Maddux. Smoltz is certain to be elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame when he becomes eligible in 2004. I hate him!! (see below).

build; I had noticed him on several earlier occasions, but this time I summon up the "courage" to speak to him. Turns out he isn't Smoltz, although he says that I'm the third cruiser who have asked him. It also turns out that he has no idea who John Smoltz is/was. My suspicion: he *is* Smoltz, but is denying it because he senses that I, nearly 9 inches shorter than he, is going to jump up and try to punch him in the nose for all of the times that he had defeated my New York Mets.

At 4:30, the captain uses the ship's intercom to announce that we should expect 10-foot swells starting tonight and not ending until we reach Lerwick at 8:00 tomorrow morning. As it turns out, the ship hardly sways and heaves, meaning that very few passengers sway and heave either. At 6:00, the ship's horn sounds, announcing it is time for a "meet and greet" in the hallways. Everyone is expected to meet his/her neighbors outside the stateroom doors; Captain Gianmario Sanguineti, Cruise Director Paul Reynolds,* and other "Regent notables" do a mad dash from one deck to another, greeting everyone in the

*On our 2010 Baltic cruise and again in 2011 for Alaska, the cruise director was a pleasant woman

named Lorraine Weimerskirch, an American I believe. In contrast, Mr. Reynolds, an Englishman with an extensive career as a composer and music director in the theater, is annoying; his announcements seem to interrupt whatever we are doing, and his low-class accent is displeasing. So be it!

hallways and exchanging good wishes. Silly, eh? I think so. But we did get to meet the couple in the cabin directly across from us: they are from Rochester and appear fairly "normal" except that he, short and round, is wearing sandals that reveal the turquoise-blue-with-sparkles polish that he had painted on his nails. Every time we would see him over the succeeding days, he would present the same appearance - too bad, I had hoped that he'd change colors, much like a mood ring.

We go to dinner at *La Veranda* for a French bistro meal, then retire to our room where we read and enjoy a nice Scotch whisky while saying silent prayers that the waters will be only minimally choppy. (It turns out that the one can request two bottles of wine or whisky to be delivered to the room at no cost. The list of scotches leans toward the blended whiskies. We choose a Dewars, quite a comedown from the single malts that we are accustomed to drinking.)

Monday, June 18

We arrive in Lerwick, Shetland Islands early in the morning. There are some clouds, but also enough sun to be reflecting off the water. After breakfast at *LaVeranda*, at 8:15 we make our way to the tour bus that will take us on our day's activities. We have sailed in a southeast direction from Iceland to the Faroe Islands (some 450 km) and on to the Shetlands (another 370 km). The Shetlands are the most northerly part of Great Britain and consist of some 100 islands of which by far the largest is Mainland. Lerwick, the capital, is situated on the eastern coast, about halfway down (or up, depending on one's viewpoint) the length of this rather narrow island; the island is quite narrow along its N-S axis, but there is a large bulge to the west, called (appropriately) West Mainland to differentiate it from North Mainland, Central Mainland, and South Mainland. Makes sense. The population of the Shetlands is 17,000 of whom about 7,500 live in the capital, whose name derives from old Norse and means "Bay of Clay."

Both our tour guide (Morag) and bus driver (nameless) are Scottish, equipped with the expected accents of the country. The bus, of course, is right-hand drive, but it's still a bit unnerving when we are driving on the left side of the road and there is oncoming traffic. As we drive south, we stop at about 9:00 in the village of Hoswick, not far from a somewhat larger village, Sandwick, about halfway down the eastern side of the island. We are there for 60 minutes, but it's not clear why - there is a small store with Scottish tchotchkes(hey, those words rhyme), a café, a few goats, and a small pond. At least the day is bright and sunny, but also cool and quite breezy.

We continue our drive, passing peat fields and sheep, and stop at an overlook with an excellent view of the water, some distant islands, and sea lions basking on the beach. We continue our drive for another half-hour to the southern tip of the island to visit Jarlshof, an archaeological site that dates to 2500 BC. In 1900, a strong storm eroded the sand enough to expose numerous ruins. According to Wikipedia, "Buildings on the site include the remains of a Bronze Age smithy, an Iron Age broch and roundhouses, a complex of Pictish wheelhouses, a Viking long house, and a mediaeval farmhouse." Other artifacts are found there from all of the various periods (Neolithic, Bronze, Iron, and Pictish) that it was inhabited. (Jarlshof is but one of some one hundred ancient sites on the islands, the oldest of which is West Voe, which dates from 4300 BC.) It is in a spectacular location, right at the edge of the (almost unnaturally) blue seas. As we leave to head for the bus, two Shetland Ponies make an appearance in a nearby yard - they are kind enough to allow their pictures to be taken.

PUN ALERT - The following conversation takes place at the archaeological site. Lee: "Did the guide say FIELD house or WHEEL house?" Ron: "Wheel house." Lee: "What's a wheel house?" Ron: "The opposite of an imaginary house."

We return to the ship at 12:40 and repair to the Pool Grill for a salad (moi) and hamburger and ice cream (Lee). Because the wind makes the day feel even cooler than it is, we return to our cabin to read. At about 3:00, I return to the Pool Grill for my own ice cream, then head to Deck 12 for a brisk walk - however, it proves to be too windy to walk a full mile, so I quit after a couple of laps and return to our room where we read until dinner time. The ship leaves Lerwick at about 5:00 and I get some excellent pictures of the landscape as we depart for open seas.

After dinner at *Compass Rose*, we return to our suite; the new issue of *Passages* reminds us to set our clocks one hour ahead for the time zone that we'll be in for the remainder of this trip. I finish reading *The Art of Fielding* and re-read the reviews of it in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*, both of which were glowing. I enjoyed the book but not as much as these reviewers and, of course, I missed all of the allusions (or so the smarmy reviewers claimed) to Jonathan Franzen, David Foster Wallace, Herman Melville, and others. Sigh. (Another review in *The Atlantic*, that I'll read later on this trip, suggests that the book is much much less than what the others alleged; I thought that the *Atlantic's* reviewer just did not like the style of writing or the details of the story, although I had to agree that certain turning points were contrived and unlikely to have occurred in our world.) As our ship sails in a northeast direction toward the coast of Norway, we see many oil drilling platforms, well-lit at night, gas flares flaring, and large ships either ferrying goods and crew to the platform or back to land.

Tuesday, June 19

At 7:00 am, four hours before reaching our next port, there are broken clouds, some sun, mild temperatures, and choppy waters. I arrive at the laundrette exactly at 7:00 (the posted opening time) and put my wash in, *this* time using the correct soap dispenser (cf., my error on June 16).

PUN ALERT: Lee (using binoculars), "There's a small boat with a cabin and it seems to have a sail on the stern." Ron: "What items are for sale on the stern."

After breakfast at *LaVeranda*, we return to our room. I begin reading *Hitch-22* by Christopher Hitchens, which should be a breeze as it's a mere 430 pages as compared to the 500+ pages of *The Art of Fielding*. At 9:45, we go to the auditorium to hear another lecture by Hugh Neighbour titled "Norway's West: Fjords, Fishing Towns, and the Making of a Nation." As I did with his first lecture, I reproduce here the highlights of the talk. Again, feel free to skip these details, if you're not interested.

The talk will cover the four towns and cities where we'll make port along the western coast: Ålesund, Geiranger, Flåm, and Bergen. Ålesund is at the entrance of Storfjord, about 1/4 of the way up the western coast; Geiranger is some 100 km inland at the end of this fjord; Flåm, by road, is some 285 km south of Geiranger, but the cruise ship will have to travel west to open waters before it turns to the east and enters the Sognefjord; Bergen is 170 km southwest of Flåm. Today's lecture will cover the years 400 to 1814; the next two centuries will be discussed in the lecture on June 23.

Facts about Norway: its population is 5 million of whom 1.7 million live in the capital, Oslo (pronounced ooslo). The population of the country is about 93% of European origin; 86% are Evangelical Lutherans. Its area (382 km²) makes it comparable to New Mexico [what a strange comparison!]. There is a mountain range than runs the length of the country along a north-south axis. Even in the summer, the climate is cool and wet, especially along the coast; Bergen, for example, has only 15-20 days a year without rain. (Please, no nasty allusions to the Seattle area.) The flag looks much like those of other Scandinavian countries: a blue Nordic cross, outlined in white, on a rectangular red background.

Inhabited since 20,000 BC, the written records date to Viking times during 800-1066 AD. The Vikings were a mixture of Norsemen, Danes, and Swedes. They have the reputation of being murderers and conquerors, but among them were sailors, farmers, and builders. [Yeah, sure.] They sent expeditions to the British Isles to the west and to Russia to the east. The period 1066-1380 is called the High Middle Ages; Norwegians settled the Faroe Islands, the Hebrides, and the Isle of Man. In 1349, the Black Death wiped out about 50% of the population and the land came under the control of Denmark. The Kalmar

Union lasted from 1396-1535 and covered Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. As the Union dissolved, control passed to Denmark again. Denmark and Norway came under British control following the Battle of Copenhagen in 1814. Denmark chose to fight the British, but this was a big mistake as Sweden and Britain conquered the lands. (From 1864 to 1905, Sweden and Norway were one; and Norway was free of Danish rule. This time period will be covered in the next lecture.)

Aside from the mountains, the most significant geographical and cultural feature are the fjords. These are long, narrow inlets with steep sides created by glaciers; these are, therefore, glaciated valleys and end in a U-shape, never a V-shape of the canyons created by rivers. The glaciers caused huge rocks and boulders to crash into the water, leading to moraines with severe currents and maelstroms (whirlpools). According to Wikipedia, "A fjord is formed when a glacier cuts a U-shaped or oblong valley by abrasion of the surrounding bedrock. Glacial melting is accompanied by rebound of Earth's crust as the ice load and eroded sediment is removed (also called isostasy or glacial rebound). In some cases this rebound is faster than sea level rise. Most fjords are deeper than the adjacent sea; Sognefjord, Norway, reaches as much as 1,300 m (4,265 ft) below sea level. Fjords generally have a sill or rise at their mouth caused by the previous glacier's terminal moraine, in many cases causing extreme currents and large saltwater rapids. Saltstraumen in Norway is often described as the world's strongest tidal current. These characteristics distinguish fjords from rias (e.g. the Bay of Kotor), which are drowned valleys flooded by the rising sea."

Ålesund, a decent-sized town of about 45,000, was founded in the 10th century by Gangerolf (aka Rollo outside of Norway), founder of the Dukes of Normandy. In 1904, a fire broke out and destroyed nearly every building. Relief supplies and building materials were sent by Kaiser* Wilhelm who knew the town

*It is not true that he invented the Kaiser Roll(o) or that he belonged to The Dukes of Hazzard.

well from his vacations nearby. Rebuilding was done in the Art Nouveau style (*Jugendstil*); there are 400 such buildings, all constructed using plans by some of Europe's most respected architects in the early 20th century. The city has Norway's most important fishing harbor with modern fleets, shipbuilding, and ship repair facilities. Most of the oil from the North Sea comes to Ålesund before being shipped elsewhere to refineries. (The Shetland Bus, see p. 12, ran from this port.)

Geiranger is a small town (population about 250) at the head of the Geirangerfjord, an offshoot of the much larger Storfjord. It is a summer tourist destination with some 140 to 180 ships arriving each year, bringing several hundred thousand tourists (and, of course, their money!). It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is the nearest town to several impressive waterfalls among which is "Seven Sisters" (*De Syv Søstrene*) with its vertical drop of 250 m. According to Wikipedia, "Geiranger is under constant threat from the mountain Åkerneset which could erode into the fjord. A collapse could cause a tsunami that could destroy downtown Geiranger." Gulp!

Flåm is another small tourist town, at the end of the Aurlandsfjord (the largest in Norway), and the home to the Flåmsbana railway which makes one of the steepest trips in the world, some 12 miles to Myrdal, a stop on the mountain railway between Bergen and Oslo. The railway was built about 80 years ago, but its two tunnels were built essentially by hand in 1940. Like Geiranger, it receives several hundred cruise ships and several hundred thousand tourists in the summer. The town was occupied by Germany during World War II for its supply of hydroelectric power, but the generators were blown up by Norwegian resistance fighters.

Bergen, with a population of over 270,000 is the second largest city in Norway. It was the capital of Norway from the 13th to the 15th century and an important member of the Hanseatic League. During World War II, it was occupied by Germany on the first day of their invasion.

Over the course of the next three days, we'll visit all of the towns and cities mentioned above.

Our ship arrives in Ålesund at about 11:00. The day is overcast, with some sun and no rain ... yet. At 1:30, we (i.e., Lee) eagerly partakes of the Tex-Mex meal offered by the Pool Grill. I settle for a hamburger patty (no bun) and some salad - how virtuous! At 12:30, in a light rain, we make our way to the tour bus. The city is spread out over seven islands (the Saga Islands); via tunnels and bridges, we'll visit two of them: Giske and Godoy. We begin with a fast tour of the city and its Art Nouveau* architecture, but

*It seems as if we can't escape this sort of ornate architecture. We encountered it in Riga, during our 2010 Baltic cruise; and again in Napier, NZ in early 2011. Well, not quite. In Napier, they called it Art Deco but it still was much too ornate for my simple tastes. There are web sites devoted to explaining the difference between the two styles, but the subtleties are beyond my comprehension (and my desire to pursue the topic). But I think it's interesting that Ålesund's Art Nouveau buildings were constructed after a fire nearly destroyed the town in 1904 whereas Napier's Art Deco structures were built after a major earthquake in 1931.

we also plan to do a little walking tour of our own at the end of the bus excursion. Although the city has the same latitude as Fairbanks, Alaska, its climate is much more temperate owing to the Gulf Stream. Rarely does the temperature drop below 32°F; the lowest ever recorded is 28°F. This city is the fishing capital of Norway and is responsible for about 35% of the country's exports. Despite the discovery of offshore oil, Norway has the highest gasoline prices in Europe, about \$13/gallon. Our well-informed tour guide, by the way, is a man named Odd. (Please refrain from making any jokes.)

A tunnel that is some 500 feet below the surface of the water takes us from Ålesund to the island of Valderøy, and from there a bridge goes to the island of Giske. Here is one of Norway's oldest and most historic churches. Its outer walls date from the 12th century. The interior consists of simple wooden pews and wooden altar with only minimal ornamentation throughout; there is much original marble inside. It fell into disrepair, but restoration was begun in 1766, as commemorated by a plaque on the wall. The altar pieces at the front and pulpit were hand-carved by an artisan who didn't finish until he was 70. (Odd imagines himself a comedian: he says that the trolls that inhabit Giske lay white eggs - pointing to the plastic-wrapped cylindrical bales of hay - and that the sheep we see are "Christmas dinner." Methinks, he's not ready for prime time yet.)

From Giske, we go through another tunnel to the island of Godøy and to the town of Alnes on the Atlantic coast. During the drive, our guide tells us how Norway is dealing with the profits from its offshore oil. The taxes on the companies and the revenue from leases go into a reserve fund. Very little is spent now. (Lee tells me that Norway's sovereign wealth fund is the biggest in the world.) This is one reason that the cost of living is so high: there are taxes on nearly everything plus a VAT. Salaries are also very high. The Norwegian welfare system receives the approval of most of the population: roads and schools, national health care, and pensions. Hospital stays are cost-free as are medicines and out-patient services,

We stop in Alnes to take pictures and to visit an old lighthouse in the village. While some the heartier members of the tour group climb the narrow staircase to the top of the lighthouse, Lee and I stroll about the grounds, taking pictures of the blue blue blue water (and yes, the sun is still out in full) and fields of flowers. The bus then returns to Ålesund and stops briefly in the hills above the city, to give excellent views of the town, the cruise ship docks, and the nearby islands. We also inspect a deserted (Gott sei dank!) concrete German bunker from the war. I ask our guide about the location of the Norsky Hydro heavy water facility that had been built in 1934 but was taken over by the occupying Germans and then destroyed by Norwegian resistance forces. Odd says that it was in the eastern part of the city, but Wikipedia suggests that it was many many miles away. So I don't know the answer. He also says that the leader of the commando raid that destroyed the factory came from Ålesund and that Odd knew him. No reason to doubt this, I suppose.

The bus unloads at about 4:00, but we choose to walk into the city to stroll the streets and admire (or not) the Art Nouveau architecture. Crossing a busy street, I'm almost run down by a Mercedes truck with Swedish plates and the sticker KISS MY ASS in the front window. No translation required. We return to the ship for cookies and coffee, then later to *La Veranda* for dinner on "Italian night." (Two full pages of Lee's journal are devoted to a description of the food that we consumed. Such details are also available for all of the other meals on-board. Once again, I resist the temptation to write about them. But I'll bet that if you ask nicely, she'll photocopy all of the relevant pages and send them to you.) The ship sets sail at

about 7:00 pm.

PUN ALERT: The captain announces over the PA that we'll sail to open sea, then return to the Storfjord, and make our way down the fjord to Geiranger. Lee: "I wish that he'd just stay in the fjord." Ron: "He doesn't want to. He'd rather say that there's a fjord in your future."

Wednesday, June 20

At 7:00, we are already deep into a fjord; the day is cool and grey, but with no rain as yet. After showering and dressing, I go to Deck 12 to take pictures of the steep walls along the fjord and of the many waterfalls. We pass many small towns nestled at the base of the hills. The waters are amazingly still. The ship performs a 360° pirouette (one assumes under the control of the bridge) to allow people on all sides to get good views. After about 15 minutes, we can see Geiranger at the closed end of the Geirangerfjorden (at least this how it was spelled at Google Map). Alas, we cannot dock at the pier (the waters are too shallow), so we will need to use tenders (*Tender is the Night?*) to get to the shore.

We are not the only visitors, today, no sirree. Anchored near us are: *Mein Schiff 2* (TUI cruises) with 1900 passengers; Princess Cruises *Ocean Princess* with 1500 passengers, and Hurtigruten's *Trollfjord* with some 800 passengers and space for 50 cars (on a 34-port Norwegian cruise).

We have breakfast at *La Veranda*. Because there are no open tables, we sit with a New Zealander named Jim. We then take the 9:15 tender (*Love Me Tender?*) and climb onto the tour bus 15 minutes later. It is an old vehicle without seat belts (despite our having been told on yesterday's tour that the wearing of seat belts is mandatory under Norwegian law - well, they can't haul *all* us off to jail ... or can they?) Our tour guide is a young woman named Emelie. Her English is quite halting (but she's blond!) and her knowledge of the region is meager (but she's blond!!) and her memorized spiel is fragmented (but did I mention that she's blond?).

The bus begins to climb and after a few minutes we are at the *Norsk Fjordsenter*, a museum devoted to the history of the region, its peoples, and its customs. We watch a short slide show and roam about the exhibits for about 45 minutes, before we are back on the bus for a series of hairpin turns (where is my seat belt??) as we climb toward Lake Djupvatn, 3,379 feet (1300 m) above sea level; Geiranger, itself, is at an elevation of but 130 feet (40 m). It has begun to rain - fairly hard - as we climb a toll road to Mount Dalsnibba (elevation 4,920 feet, 1500 m). We are fortunate to have an experienced driver (at least we hope that he's experienced) who maneuvers the bus around the turns while avoiding other vehicles (buses, bikes, and cars) coming from the other direction. We learn that this road is open only from June to October. Our guide continues to mangle the English language (but, hell, her English is better than my Norwegian and, besides, do I need to remind you that she's blond?). The tree line is at 870 m (2800 feet) and there is snow on the hills above it. As we climb the toll road, the rain has changed to snow - and when we stop at the summit (over an hour after leaving the museum), we get not a spectacular vista (the valleys are shrouded by clouds and fog) but there is enough snow to make snow balls that one's wife can throw at him (even when the evidence of her malfeasance is caught on camera). There are many inukshuks (or whatever the Norwegians call them) in all directions.

As we begin our descent, I try to snap pictures through the bus's windows of the snow banks that were created by plowing this road several weeks earlier - they are of a most impressive height, but (alas) the pictures are obscured by huge raindrops on the windows. Our excellent driver negotiates the nasty turns and delivers us safely to lower elevations; on the way, we pause for a photo-op at Flydal Gorge which allows a nice overview of Geiranger and of the three cruise ships that are at anchor (ours' being the furthest from shore). Once at the pier, I take a picture of Emelie (still blond!) and we board a tender (*The Tender Trap?*) for our return to the ship. We get good views of the two much larger cruise ships between our ship and the dock.

On board, we make our way to the Pool Grill for hamburgers and salad; with our furnaces thus stoked, we do six walking laps on the Deck 12 jogging track and, thus exhausted, we return to the Pool Grill for some much needed ice cream. The ship leaves Geiranger at 3:00, but inches away only slowly, waiting for the traditional cannon shot that is supposed to occur precisely at this hour. It finally sounds at 3:30 and we can finally move out. I take numerous pictures from our cabin's veranda - I know that we're supposed to pass the famous Seven Sisters waterfall, so I take pictures of every waterfall, thinking that it might be *the one* until finally we are directly in front of the Seven Sisters - and it is, indeed, spectacular. (Much like her description of our meals, Lee waxes poetic over the waterfall - for my part, it suffices to suggest that you look at the Picasa pictures.)

We have coffee from the Coffee Connection, dinner at *Prime 7*, and spend the rest of the day relaxing, battling the very slow internet connection, sipping a scotch, and reading. From time to time, both this day and on the preceding and succeeding days, we venture to Deck 5 where large jigsaw puzzles are laid out - everyone who passes tries to put in one or more pieces, but some passengers are true fanatics and try to organize the work as if it were a chain-gang stone-smashing detail. Of the ten or so times that I stop at the table (where I saw at least seven different puzzles), I probably succeed in placing 15 pieces - some of them even in the correct spots.

Thursday, June 21

We cruise into the port of Flåm at about 7:30 am. For a change, the skies are blue and the sun is bright, although the air is quite cool. As we drop anchor some distance from the town (yes, we'll need to use the tenders again), a large cruise ship, the Italian *MSC Opera** (with more than 2000 passengers), passes us

*This ship has a bit of a history. According to Wikipedia, "In May 2010, one week after a similar incident on board the *MSC Orchestra*, UKBA Officers at Dover found a large quantity of cocaine concealed in four passenger cabins. Four Latvians and three Lithuanians were later convicted at Canterbury Crown Court and sentenced to a total of 84 years imprisonment." And, according to a May 2011 article in the *Daily Mail*, "It was meant to be a luxurious and relaxing break, with passengers enjoying stop-offs in Amsterdam, Stockholm, Helsinki, St Petersburg and Copenhagen. But the ten-day cruise quickly turned into a nightmare for the 1,700 people on board – including 400 Britons – when their luxury liner broke down in the Baltic Sea. Holiday makers aboard the stricken *MSC Opera* staged a mutiny after enduring blackouts, food shortages and no running water or working toilets for almost three days." Those of us on the well-run Regent Seven Seas *Voyager* can partake of a bit of *schadenfreude* at such news.

and takes up the only pier reserved for cruise ships. Why? We were here first, or does size matter? Maybe there were payoffs under the table? Whatever.

We are not scheduled for a tour until the afternoon, so after a bagel and coffee at The Coffee Connection, we take advantage of the sunny day by relaxing on the pool deck and reading. At about 11:00, we have a light lunch at the Pool Grill, then take a tender to shore to meet our tour bus at 1:00. Lee had already gone to Destination Services to change 50 USD into Norwegian krone for use as tips for the tour guides; she met and chatted with one of the local guides who seemed very knowledgeable about the area; and she decided to engineer our getting on this guide's bus when the time came.

There had been a change from the cruise ship's announced schedule: originally, we were supposed to be in Flåm only for the morning, then depart at noon and arrive in Gudvangen at 2:00, and finally leave for Bergen at 7:00. Flåm and Gudvangen are separated by only 22 km on land, but are a greater distance apart if traveling on the fjords. The new schedule calls for the ship to remain in Flåm all day and depart for Bergen at 7:00. Are we upset, angry, disappointed, p.o.'ed that Gudvangen is not a port of call? Not at all. First of all, we have no idea what is appealing about Gudvangen. And second, it turns out that our

bus tour will take us there by the much shorter land route.

As planned by the scheming Lee, we do board the bus with Sandra (the woman from Destination Services) as tour guide. According to Wikipedia, "The name Flåm is documented as early as 1340 as Flaam. It is derived from the plural dative form of the Old Norse word flá meaning 'plain, flat piece of land,' and it refers to the flood plains of the Flåm River." So now you know. Plural dative, indeed!

OBSERVATION: In every place we've been so far (Iceland, Faroe and Shetland Islands, and Norway) we've seen very few (if any) young people (or even old people) with tattoos, body piercings, wild hair colors, etc. Why?

It is a sunny, pleasant day, with temperatures in the 70° F range. What a change! The bus climbs from Flåm and takes us via two tunnels (one of three miles in length, the other of seven) to the spectacular Tvindefossen, a huge waterfall (450 feet high) that allows close approach on foot and over slippery rocks. This waterfall is frozen in winter, which is hard to believe considering its size and the volume of water. In addition to the falls' beauty and majesty, Wikipedia also informs us that "... in the late 1990s the water at Tvindefossen acquired a reputation for rejuvenation and revival of sexual potency that made it one of the most important natural tourist attractions in western Norway, with as many as 200,000 people a year from the U.S., Japan and Russia visiting and filling containers with the water." (Sandra does not reveal those essential truths to us. Still we'll give her a nice tip at the end of the day. But she does encourage us to drink some of the water. I do not feel especially rejuvenated or horny, much to my dismay.)

On the bus trip, Sandra fills us in on facts and features of the region. Flåm is at the deep end of the Aurslandfjord, an arm of Sognefjord, which is the longest (126 mi) and deepest (4000 ft) in Norway. Our journey then takes us up another ascent to Stalheim and its historic hotel (which is a popular ski resort in winter), where we have some refreshments and wander through the public rooms and gardens. The hotel's cabinets are filled with classic pewter dishes and serving pieces; the walls are adorned with old swords and shields; the gates feature some elaborate ironware designs.

From there, it's a further ascent via a steep road with no fewer than twelve hairpin turns and another tunnel. At the summit, we see the tracks of the Flåmsbana railway that links Bergen and Oslo. Then, we begin winding our way down to the valley by Norway's steepest road (18% grade) with many more hairpin turns. We pray that our driver is experienced. We are alongside the river Naerøy to the town of Gudvangen. Along the way, we pass farms, small towns, and several waterfalls of modest size.

Because the winters are severe and there is very little daylight, most of the residents (Sandra among them) take cod liver oil (from September to April) to compensate for the deficiency of Vitamin D. (This was also reported by Odd in Ålesund, so maybe it's really true.) We are too far south for residents to see the midnight sun, but still there is very little daylight during the winter months.

Sandra also tells us that 98% of the country's electricity comes from hydropower, most of it from western Norway with its high lakes and waterfalls. The remaining 2% comes from wind. No fossil fuels are burned to create electricity. All of the petroleum recovered from the offshore wells is exported to Great Britain (there are pipelines to Scotland and to England), but none of it comes here. Therefore, not only is it not used for electricity, it's also not used for heating. The bus continues heading down toward the valley, passing through two more tunnels, and finally depositing us at the tender dock for transport back to the "mother ship."

Dinner at *La Veranda* is a Scandinavian buffet featuring a variety of cold and hot dishes. I go to Deck 12 to take pictures as we head up the fjord, away from Flåm. Lee has dessert with her meal but I wait until 8:45 to get ice cream (the Pool Grill was still serving until 9:00).

Friday, June 22

The day begins slightly cloudy, windy, and cool as we arrive in Bergen and dock at about 7:30. I discover that the connectivity that has been absent on my cell phone is now restored. What I won't know, until later in the trip, is that my phone (a replacement for a malfunctioning one) has no SIM card and, therefore, no GSM-capability (which is needed in Europe). What I'm connecting to, now, is the cruise ship's Wireless Maritime Services which can be accessed with CDMA.* As we enter the port, passing beneath a couple

*The background: I had purchased a "world phone" from Verizon last summer for use in France during our September-October trip. It worked fine, but in March of this year it began behaving badly. Because it was still under warranty, Verizon sent me a free replacement with the instruction that I should install the battery that was included and that I should return the old unit to them. At a Verizon store in Gig Harbor, I had one of their "experts" install the battery and transfer my address book to the new phone. There was no mention of removing the SIM card from the old unit and installing it in the new, so the card went back to Verizon, carefully tucked inside the old phone. I had no idea that the new phone did not come with a SIM card - after all, the original one did. It was only at the end of the cruise that I discovered that I had no phone service. A call (using Lee's phone)** to Verizon on June 24, consuming expensive roaming minutes in the process, allowed me to speak to two different reps; as they led me through various steps with the phone, it became clear what my problem was. At any rate, after returning to the U.S., I went to the major Verizon store in Tacoma, explained my problem, and received a new SIM card but only after I was willing to part with \$10. Lesson learned, I suppose.

**Lee has an ATT phone and has had connectivity throughout the trip. However, there was a quirk here as well. When I used her phone to call our home voice mail (to see if messages had been left since our departure), the first instruction from the disembodied computer voice was "If you have a mailbox at this number, press the pound key." However, pressing the pound key not only did not allow me to proceed with the call but generated the message "Are you still there?" followed by "Good-bye." So much for modern technology, eh? Apparently this was a quirk of the ship's wireless service, because a few days later in Den Haag, the call to our home voice mail went smoothly.

of large bridges, we see at least three other large cruise ships docked near us. I take lots of pictures from Deck 12 after finishing breakfast at *La Veranda*. There is a predicted high of 25°C today, which will be quite welcome after the chilly days we've had so far.

At 8:30 we climb into the tour bus and are greeted by our guide Bjørn (which means Bear in Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, and Danish), but he is somewhat grumpy, easily flustered, and often distracted by his cell phone when he should be talking to the tourists and answering questions. Interspersed in his "patter" are silly little comments; one wonders if we're the first tour group he's been in charge of. He informs us that there are no fewer than *six* other cruise ships today - and we can believe it when we see how congested the city is as we approach our first destination. There are pedestrians, cars, large trucks, and rival tour buses everywhere, thus making progress very slow.

We are heading to the funicular that will take us to Mount Fløyen for a panoramic view of the city. Because of the congestion, Bjørn leaves the bus and walks to the funicular station to buy tickets for us, while the driver (who is Swedish and not very familiar with the city streets) circles and, somehow, manages to reconnect with our guide at 9:00 after a couple of circuits. (My history buff wife is upset that neither the driver nor Bjørn talked about the old buildings that date from the days of the Hanseatic League. Your faithful scribe, who cares not a whit about history, is agnostic on this topic.) We join a long line to wait for the next funicular to take us to the top. Bjørn says that we'll meet in an hour to descend to street level, but it's quite clear that spending so much time at the summit is going to be taxing - there are only so many vistas of which one can take only so many pictures. As Lee and I are strolling through a small park at the summit, we encounter our intrepid guide smoking cigarettes and talking to friends/family/ whoever on his phone; he ignores me when I approach with a question.

When we return to street level and have exited the funicular, the line to get on is immeasurably longer

than the one that we encountered an hour earlier. But very pleasant to look at are dozens of Norwegian nymphets, all of them blond (and all of them, alas, below legal age) in red uniforms among the people standing on line.

We drive, next, to the city center where we walk through the streets and are shown such "landmarks" as the apartment building where Henrik Ibsen lived and the coffee shop where he stopped every morning. (This was in the pre-Starbucks days, if you can imagine such a thing.) There are graffiti on most of the walls, something that we'll encounter in the other large cities that we visit on this trip. We are shown a Catholic church, the only one in this Lutheran-dominated city. (As far as we can tell, there are no mosques, synagogues, or Mormon temples. Perhaps.)

From there, it's a relatively short drive to Troidhaugen, where Edvard Grieg lived for his final 20 years and where he composed some of his major works. There is a 400-m stroll through a small forest* and finally

*Some of the trees are quite unusual, with large knobby branches at strange angles and such. A fellow tourist asks me, "What kind of trees are these?" I answer, "Norwegian trees." This seems to satisfy her.

we're at the home where Grieg and his wife Nina lived. We tour the house (no pictures allowed inside) and then get to peer inside his Komponisythyttan (which may or may not mean Composition Hut). Finally we wander to the Edvard Grieg museum for information about his life, his music, his travels, etc. What I find surprising (shocking, actually!) is that there are no audio clips or videos of his music. Many of his works have familiar melodies and themes that are recognizable even by only casual music lovers - among these are his piano concerto, Peer Gynt Suite, Holberg Suite, lyric pieces for piano, etc. So where were these musical selections, I ask you?

When we return to the city, we ask Bjørn to let us off before returning to the dock. We want to visit the art museum(s) where we can see the works of Edvard Munch, who painted so many excellent pictures in addition to *The Scream*. When planning this trip and choosing excursions, we had intended to take a Saturday evening tour in Oslo (tomorrow) that would include the Vigeland Sculpture Park (more about this later), then on Sunday morning go out on our own to visit the Munch Museum, which we had toured many years before. Alas, Regent Seven Seas changed the schedule,* moving the Vigeland tour to Sunday

*Do you recall Robbie Burns's words "The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men Gang aft agley" from p. 9 of this manuscript? Well, they apply here as well. And they will apply later on when we're in den Haag.

morning and not leaving enough time on Saturday to do the Munch. Thus, if we are to see any Munch paintings, it will have to be here in Bergen.

The Bergen Art Museum actually is three separate structures, all within a block of one another, specializing in different collections. The Stenersens Collection has modern works; the Rasmus Meyers Collection has Norwegian art up to 1915; and the Lysverket Art Collection has Norwegian works from the 14th to the 20th century. The first building that we enter is called Bergen Kunstmuseum and it's not clear which of the three collections it houses, but we see many excellent paintings by Picasso, Klee, Braque, van Gogh, Seurat, and (of course) Munch; photos are permitted and you can view some of the canvases at the Picasa web site. We then walk to the Rasmus Meyers collection for an excellent collection of Munchs, none of them repeats of those in the first museum.

We return to the ship at 2:30 where we go, of course, to the Pool Grill for a mid-afternoon lunch/snack. Hugh Neighbour is walking past, so I stop him to ask a few questions. Much to our delight, he and his Swedish wife, a chemical engineer if you please, sit and chat with us. I have many questions about his

two lectures, about the foreign service, and about his career. I also ask how he got this neat "gig" giving lectures, seeing the world, and getting paid to do so. (I hint that if he hears any inklings that a cruise line would love to hire an organic chemist who can tell interesting stories, I'm his guy.) His wife had received a degree in food chemistry at the University of Lund and knew several of the professors whom Lee knows quite well from her research area. (Unfortunately, she speaks very rapidly and with a strong accent - I have trouble following her conversation above the clatter of the dishes, and I learn later that Lee also has difficulty.) What we do discern is that she's concerned that their son may not have a high enough GPA to go to University of Virginia or Virginia Tech, his first two choices. (The Neighbour family lives in McLean, an expensive neighborhood described by Wikipedia as "home to many diplomats, members of Congress, and high-ranking government officials partially due to its proximity to Washington, D.C. and the Central Intelligence Agency." Cool!)

We return to our room but find that the internet connection is painfully slow (almost to the point of being unusable). So we sit on the balcony to read, until the gusts of wind drive us indoors. The ship sets sail at 3:30 and I take pictures of the scenery as we head toward open waters. The captain announces that we should experience some rough seas, all the way to 3:00 tomorrow afternoon when we reach Oslo. Let's hope not. We have dinner* at *La Veranda*, another Italian-themed menu, then spend the evening reading

*Although Lee is very definitely interested in food (and describes this meal in the same detail that she lavished on all of the others), it is her catty observations of the scene at a nearby table that I will quote in their entirety: "The entertainment is provided by a table for six - social travelers?! Four women of various ages talking loudly about dancing; Crystal Cruises and the Artie Shaw orchestra are mentioned. We know that Crystal does provide single male partners on some of its cruises. But Regent, we're unaware. However, a youngish Asian man sits between two of the women and caresses their arms; an older doddering man arrives and completes the table." In reading these words, it occurs to me that I could have a post-retirement career as a cruise escort, but then I think better of it if I were to be described as "an older doddering man!"

in our room.

Saturday, June 23

Throughout the night, we experience rough seas - lots of rocking and rolling (but without musical accompaniment) plus strange creaks and groans (from the ship, not from us); this still persists through early morning when we arise. The day is cloudy, cool, and threatening rain. As we are near the end of the cruise, I take advantage of the free time this morning by doing another load of wash. A fellow passenger tells me that her cabin has no hot water; she's at the stern end of Deck 9. Let's hope that the problem is localized there. We have our usual breakfast at *La Veranda*.

As we're not scheduled to arrive in Oslo until 3:00, we attend a third Hugh Neighbour lecture: "Modern Norway and Oslo: Have Hydrocarbons Reshaped Society?" Neighbour gave two other lectures, one on Iceland at the start of the cruise and one on Copenhagen at the end; we skipped both of those - and you should feel free to skip this one on Norway, if you wish.

An outline of what he'll cover: history since 1814; discovery of petroleum; Norway's government; Oslo and its art/architecture.

In 1814, Napoleon defeated Denmark which then lost Norway. Sweden moved in and took control. For 90 years, the country was called "United Kingdoms of Sweden and Norway." Despite this, Norway did have an independent parliament. Significant numbers of Norwegians emigrated to the U.S. and Canada because of growing dissatisfaction with Swedish influence. During the 1800s, Norway had the third largest fleet of merchant ships (behind only the U.S. and UK) but they were required to fly the Swedish flag - this did not sit well. In 1905, the parliament voted for dissolution of the bond to Sweden and this was ratified in a

referendum by the people in which 99.5% voted. (Yay - these are Saddam Hussein type numbers!) There were a few flare-ups and both Sweden and Norway moved troops to the border, but then drew back. In October 1905, Sweden recognized the independence of Norway. According to Wikipedia, "After a national referendum confirmed the people's preference for a monarchy over a republic, the Norwegian government offered the throne of Norway to Prince Carl of Denmark, and Parliament unanimously elected him king, the first king of a fully independent Norway in 586 years. He took the name of Haakon VII, after the mediæval kings of independent Norway."

During World War II, Norway declared its neutrality but was attacked by Germany and occupied. The king and parliament escaped to London where they directed acts of sabotage by the Norwegian resistance movement. One of the chief accomplishments was sabotaging the heavy water plant which was crucial to the making of a German atomic bomb. The partisans also sabotaged ships and trains throughout the country; this required Germany to station 350,000 troops in the country, thereby pinning them down and removing them from the war effort elsewhere.

Norway's population is 4.7 million of which 1.7 million live in Oslo. Offshore oil was discovered in the late 1960s; production has now peaked and is beginning to wane. *Statoil* is 67% owned by the government of Norway; only a small portion of the taxes is spent, the majority's being invested in a sovereign wealth fund that invests in a variety of enterprises. It is estimated that 1/4 of Norway's GDP and 1/3 of its income come from oil. Oil and gas account for 60-65% of total exports, resulting in a huge budget surplus. Unemployment is 3.2%, which sounds remarkable but is actually high by Norwegian standards. The average family income is about \$90 K, but the cost of living is very high; this equates to \$55 K when corrected for cost of food, fuel, and housing. While the gross GDP* is less than Sweden's and much less

*Gross GDP? Isn't that redundant, in the way that PIN Number and ATM Machine are? Well, yes. But Hugh Neighbour said it - and who am I to question a retired U.S. diplomat?

than the U.S.'s, the per capita income is huge, second only to that of Luxembourg.

The government is a constitutional monarchy, but parliament and the prime minister actually run the country. The parliament is a multi-party affair; the judiciary is independent. Welfare taxes (income tax) are very high (compared to Canada and the U.S.); the gasoline tax raises the cost of fuel to \$12-13/gal, the highest in Europe. The VAT is also high at about 15%. But in return, citizens get free education, health care, hospitalization, transportation, and infrastructure.

Haakon VII died after a fall in 1957 and was succeeded by his son, Olav V. At his death in 1991, his son Harald V became king and rules to this day. During WW II, while Haakon and Olav were in London, Harald and his siblings were in the U.S. and Canada. Harald married a commoner [shocking!], Sonja Haraldsen, to the great displeasure of his father, the king. Again, turning to Wikipedia, "She became engaged to then Crown Prince Harald in March 1968. They had been dating for nine years, although this had been kept secret because of opposition to her non-royal status. The Crown Prince made it clear to his father, King Olav V, that he would remain unmarried for life unless he could marry her. This would in effect have put an end to the rule of his family and probably to the monarchy in Norway, as he was the sole heir to the throne. Faced with having to choose one of his relatives from the Danish Royal Family, the Dukes of Schleswig-Holstein, or even the Grand Dukes of Oldenburg as his new heir in place of his son, Olav V consulted the government for advice and the result was that the couple were wed on 29 August 1968, at Oslo Domkirke. She thus acquired the style of Royal Highness and the title of Crown Princess of Norway." They have two children, "Princess Märtha Louise and His Royal Highness Crown Prince Haakon, heir-apparent to the Norwegian throne" although one assumes that they go by shorter names. HRHCP Haakon also married a commoner (it's contagious!) who was also a single mother. [How modern!] The public initially rejected her, partly because of her motherhood but also because she had been part of an Oslo drug sub-culture. [How very very modern!!!] Wikipedia tells us "In a heartfelt press conference before the wedding the Crown Princess explained about her past, saying among other things that her youthful rebelliousness might have been stronger than most young people." Ah, yes, youthful indiscretions - does anyone recall George W. Bush's use of this phrase to refuse to answer questions about cocaine use?

Elections for parliament occur every four years; the next will be in 2013. The principal parties in the government are Social Democratic (38%) and Conservation Liberal (whatever the hell that means!) (24%). Jens Stoltenberg is the prime minister as leader of the center/left coalition. As for dealing with the rest of the world, Norway belongs to the U.N. Council of Europe, but not to the European Union. Nevertheless,

they implement most euro market rules. And they take part in international affairs, such as sending election monitors to Guatemala and Nicaragua. [Maybe they could send some to Ohio for the 2012 elections?]

Mullah Krekar, a refugee from Iraq, sought asylum in Norway in 1991. He is described by Wikipedia as "a Kurdish Sunni Islamist Islamic scholar" [whew!]. He has caused a bit of trouble, one might say. According to Wikipedia, "On March 26, 2012 he was sentenced to 5 years in prison for making repeated death threats against Norwegian politicians and other persons if they pursued certain civil actions against him. He has appealed this prison sentence. The next day, March 27, 2012, he was arrested by the Norwegian Police Security Service (PST) and Norwegian Police and taken into protective custody and incarceration. This occurred after certain additional statements of a threatening nature were linked to him, suggesting that others might take retaliatory actions against Norwegians if his civil prison sentence were implemented." Nice guy.

Norway is a member of NATO and follows the defense policies of that organization, including sending about 500 troops to Afghanistan [lucky boys!]. (On a per capita basis, this is equivalent to 50,000 troops from the U.S.) Sweden, Denmark, and Finland also have forces in that benighted country.

The GIUK Gap is a region of the North Atlantic which has military significance for the navies that patrol it. The acronym stands for Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom and refers to the open seas between Greenland and Iceland as well as between Iceland and Scotland (the region that we traversed just a few days ago). Norway is at the eastern edge of the gap. Norway has had conflicts with Russia over ownership of islands in the Barents Sea. Russian and Norwegian troops are stationed near the border between the two countries in the far north, near Murmansk.

On July 25, 2011 Norwegians were horrified at the murderous attack by Anders Breivick, killing eight people with a bomb at a downtown government building and 69 more, mostly teenagers, at a camp on the island of Utøya. His trial, which was in progress during the cruise, has ended with a 22-year jail sentence (the longest allowed under Norwegian law) for the killer.

Oslo is said to be at the end of Oslo Fjord, but it's not a true fjord but really a bay. Hugh Neighbour shows slides of some of the city's major attractions: the Vigeland Sculpture Park, the Viking Ship Museum, the ski jump from the 1952 Winter Olympics, the Nobel Peace Prize Center, and so on. He talks about several concert halls and museums, including the National Gallery which has one of the versions of Munch's *The Scream*. According to Wikipedia, "Edvard Munch created the four versions in various media. The National Gallery, Oslo, holds one of two painted versions (1893). The Munch Museum holds the other painted version (1910) and a pastel version from 1893 ... The fourth version (pastel, 1895) sold for \$119,922,500 at Sotheby's Impressionist and Modern art auction on 2 May 2012 to financier Leon Black, the highest nominal price paid for a painting at auction." There have been several notable thefts of the painting: in 1994 from the National Gallery (recovered two months later) and in 2004 from the Munch Museum (recovered in 2006).

Following the lecture, we have lunch at the Pool Grill which is offering a seafood buffet. Because of the heavy seas and headwinds, the ship is about 45 minutes behind schedule when it docks at 3:45 near Akershus Fortress, which we will visit later today. At 4:15, we descend to the pier and meet our tour guide, Iori, a Welshman. Today, we'll be walking (no buses!) to sights and sites that are relatively near the pier. It won't be until tomorrow that we travel by bus to the suburbs to see their special sights. The day is cool, there is some wind, and the clouds are grey and massive and threatening, but there is no rain ... yet.

We walk, first, past the outer wall of Akershus Fortress. A display on the lawn, outside the fortress's walls, is of empty chairs representing the missing Jews who were sent to concentration camps during World War II. While still in the wharf area, we pass the mine sweeper, M314 Alta; although of relatively recent origin, it is docked at the place where Germany first attacked Norway in a surprise move in 1940. Across the street, just outside the fortress, is a statue of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a man much revered by the people of Norway.

From there, it's a short walk to Oslo City Hall. There is a large outside plaza* with crews busily removing

*Iori tells us that in 2011, 250,000 people massed here, each carrying a single rose on the day after

Anders Breivick's killing rampage.

fences and bleachers - just seven days earlier, Aung San Suu Kyi gave the Nobel Prize address and received the medal that had been awarded in 1991(!) but which she was prevented from accepting by the authorities in Myanmar (Burma). City Hall is graced with numerous outdoor statues, both free-standing and wall-mounted; inside, there is an enormous hall with all of the walls covered by murals by Henrik Sorensens, depicting scenes from Norway's history and legends. It is from here that the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize is announced on December 10 of each year, the anniversary of Alfred Nobel's death.

Just a block away is the Nobel Peace Center, a very impressive place with features about all of the peace prize winners down through the years. As one enters, there's a large display devoted to Aung San Suu Kyi. In addition to the wall displays for each winner, there is a darkened room in which there are iPad-size video monitors attached to flexible wire stands that allow the monitors to sway. Each monitor is devoted to one winner; the images on each monitor cycle among a picture of the winner, the proclamation for him/her, part of the winner's acceptance speech, etc. They are not in any particular order, neither alphabetical nor chronological nor geographic. The darkness of the room and the stillness of guests as they make their way from one monitor to another makes for a solemn visit.

Except! As we are walking to the front door and the tour guide says we'll spend about 30 minutes, some idiot (sorry for being judgmental, but so be it) in our tour group says, "How long does it take to spit on Obama's picture?" Nice. Well, I feel more or less the same about the displays for such "great" peace-lovers as Henry Kissinger, Menachem Begin, and Yasser Arafat. I try to take pictures of various monitors, but the dimness of the display and the shakiness of the posts make several of the photos quite blurred. As we make our way to the exit, we pass a wall that is covered with paper having tiny pictures of all of the winners, arranged in a symmetrical and repeating pattern; in the gift shop, we learn that this wallpaper pattern is also available as gift wrap.

We then walk through city streets and across a vast park. We notice that the walk/don't walk lights for pedestrians are "unusual" - they consist of three lights in a vertical array, a green at the bottom and two reds above it. The authorities discovered that pedestrians routinely ignored one red light but were quite obedient when there were two illuminated. Strange people, these humans. We walk past the National Theater and the home of Henrik Ibsen, which is now a museum. The sidewalk has sections with passages (in Norwegian, alas) from Ibsen's plays. Across the street is the royal palace, seemingly unprotected (in contrast to the armed fortress that is our White House). Iori draws our attention to the manhole covers that have elaborate figures and words carved into them.

We pass the University of Oslo and then a statue of Johan Sverdrup (1816 - 1892) who is considered the father of Norway's parliamentary system and who served as the country's first prime minister. In a square, we see an unusual sculpture in a fountain: an arm with a finger pointing downward, marking the spot where King Christian IV indicated the city would be rebuilt after the fire in 1624. We return to the ship by walking through the grounds of Akershus Fortress. This imposing structure was begun in 1290 and was the scene of several battles over the centuries. The fortress is still a military base, but is open to the public and is the location of the Norwegian Resistance Museum, which Lee and I visited (and enjoyed!) in 1998. As we enter the grounds, the skies open and we are getting drenched. Lee and I are wearing rain jackets and hats, but they only offer partial protection. Near one of the barracks is a classy 1930s vintage car with a chauffeur sitting in the driver's seat - shortly, a rather wet bride and groom emerge from the building and move very very briskly to the car.

It's only a short (and wet!) walk to the ship. When we arrive at about 7:00, we are surprised to see the same sort of welcoming party that greeted us on the final day of the 2010 Baltic cruise. That is, the entire crew (waiters, cooks, stewardesses, entertainers, on up to the captain and his assistants) are standing and singing and clapping, while trying to stay dry under umbrellas. It's an amazing (and, quite frankly, embarrassing) scene. We get up the gangplank as quickly as possible and to our room so that we can dry

out. We go to dinner at *Compass Rose*, then relax and read in our cabin.

Sunday, June 24

It is cool this morning, with lots of heavy clouds and a strong threat of rain. The ship's forecast says that the odds of wet stuff are 70-80%. Ugh. The bathtub and sink in our room are spewing out yellow water, not a pleasant sight. According to the "authorities" to whom I report it, the crew had drained the water tanks and refilled them. Why this makes the water yellow is not explained.

We have a fast breakfast at The Coffee Connection, then make our way downstairs at 8:30 to meet our tour bus and our guide, Margaret. Although this tour will visit several other sites, we are most interested in the 1952 Olympics ski jump (Holmenkollbakken)* and the Vigeland Sculpture Park.** But we begin, under

*When we visited Oslo in 1998, we ate at an outdoor restaurant near the ski jump. It was there that we overheard a Norwegian man, perhaps in his 60s, telling his young German visitors how Norway fought the Germans during World War II, but Sweden remained "neutral" and, thereby, accumulated much wealth by selling goods to both sides of the conflict. Prior to that trip, I was under the mistaken impression that Scandinavians were essentially identical people, no matter which country they resided in. I was disabused of that notion, not only by the conversation just mentioned but also by various subtle (and not so subtle) digs, such as the clock on a harbor cruise ship in Stockholm that ran backwards and that was labeled "Norwegian Standard Time."

** In 1998, we had a marvelous time at the Vigeland Park and took dozens of pictures to help us remember the variety and complexity of the human figures depicted. This was, of course, in the days of film. You do recall film, yes? Well, I discovered at the end of the day that the film in the camera had not advanced. Thus, I managed to make 36 exposures on a single frame! When I returned to the U.S., I challenged some of my analytical chemistry colleagues at The University of Tennessee, to deconvolute the mess, but they refused to try. Damn! Well, in 2012, I'm using a digital camera, so nothing can go wrong. Right? Well, as it turned out, there were problems, not with the camera but with the weather (*vide infra*, as they say in the chem biz).

cloudy skies, passing by the Akershus Fortress and getting a fleeting glimpse of the new opera house across the water. Margaret seems to be permanently out of breath (a smoker, perhaps?) with regular gasps coming through the amplification that she employs on the bus. Her English is somewhat accented, but not too strongly - it's the regular intakes of air that often make her hard to understand.

The bus visits several places that we saw on yesterday's tour (Oslo City Hall and the King Christian IV finger statue) but Lee and I remain on-board; the bus then drives past the royal palace and the parliament. It's about 10 km (and a distinct uphill ascent) to reach the Holmenkollen neighborhood and the ski jump. Viewed from various angles (not including the summit!) it's a very impressive sight, even though the skies have decided to let loose with a fairly steady rain. We remain there for about 30 minutes before being called back to the bus. I also have a chance to chat a bit more with Hugh Neighbour.

Fifteen minutes away and downhill toward the city center, we stop at Frogner Park and the spectacular Vigeland Sculpture Garden. The grounds are vast, and feature over 200 granite or bronze sculptures by Gustav Vigeland (1869 – 1943). According to Wikipedia, "In 1921 the City of Oslo decided to demolish the house where Vigeland lived and build a library. After a long dispute, Vigeland was granted a new building from the city where he could work and live: in exchange, he promised to donate to the city all his subsequent works, including sculptures, drawings, engravings and models. Vigeland moved to his new studio on Nobels gate in the borough of Frogner during 1924. His studio was located in the vicinity of Frogner Park, which he had chosen as the definitive location for his fountain. Over the following twenty years, Vigeland was devoted to the project of an open exhibition of his works, which later turned into what

is known as Vigeland Sculpture Arrangement (Vigelandsanlegget) in Frogner Park. The Vigeland Sculpture Arrangement covers 80 acres (320,000 m²) and features 212 bronze and granite sculptures all designed by Gustav Vigeland. The sculptures culminate in the famous Monolith (Monolitten), with its 121 figures struggling to reach the top of the sculpture."

We enter the park on the north side, which means that the monolith, mentioned above, is seen near the beginning of our walk. We enter through magnificent wrought-iron gates. There are numerous web sites that show photos of the sculptures; among the better ones are <http://vigelandsculpturepark.blogspot.com/> and <http://travel-wonders.com/2011/05/08/vigeland-sculpture-park-a-study-of-humanity-oslo-norway/> and, of course, my own Picasa photos. The monolith is 60 feet high and consists of over 100 human figures, nude of course, intertwined and carved out of one piece of stone. Along the walking paths are huge granite sculptures of men and women, both young and old, children, and infants, all engaged in the types of love and turmoil and respect and teaching and anger that come into every life. Everyone's favorite, it seems, is "Angry Boy": a child having a crying tantrum and stamping his foot. (The child's left hand had broken off or been broken off, so it is replaced by a bronze substitute. Not mentioned in the literature, perhaps for prudish reasons, is that his penis is also a bronze replacement.) Also celebrated is the beautiful bronze "Wheel of Life" featuring men and women in an interlocking circle. The works are breathtakingly beautiful and truly awe-inspiring. (And this time, I don't worry about film in the camera, but still I have trouble taking pictures with one hand while holding an umbrella to ward off the heavy rain with the other.) Rather than trying to describe the statues, I urge you to indulge your senses by going to my own pictures or the two web sites above or any other sites that can be found with Google.

We spend about an hour at Vigeland, but we could have easily spent more time had the tour allowed it and had it not been raining so hard. When we return to the city center, we ask the bus to stop so that we can get off and visit the National Gallery of Art where we get to view masterpieces by the likes of Cezanne, Picasso, Monet, van Gogh, and Munch (although, alas, we are *forbidden* to take any pictures of "The Scream.") From the museum, it's a 35-minute walk (in the rain, of course) back to the ship. There is a new cruise ship in the adjacent berth, the *Costa Luminosa* which carries 2200 passengers and a crew of over 1000. This is the very cruise line whose even larger *Costa Concordia* still lies on its side after running aground off the coast of Italy. Given the number of mishaps, illnesses, and serious accidents involving cruise ships, it's amazing that anyone (the Magids included) is willing to sail. For a summary of problems just in the first half of 2012, see: <http://www.cruisejunkie.com/events.html> and http://www.shipdetective.com/advice/safety/incidents_2012.htm#allure

We have lunch at the Pool Grill ("A Taste of Norway"). The ship leaves Oslo at about 2:00. I sense that I'm getting a cold: coughs, sneezes, congestion, general yuk - undoubtedly not helped by the cold and wind and rain of the past few days. At Lee's urging, I visit the ship's store and buy (at an outrageously inflated price) some Contac Cold and Flu capsules plus Vick's cough drops. This is a harbinger of misery that Lee and I will experience (mostly Lee) once we are in The Netherlands and Belgium.

I suppose that we ate dinner at *Compass Rose* but I have no such entry in my notes. What I do write down is that we have written instructions to have all of our luggage, properly tagged and suitably packed for airport security, outside our doors by 11:00 tonight. (We decide not to pack the half-empty bottle of Scotch whiskey.)

Monday, June 25

The final edition of *Passages* wishes us a pleasant journey, hopes that we'll come back for another cruise, salutes us in no fewer than 30 languages, and informs us that we have traveled 2,137 nautical miles. (The breakdown: to Isafordur, 197; to Akureyri, 170; to Tórshavn 449; to Lerwick 235; to Ålesund 254; to Geiranger 59; to Flåm 129; to Bergen 129; to Oslo 313; and to Copenhagen, where we arrive at 6:30 am, 217).

Our ship docks in Copenhagen at about 6:30 am. From our veranda, it looks very familiar. Well, it should - we were here, at this very dock on this very ship (although two decks down) just two years ago. My cold seems a bit better ... I think. We have a quick breakfast at *La Veranda*, then it's back to the room to finish packing our carry-ons for the flight to Amsterdam. Our orders (Jawohl, Herr Hauptmann) are to vacate the room by 8:00 and wait in the Constellation Theatre for our "color" to be called at about 8:45.

Explanation: the tags that we were given for our luggage, yesterday, are color-coded so that they are delivered to one of these destinations: a tour bus around the city before going to the airport; a bus to a city hotel; a taxi stand (which is what we did in 2010); or (in our case) a bus directly to the airport. I had wanted to do the quick bus tour of the city before heading to the airport, but was overruled in a 1-1 vote by Lee who argued that we saw most of the city two years ago and it would be nice to get to the airport early, just in case there are any glitches.

"Green" is finally called at 9:40. When we head down to the pier to identify our luggage for transfer to the bus, we find that there had been a heavy rain earlier and that our suitcases are drenched because the awning covers others but not ours. In particular, the soft-sided Cougaroo is so wet that its light-tan color is now a rich dark-brown; our fear, of course, is that its contents are wet as well. Lee registers a complaint with the Regent Seven Seas representative who also does commentary on the bus.

We board the bus for the half-hour drive to the airport. This is not really a touristic trip (there's no effort to "see the sights") but the Regent rep does point out some highlights and answers questions, one of which was "Do you have universal health insurance?" to which the answer was "Of course!" Of course!! Shakespeare had it backwards - the line should read "Something is very right in the State of Denmark."

PUN ALERT And, as the Rodgers and Hammerstein song tells us, "There is nothing like a Dane!"

At the airport, Natasha, another Regent employee, meets us, helps us recover our luggage, and directs us as to which line to stand in. (Lee also reports the possible water problem to Natasha, who assures us that we'll be compensated for any damage to our clothes.) The system at this airport is a bit different from others - while I stay in the baggage line with *all* of the luggage, nudging it along, Lee and Natasha go to another desk to check us in; my passport (without my being present) is, apparently, sufficient.

Natasha leaves us in the very very very long and very very very slow-moving baggage line, but she should have known better. That is, Lee spots a sign for Business Class travelers, which is much much much shorter and much much much faster-moving. So I "break" the fabric "rope" that contains us in the pen with the peons and we make a dash to the other desk. Then it's through security in record-breaking time (shoe removal is not required but all of the other things we do at U.S. airports are). The airport is enormous and we wander a bit in an effort to find the KLM Business Class Lounge. We do find it, at last, but we are asked by the clerk at the desk if we have a card. A what? We have no idea what she means. Lee explains that she has million-mile status at Delta (a KLM partner) but the clerk is not impressed: this is not equivalent to having "a card" and so we are directed to a "lesser" end of the lounge. What the differences are, I have no idea. Maybe there are strip shows and free booze at the other location? Who knows? So, we have to sit with the other "non-card-carriers" but it's nice to have comfortable chairs because we are very early for our 2:35 flight.*

*This is the kind of problem that confronts historians (real historians, that is) all the time. My notes of the encounter at the desk are in direct opposition to Lee's. Her notes tell her that her million-mile status on Delta did get us into the privileged section of the lounge. We argued about whose account is correct for quite some time, although we stopped short of exchanging physical blows. So how to settle the dispute? Well, she "cheated" - she found a picture of the lounge** at KLM's web site and not only showed it to me but also indicated the very seats that we were occupying. I am defeated! Now I hate the internet!!

**She also reminded me (and this I do recall) of the brassy American woman from Atlanta who was seated near us in the lounge. She was using (and misusing and abusing) a laptop, so in a loud voice

she had to get her beleaguered husband (I assume that he was the husband) to show her how to reach the internet, how to send email, how to receive email, and so on. And then, when she did reach a desired web site or received a message from a long-lost friend or relative or learned something about the weather, she would read said information to her hubby in a loud and ugly Southern U.S. drawl, positively dripping with molasses and biscuit gravy. And, as if this were not enough, on-board the plane there was a young woman who was afraid of flying, so the flight attendant asked a gentleman if he'd change seats so that this woman could sit next to her friend. Embarrassing for her, yes, but our Atlanta friend had to stand and stare disapprovingly at the poor woman. Sometimes one regrets having to acknowledge such horrible people as fellow citizens. I wonder if they have the right to vote ... or to have children.

At about 1:35, we head toward the departure gate and take seats in the waiting area, along with other passengers. This is WRONG! A KLM representative orders all of us to go back into the concourse and re-enter the waiting area but only after showing our passports and boarding passes and facing the scrutiny of stern agents. The announcement to enter the plane comes at 2:15, but there is no system, no assignments of zones, no attempt to fill the rear seats first. Instead, everyone boards, regardless of where they're sitting (worst of all, there's no preference given to us in the business class upper crust, the one-percenters as we like to think of ourselves) but we finally get to our seats. The plane is a small one with 2-2 seating, an Embraer 175, with a total of only 80 seats. Apparently the first four rows are considered business class because only we were offered newspapers. Once the plane behind us is moved away, we are pushed back from the gate, and are air-borne at 2:38; we land in Amsterdam at 3:55, five minutes early.

It is a long walk in Schiphol Airport, a long wait for our luggage, a long line at customs, and another long walk to the AutoEurope car rental desk. We have an Opel Astra. (When we made the reservation, we requested a Peugeot 308 or similar car, manual, with A/C. The Astra is quite satisfactory.) It's a nice car and it handles well, although it's a bit "touchy" in first gear, at least until I get accustomed to it. It's also a diesel, as was our Peugeot in France last year, so we expect to get good mileage.

The drive to the Palais Hotel in Den Haag (the Hague, population 500,000, the third largest city in The Netherlands), 45 km away mostly on fast roads, is uneventful, except that the hotel's instructions are a bit ambiguous toward the end - that is, we follow the instructions by turning into the middle lane of a busy street, only to discover that we really need to be in the left-hand turn lane. So we do not turn, but proceed straight ahead, right into rush hour traffic. Eventually we are able to make a U-turn and get ourselves righted. The car's thermometer registers 17-18°C during the drive.

If a school child were asked the question, "What is the capital of The Netherlands?" the answer might not be immediately clear. Here's how Wikipedia describes the state of affairs: "The Hague is the seat of the Dutch government and parliament, the Supreme Court, and the Council of State, but the city is not the capital of the Netherlands which constitutionally is Amsterdam. Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands lives at Huis ten Bosch and works at Noordeinde Palace in The Hague. Most foreign embassies in the Netherlands and 150 international organizations are located in the city, including the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, which makes The Hague one of the major cities hosting the United Nations, along with New York, Vienna and Geneva."

The hotel is located on Molenstraat, a very narrow, pedestrian-only street, entry to which is prevented by bollards. Following the hotel's instructions, we push a button to announce our arrival; the bollards retract and we can drive right up to the hotel's entrance. Nice people help us unload our luggage and give us a small local map that shows how to get to the nearby city parking garage. What the map does not show is that at the end of Molenstraat, where we're supposed to make a right turn, there are numerous bikes blocking the middle of the very narrow street; and what isn't being blocked by the bikes is blocked by locals sitting in chairs outside a restaurant. When they finally clear the chairs and bikes (after considerable grumbling), I squeeze through, only to find myself driving down an alley and making yet another right turn

onto tram tracks. Am I supposed to be here? The hotel staff (when we finally return) says that we did the correct thing. A little further along on the tram tracks (with a tram in hot pursuit behind us), there is an entrance to a multi-story parking lot on the left. The parking spaces are all rather narrow, but by going to an upper level we find one that has no other cars on either side.

It's a short walk back to the hotel. We are assigned to Room 107 which, of course, is on the second floor. The good news is that the hotel has an elevator. The bad news is that our room is not air-conditioned; we had been under the impression that the rooms are air-cooled, but the staff tells us that only those rooms on the third and fourth floors have A/C. The room is okay, but rather old-fashioned and not decorated to my taste.* And it is difficult to get it to cool down, even with the windows open. (As for my cold, it seems

*It will not be news to any person reading this, but husbands and wives do not always agree. To elaborate, Lee describes our room this way: "The decor is beautiful - blue and antique gold, with pastoral figures (18th century French?) on the draperies, lampshades, upholstered chairs, and bed pillows." Oh, well, as the French say, *Chacun à son goût* which translates loosely as "Elio Chacon is standing in goo."

to be getting better; I continue taking the Contac capsules.)

Although the car's manual is printed in Dutch, I bring it to the room to learn about some of the Astra's features. In particular, I am unclear about how to engage and how to release the emergency brake; there is no handle or foot pedal, but rather what looks like a light switch on the console. In fact, at one point near the hotel, I must have had the emergency brake still on: I needed to hold the car when stopped on a hill, but when I drove forward the car produced that familiar and terrible smell of burning rubber. It's not clear why this happened because, as I learned later, simply stepping on the floor brake and moving the car into gear is supposed to release the emergency brake. When I find a picture in the manual that corresponds to the switch, the accompanying text reads "*U kunt die elektride handren ...*" Am I too embarrassed to ask the lovely young things at the desk for a translation of U KUNT? U betcha I am.

At 7:45, we walk from the hotel to Prinsestraat and check out the menus of various restaurants. Many of them are devoted to Indonesian, Indian, and other Asian foods, none of which I can eat, so we settle on Die Harlekein on Nobelstraat; the menu is only in Dutch, but one of the servers volunteers to translate it into English. The food is excellent, although my shrimp are unpeeled and prove difficult to shed of their shells because they have been cooked in a slippery butter sauce. We return to the hotel at about 10:00 and manage to locate an English language version of the Astra manual on the internet. This proves to be very helpful for various issues, including the emergency brake, although I'm still mystified why it didn't turn off as soon as I began driving. (The internet connection at the hotel, by the way, is fast and free - exactly as one likes it.) The room is still quite warm, even though we left the windows open. Lee, bless her curious soul, finds a small fan in the closet - it gives some relief.

Tuesday, June 26

The morning begins bright and sunny, with clear blue skies. I hope that the day won't be too warm. As I mentioned earlier, the hotel room is not furnished to my taste, but the bathroom fixtures are quite modern. There is a lovely breakfast room on the first (i.e., second) floor. Eight tables are set up and there is a nice assortment of breads, cheeses, sweets, and cold cuts on the buffet table; in addition, one can order eggs in any style from the kitchen. Several of the tables are occupied (or will shortly be occupied) by Americans, who are part of a bike-riding group. Mercifully, they are not as loud and annoying as were the bicyclists at *Le Manoir les Minimes* in Amboise, last fall. They engage in typical American tourist talk like the difficulties of reading the *New York Times* on an iPhone and "Why can't I find this column by David Brooks?" Although iPhone-less (and proud of it), I've already read this column on our laptop, so I tell the woman how to find it. I think that she appreciates my help, but maybe not.

One of our reasons for selecting this hotel was its proximity to Mauritshuis,* an art museum less than 1

*Some background: when we were in Amsterdam in 1995, we drove one day to Haarlem to see the Frans Hals Museum and then to Den Haag to visit Mauritshuis. Our goal was to view its three paintings by Vermeer, an artist for whom only about 35 works still survive. The museum also had works by Rembrandt and other Dutch artists. Well, we arrived in the city near closing time, and we had no map (and, of course, no internet) - everyone on the street whom I asked for directions to the museum were unable to help. So we returned to Amsterdam.

km away. Well, the fates conspired against us again because Mauritshuis was under renovation and the entire collection had been moved. We actually knew this before leaving the U.S., but couldn't tell from the various web sites when/if the collection would be returned. "The Girl with a Pearl Earring," for example, is now part of a traveling exhibit in Asia. About 100 paintings from the collection are at another Hague museum, Gemeentemuseum, which we will visit this afternoon.

So we are disappointed in that quest but there is a nice replacement: the Escher Museum is even closer to the hotel, and is housed in the former winter palace of Queen Mother Emma of the Netherlands. Who knew? The walk to the museum is along Lange Voohout, a pleasant tree-shaded street with a grass esplanade separating the two directions of car traffic. Many (most?) of the foreign embassies are in the row houses that line the street. In the esplanade are a number of interesting sculptures, in various media, whose reason for existence is not made clear until our return from the museum (see below). One of the houses has an inscription indicating that it was the home of Constantijn Huygens. Alas, this is not Christiaan Huygens, his contemporary and a famous physicist, mathematician, and astronomer. Rather, Constantijn was a poet and composer, about whom we (or at least Wikipedia) does not know very much. On the walk, we find a much needed ATM but not a pharmacy: Lee seems to have caught my cold and is suffering more than I did.

We arrive at the Escher* Museum just as it is opening at 11:00. And it is a treat! We had seen most,

*Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898-1972) was born in the Netherlands. He spent his 20s in Spain and then in Italy, where he married one Jetta Umika (before she became a Volkswagen?) and studied the elaborate architecture of the region as a prelude to incorporating these elements into his drawings. Unable to abide the rule of Mussolini, he moved to Switzerland for two years and then, in 1937, to Belgium and later to the Netherlands. According to information available at the museum, he struggled mightily to be recognized as a serious artist and to make a living from his works, but public opinion turned in his favor and in 1955 was made a "Knight of the Order of Orange Nassau" which, it seems, put him in pretty exclusive company. The variety of styles and themes in his drawings, woodcuts, and lithographs is so vast that it's difficult to pick out favorites, but forced to do so I would choose "Drawing Hands," "Waterfall," and "Hand with Reflecting Sphere." For more information, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M. C. Escher](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M._C._Escher) and <http://tinyurl.com/c7ro7rt>

maybe all, of these wonderful prints when the collection was on tour and came to the Knoxville Art Museum in 1999. Nevertheless, it is great fun to revisit old friends. It's surprising that photos are allowed, so I take full advantage of this by snapping pictures of nearly everything. In addition to the completed works, there are displays that explain the various techniques that he used; and there are prints of the planning for some of the very famous pictures. We own a book of Escher pictures, but I did not know that he carved some three-dimensional objects that display all of the wit and brilliance found in the two-dimensional ones. On an upper floor is a room that features a full-size optical illusion that Escher created, in which the eye seems to suggest that ceiling and floor at the rear wall are parallel, when in fact they're not. I try to take a picture of this, but suddenly a guard's hand appears in front of my lens - no pictures allowed in this room. Why? It's not clear. (Although not the reason for our visiting this former palace, we can't help noting the portraits, mirrors, furniture, and chandeliers from the time of Queen Emma.) We

leave the museum at 12:30.

When we walk back along the esplanade of Lange Voohout, we see sculptures in wood, in metal, in fabric, in straw, and in other media, put together by "The Rainbow Nation" of art works from the people of South Africa. Among the most striking is a bronze of a dictator, holding pistols in each hand, with his penis tied in a knot. Another is a full-sized elephant made of what looks like black wood chips. Pictures of these and of the Escher collection can be seen at the Picasa site.

We walk past our hotel, and then to Torrenstraat where we catch the tram to the Gemeentemuseum (Municipal Museum), some 4 km away, and arrive at 1:30. We take a few pictures of the paintings before a guard comes along and tells us that picture-taking is forbidden. (This is weird, because when we entered the museum, I asked a guard if pictures are allowed and he said yes.) The restriction is disappointing because they have an excellent collection of Dutch painters (e.g., Reubens, Rembrandt, Hals, Mondriaan) and others (e.g., Picasso, Degas, Monet). There is but one Vermeer, "View of Delft" (on loan from Mauritshuis). Boor that I am, I fail to appreciate its excellence, although my good friend Mait Jones assures me that "*Gesicht op Delft* is his best painting, and arguably the greatest work in the history of all painting. Van Gogh thought so. It is enough to see that." It should be noted that Prof. Jones is wont to exaggerate in his praise or condemnation; and besides, his temperament was corrupted by his having been a New York Giants baseball fan in the 1940s-50s.

Exhausted, at 3:00, we have coffee and pastry in museum's cafeteria, then take the tram back the Torrenastraat station. Walking along this busy commercial street toward the hotel, we are looking for a pharmacy because Lee's cold is getting worse. We stop in various stores to ask if there is a pharmacy in the neighborhood, but despite the excellent English of all of the store employees, nobody recognizes the words "pharmacy" or "drogerie"; we do locate a health food and vitamin store, where the employee recommends acetylcysteine for clearing phlegm - well, it's worth a try.

At the hotel, I ask the desk clerk if she can recommend some restaurants for dinner; I also ask about taking the train to Amsterdam, tomorrow, because we plan to visit the Rijksmuseum and the van Gogh Museum, quite near one another. Back in our room, I lie down - it was a hot day, filled with lots of walking, and I think that I may be running a fever. Lee is also feeling feverish, but my expert "hand-on-the-forehead" technique suggests that she isn't. While I rest, Lee goes down to the desk to get information about train schedules and which station in den Haag is best to leave from. Heading down the staircase, she is nearly bowled over by one of the female bike-riders who is blindly charging up. Shouts Ms. Magid, "Are you planning to hit me?" the woman stops abruptly. Damned ugly Americans! Lee learns from the desk clerk that the word we should have used when asking for a pharmacy is "apotheek," and that, in contrast to free-standing stores in the U.S., these are usually associated with a doctor's office.

We have dinner at Caruso's, a lovely brasserie just down the street on Molenstraat. I choose onion soup, veal scallopini, and panna cotta and these are excellent, but the service is unbelievably slow. We arrive at 6:00 and don't get out until 9:30. It's not that this was "fine dining" with each meal prepared only to order; rather, there is but one server and he seems to have lots of pals with whom he'd rather chat and smoke a cigarette or two. Even getting the bill is an adventure in persistence and endurance. But the good news is that my fever (if fever is what I had) has broken, but the bad news is the Lee is coughing badly.

Wednesday, June 27

It is a grey, cloudy, cool day. My cold does seem to be gone, but Lee's is worse. Even with the windows open overnight and the fan blowing, the room is hot, sticky, and humid when we arise. Through the open window, we hear the call of a mourning dove - it sounds the same as our Gig Harbor birds, whereas I would have expected the bird to speak with a Dutch accent. In the breakfast room, every table is occupied by people from the bike-riding group, but (again) they are not as loud as the groups that we encountered in Amboise.

Following breakfast, we note that a light rain has begun. The forecast calls for two hours of rain, followed by clearing. Because Lee's cold is even worse, we scrap the idea of going to Amsterdam today. We ask the desk clerk if it's possible for Lee to see a doctor. The clerk gives the name of a nearby apothek (we were actually very close to this one when we were searching yesterday afternoon) that is associated with a physician's office. We walk there but learn that the earliest appointment that we can get with the doctor is Friday. We'll be gone by then, so we walk downstairs to the associated pharmacy and find that they can't dispense any serious medicines without a prescription; the best that they can do is an over-the-counter bottle of paracetamol (a.k.a. acetaminophen).

Having scrapped the plan to take the train to Amsterdam, we consider driving to the north coast to view the dikes, but I feel too tired for that, almost 100 km away. So, we hang out in our hotel room. Lee has sweats and chills, but manages to get some sleep. I spend the time reading and doing crossword puzzles. In the late morning, some sun comes out, but then the rains start again. Lee sleeps most of the afternoon as well. We have dinner at a simple restaurant, Humphrey's, like Caruso's also on Molenstraat. It is part of a chain, but doesn't behave like one. I have a simple meal (smoked salmon salad, beefburger with fries, and cheese cake) and it's quite good. And, unlike Caruso's, fast! Lee has soup, a fish dish (wish wash delish), and macaroons (unlike the coconut-filled macaroons in the states, these are more like meringue cookies, or so she says). All three of the dinners that we had in this city involved three courses for a fixed price; after adding in wine and coffee, each was only about € 65 for two of us. Not bad, not bad at all.

Thursday, June 28

Let us return to Robert Burns and "The best-laid schemes ..." (pp. 9 and 24). Our original plan, as devised by my intrepid travel guide (i.e., Lee), was to go to Amsterdam yesterday (already scrapped) and to Otterlo (to the Kröller-Müller Museum) today, before going on to Gent and tonight's hotel. Having gone to bed early last night (9:15), the hope was that Lee might be over her illness, but this proves not to be the case. She still feels feverish and congested, while I seem to be having a relapse (congestion and sneezes). After breakfast at the hotel, we pack our bags but both of us are feeling hot and sweaty (is it the humidity in the room or our sickness or both?) and Lee thinks she's having a relapse. So she takes another nap - and we kiss Otterlo good-bye. Perhaps if we go directly to Gent, we'll be able to find a doctor? So we spend the morning in our room, Lee asleep and me reading. (I'm almost finished with *Hitch-22*.)

We walk to the garage where the car has been since Monday. Paying by credit card often causes confusion in Europe, as some machines require European cards with an imbedded chip. The machine at the entrance to the garage seems not to have accepted my card, but every time I insert it again the card is spewed out. Eventually an attendant arrives and tells me that the original transaction did succeed and that I'm free to get my car. The Astra is right where we left it (that's a relief!) but it still smells from the burning emergency brakes (although Lee can't smell it, one small benefit of having a cold).

We drive back to the hotel, retrieve our luggage, and head toward Gent. Because Lee is still feeling weak, I drive all the way. After a while, we realize that the fuel gauge on the dash board has not budged at all. Either we're consuming no fuel (an unlikely event) or the damned thing is broken. This evening, when we can fire up the laptop, I can check the Astra manual (in English!) for the capacity of the tank, so that we can calculate based on mileage (kilometerage??) and an assumed mpg or km/l if we are close to running dry. (A little later, the needle on the gauge does finally move, but I'm still not sure that I should trust it.)

The distance to Gent is about 190 km. The road is a heavily traveled one, filled with many large trucks as it passes near Rotterdam (population over 600,000, the second largest city in the Netherlands, and the largest port in Europe) and goes through Antwerp (the second largest city in Belgium with a population of over 500,000). There are also several long slow-downs (and even complete stops) because of construction on the road. We are following the driving instructions from Google Maps as we enter Gent (population 250,000) and make our way to the Harmony Hotel. We are approaching from the north and

looking for Kraanlei 37, situated on one of the many canals and rivers that criss-cross the city.

Well, we miss the turn onto Kraanlei, as it's hard to believe that it was really a street, and we find ourselves across the river, heading toward the old city, the large central market, many hotels, the cathedral, etc. But we cannot figure out where we went wrong (the small Google map does not show the streets that we're finding) and we seem to be getting further from our destination while driving around in circles. The streets are filled with people, both tourists and citizens, some in Western garb and others in Middle-Eastern regalia, many on bikes that are careening this way and that. Trying to find our way back to the river, we encounter numerous one-way streets (that are, of course, in the "wrong" direction) and pedestrian streets onto which we mistakenly drive from time to time. The day has also turned quite warm, with the car's thermometer registering 30°C.

We park the car and enter a business office, but the woman on duty has no idea where Kraanlei or the Harmony Hotel is. She also has no useful map to give us. She suggests that we walk to the Ibis hotel where we'll surely get good directions and even a map. And she's right. The desk clerk provides us with excellent maps, but tells us that getting to Kraanlei is difficult by car. It's very close, as the crow flies, but, alas, the car is constrained to stay on streets. Many twists and turns later, we find ourselves on Kraanlei in front of the hotel; as there is nowhere to park, I pull up onto the sidewalk (how European!) and ask the hotel staff what to do.

We had made a reservation to park in their own garage, and so I'm given driving directions to get there: it consists of driving to the end of Kraanlei, making a left turn into what looks like an alleyway, making another left onto a narrow cobble-stone street called Corduwaniersstraat, finding the gate at the rear of the hotel, and pulling in. We find ourselves barely inside the gate (which closes behind us - I'm reminded of Sartre's *No Exit*); there are several cars in the upper outdoor parking lot and we see the indoor garage down the ramp ahead of us. Lee and I enter the hotel from the rear and go to the desk, where we check in. One of the managers, the only male we would see during our stay, comes with us to the parking area, helps unload the suitcases, shows us the path down an incline to the garage and through it to the elevator (whew!), and escorts us to room 301. We leave the key with him, as we are required to do every time we return to the hotel, because the staff will move the cars around in order to facilitate entrances and exits. He assures us that the car will be parked in the indoor lot before the day is over.

And wonder of wonder, the room is beautiful and ... air-conditioned! (I had been concerned because the public area at the front desk was not artificially cooled.) The furniture is very modern and pleasant to see; the bathroom fixtures are modern as well, and above the tub are two murals of nekkid* wimmen (see the

*Sam Venable, a humor columnist for the *Knoxville News Sentinel*, explained the difference between naked and nekkid: naked is when you have no clothes on, nekkid is when you have no clothes on and are out to make mischief.

Picasa photos for the salacious details). There is a balcony that overlooks the river and provides a view of the old city and the church spires, which do not look as threatening as they did when we were trying to find the damned hotel. The manager informs us that tomorrow is supposed to be cooler (22°C) with a chance of rain.

We walk to the tourist information office and, at the advice of one of the staff, take an hour-long river/canal cruise at about 5:30. The boat is open-air and there is one other family onboard - alas, they are Flemish speakers, so the guide (who also steers the boat) delivers his spiel alternately in both languages. He is very well-informed, or so it seems, with a very gallic sense of humor and voice inflection. He steers us by old homes, warehouses, government buildings, statues, hotels, and restaurants. Not all of the locals are pleased: we pass a banner that says, in English: BOAT TOURISM NOISE TERRORISM. Near the end we see large block letters on the shore that say SEARCH AND DESTROY, but this is merely announcing an art installation of at one of the museums and is not a threat against tourists. A stretch of concrete wall,

at the water's edge, has this legend engraved: *Onder de maan schuift de lange rivier. Over de lange rivier schuift moede de maan. Under de maan op de lange rivier schuift de kant naar zee.* Google's translation engine does not have Flemish, but we are told that Flemish and Dutch are essentially the same, so the translation from Dutch to English seems to be: *Under the moon moves the long river. Over the long weary river moves the moon. Under the moon the long river slides side to the sea.* Well, of course it doesn't make any sense, but perhaps I didn't copy the words faithfully from the Picasa pictures. So be it.

We make our way back to the hotel and try to connect to the free wi-fi. Earlier in the day, there was no problem with Lee's iPad, but the laptop didn't seem to be able to find the signal. The same is true in the evening, so I ask the desk clerk about it - she comes to the room to see if she can work any magic, but is unable to do so. She suggests that maybe a hard ethernet connection will work, but still the laptop remains "blind" so she offers to lend me an old HP laptop (in a surprisingly large carrying case and weighing many pounds). We'll pick it up after dinner.

We ask for a dinner recommendation, something nearby as the skies are beginning to cloud up and the winds are picking up. She suggests 'T STROPKE* Brasserie, just down at the corner of Kraanlei and Sint-

*The name** on the facade and on the menu is written with the initial T as the end of a hangman's noose. See <http://www.brasserietstropke.be/> for a picture of the logo.

**The name is a contraction (sort of) of *Stroppendragers* which, according to Wikipedia (in a distinctly awkward translation), means *sling carriers*, the "nickname of inhabitants of Gent. Emperor Charles humiliated the notables of Gent, his birthplace, in 1539, because they were up against his head, by passing them through the city to go with a noose around his neck. The noose is to live as a symbol of proud resistance against every form of tyranny and misplaced authority. Gent call themselves stubborn, proud (not the same as 'proud') people always leave room for other opinions and in science free study inclined. [Well, I told you that it was an awkward translation!] Charles V and all the Catholic Habsburgs were so that the people of Ghent during the reign of his son, Philip II some years Calvinist republic have maintained. During the Ghent Festivities will be every year many locals can see a black and white noose around their neck. White and black are the main colors of the coat of arms of the city, a white lion on a black background." [Well, it serves you right for asking.]

Margrietstraat. We are given a choice of eating inside or out, but the weather looks very threatening so we choose indoors. A big mistake! Not only does the weather front blow through with nary a drop of rain, but the indoor dining room is extremely hot and uncomfortable, with high humidity and no air flow. I am sweating profusely, as is my dinner companion. We each order Waterzooi with chicken, a classic Flemish stew with a little of this and a little of that thrown in. The waiter says that we'll need a larger table than the one at which we are seated ... and he wasn't kidding. The meal arrives in two huge white tureens from which large portions can be ladled into soup bowls that are placed in front of us. Delicious! Superb!! But too much food to finish, especially after having started with a salad. And still not delicious enough to take our minds off our excessive perspiration. Before I forget, I need to mention that one of the interesting features of this restaurant are the murals of half-nekkid (remember that word?) women adorning the walls. These paintings, along with the murals above the bathtub in our hotel room, are giving me the idea that Gent is a very "accepting" place.

Upon returning to the hotel (and our air-conditioned room), I liberate the ancient (well, it was at least six years old) HP laptop. It is running Windows XP and it requires an ethernet connection, but it does work. Alas, there is a small problem: the letters on the keyboard are in an unfamiliar arrangement. For example, whereas we are accustomed to seeing QWERTY on the top row, those five keys are AZERT; furthermore W has replaced Y; M and N are somewhere or other; caps are needed for apostrophe and comma and for digits 1, 2, ... 9; and the only way to get the @ symbol for email addresses is with CTRL-ALT-2. I'm a ham-handed typist when the letter keys are where they belong, but with this baby I'm wearing out the

backspace key. (For an education on the variety of keyboards across the world, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keyboard_layout.)

But I'm glad that we are able to connect to the internet because we learn that the U.S. Supreme Court has upheld the constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act by an "overwhelming" 5-4 decision. Hooray for Chief Justice Roberts, you old softie and liberal, you. Amazing!

Our room has a fancy espresso machine, but we're too inept to figure out how to operate it. Another call to the front desk leads to a visit from a young (and very tall) clerk who instructs us in the fine details of the operation. It's actually quite easy, once one gets the knack. But isn't that true of all sorts of things? (By the way, she's the one who shows me how to get the @ sign on the crazy keyboard.)

Friday, June 29

Lee is still very congested and is wheezing and coughing regularly; she has a fever and is having trouble with her balance, but she refuses to ask the desk staff for a doctor. Obstinacy, thy name is woman!! From the window of our room, I can see that the day is cloudy but without rain (so far); I can't tell about temperature. (As it turned out later, yesterday's unpleasant heat had dissipated and today, both here and in Bruges, would be in the 21-24°C range.)

We have a pleasant breakfast from the buffet in a dining room near the front desk. The selection of foods is not vast, but there are enough meats and cheeses and rolls to satisfy. Following breakfast (and after allowing Lee some rest in the room), we ask the desk clerk at about 11:00 for the key to our car. Even though we had left the vehicle, yesterday, in the upper (outdoor) parking area, today it is secured nicely indoors in one of the seven available spaces; fortunately, it has been backed into its space because this means that I have a clear shot to get out. And why should this cause concern? Because there is a steep ramp from the garage level to the upper parking area and, as if that were not challenging enough, there are steps in the middle of the ramp for pedestrians to walk up or down. Thus, it's necessary to get up enough speed to reach the top of the ramp while being careful to avoid driving on the steps. One wonders what it would be like if it were not possible to park facing out. One (that is we) will find out on Sunday!

Today we are driving to Bruges (Brugge in Flemish, population about 120,000), about 55 km northwest of Gent. It's quite a chore to get through the traffic in Gent and it takes a full 45 minutes to reach the highway. We are driving a city route different from the one by which we arrived, and although we now have two excellent city maps it is challenging to figure out which streets lead where. On top of this, there are pedestrians and bicyclists everywhere (but no crosswalks or bike paths), and there are cars coming onto the main street from side streets without yielding or stopping. There's a good explanation for this: as far as I can tell, there are no yield or stop signs on the side streets! Amazingly, there are no honking horns and, just as amazing, no accidents. Finally we get onto the E40 highway and arrive in Bruges, where we arrive at about 12:30.

Having no map of Bruges (except a stylized one from a tour book), we circle a bit (and, on two occasions, finding ourselves on pedestrian-only streets being glared at by the locals) before finding an indoor parking garage. We then make our way to the tourist information office and acquire a decent city map. Initially I'm disappointed at encountering what looks like a modern city with high-end clothing and other retail shops, but then we get into the old city and we are enchanted.*

*I'm reminded of the movie *In Bruges* in which Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleeson, Irish hit-men, are sent to Bruges to await orders about their next victim. While waiting for the phone call, Gleeson spends his time reading tour books and delighting in walking about the old town, while Farrell hates the place and wants to return to Dublin. That it turns out that Farrell is to be the victim, it seems only fair, given the absence of his sensitive soul. If you've not seen the movie, I urge you to do so. Upon returning to the States, we borrowed the DVD from the library so that we could watch again. Despite

the excessive flow of blood from the three principals (Ralph Fiennes is the man who orders the hit), it's a comedy ... until it becomes a tragedy.

Lee is feeling quite ill again (sweats, chills, weakness) so we seek out a pharmacy or apothek or whatever it may be called. No doctor, of course, but the clerk finds a "potion" to serve as "a decongestant to free the lungs." This is an herbal remedy (it contains thyme, rosemary, and oregano - sounds like seasoning for an Italian meal); its active ingredient is troplium* magus, which is really *tropaeolum majus*

*Surely this can't be tropylium, a substance known to all organic chemists and, especially, to those of us who got our Ph.D.s with Bill Doering at Yale. For the uninitiated and unwashed multitude, here is an explanation in terms that every layperson should comprehend: tropylium ion, $C_7H_7^+$, was synthesized by Doering and Prinzbach to prove that inherently unstable carbocations could become stable if they satisfy the Hückel Rule of $(4n + 2)$ π -electrons for non-benzenoid aromatics. Now aren't you glad you asked?

(aka garden nasturtium). Nowhere in the Wikipedia entry does it mention its use as a decongestant, not even among the primitive peoples of Bruges. But it does come as 125 mg tablets, so Lee figures it can't hurt (even if it won't help).

We come upon the Sint-SalvatorsKathedraal, which began life as a parish church in the 10th century, was then transformed into the huge cathedral that it is today. From there, it's on to Markt and then to Burg, the two large town squares which are ringed by restaurants and hotels, situated in historic buildings. The Church of Our Lady is there, with its brick spire reaching a height of 122 m; so is the Basilica of the Holy Blood (which sounds better in Flemish: *Heilig-Bloedbasiliek*);* alas, it is closed from noon to 2:00. The

*According to Wikipedia, "The relic of the Holy Blood, which was brought to the city after the Second Crusade by Thierry of Alsace, is paraded every year through the streets of the city. More than 1,600 inhabitants take part in this mile-long religious procession, many dressed as medieval knights or crusaders." It's indeed amazing how many relics of Jesus's blood and bones, as well as wood and nails from the cross, are scattered around the churches of Europe.

Stadhuis(City Hall) dates from the 14th century and is impressive. The square is filled with pedestrians, bicyclists, and nearly every kind of vendor (each with the singular goal of separating tourists from their money) that one can imagine. There are horse-drawn carriage rides, several of them competing with one another. We walk across a bridge for a view down one of the canals that run through the city. Next to a statue of one Guido Gezelle, a 19th-century writer and priest, is a sculpture of a crashed airplane made by Yves Obyn for a 2012 art project called Kamarama; the accompanying legend says "Yves Obyn created this very special art work for Kamarama, Oh, Boy! It represents a crashed Beechcraft Bonanza. A fanatic built his own airplane but because of the poor construction, it quickly crashed. The spectator is a disaster tourist, causing a congestion in the heart of Bruges due to the curiosity factor ..." No, I have no idea what it means, but you know how it is when artists "explain" their work.

As we make our way back to the parking garage, we see lots of signs warning about pickpockets. Thanks a hell of a lot for the warning, but why did we not see any signs when we began our walk through Bruges. During our stroll through the city, Lee is really flagging. I keep hoping that she'll relent and agree to see a doctor, if we can find one once we get back to Gent. But first we need to extract the car from the parking garage, an exercise that proves to be more difficult than expected. Having missed the fact that we needed to get a ticket from a *caisse* (I don't think that there was one at the doorway where we entered the garage), I assume that there would be a place to insert a credit card as one exits the building. Not so! Fortunately, nobody is behind me on the exit ramp, so I back out and find a parking space near a different door from the one we entered. Lee stays behind (she's really feeling ill) while I look for a *caisse*.

Remembering from France that many machines will not recognize my credit card, I take Lee's credit card up an escalator, find a machine, and insert it, only to discover that it demands a PIN (or PIN Number was we say when being redundant). So I descend the escalator and return to the car and to the person who knows the PIN, then ascend and ... *voilà* ...it works! (I also teach another confused soul who is having his own troubles paying with a credit card.) Armed with the canceled ticket, I manage to get out of the garage.

We drive to Damme, just 8 km from Bruges, which is on the *Uilenspiegel* Autoroute. According to Wikipedia (and a rather strange translation therein), "Till Eulenspiegel (or Tijn Uilenspiegel) is a character from among others the Dutch - German folklore. According to the legend, was a rascal who Uilenspiegel free as a bird in the sixteenth century by the Netherlands and Germany (in German known as Till Eulenspiegel) and attracted everyone fooled with his strokes. The novel De Coster wants Eulenspiegel was born in Damme, where one of the many statues in Europe is that Tijn should imagine. The legend also wants him in 1350 in the German Mölln died. There may even be a grave visited attributed to Tijn." Well! After that, what can one say? The town also has a windmill, some nice metal sculptures of animals, and old buildings ... but we do not see the rascal Till or Tijn.

Returning to Gent, we make many wrong turns (my navigator is less capable than usual, attributable - she says - to her illness) but we stop at a small store in a small town where a delightful young woman is happy to show me the way. To Gent, that is. Damme!! We figure that the gas gauge, whose needle had hardly moved, is not to be trusted,* so we fill up (383 km, 23.6 L, equivalent to 38.1 mpg) and drive the rest of the

*Having stayed pegged at FULL for most of the trip, it finally showed signs of life at 250 km. Still, we don't feel confident of its accuracy.

way to Gent. Using our room card to open the gate at the hotel's parking area at about 4:30, we find that there are available spaces - and although quite narrow, I manage to maneuver into a space, though I had to do it facing forward. I had hoped to have the car pointing outward (see pp. 37, 39).

At the reception desk, we ask about the possibility of getting Lee to a doctor, late on a Friday afternoon. (She must really be sick because she has finally surrendered to my incessant nagging.) The clerk gives us a couple of names, but the first one (who is "less expensive") is not available, so we call the more expensive one: Paul Symons, Huisarts. His office is a 10-minute walk from here and he agrees to stay in his office until we arrive. Our instructions are to ring the outside bell, which we do - but nobody comes to the door. So we enter a hallway and see several doors, none with any identifying marks. We're about to walk outside again when the good doctor opens a door and invites us in.

Quite unlike a doctor's office in our country, his consists of a fairly grim single room (perhaps this is not the primary locale for his practice?) that has his desk, a few old chairs for the patient and friend(s), an examining table, and cabinets with medical hardware and medications. He takes Lee's history, tells her that the herbal remedy is worthless (we knew that!), takes her temperature (under her arm - interesting), and announces that she has a fever at 37.6°C. I do a quick calculation and tell him that 99.7°F is hardly a significant temperature, but he dismisses me as a crank.* He does find considerable congestion in her

*Lee also delivers a sharp elbow jab to my side. She wants to get an antibiotic ... and if this means that she needs to have a fever, so be it. Her logic is unassailable.

lungs, so he writes a prescription for clarithromycin, which we get filled at a nearby pharmacy.

The evening is nice and cool. We walk to the restaurant *Korenlei Twee* which merely signifies its address as Korenlei 2, quite near the hotel. It is an elegant place with a free first course and a free intermezzo white wine sorbet. There is also an amusing incident that occurs during dinner. Seated to my left are

three tourists from France; they are joined by a fourth, the adult daughter of one of the others. Seated to my right are a couple who are speaking Flemish.* Even though we understand not a word of this

*Flemish is such a guttural-sounding language, one can't help wondering if this is the origin of our English word phlegm. Probably not. Is "belch" derived from Belgium? Also probably not.

language, it's quite clear that they are displeased by the mere presence of the four francophones at "their" restaurant. (What they think of the English-speaking Magids is something about which we know nothing.) Their annoyance reaches a head when one of the French women tells the waiter that she wants her steak prepared *bleu, bleu, bleu!* That is, she wants it blood-red (or blood-blue, I suppose). When it arrives at her table, she rejects it as being too *bien cuit* (well-done) and sends it back to be replaced by something that is almost mooing. Well, no knives are drawn nor do the police have to be called to stop the potential border war, but the locals are nearly apoplectic. Apparently, the two Belgians hold no animosity for the American neophytes, because when a waiter delivers an intermezzo (a white wine sorbet that we had not ordered), the man leans over to say that everyone gets this intermezzo; and he translates what the server called it.

What I find amazing, as I scan Lee's journals for items that I can ~~steal~~ use, is that every time she writes about how sick she's feeling, she then launches a detailed description of the delicious meals that we are having. She's like a baseball player who, having just suffered a compound fracture of his arm, comes to the plate in the 9th inning of the World Series and hits a game-winning home run with one hand. I had promised (pp. 7, 19) not to devote time and effort to describing what we eat, but I'll make an exception for this occasion. I now quote our resident gourmet: "We drink Leffe Blond and Hoegaarden beers, the latter poured by our waiter to deliberately overflow its tulip-shaped glass. The meal is wonderful: an *amuse bouche* of salmon carpaccio with (in an asymmetric glass) salmon mousse with tiny shrimps. For first courses, Lee has a gaspacho with fried langoustine and hijiki* algae (black, salty); Ron has shrimp

*According to Wikipedia, "a brown sea vegetable growing wild on rocky coastlines around Japan, Korea, and China."

has shrimp croquettes, a Gent specialty. Our mains are seared scallops with assorted vegetables for Ron, whole small Dover sole *munière* with fries and salad for Lee, who demonstrates her skilled deboning technique! Unfortunately, her appetite is still largely missing in action, so no dessert."

Walking back to the hotel, we pass through the large Groetenmarkt where some street theater is in progress. Near the obelisk in the center of the square, three men are pounding with hammers, in rhythm, on aluminum sheets. Another man is running toward them, lofting what appears to be a large kite or flag over his head. When he arrives, the pounding stops and everyone in the "audience" applauds. But this "everyone" is not a normal crowd. Oh, no they are not. They all are draped in brightly colored sheets and wear headgear that may be made of cardboard or metal and are shaped more or less like a dunce cap. At the end, everyone is smiling, so I guess that we're safe from harm. Back in our room, having finished I finish reading *Hitch-22** and begin Peter Carey's novel, *My Life as a Fake*.

*Here's what I wrote in an email to Bill Gurley: "I have multiple reactions, often conflicting, about the book. First, Hitchens never really explains the title. There is a solitary mention, early on, of *Catch-22*; and he cites the name *Hitch-22* on the last pages ... and that's it. What comes through loud and clear is that the man has done nearly everything that a correspondent could do - visited every war zone on the planet and been shot at, arrested, beaten, deported, etc. I respect him for his physical bravery and for standing up for what he believes, which he contends is not really that much. But what drives me crazy is his EGO. Nearly every page is devoted to name-dropping of the most flagrant sort. He was either 'best friends' or 'mortal enemies' with all of the world's intellectual elite. And even worse, he often 'apologizes' before quoting in detail from some of his famous friends who have written nice

things about him. Nobody escapes without an adjective before his or her name: loathsome Bill Clinton, wretched Mike Dukakis, etc. Well, he does make his opinion clear enough. I had hoped to read more about his atheism and terminal illness, but these are mentioned only tangentially. And here's something that really surprised me. In his 20s, he learns that his mother (who had committed suicide) was Jewish. She had never told her husband or her two sons, but an aunt revealed it. So ... now Hitchens "feels" Jewish and starts viewing world events from a different point of view. What's so weird is that you'd think that he would agree with Sam Harris who argued that nobody is born as a Jew/Catholic/Hindu ... Instead, one's religion is something that is chosen when a child is old enough to do so. So in what possible sense is Hitchens a different person when he discovers that he's half- Jewish? It makes no sense. Do I recommend it? Yes, but not strongly. As I said, his life was extremely interesting and filled with all sorts of adventures, both physical and intellectual. On the other hand, if you decide not to read it, you won't go to your grave thinking that you had missed a great opportunity.

Saturday, June 30

The morning begins in bright sun. At the buffet breakfast, there are also some warm choices: eggs, bacon (very chewy, almost inedible), and pancakes. Lee is coughing and sweating this morning, but insists that she is feeling better. She's taking the antibiotic that was prescribed yesterday but it's too early to hope for a miracle cure. Because she is still fuzzy, coughing, and sweaty, she rests during the morning; I read and surf the internet, using the ungainly Hewlett Packard laptop.

At about noon, we walk to the old city. There is a nice cool breeze, but the day is also quite warm when the sun breaks through the clouds. There are huge crowds everywhere, both locals who are off from work on the weekend and tour groups with their guides. In addition to having to avoid collisions with this large percentage of the human race, it turns out that all of the streets are cobblestone which makes for somewhat treacherous walking. We visit the old meat market which is, now, a café. It has enormous wooden beams, from which hang (fake) aged hams. And from there, we walk through the large square and past a 20-person brass band to St. Bavo's* - alas, no pictures allowed, which is a shame because

*Something seems to have got lost in this Google translation of a tourism web site: "When Charles V was Baptised there in 1500, the metamorphosis from a closed Romanesque church to a spacious Gothic one was fully underway. However, substantialism." Remember, you read it here first.

the church has excellent sculptures, including some installations by modern artists, and unusual stained glass windows. Lee then "squanders" € 4 to view a 15th century altarpiece called "The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb"* Because the church is hot and humid, I wait outside, watching the crowds and doing my

*Alas, the same web site's translation for this work seems to be written in a language that is not quite standard English: "The brothers Van Eyck painted this unique altarpiece in 1432. It is the highlight of the Flemish Primitives and a milestone in art history. The Polyptych survived the Protestant Iconoclasm, fell into French hands under Napoleon and was requisitioned by Nazi Germany consistently the Second World War. But it has now leg hanging peacefully for more than 50 years in the place where it belongs: St. Bavo's Cathedral. Admittedly though, the 'Just Judges' Panel, All which was stolen in 1934, is still Replaced by a reproduction." Well!! I don't know about you, but to me "leg hanging peacefully" carries the connotation of one of those "(fake) aged hams."

best to hold onto my hat lest gusts of wind whisk it away. Lee emerges 45 minutes later, drenched because of her fever and because of the closeness of the packed room. Quoth she, "If you think that the

main part of the cathedral was hot and stuffy, this enclosed area was far worse." At least she wasn't tempted to climb the 444 steps of the tower.

We stroll around the old city a bit longer, taking pictures of the canals and rivers, the old buildings, the outdoor cafes, and the expensive shops, and then return to the hotel at about 1:45. Our room has not been made up (we may have "blown" it by putting out a Do Not Disturb sign while Lee was sleeping during the morning, but after a word to the front desk we're told that it will be taken care of.)

Although we had parked in the hotel's indoor garage with the car facing into the parking space, there was enough maneuvering room (with spaces on either side) that I could turn it around before heading up the steep ramp (see pp. 37, 39). We drive to Geraardsbergen, about 40 km south of Gent, and from there to Oudenaarde, 30 km to its west, before returning to Gent. Geraardsbergen is a moderate-sized town with an interesting history. According to Wikipedia, it "is one of the oldest cities in Belgium. It came into existence close to the settlement of Hunnegem. In 1068, Geraardsbergen was one of the first communities in Western Europe to be granted the city status. Geraardsbergen was destroyed in 1381 by Walter IV of Enghien and his troops. The legend goes that during the siege, the people of Geraardsbergen threw some of their food which was left over the city wall. By this they wanted to show that they had enough food to survive a siege for a long time. This bravado notwithstanding, the city was still captured by Enghien's troops. This event lives further in the city. Every year during carnival the city organizes on top of the Oudenberg (111m) the 'krakelingenworp' to celebrate this historical event."

Ah, well, different strokes for different folks. It is a warm day (24°C according to the car's thermometer) and, lucky us, a street fair is in progress in the center of the city as we arrive at about 3:00. Because the main streets are blocked (and filled with tents for vendors), we are forced to park some distance away from our destination, which is the central square where we hope to see the Sint-Bartholomeuskerk, the town hall, and the celebrated statue called *Manneken Pis*. To get there, we have to traverse a steep viaduct over the train tracks and then trudge uphill on the main street, past the crowds and booths (featuring all sorts of Belgian tchotchkes) and food stands and generally noisy goings-on. (There are rival DJs on each street trying to drown the sounds of the others while assaulting our poor ears.) The crowds are interesting: mostly middle-aged and older citizens; obviously this fair does not appeal to the young folk.

Well, we get to the town square, probably a mile from where we had parked. The town hall is nice, the cathedral is beautiful (and interior pictures *are* allowed, unlike St. Bavo's), and *Manneken Pis* does not disappoint. We had seen a replica of this "naughty" statue/fountain in Brussels, but this one in Geraardsbergen is the original, supposedly from the 15th century, although I have my doubts.

It is still quite warm as we make our way back, through the crowded streets, to our car. But on the way, we do stop for a brief refreshment: Lee has a Magnum Classic ice cream bar and I have an individual sized Ben and Jerry's cup; the flavor is "chocolate chip cookie dough," which is my favorite and, for whatever reason, seems to have disappeared from U.S. markets. Maybe it's all being shipped to Belgium?

We drive to Oudenaarde, but don't stop there, although we note that it looks like a prosperous community as do the several small towns (and townlets?) that we pass on the way. (Is it possible that we're finally getting "tourism fatigue"? I think so.) Interspersed among the charming homes and shops are some surprisingly large McMansions that might seem grotesque even in the U.S. One surmises that farming is a financially rewarding profession in this part of the world. (Or, perhaps, these homes belong to foreign millionaires who desire a little country villa for escape from the travails of making money? Mitt Romney, are you listening?)

What is also depressing is that graffiti cover the walls in nearly every city and town, regardless of size and location. Gent, in particular, is "adorned" nearly everywhere with painted slogans, pictures, cartoons, whatever. Maybe it's encouraged? I would hope not.

PUN ALERT: Lee (pointing): "I think that the parish house is next to the church." Ron: "Parish the thought." OK, OK, it's really weak, I know that. But it has been many days since the previous one and I felt the need to write something.

On the drive back to Gent, the day has become considerably cooler, with the temperature dropping from 28°C to 19°C. Using our room card to open the gate at the hotel's parking area, we find that the one indoor space that is open (the same one that we vacated earlier in the day) can be accessed only by driving forward into it (while trying to avoid scraping against the cars on either side - the spaces are very narrow); we know that this will present a problem when we need to leave tomorrow because we are not pointing in the outward direction (see pp. 37, 39). I obsess over this during a sleepless night (really!), trying in my mind's eye various schemes for turning the car around before trying to go up the ramp. But that's for tomorrow.

We go to dinner at *Al Castello*, a wonderful family-owned and -operated Italian restaurant just around the corner from the hotel. We had not made a reservation, but are "granted" the last remaining open table as long as we promise to vacate it before 8:00 - which, of course, we do promise and, indeed, fulfill that promise. My meal is delicious: a huge mixed salad, then veal parmigiana (breaded veal filled with ham and cheese, cordon bleu style), over tagliatelle and sauce. As we return to the hotel, a gentle rain has begun but it doesn't last because I succeed in taking a picture of a nearly full moon in a cloudless sky at about 9:30.

Two days ago, I exulted over the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to uphold the Affordable Care Act. There is a Charles Blow op-ed in the New York Times, today, in which he tells us about two of the unhappy GOP legislators: "According to *Politico*, 'Indiana congressman and gubernatorial candidate Mike Pence likened the Supreme Court's ruling upholding the Democratic health care law to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks,' during a closed-door House G.O.P. meeting. He later apologized" and "Senator Rand Paul, a Republican from Kentucky and the son of former presidential candidate Ron Paul, issued a statement that seemed to suggest that the court doesn't even have the authority to make the ruling. It read in part: 'Just because a couple people on the Supreme Court declare something to be 'constitutional' does not make it so. The whole thing remains unconstitutional.' " Amazing!

Ah, what won't art lovers do to satisfy their desire to see masterpieces? The careful reader may remember that our original plan was to take a train from Den Haag to Amsterdam on June 27 (to visit the Rijksmuseum and the van Gogh) and to drive from Den Haag to Otterlo on June 28 (for the Kröller-Müller Museum) before heading to Gent; these plans had to be squelched because of Lee's illness (see pp. 1, 36). So here's the revised plan. Tomorrow, we will drive about 225 km each way to Otterlo and then, on Monday, we'll check out of the Harmony Hotel and hope to visit the Rijks and van Gogh. (As it will transpire, we *will* get to Otterlo but not to the Amsterdam museums.)

Sunday, July 1

It is a pleasant, sunny morning. Our plan, today, is to drive to Otterlo for a visit to the Kröller-Müller Museum. We plot a route that will allow us to avoid the traffic congestion around Rotterdam; alas, there is no way to avoid Antwerp. The museum is located in the National Park De Hoge Veluwe and can be reached by driving through the park either by car (which we choose) or on a borrowed bike (which we did in 1995 but are not eager to do with our 17-year older and broken-down bones and muscles).

After breakfast at the hotel, from a window we can see the outdoor upper parking lot and we note that there is a car blocking the exit. Thus, we'll need to have someone from the hotel move it. I had hoped that, on a Sunday morning, those who had parked alongside us in the indoor lot would have moved (surely people must go to church, right?), but when we get our key from the front desk and head to the garage, we find it as densely packed as it was when we parked there. I try several times, all under the watchful eye of Lee who is trying to help me find clearances of just millimeters, to turn the car so that it's facing the

ramp, but I'm unable to do so.

The woman at the front desk, who may also be the hotel manager, offers to help. "I've backed many cars up the ramp, both mine and those of guests," she says. I back the car out of its space and give her the keys. (There is a terrible noise as I back up - it sounds as if something is wrong with the power steering, but she assures me that it's merely the sound of the tires on the concrete floor that had been treated with some sort of sealant.) Now, granted that she's unfamiliar with the feel of the clutch and the accelerator pedal of our rented Astra, but she makes several attempts to zoom up the ramp backwards, each one resulting in failure as she stalls the car near the top and allows it to coast down. I should mention that there is an added difficulty to this operation - while she can be fairly sure that she's not going to collide with a car in the upper lot that its owner may have suddenly decided to move, it's not a straight shot from the top of the ramp to the archway leading to the gate. No, one also has to angle the car while not being able to see behind because the car is at a very steep incline and neither the side nor rearview mirrors are of much help. But she is determined - and on what is probably her fifth attempt, she reaches the summit, triumphant in her success. (Well, hell, she didn't have to worry about paying the rental company for any dings, scratches, dents, or whatever the vehicle might have incurred.) I thank her profusely - and we are on our way.

As we drive away from the hotel, we are surprised to see the sidewalks and streets littered with discarded beer cans and other detritus. Apparently Saturday nights are "exciting" here, but still it is surprising that the good Belgians are not more respectful of their environment. Even at a highway rest stop where we change drivers, there is crap on the ground near the various waste and recycle bins. The highways turn out to be excellent (even if the signs are all in Flemish; well, at least the numerals are Arabic - but what would one expect?) The temperature is a pleasant 19-21°C. While Lee is driving, I turn on the car radio for the very first time on this trip. I find R4NTR which is a classical music station. A few traffic jams and road construction blockages notwithstanding, the countryside is pleasant: farms, fields, gently rolling hills all of which, I have to say, is spoiled by the persistent graffiti that are seen on nearly every surface whenever we enter a town. Why? The only "tricky" part of the drive is near the very end when we have to get off the fast road A50 and onto the regional N 310 that will take us to the park entrance; Google maps, which we consulted in the hotel and from which I sketched a crude map, suggest that we'll have to make several counter-intuitive turns but, in fact, it all works. Along the way, we see exit signs for Hoboken (near Antwerp) and Breukelen (near Utrecht) - one wonders if they're named *after* the places in New Jersey and New York. Probably not. At about 12:15, we reach the park gate, buy our tickets, and drive (a surprisingly long distance) through the park and to the museum.

The museum is fantastic. We had fallen in love with it during our 1995 visit and we enjoy it just as much this time. Here is its history, as described in its web site: "The Kröller-Müller Museum is named after Helene Kröller-Müller (1869-1939). Helene Kröller-Müller collected almost 11,500 art objects with the help of her advisor, H.P. Bremmer. The purchases were paid for from the capital accumulated by her husband Anton Kröller as director of Wm. H. Müller & Co. Helene Kröller dreamt of a 'museum-home', a dream that came true in 1938 when the Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller opened its doors. Helene Kröller-Müller was its first director. After her death in 1939 the museum building underwent a few expansions with the addition of a congress wing and sculpture gallery in 1953 and a whole new wing between 1970 and 1977. This wing served as a suitable accommodation for the growing collection of modern sculpture. The museum's sculpture garden has increased in size over the years and is now one of the largest in Europe." (The complete collection of art in the museum can be seen at <http://www.kmm.nl/collection?lang=en>)

The breadth* and quality of the collection is exceptional. Because picture-taking is permitted indoors, I

*I cannot type this word without recalling an incident from 1985. I was serving on the search committee to hire a new Dean of Liberal Arts at The University of Tennessee. A letter of recommendation for one of the more promising candidates extolled his academic achievements with "His knowledge is immense. When he opens his mouth, his breath is extraordinary." Alas, he did not receive an on-site interview.

have some wonderful images (see the Picasa site) of oils and small sculptures by Brancusi, van Gogh, Picasso, Manet, Giacometti, Gauguin, Monet, Renoir, Modigliani, Leger, Moore, Cézanne, Mondriaan, and Gris. (Ooh, what a name-dropper!) The van Gogh collection is especially impressive, numbering nearly 90 works including some of his most famous: *Self-Portrait*, *The Potato Eaters*, *La Berceuse (Augustine Roulin)*, *Portrait of the Postman Joseph Roulin*, *Haystacks in Provence*, and *The Langlois Bridge at Arles*.

It's not until 1:45 that we complete our rounds of the indoor exhibition. Exhausted both physically and intellectually, we repair to the museum's café for apple pie and coffee. And then it's time for a stroll through the sculpture garden. It is immense and the sculptures are displayed all over the place, including within fountains and behind trees. Among the more familiar artists are Tony Smith, Jacques Lipschitz, Rodin, Renoir, and Henry Moore; the majority, however, seem to be Dutch whose names are not well-known, at least to me. Among the most memorable sculptures are: *Needle Tower* by Kenneth Snelson, another example of which we encountered in Washington, D.C.; *Jardin d'email* by Jean Dubuffet (about which more in a moment); the Aldo van Eyck Pavilion, featuring numerous bronze, metal, and granite sculptures, both abstract and figurative, by a variety of artists; a tree whose trunk and roots are metallic, but at first sight appears to be growing out of the ground; and a pavilion that is not on our map but which features numerous spectacular sculptures by Barbara Hepworth. Our map of the garden suggests that there is a Richard Serra steel sculpture nearby but we are looking for a massive installation like those in outdoor sculpture parks throughout the world - what we find is one called *One*, a cylindrical hunk of metal about three feet tall and about three feet in diameter - very unimpressive.

The Dubuffet work is extraordinary. According to the museum's web site, it is constructed of "concrete, glass fiber, reinforced epoxy resin, and polyurethane paint" and it is huge. Approaching it, one sees a curvy white wall behind which there are white objects, outlined in black, rising up. There is a door through which one can enter; up a set of stairs, one emerges through another door onto a surface that looks like a landscape that has been rocked by a recent earthquake. Everything is white with black outlines - and there is not a single straight edge anywhere. Children are having a ball running through it, trying to keep their balance. Words cannot convey the beauty and strangeness of this "playground" so please look at my Picasa pictures or at some of the images posted online, such as at http://www.dubuffetfondation.com/sculptures/email_ang.htm and at <http://tinyurl.com/8s25l32>

PUN ALERTS:

- Lee: "We're supposed to see a Serra." Ron: "Maybe it's coming later. As they say, 'Que Serra, Serra.' "
- As we are leaving the sculpture garden and walking back to the museum building, Lee says "We need to go past the Dubuffet," to which Ron replies, "You've never been known to pass da buffet in your entire life."

At about 3:30, we've completed our tour of the sculpture garden, so it's time to make the 225-km trek back to Gent. Leaving the park, we (of course) make a wrong turn (I'd fire my navigator if only another were available), but find ourselves in the lovely tree-lined town of Oosterbeek. Then, having entered the city of Gent several times by now, it's hard to believe but our intrepid guide and expert navigator misses the turn off the highway, so we have to retrace our paces. Again, I'd fire her if I could - and if she'd allow it.* We

*My Knoxville friend, Bill Gurley, who is also the IT guy at the UT chemistry department and has been an outstanding help to me when I've run into computer or internet problems over the years, wrote the following: "Recently I resolved a printer issue that my wife was having with her iMac, and she really needed to print something for her work that day. That evening she said 'I married you for love, but I stay for the free tech support.' " So it is with me and Lee! That's a major reason that I can't fire her.

don't reach the hotel until 5:45, and to make things worse the gas gauge in the car is reading nearly empty. Nevertheless, a quick calculation, based on the consumption of fuel at our first fill-up, suggests that we are not as near empty as the needle would seem to indicate. I hope.

The long drive notwithstanding, it is a pleasant journey. The roads are excellent and are well signed. The temperature stays at 20-22°C all day. The drivers are well-trained, all of them using their directional signals and passing only on the left. This is totally different from the aggressive, even dangerous, behavior exhibited in the cities of Belgium and the Netherlands. As we drive, we note the absence of large trucks on the highways, but we do see large numbers of them parked at rest stops - is it possible that commercial traffic is forbidden on Sunday? There are numerous bike riders on the paths that parallel the highways, especially in the park for the museum where both personal and borrowed bikes are seen everywhere.

I ask the hotel clerk (not the older woman who "saved" us by backing our rental car out of the garage, but a younger - and very tall - woman who has the late shift) about the languages spoken in Belgium and the fluency of most Belgians with English. She tells me: ● Flemish is essentially the same as Dutch, but with a slightly different accent. ● The official languages of the country are Flemish, French, and German, the latter spoken by a small number of Belgians, no more than 10,000. ● Students in this part of Belgium study Flemish throughout their school years and French in school until age 10; it's then mandatory to study English in high school. ● She is fluent in colloquial English because of American TV and movies that are readily available. (My goodness, an entire generation that has been fed the likes of "Make my day," "I coulda been a contendah," "ET, phone home," and "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious"?) ● She also studied German but has forgotten most of it because of disuse.

We walk to the market square and note, once again, how tall the people of Belgium and the Netherlands are, especially the younger generation. Published statistics suggest that they're not as tall as the Danes, but they are certainly taller than what we encounter in the U.S. Having eaten at good-to-excellent restaurants for the past three weeks, this evening we have dinner at a McDonald's for a refreshing change. Let the record show that this was Lee's idea, not mine. OK, I did go along with it, but only to keep familial peace. The place resembles a zoo, with children and adults crowding everyone and speaking/screaming loudly. The one interesting thing is that a 10-year-old boy at the next table looks like my son Steve. When he was 10, that is, not as a candidate for AARP next June.

In the evening, we make new plans for tomorrow. Rather than going into midtown Amsterdam to visit the two museums that we had missed, instead we'll drive north of Amsterdam to Volendam and Edam, then further north to see Houtribdijk, the 27-km dike that separates the Markermeer from the IJsselmeer.

Monday, July 2

After breakfast in the hotel, we load our luggage into the car, check out by 9:00, and begin the challenging 260-km drive. Some observations: ● The first major bottleneck is outside of Antwerp at the entrance to the Kennedy Tunnel: because of road construction, five lanes of traffic have merged into just three, so it is stop-and-go for a considerable time. Also, unlike the situation on Sunday, today there are lots of trucks on the road. Lots of them. Big ones. In large numbers. ● Then, about 15 km outside of Breda, there is a huge slowdown as all of the traffic is filtered into just one lane; and one stays in that one lane for about 5 km. ● But on the positive side, there is absolutely no honking of horns, neither on the highway nor, as I mentioned earlier, in the congested streets of the cities. In this regard, Belgium and the Netherlands "feel" like the Seattle area, where very few drivers lean on their horns, either in rage or excitement. The contrast with San Francisco is striking: when we visited there in December of 2011, our ears were constantly assaulted by blaring automobile and truck horns. ● Just as we observed in France, last year, there are no pickup trucks on the roads. I wrote in my 2011 travelog, "Over the next two weeks we will finally see one such open-bed vehicle. Now granted that the French populace may not have many good ol' boys with their drawl, coon dog, gun rack, and chaw of tobakky, one does wonder how people who actually need

small trucks in their professions manage. Yes, there are many enclosed vans (plastered top to bottom and front to back with ads and logos) but they don't serve very well the purpose of throwing large objects (rocks, lumber, small animals) into an open bed." • As remarked earlier, we don't really trust the fuel gauge on the dashboard, so we stop for fuel near the Belgium-Netherlands border: 735 km takes 39.7 L which is equivalent to 43.6 mpg. Pretty damned good, eh?

Just after coming out of the Kennedy Tunnel, the car radio's classical radio station treats us to all three movements of Rodrigo's guitar concerto *Concierto de Aranjuez*, a melodic work whose very traditional style belies its having been written in 1939. Why do I make note of this? It's because KING-FM in Seattle seems to know the moment that I get into my car because that damned piece is on the air much too frequently than to be just a bad coincidence. It's actually a pleasant work, but as often as KING-FM plays it, one would think that they hold it as equal to Beethoven, Mozart, Bach, and that ilk. Even on our New Zealand trip in early 2010, KING-FM must have sent word to their antipodean radio counterpart that the Magids would be visiting and would just *love* to hear the work.

Aside from the traffic tie-ups, the drive is a pleasant one, passing over amazingly flat terrain (slightly rolling at times) and past farms with sheep, horses, and cattle. The sky is partly cloudy and the day is cool, with temperatures around 19-20°C. Traffic picks up again as we near Amsterdam,* but we take a ring road

*Between Utrecht and Amsterdam, we again pass the exit to Breukelen; and on the Amsterdam bypass we see a sign for the Breukelen Apartments. (It even has a web address with the American spelling Brooklyn-Hts.nl, but attempts to access it from my U.S. computer fail.) Are these the "Last Exits to Breukelen"? Hubert Selby, Jr would want to know, if only he were still alive.

that skirts the city to the east and allows us to proceed northward toward Volendam and Edam.

We stop in Volendam, pick up a city map at the information office, and walk to the harbor that looks out on the Markemeer, the large sea that is separated from the IJsselmeer by the Houtribdijk dike that we'll visit shortly. There is supposed to be a small dike here, although we don't see it. Our first major sighting is the stacks of round cheeses (perhaps two feet in diameter) in yellow casing, outside an impressive cheese shop. Heading toward the water, we encounter restaurants, hotels, cafes, and coffee bars along the boardwalk and many, many small boats. There was a chance that we'd see women dressed in traditional garb, including wooden shoes and white Dutch cap, but I guess that the tourist season must be over and all that we see is a wooden cutout of such an outfit. (There is a hole into which a female tourist can thrust her head for picture-taking, but the female in our party categorically refuses to do so.) Our route back to the car takes us through lovely neighborhoods alongside canals with bridges that resemble those that van Gogh painted at Arles. There's a small pond or canal, it's not clear which, populated not only by dozens of swans but a layer of green scum (probably algae); it looks like a solid surface, except when the swans move easily through it and it closes up behind them. The town appears very prosperous and there are several large buildings devoted to light industry that probably serves to employ a significant portion of the population.

From there, it's just a short drive to Edam, which (frankly) looks a lot like Volendam. One is struck (figuratively, not literally) by the large number of bicyclists throughout the town. We stroll about, along pleasant canals, and past historic buildings (including the market place where cheeses are brought in and weighed). Some of the residential row houses are so old that they buckle outward, either in the front or along the sides. I assume that they're stable structures, but the pooching-out does give one pause. We enter Grote Kerk (or St. Nicholaaskerk), a beautiful structure dating from the 17th century; its lack of ostentation is a welcome relief.

PUN ALERT: Lee (inside the church): "I've never seen an organ like that!" Ron: "Is my fly open again?" (This is almost too easy, as I made the same reply when we were in Angers last year - see my France travelog, p. 31. Well, I can't help it if she keeps playing *straight* man. I apologize for that last sentence.)

Alas, the ambience of this lovely town is degraded by the drone of airplanes, making their way to Amsterdam's airport. After some coffee and cake at the Hotel Edam-Grand Café,* we leave Edam at

*Whether the café is known for its food and drink, I do not know, but there are some gorgeous tall blonds, some of them *even* women, having a late lunch or snack here. Alas, all are accompanied by partners, as am I, now that I think of it.

about 2:45 and, driving north about 45 minutes, reach the Houtribdijk dike. (Wikipedia claims that it's a dam, not a dike. Whatever.) The dike was built in the 1960s and has a high-speed road across it, linking the towns of Lelystad and Enkhuizen. On one side of the dike (dam) is the Markermeer. Wikipedia informs us that it "is a 700 km² (270 sq mi) lake in the central Netherlands in between North Holland, Flevoland and its larger sibling, the IJsselmeer. A shallow lake at some 3 to 5 m in depth, it is named after the small former island, now peninsula, of Marken that lies within it. The southwest side of the lake that begins where the IJ once emptied into the Zuiderzee is known as the IJmeer." There is an observation place about halfway across where we stop to take pictures of the waters on both sides. Here, one also finds large panels describing the building of the dam/dike and the chronology thereof. As there is no way to make a U-turn, we drive to Lelystad at the eastern terminus and make our turn there.

Lee takes over the driving and delivers us to our Hilton Hotel at Schiphol Airport. On the way, our perfect record of not seeing any pickup trucks is shattered as we see a Dodge Ram, a Ford F150, and another Dodge Ram with a bumper sticker WHITE TRASH. And, as we are driving on the roads inside the airport, looking for the hotel, a bus honks at us, the *first* horn we've heard in three weeks. We do get to the hotel, dump out luggage at the front desk, then leave to fill the car with fuel before we return it to the car rental. The Hilton clerk tells us where to find gas on the airport, but we circle and circle, without success. So we return the car (directly across the parking lot from the hotel) and tell them that the tank is not filled. For some reason, we do not get charge for it. In total, we drove about 1400 km, some 400 km since the last fill-up.

After checking into our room, we go to the lobby and have dinner in the Hilton dining room. I had hoped for an extravagant buffet spread of hot and cold dishes like those that we had at the Copenhagen and Paris Airport Hiltons in 2010 and 2011, respectively. Instead, this restaurant has no buffet, so we order from the menu: I chose a nice meal of shrimp and Chinese noodles.

I'm surprised that I'm *still* congested: stuffy and coughing up phlegm, more than a week after the illness set in. I've pirated some of Lee's antibiotic, but neither it nor the decongestant has done me much good. And she is not fully recovered, either.

Tuesday, July 3

It's a cloudy morning, but it doesn't look like we'll get any rain. The hotel restaurant, for breakfast, does have an excellent buffet with ample choices, both hot and cold; or, one can special-order pancakes or omelettes. (Let the person keeping the big ledger book in the sky be informed that I ate much less breakfast than you-know-who.)

We re-pack our suitcases so that we comply with airline regulations, then check-out at 10:45. The van driver assures us that Hall 3 at the enormous Schiphol Airport is used for all flights to the U.S., but he's wrong - in fact, when we arrive we discover that check-in for Delta/KLM flights is in Hall 2 (which is what the internet also indicated). Nevertheless, checking us and our baggage goes quickly, but then there is a very long walk before we reach the very nice business class lounge at 11:25 which, alas, is hot and stuffy. But at least we can relax until our flight.

I try to continue reading *My Life as a Fake*, but I find it very difficult to concentrate on the many twists and

diversions in the plot, given that Peter Carey disdains the use of quotation marks to set apart conversations from descriptions, and to let me know which character is speaking. Also, it used to be that only teen-aged girls could not be separated from their cell phones, but now the worst offenders are the three business men sitting near us. One (by his accent) is a low-class Brit, one is a Russian (who alternates between English and Russian), and one is of unrecognizable nationality (maybe Dutch). These competing, loud cell phone calls are even more distracting than the absence of quotation marks in the book; after a while, I give up trying to read the book and so I start on an *Atlantic* magazine.

I find it difficult to concentrate even on the magazine when the Russian is nearly shouting things like "Greg, this is important! I need this! On company letterhead, I need a note from you saying that the Board (the other Board) does not need cyber or cryptographic treatment. Tell André the same thing by Skype. Greg, you *have* to sign this paper! It needs *your* signature! Good-bye." I have no idea what this is all about, but it's quite entertaining. He immediately makes another call, this time speaking loudly in Russian - how inconsiderate of him! He then leaves the lounge, perhaps to go to the gate for his flight.

At 1:40, we head to the gate, which we thought was E4 (very close) but notice on the departure board that it's been changed to the very distant E17. Fortunately, there are some moving sidewalks to make the trek less tiring. When we had checked in earlier, we went through Passport Control but not through Security. This is done near the gate: our passports are scanned, our names are checked against the do-not-fly list of bad guys, and we are asked questions about whether we packed our suitcases ourselves, if they were ever out of our sight, had we received any gifts, etc. Finally, the agent tells us that there are mechanical problems with the plane, so we should just go ahead and stand in line until the plane is ready to board. He also tells us that we may need to switch gates.

After 10 minutes, we are allowed to proceed and now comes the real Security check: we remove belts and all items from our pockets (but are allowed to keep our shoes on) and we pass through a full body scanner. (I realize afterwards that I had forgotten to remove the plastic bag with explosive liquids from my carry-on, but we managed to get through.) Finally, we get to the waiting lounge where we can sit.

At 2:30, there is an announcement over the P.A. The Delta plane that is parked right outside the lounge window and is connected to the jetway is not our plane. Huh? Rather, it is disabled and needs to be moved before our plane can arrive. The speaker says that he'll give us an update in 15 minutes.

At 2:45, the plane is still there, the cockpit windows are open, the left and right doors are open, and there are people moving around on the tarmac, but the plane is fixed in space. There's a new announcement that they will clear the derelict plane in about 15 minutes. And we wait. One of the staff tells me that we passengers could have changed gates (again!) but this would have required that all of us go through Security again. They decide that the lesser of two evils is just to wait things out at E17. The problem seems to be that there is a malfunction of an on-board computer that is preventing the pilot from starting the engines. I ask a clerk why they can't just use one of the trucks to push the plane out of the way, but he mumbles something about the plane's needing to have its own power. A new announced departure time for our plane (which is nowhere in sight, but - we are assured - is at the airport) is 4:00.

[A tragedy of monumental proportions now occurs - I had been taking notes, throughout this trip, on 8.5x11" sheets of paper, front and back, and had just finished p. 19 and was starting p. 20. But at some point on the flight itself, that page disappears! It's difficult to figure out how or where or when this occurred, but the rest of my notes concerning the airport lounge are written from memory some five hours later. Oh, well, nobody ever said that historians have an easy time of it, eh?]

While waiting in the lounge, I finish *My Life as a Fake* and two magazines (*Atlantic* and *Yale Alumni*), and I start reading Margaret MacMillan's *Nixon and Mao*. The disabled plane is finally moved away at 3:30 (to great cheers by the waiting throng), but our plane doesn't get to the gate until 4:00 because, we are told, there's construction on the taxi strips all over the airport and the plane had trouble getting from its holding place to this terminal. OK, we'd already experienced serious traffic jams on the roads in Belgium and the

Netherlands, but this is ridiculous! Finally we board, the doors are closed, and we are air-borne at 4:30, an hour-and-a-half behind schedule. The published flying time is 10.5 hours, but the pilot tells us that the expected head winds are very gentle and we should arrive in 9.5 hours. In fact, we land in Seattle at 5:00 pm, just 35 minutes late.

The flight is uneventful, aside from a very noisy Russian family seated relatively near us. Actually, they are not so close, but they are definitely very loud. This applies to the father and, much more, to the mother who keeps us an incessant conversation with anyone who will listen; their son looks like he wants to crawl into the woodwork. On the flight, we do not starve of course. I pass on the first course (curry shrimp) but have the mixed green salad, pan-seared chicken breast, and pear almond tart. And for the pre-arrival meal, I have a turkey and swiss cheese sandwich. We get through Immigration and Customs quite speedily and call Steve, of Harbor Taxi, who is waiting just outside the airport. On the drive home, he gives us the sad news that, after 18 years, he is selling the business and moving to Florida - we are his last ride. The reasons: business is slow and, besides, the gloomy weather is finally getting to him.