

RHINE-DANUBE

MAY 27 TO JUNE 13, 2022

An adventure!!

This will be our first overseas trip since March, 2020, when we were unceremoniously booted out of Australia before we could even get to New Zealand. The culprit, of course, was the Coronavirus that was just beginning to attract everyone's attention.

Because of the pandemic, we cancelled a South America cruise planned for March, 2021. And Yale cancelled its theatre seminars in October, 2021, and March, 2022, the latter being moved to October, 2022, when we already had other travel plans.

So ... this trip is a BIG EVENT for us - and is the first of three upcoming journeys, the two others on Regent Seven Seas for a cruise from New York City to Montreal (in October, 2022) and - just to prove that we hold no grudges against our antipodal friends - a cruise around New Zealand/Australia (in January, 2023).

Writing these opening paragraphs a month before departure, I remain apprehensive about two things:

(1) I worry that, with COVID cases increasing here and in Europe, the trip may get cancelled; failing that, I worry about the disappearance of the mask mandate; and I worry about being on a river boat for two weeks with people whom I don't know and whose vaccination status is unknown to me.

(2) Over the past year, and increasingly over the past six months, my legs have become weaker. Last fall, I was barely able to make it to "my" benches when I made my neighborhood walks. In the fall and, again, this spring, I've had numerous sessions with the physical therapists at Heron's Key who, valiantly, tried to stretch and strengthen my muscles. I've been subjected to X-Rays and MRIs, I've been tested for venous flow, I've been analyzed for electrical signals, and I've visited a cardiologist. Finally, I consulted a neurosurgeon who will do a revision surgical procedure that involves putting a spacer between two vertebrae and cleaning out fat deposits around the spine. This will not be done until a week after our return from the present trip, but maybe it will make things better for me on future trips. All of this is a way of saying that I may have trouble walking and sight-seeing during the ship's excursions. I've been working with a walker and with walking sticks - the former is not practical to take on our journey, but I do hope that the latter will help me on the visits to various touristic sites.

In contrast to earlier Tauck voyages in which they rented about half the space on an open-sea-going vessel owned by *Compagnie de Ponant*, this river cruise on the Rhine and Danube is on a the *MS Esprit*, a vessel owned by the Swiss company Scylla.* Whereas most of the European river cruises

*What an unusual name, given that the word Scylla conjures up images of the two mythological monsters, Scylla and Charybdis, that imperiled ship travel, according to Greek legend.



use boats that have capacities of 120 passengers or more, the Tauck ship carries only 98 passengers and a crew of 36. It features a formal restaurant and a more casual dining venue. It looks like any other European river cruise, but what should one expect, right? The cabin that we've chosen is 225 square feet - not huge but also not minuscule. Excursions, meals, internet, and other amenities are included in the price. It promises air conditioning, a necessity, but I have little hope that its wi-fi will be powerful

As for getting from Heron's Key to SeaTac airport and return, we considered driving and leaving our car in

the airport's parking garage. But considering that this is a holiday weekend, finding a space might prove a challenge, so we're going to take advantage of ride services. When we went to Australia/New Zealand in March, 2020, we hired Jesse Langford, highly recommended by others, and fully reliable. We were fortunate to fit his schedule such that he can drive us both to and from the airport.

Over the course of the trip, I took some 239 pictures. Why so few? Well, as you'll read in the account, my sore legs prevented me from going on more than three of the ship's excursions. Nevertheless, I do have some nice images of such things as art museum collections and the Court of the Nuremberg trials. Of the 239 total, 216, along with images from earlier trips, can be accessed at <https://tinyurl.com/548ns62s>

READING MATERIALS In addition to several magazines (*The New Yorker*, *TIME*, *The Progressive*, *Yale Alumni Magazine*), NYT crossword puzzles, Sudoku puzzles, and soft-cover books (*Shards of Memory* by Ruth Praver Jhambvala, *Gain* by Richard Powers, *The Biographer's Tale* by A. S. Byatt, and *The Safety of Objects* by A. M. Homes.), I will have my Kindle Reader. In earlier travelogs, I've marveled at the fact that several titles that I downloaded from Amazon through the Pierce County Library have remained on my device, *long* after their three-week borrowing period. From those many titles, these five remain and are unread: Olen Steinhauer's *All the Old Knives*, Robert Harris's *V2*, H.R. McMaster's *Battlegrounds*, Bill Clegg's *The End of the Day*, and Richard Russo's *Chances Are*.

"Surely this is enough for the upcoming trip," you say. Well, yes, but given that my weak legs may force me to stay onboard the ship when I should be out on excursions *and* given that we have two more cruises planned for the next eight months, perhaps I need more. So ... having demonstrated that as long as I keep the Kindle in Airplane Mode, I can ~~steal~~ borrow additional books without worrying about their being snatched back by the (rightful) owner. So ... a few months ago, I arranged things such that 17(!) books would become available at the same time. And so, Dear Reader, I left Airplane Mode for the minimum time needed, and I downloaded all 17. Do I feel guilty? Not really. Surely my "possessing" these e-books does not prevent Amazon from lending them to others. Besides, it's fun to think that I may be poking the lion (i.e., Jeff Bezos) without fear of retribution. At least that's my hope. When the Amazon police come knocking at my door with a warrant for my arrest, I won't be so sanguine any more.

FRIDAY, MAY 27 TO SATURDAY, MAY 28

Jesse arrives at Heron's Key right on time. We encounter very little traffic on SR-16 or I-5, and so we arrive at SeaTac in 45 minutes, near record-breaking time. We check our luggage and are issued boarding passes. Lee has ordered wheelchairs for each airport on this trip; and we find one (with driver!). Although we are clearly Delta Pre-Check (it says so on the boarding pass), he takes us through regular security - the agent says that we'll need to remove all electronics from our carry-ons, something that's not required in Pre-Check. So, we retrace our steps (and wheels) out of security and try to find the Pre-Check line. Our "driver" tries to follow the instructions given to him, but we are unsuccessful; and he keeps muttering "crazy guy" over and over as we search. Finally, he realizes where we have to go, so it's out of the security area, into the main lobby, all the way to the south end (past Qatar Airlines), under the suspended vintage plane, *et voilà* there it is. Not only do we not have to empty our pockets (which I've already mistakenly done) but we don't have to remove items from the carry-ons. And I don't even have to pass through a scanner - instead, an agent comes over to me in my wheelchair, swabs my hands to check for explosives, drugs, who-knows-what else, and we are through. Apparently, we are not deemed threats against society. I, Lee, and the wheelchair *cum* driver arrive at the Delta lounge, located in Terminal A near Gate 1.

This is a new lounge, much more pleasant than the old one. It is larger, more comfortable, less crowded, and relatively well air-conditioned. We get comfortable chairs near the windows. During our couple of hours here, I have a coffee, barbecue potato chips, and a couple of cookies. Most surprising (and pleasant), we are not surrounded by loud cell-phone talkers. There is a woman sitting opposite with whom we talk, but she is soft-spoken and very difficult to hear. We nod our heads a lot. (This reminds me of my futile attempt to have a conversation with the German-speaking old woman on the KD Danube cruise, so

many years ago.) I do manage to ascertain that she is Scottish, lives in England, and doesn't think that Brexit or Boris Johnson are so very bad.

At 4:00, it's time to head to Gate A11 for our flight. A new wheelchair attendant is much better than the last (well, who wouldn't be?) and knows to rotate the wheelchair 180° when going down the two inclines that are integral to the hallway leading to the high-numbered gates. If you think that Gate A11 can't be very far from Gate A1, you are very wrong. In fact, it's quite a long haul - I'm delighted that I don't have to walk it. As reluctant as I was to tip the first driver, I'm pleased to do so with this woman. She delivers us directly to the doorway (now closed) that leads to the plane. She says that she's not allowed to proceed further, so a Delta ticket agent wheels me down the jetway to the door to the plane, after which I'm on my own. Boarding begins at about 4:25, even though the departure is not until 5:15.

Our plane is an Airbus A330. I have Seat 3G and Lee is in 3C. In the 1-2-1 seat arrangement on this Airbus A-330, we are in the center seats, side-by-side. Stefan chose these for us - and although I greatly prefer a window seat, this would be in 3A, separated from Lee by a fairly wide aisle. This 1-2-1 seating arrangement stands in contrast to British Airways 2-4-2 plan which we experienced (unhappily) on two different sets of flights between Seattle and London in 2018.*

*As I wrote in my earlier travelogue: The seats are arranged 2-4-2 which means that BA has managed to squeeze four more seats into Business Class than other airlines do with 1-2-1 seating (as in Delta's Boeing 777 and Airbus 330 planes). This feat of legerdemain is accomplished by making the seats quite narrow and by snuggling together a pair of seats, one forward-facing and the other rear-facing. Starting at the window, the paired seats are designated A/B, D/E/F/G, J/K. Seats B, D, G, and J face forward, but A, E, F, and K face backwards.

I was proud of myself for remembering to pack a pair of hearing aid batteries because I knew that the ones presently in use would run out sometime during the flight. What I had *not* planned was for one of the batteries to escape from the container, never to be found. One of the flight attendants rescued me by giving me one of hers. (We old folk always are willing to help one another.)

While waiting to begin our taxi to the runway, our ears (with hearing aids or not) are assaulted by very loud instrumental music and vocalizations being blasted through the public address system. What has our society come to, that we Americans can't bear to be separated from our music and cell phone videos and games? (We also can't bear to be separated from our guns, as the recent massacre at Hood Elementary School in Uvalde, TX reminds us.)*

*Gun rights activists insist on preserving their "second-amendment rights" but I wonder if they've actually read the language of the amendment. It states: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." When Scalia and four other justices ruled on this, they paid attention to the concluding clause while ignoring the introduction. It seems clear to me, admittedly a non-lawyer, that the writers of the Bill of Rights included the part about the militia for a reason. It's not just boiler-plate. Retired Justice John Paul Stevens has written a book in which he suggests six amendments to the Constitution. His remedy for the gun madness is to insert five words so that it reads "... the right of the people to keep and bear arms **when serving in the Militia** shall not be infringed." Good luck with that!

Our plane is pushed back at 5:15 and we taxi toward the runway. I hate not being able to look out the window (all of the people on my left and right have their blinds closed), so I can't "help" the pilot navigate to the runway. We take off (I assume to, from the sound) at 5:40. The first 15-20 minutes are very bumpy but most of the flight is smooth. I begin reading the May issue of *The New Yorker*.

At 6:15, drinks and food begin to arrive. I have a Macallan Single Malt (a poor imitation of the peaty

whiskies that I enjoy) along with some finger food (cheese, fruit, nuts). Then (at 6:45) comes the opening course: cream of celery soup, iceberg lettuce salad with a half hard-boiled egg, roll and butter. And ten minutes later, we get the main course: braised beef (with a delicious gravy), potatoes, and red cabbage. For dessert, there are three large scoops of vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce. The only disappointment is the coffee: weak and tepid.

At 8:15, I succeed in using my catheter (despite the narrow confines of the lavatory and the bumping of the plane). From 8:30 to 10:30, I watch the film "Dear Evan Hansen," which I found to be excellent. I then take my regular late evening pills and try to sleep. As is typical of my experience on earlier flights, I close my eyes from 10:45 to midnight, but I'm not sure that I'm sleeping much of that time. I then move my watch nine hours forward (from 12:07 am to 9:07 am) at which time I take my morning pills. I work a New York Times crossword puzzle.

Another complaint about Delta (in addition to the blaring music) is that there is just not enough lighting in the cabin. Even before the lights are dimmed so that passengers can sleep, there is not enough illumination for this old man to read - I need to put on the ceiling spot light and the light that's on the back of my seat, just above the left shoulder. And even then, it's a challenge, which (of course) gets much worse when the ceiling lights are turned down. Fortunately, the Kindle presents little problem as it has its own illumination. I'm reading Alexander Vindman's memoir, "Here Right Matters," which I began earlier in the week on neighborhood walks and which I'll finish in the next day. It's excellent.

At 10:00 (Europe time), I succeed a second time in using my catheter (fortunately the plane was not bumping badly) and at 10:15 my right hearing aid battery fails, so I replace both. At 10:30, the ceiling lights come on and we are issued warm towels for refreshing ourselves. The towels come in a sealed package from a Dutch company called GROWN ALCHEMIST. Cool! At 10:40 (we are now over Ireland, as I can see from the video display) and we are served coffee and breakfast: pancakes surrounded with warm berries, along with a bun plus butter, a fruit cup (kiwi fruit, orange, not-ripe pear), a small bowl of applesauce, and a small cup of yogurt.

At 11:40, the video display of the map is turned off (why?) so I'm unable to assist the pilot in landing the plane, especially with all of the window shades drawn. We land (based on the sound) at 11:45, about a half-hour ahead of schedule and we taxi to the terminal. You'd think that everything would now go quite smoothly, but you'd be wrong.

At about noon, the plane comes to a halt (with no terminal building in sight) and we are told that we have to wait here because our gate is not ready. We sit still for 35 minutes and are then given permission to proceed. But do we go to a terminal? No, we do not. We stop on the tarmac and a *very long* set of steel steps is brought to the plane's door. This presents a problem for me with my bad legs and obscured vision from wearing my mask *and* because I'm holding my briefcase and carry-on in my left hand while maintaining a death grip on the handrail with my right. But I get to the bottom without tripping, slipping, or falling. We then get on a very crowded bus (requiring a big step up); fortunately, I find a rail to hold onto as the driver practices his Indy-500 sharp turns. We are let off, not at a ramp but at a curb requiring a significant step down, and we are in the terminal but not anywhere near the gate we thought we'd go to - thus no wheelchair for me.

Lee and I walk toward baggage claim, all the time trying to find a KLM or Delta agent who can secure a wheelchair. After a bit, Lee parks me on a seat while she goes off in search of help. She goes to one end of the hall, but finds nobody. She returns, walks past me, and goes in the other direction. The next time that I see her - and it's after a considerable wait - she is whisking past me on one of those six-person passenger carriers, although she is the only passenger. When it stops, the driver removes a wheelchair from the back of the vehicle and they come to "rescue" me.

The wheelchair pusher, instead of taking us to "regular" Passport Control (where there are long lines), wheels me to an alternative window that is (supposedly) reserved for flight attendants and pilots. There is

no wait as Lee and I are deemed safe to enter Amsterdam. The driver then takes us to Baggage Claim area 15, which is a very long distance away. Fortunately, our two suitcases are still on the carousel, accompanied by almost no others. Lee, in the meanwhile, has called Tauck to say that we are delayed but will be out soon. I must say that this chair pusher is much more competent than the idiot in Seattle and also speaks better English; she also refused the 5 euro tip that I tried to give her. She wheels me out the door where the Tauck representative greets us and takes over. She pushes me across several curbs while a driver gets his van for us.

As we drive to the hotel, I marvel at the very modern, unique architecture for the office buildings that we pass, quite uncharacteristic from the traditional Dutch architecture in the city center. When we get to the hotel, we are greeted by three employees, two of whom get our luggage; we are also "greeted" by about eight steps, but the third employee activates a small "elevator" that carries me to the lobby. (Apparently, Amsterdam has no law requiring handicap access to public buildings.). We get to the check-in desk, are given keys, and are taken to our room where our luggage is already present.



The room is lovely and very spacious, but there is a hazard. The entry hall and bathroom area are four steps above the main room, so every trip to the bathroom will require my mounting stairs. But the good news is that the check-in clerk was able to get us a 6:00 reservation in the dining room (Lee had tried to do it by internet but was told that it was full). All of the staff are young, helpful, filled with youthful health, and very tall.

We are handed a Tauck envelope with information. The two tour directors are Gabriella Bartha (Czech Republic) and Razvan Ionescu (Romania). The cruise director is Maggie Chada (from Poland). They'll be in the lobby tomorrow morning from 9:00 until 11:00 and will issue luggage tags. We are to tag those items that we want delivered to the ship and have them ready to be picked up in our room at 10:00. We need to check out of the hotel at noon tomorrow and be ready to be transported to the ship at 3:00.

My legs are totally shot, a "reward" from the steel staircase at the plane, the steps up and down to the bus, and the walk through the airport. For dinner at the hotel restaurant, there is a very limited menu. I have onion soup (different from traditional French onion soup) and pumpkin risotto. Both are excellent. And we have coffee, no dessert. At the end of the meal it is now 7:30. We are exhausted and so we retire to bed at 8:30.

SUNDAY, MAY 29

I am amazed. On most overseas trips, I have trouble sleeping through the first night or two, but last night I stayed in bed until 7:45 when the alarm went off. I did have some waking periods, but I managed to get back to sleep.

This hotel is very elegant. In spite of its age, the bathroom fixtures are new and work very well. And the staff are superb - they are everywhere and are eager to help. They are all young, smartly garbed, good-looking, and tall. Did I mention that? I hate them!!

This morning, Tauck has a room reserved for a buffet breakfast, which we eagerly take advantage of. At 9:00, we find Tour Director Razvan, a most cheery and voluble young man, who gives us tags for our luggage. Returning to our room, we tag our carry-ons and large hard-sided suitcases and wait for someone to pick them up for delivery to the ship. And someone does, indeed, arrive just after 10:00. Check-out is not until noon, so we stay in our room for the rest of the morning. I come close to finishing the Alexander Vindman book.

After check-out, we go to the bar where the hotel has set out coffee and where we can sit for a couple of

hours. We get to talk with a few of our fellow passengers. The main topic of conversation is to discuss which other Tauck trips people had taken and what their impressions were. We win the upmanship bragging rights because nobody else can match our story of getting kicked out of New Zealand and Australia in March, 2022. I finish the Vindman and start the May 16 issue of *The New Yorker*.

At 3:00, a bus arrives to deliver us the ship. We marvel at the number of bicyclists: business people and families with children. They are on every street and seem to have priority, given that our driver yields to them the right of way. There are also huge bike racks, although (I sense) not as many as in Copenhagen. The trip to the boat takes only 15 minutes. We go first to the Reception Desk (to be issued key cards and to have our pictures taken) and then to the Panorama Lounge. In a short while, a clerk takes us to our room, quite near the end of the hall where this lounge and the dining room (Compass Rose) are located. Well, the horizontal distance is short, but not the vertical. Compass Rose is a half-flight down from the level where our cabin, 203, is located; and the Reception Desk and Panorama Lounge are a half-flight up. There is an elevator that stops at four levels: Compass Rose; the deck for the 2xx rooms; Reception Desk and Lounge; and the deck for the 3xx rooms. Over the many days on the ship, we'll use the stairs about half the time, the elevator the other.

Upon entering 203, we are delighted that all four of our pieces of luggage have already arrived. There are some forms to be filled out and signed, acknowledging Tauck's lack of liability should disaster occur. Damned lawyers! We are also required to take our electronic devices to the Reception Desk to have them registered and authorized for the ship's WiFi.

We unpack and discover that there are ample drawers and closet space for all of our goodies. Yes, the room is a bit small (a bed, a table with two chairs, two end tables, and a small dresser). But it all works beautifully. Best of all, the bathroom* is extremely modern and well-designed, even featuring a large

*I suspect that company founder Arthur Tauck was left-handed, given the position of the toilet paper roll that is nearly inaccessible to a right-handed person. And, not meaning to be indelicate, I must add that the cramped quarters impede a right-hander's ability to wipe his/her/its bum.

medicine cabinet behind what I originally thought we just a mirror. And tomorrow morning, we'll discover that the shower has responsible controls for water volume, water temperature, and the choice between use of a wand and the rain shower.

At 4:45, we walk to Arthur's (the small restaurant at the far far end of Deck 3) to tell them about my cumin/curry allergy. At 5:30, in the Panorama Lounge, is the mandatory safety briefing. In contrast to the procedure on Regent ships, we do not bring the bulky orange life preservers that are in our closet. In fact, one traveler is told by a ship's employee that because the rivers are not very deep, the proper procedure, should the ship begin to sink, is to stand outside on the sun deck and hold a glass of wine high.

The Discovery Briefing is conducted by Cruise Director Maggie who leaves us with this fun fact: we will be traversing 68 locks and five countries by the time that the cruise is ended. The Safety Briefing is done by Captain Milan Sretr (not a typo). To raucous march music provided by ship's musician Arsenio (on piano and electronic musical noise maker), the captain introduces a large number of the crew (hospitality, wine, food, tourism, housekeeping, etc.) They parade the length of the room, make a U-turn, and assemble alongside him. Over the course of the trip, we will interact with many of them. It seems that most of the servers in the dining room are either South Asian women or East European men, with a few crossovers of South Asian men and East European women.

Following this, we go to Compass Rose for a buffet dinner. It consists of a nice variety of hot and cold specialities. Our dinner partners are Virginia and Larry from Malvern, PA (near Philadelphia). She was a pharmacological scientist, he a heart surgeon. They are moving to North Carolina to be with aging parents. Following dinner, we read in our cabin and head to bed at 10:30.

MONDAY, MAY 30

The ship has been under sail since about 4:30 am and should reach Utrecht at 7:30. We are up at 5:45 to allow time for Lee to get ready for the Floriade excursion that leaves at 8:30. As I have zero interest (really negative interest) in plants and flowers, and to save my legs from extensive walking, I choose to stay onboard the ship. (During the night, I awakened at 2:30 and didn't fall asleep again until about 3:30; I slept until the alarm went off.)

We have the buffet breakfast at Compass Rose. It is very crowded, but the use of two lines allows people to proceed more rapidly. Available at the buffet are fruits, juices, cold and hot cereal, cold cuts and cheeses, hard-boiled egg, rolls and toast. One can also special order omelets and eggs benedict.

The Floriade is a "big deal," as I learn from the promotional materials and from Lee's report. As described by Wikipedia, "Floriade is an international exhibition and garden festival, held every 10 years in the Netherlands. All have been World Horticultural Expositions and listed as an A1 category exhibition by the International Association of Horticultural Producers and hence recognised by the Bureau International des Expositions. Floriade is currently being held in 2022 in Almere." Different regions of the Netherlands compete to host the event and from the four finalists chosen, the nod eventually went to Almere. You can read all about it at <https://floriade.com/nl/bereikbaarheid/> but if your Dutch is not up to snuff better at <https://floriade.com/en/>

As reported by Lee, it's about a 45-minute bus ride from Utrecht to Almere, so the Tauck group arrives at the exhibition at 9:15. There is a local guide to orient the visitors who are then encouraged to go out on their own to explore what's of interest. The Tauck tour directors hand each person money to buy lunch, but since cash is not accepted by any of the restaurants or vendors, the money can be stashed away when paying by credit card. At 1:30, the coaches leave Almere and return to the ship at Nijmegen.

Nijmegen??? I thought the ship was at Utrecht. Well, yes, but as those of us who stayed on board well know, at 8:30 the ship had left Utrecht and proceeded to Nijmegen, arriving at 3:00. As I was still on-board, I was privileged to experience the first of our lock passages. Only 67 to go!

Lee returns with glowing reports of her visit to Floriade. So what did I, one of the "left-behinds," do? The day was sunny and bright, not too hot. What surprised her (and me, as well) is that she had forgotten that we were in Nijmegen just three years ago.

Quoting from my 2019 travelogue, "We're heading to Lanaken (in Belgium) but stop, *en route*, in Nijmegen. It's about 85 km east of Utrecht, not far from National Park de Hoge Veluwe where we were yesterday, and very near the border with Germany. With an unpronounceable name (Wikipedia provides a sound clip but it's impossible for an American to mimic it), Nijmegen has a population of about 175,000. [We park] near the museum Het Valkhos, which we will visit shortly. But first we walk up Valkhof Hill, which "features a Carolingian chapel (eighth, ninth century AD) and a small remainder of an imperial castle that was demolished in 1798." If interested in the outstanding and eclectic collection at the museum Het Valkhos, you can consult my old travelogue:
<http://web.utk.edu/~rmagid/Neth-Belg-Ire2019.pdf>

During Lee's absence, I spend part of my day in Arthur's (for coffee) and the Panorama Lounge (for a change of scenery). I read the May 16 issue of *The New Yorker* and I begin the Kindle book, "The Copenhagen Trilogy" by Tove Ditlevsen. From my chair in the Panorama Lounge, I observe a safety drill for the crew. (An announcement over the P.A. said that passengers were exempt.) Captain Sretr has assembled groups of crew members, one after another, about 15-20 in each group and is not only going over safety procedures but also quizzing individuals about their understanding. The crew are sporting life vests, not the bulky orange devices in our closets, but much smaller versions much like those that are featured in airplane safety videos.

At 10:25, we enter a lock in which we are lifted up before the exit gates open. We will learn later that all of the locks on the Rhine and Main will move us up, but those on the Danube will go down. I can't see if other vessels are behind us, but I do note a barge in front of us, tethered to the port wall (we are at the starboard). About 10 minutes later, I can see the exit gate opening in an upward direction, unlike the horizontal opening of the gates at the Ballard Locks in Seattle.

I try to return to the cabin, but see that FIRE DOORS have closed at the entrances to both floors. So, I chat a bit with one of the employees at the Reception Desk. I ask him why the ship stopped along the shore for about 15 minutes about a half-hour earlier. He said that a few maintenance workers came on board and that they would disembark at the next stop. I ask why the crew are sporting life jackets instead of the bulky ones for the passengers. He says, hesitantly, "Well, we are younger than most tourists, so we don't need the extra buoyancy. Our vests will barely keep us above water, so we have to tread hard."

When I inquire as to how fast this river boat travels, he replies "about as fast as a bicycle." When I press for a more quantitative estimate, he said "about three knots."

"What is a knot?" I hear you ask. "Well, it's one nautical mile per hour," I reply, condescendingly. "Uh, so what is a nautical mile," you inquire. In truth, I've forgotten the answer, but to the rescue comes this description that I wrote in my 2018 Netherlands-Belgium-Ireland travelogue:

Wikipedia gives this extremely "clear" description: "A nautical mile (symbol M, NM or nmi) is a unit of distance that is approximately the length that spans one minute of arc on the surface of the Earth, measured along any meridian. By international agreement it has been set at 1,852 metres exactly (about 6,076 feet)." Note the use of commas in place of periods, just to confuse us.

Perhaps it would be clearer if I told you that 1 NM is 1.1507794480235 mile? (The laptop's conversion calculator doesn't know about significant figures, does it?) I think it would be safe to say, simply, that a nautical mile is a bit longer than a mile by about 15%. Now some smarty-pants is going to ask "What is meant by a *knot*?" Well, my children, one knot is a speed of one nautical mile per hour. Right? Right. That's 1.852 km per hour or 1.151 miles per hour.

The captain assembles a third group of crew for his safety drill, but fortunately this is the final one. And, *mirabile dictu**, the Fire Doors open and all is right with the world.

*A colleague in the English Department at the University of Tennessee tells the story of a rather mediocre student who, one day, turned in a remarkably good paper. My colleague wrote *mirabile dictu* on the front page and returned it to the student. A day or so later, the faculty member got a call from his department head - apparently the student had gone directly to the main office to complain that his professor had called him a miserable dick.

I return to the cabin and use my laptop to read (skim, really) the news at *The Seattle Times*, *The Tacoma News Tribune*, and *The New York Times*. The phone rings. It's the employee whom I'd been speaking with, worried that I wasn't going to be able to have any lunch. I told him that I wasn't planning on lunch - rather I would go to Alfred's for a coffee and a couple of their cookies.

OBSERVATIONS: (from today and later in the trip)

- As we cruise on the Rhine and Main, the hillsides to the left and right are covered with vineyards. All appear to be healthy and ready for plucking. But how in the hell does one do this for those fields that are on steep hills? I imagine that it's back-breaking enough when the vineyards are on level ground, but the ones that we are seeing could best be harvested by a mountain goat (if such mountain goat were to suddenly grow opposable thumbs.)
- Again, on both rivers, we see numerous campgrounds with close-packed campers, RV's., and mobile

homes of every description and size. Gabriella tells us that as soon as the sun comes out on a regular basis and the air warms up, Germans take to their vehicles for short or long vacations. We see families swarming here and there, some cooking, some sun-bathing, some swimming in the murky river.

- On the Rhine (and to a lesser extent on the Main), many barges appear to be permanent homes for families. They have one or two cars at the stern of the barge behind the living quarters. I imagine that these barges are company owned and that the families are renters, but maybe not.

Following my coffee-and-cookie-lunch, I return to the cabin and begin typing this travelogue (while I can still read - or guess at - my scribbled notes). Lee returns at 3:30 with glowing tales of the Floriade - and she has the photos to establish the accuracy of her report. "Exhausted" by my day of sitting around, I take a little nap at 5:00. At 6:00, we go to the Panorama Lounge for drinks and conversation, along with information about the next day's excursions. Then at 6:30 it's to Compass Rose for dinner. Also at 6:30, *MS Esprit* leaves Nijmegen and heads to Köln. We sit at a table for four, hoping for someone to join us, but (alas) we eat alone. The service is impeccable and the food is excellent: I have salmon salad, onion soup, roast beef, chocolate tart (all chosen from an extensive menu) and wine, then coffee. We are back in our cabin at 8:00 and in bed at 10:00 after this "exhausting" day (at least for Lee.)

TUESDAY, MAY 31

It's amazing, but we sleep until 7:45. The day begins cloudy, but shortly changes to sunny. Following our showers, we head to Arthur's for breakfast: corn flakes, roll, cheese, juice, coffee. Only two other travelers arrive during our time here. When each of them leaves, a ship's employee gives a very vigorous disinfect of the table and chair (including the table and chair legs). Is this necessary, given that we've been told that the virus does not last on surfaces?

At 10:00, our tour guides give an overview of the journey from Amsterdam to Budapest. They caution inexperienced bicyclists that it's a mistake to suddenly think that they can ride several miles - better they should shun the bike rides, but still be aware that walking over cobblestones can cause problems. At 10:45, it's back to our cabin.

Because I didn't go on yesterday's excursion, I head to the Reception Desk to get an ear-bud for my Vox Box. I also check if there will be a group for slower walkers today. The answer is yes. We'll all walk to the Köln Cathedral, but the "mellow-yellow" groups will use fewer stairs and be able to sit on benches during the trek. Following, the cathedral, we'll walk a short distance to the Ludwig Museum (modern art) before walking back to the ship.

We are back in our cabin and read for a while. Barge traffic continues, both up river and down; sometimes there are three "lanes" of ship traffic. The ship arrives in Köln at noon. At 12:15, we have a light lunch at Compass Rose: salad, roll and butter, coffee. At 1:30 we gather for our excursion. All will go to the cathedral, first. Then Gabriella will lead a group to the museum while Razvan takes the "hard core" drinkers to a traditional pub.

The local guide for the "mellow-yellow" group (about eight of us, including Lee who didn't have to join us laggards) is Aylin (pronounced Eileen). She is excellent: full of knowledge, witty, accommodating, and in possession of perfect English. (I do ask her, however, why she pronounces Nazi with a soft Z- even in the U.S., most people give it the correct German pronunciation.) I'm sorry that I didn't record her patter, but here are some salient facts:

- The local beer is Köhlsch. Don't expect to find anything else at a traditional pub. It is served in a long narrow glass. The established procedure is to slap one's coast on the table if a refill is desired. When one has finally finished, the coaster is placed upside-down on top of the glass; on it will be pencil marks



indicating just how many beers you've consumed.

- The beer steins that one associates with Germany are found only in Munich. Similarly, Oktoberfest is a purely Munich-based celebration.
- Köln is Germany's fourth largest city, following Berlin, Munich, and Hamburg. In fifth place is Frankfurt. The culture is very different in each city. Residents of Köln tend to be more relaxed (and less Germanic). We are on the left side of the Rhine. In all German rivers, left and right are in relation to which way the river flows. Here, the right side of the river has less expensive housing.
- Köln was heavily bombed during World War II, but the cathedral was largely spared, mainly because allied pilots used it as a landmark during their raids. Construction of the cathedral began in 1248, but was halted when money ran out and when a large portion of the population died in the plague. It wasn't completed until the 19th century.
- Köln is Germany's oldest city (not that there was anything called Germany at its founding). It was ruled by the Romans, the HRE, ... and the Nazis.
- Aylin prompts our group to say what characteristics we think Germans possess. Some of the adjectives offered are: precise, strict, rule-follower, engineers, builders, authoritarian.
- The Rhine, today, is not where it used to be. For years, it was some 100 meters inland from here, running right through the middle of the city; when it flooded (as it did often), the city remained under water for days. So the path of the Rhine was changed. And, there is a flood wall running the full length of the river. We don't see it because it is buried under the sidewalk. But we do see the "manhole covers" under which metal poles pop up and along which steel planks are installed.



We don't go into the cathedral (although we could have done so) but rather follow Gabriella to the Ludwig Museum. It has an extensive collection of modern art, including Americans like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. But its primary focus is on Europeans, including what it claimed to be the world's third largest collection of Picasso. In addition to Picasso paintings and sculptures, we enjoy works by such well-known artists as Mondrian, Leger, Giacometti, etc., and a variety of German Expressionist artists whose names are not familiar. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Museum_Ludwig



Our group breaks up as we, individually, explore different rooms and artists. The walk to the cathedral and the traversal of the museum have tired me out. I take advantage of benches in the various galleries to rest, while Lee continues her exploration of the facility. We were required to don masks when entering the building, but shortly before our time has ended an employee tells us (and everyone else) that the mask requirement has been lifted.

Before returning to the ship, we stop in the café. I have only a coffee. Lee orders a slice of a very rich cake and, to her regret, an iced coffee that comes with ice cream and whipped cream. Burp!

Exhausted and dripping with sweat (even though the temperature is probably in the low 60s), we follow landmarks given to us by Aylin and Gabriella to find our way back to the ship. Although it's not a very long walk (for *most* people), it is a challenge for me. I stop twice to sit on a bench and rest for a while. I decide that if future excursions are as walk-intensive as this, I'll need to avoid them and stay on board the ship. I intend to discuss this with Maggie.

We make it back to the ship at about 5:00. The social hour is at 6:00 and dinner is at 7:00. In the evening, a trio that calls itself *La Strada* performs: it consists of two women on violin and a man on amplified guitar. They play a wide variety of music (ranging from Vivaldi to Bert Bacharach) and are very good. Meanwhile, the ship has left Köln at 7:00, arriving in Bonn at 10:00. Despite this being Beethoven's home town, this stop is not part of our itinerary; instead, it's an opportunity for the musicians to disembark. At 10:30, we are underway, again, heading to Rudesheim. We head to bed at 11:00.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 1

We rise (prompted by the raucous alarm clock) at 7:45. My night had been a restless one, but I did manage to stay asleep for most of the time. At 8:30, we go for breakfast in Arthur's, then to the Panorama Lounge for commentary on the vast number of that we sail past on the Rhine. The best view might be from the sun deck, but my weary legs tell me, "Don't try going up those outside stairs" and so I don't. I am reminded of the tour guide on an earlier Rhine cruise who said that after the umpteenth castle, it's not unexpected for travelers to complain ABC!! (That's short for "Another Bloody Castle" but "could also refer to land visits in Europe where it means "Another Bloody Cathedral.")



Because we didn't arrive in the lounge at the start of the ship's passage through the Rhine Gorge, our "first" castle is Rheinfels, about one-third of the way along *Schlossweg* (a compound word that I just invented). Of course, we are treated to the Lorelei legend when we approach (duh) Lorelei; and to many other legends associated with other rocks, castles, bends of the river, whatever. The common features of these sagas are: (1) a beautiful young virgin - female, in case you wondered; (2) a cruel older relative; (3) a handsome young adventurer - male, of course; (4) ship wreckages; and (5) a tragic and often bloody end. After a lifetime's exposure to such morbid tales, is it any wonder that the Germans are so militaristic? (In the course of snapping many pictures of the distant castles, I realize that I forgot to set my camera for European day and time; thus the metadata for all of the early pictures from this trip will be wrong.)

Again, we are impressed by the volume of river traffic, not only the many barges but also river boats like ours. For example, we are passed by two Viking vessels heading downstream, separated by not more than five minutes. Lee and I quit the *Schlossspiel* (another invented word) at 11:00 while there are still more castles to view and we return to our cabin. The ship arrives in Rudesheim at noon.

I talk with Maggie about my difficulty, yesterday, in walking even the relatively short distances when we were in Köln and my worries about how I would fare on later excursions. She says that this afternoon's outing shouldn't be too taxing: instead of walking to the German restaurant in Rudesheim, there is a choo-choo (her words) train that can take us there and return us to the ship at the end of the day. But she acknowledges that most of the future days will present problems. She says that she'll consult with Gabriella and Razvan to see if they can suggest alternatives, but I told her not to worry, that I was aware that I might have a problem, that I considered cancelling my part of the trip but decided to try to brave it, and that I have no regrets if I spend the remainder of the voyage on board the ship. (She adds that walking will be even more difficult in the next few days because it appears that bad weather may be coming.)

At 12:15, we board the choo-choo, an "engine" pulling three "railroad cars" up a steep hill into town. Alas, after disembarking, there remains a fairly steep and cobble-stone-laden path to the restaurant that is associated with the Rudesheimer Schlosshotel. It is outdoors, but covered, and offers a large number of long tables. Because the walkers arrived before the choo-choo, most seats are already taken, but Lee and I find places at the two ends of one of the tables. Razvan places a small card in front of my place: NO CUMIN, NO CURRY. The lunch consists of a nice green salad, cream of celery soup, and Runderschnitzel plus potatoes, followed by apple cake and coffee. A three-man band (clarinet, keyboard,

and violin) play a variety of German music, including several vocal solos by a baritone (the clarinetist) and a counter-tenor (the violinist). Several of my fellow passengers get up to dance - more power to them!

We walk a short distance to Siegfried's Musikkabinett, a museum with a vast collection of automatic music-making machines, some from as long ago as the early 20th century. It is housed in a classic half-timbered house. Alas, there are steps and uneven floors with very few places to sit; and, as it is not air-conditioned, my time inside is unpleasant. Nevertheless, it is a wonderful and varied collection. Most amazing is that all of the instruments have been restored and are in working condition. The welcome news is that there is an elevator to return to ground level. <https://www.smmk.de/pages/en/welcome.php/>



The choo-choo returns us to the ship at 3:30, where we spend the remainder of the afternoon in Alfred's for drinking (coffee), working a New York Times crossword puzzle, and reading (Tove Ditlevsen's *Copenhagen Trilogy* proves to be very long and slow going. It will be a few more days until I finish it).

At 6:00, the ship leaves Rüdeshheim and we go for a drink in the Panorama Lounge, then to Compass Rose for an excellent dinner: baked cheese, clear tomato soup, sauerbraten, dessert. The food throughout the journey will be prove to be excellent, varied, elegantly prepared and presented, and not too filling. The chef, cooks, and serving staff deserve a huge amount of credit for this.

We return to our cabin, read for a while, and head to bed at 10:30.

THURSDAY, JUNE 2

[*Dear Reader:* If you are of a sensitive nature and are loath to hear about medical conditions and bodily functions, feel free to skip this paragraph and return news about the journey. Last January, my friendly neighborhood urologist informed me that my bladder was not emptying properly and that I needed to use a catheter. *Four times a day!* So, it's a nuisance, yes, but also something manageable ... until one thinks about the logistics of doing so when on an extended absence from home. First, there is the issue of packing about 60 of the damned things in a suitcase. Then, there's the matter of finding time and opportunity to employ these devices while on an airplane or out on one of the ship's excursions. So, I make an executive decision - instead of hewing to the prescribed "four times daily," it wouldn't be very wrong to fall back to three if that should prove more manageable. Even the physical act of using a catheter when confined to the tiny lavatory on an airplane which may be being buffeted by air turbulence proved not to be a serious impediment. Now I'm finished. You may resume your reading.]

The river Main is the main tributary of the Rhine and we joined it just after passing Wiesbaden and Mainz. We'll spend the entire day cruising the Main. In Compass Rose, where we have breakfast (fruit, rolls, cheeses, juice, and coffee), we discover a daily newsletter, *USA Times*, consisting of eight pages of news, mostly focused on the U.S., gleaned from many sources. It also has news about sports, finance, weather, and (of course) celebrities. The Daily Program cautions us that we'll be passing under some low bridges, so we have to be careful if we venture to the sun deck. The rear of the deck is closed, but the part forward of the wheelhouse is accessible. Nevertheless, if a crew member yells DUCK, don't assume that he is alerting you to a waterfowl in the family *Anatidae*.

At 9:00, Gabriella does a presentation about the Main and it is followed by a glass blowing exhibition at 10:00. We're told that the intended glassblower, Dieter, has taken ill but is replaced by one Kalle,* who is

*Wertheimer Glaskunst was founded in 1841 by "Karl Ittig of I" (no, I don't understand the strange name). One of his descendants is "Karl of II" who is also known as Kalle. His business card gives his name as Karl_the_German. With all of these aliases, he could be part of a witness-protection program. See <http://www.glaskunst.de/index.php/en/family-history>

from the Ittig Glassblowing House in Wertheim. He is a "mature" man with a wonderful mustache and an even better sense of humor. He is shown to the right. sans mustache. The man could have had a career as a stand-up comedian. Prior to the demonstration, I chat with him about glass blowing in Tacoma and Seattle, but he knows all about it. Not only has he worked with Chihuly for many years, he has also taught at Pilchuck and has taught several Chihuly students. He makes numerous trips to the Seattle area for his collaborations. He also visits the glassblowing studios in Eugene, OR, where techniques for fusing different colored glasses that expand/contract independently have been developed.



Much to my surprise, he has not only a propane tank (for the flame) but also an oxygen feed to get the flame hot enough to work the glass. He enlists one of the passengers to accompany him in drinking Jägermeister* from a specially designed glass of his invention. In his presentation, he also demonstrates

*From Wikipedia, it is "a German digestif made with 56 herbs and spices. Developed in 1934 by Wilhelm and Curt Mast, it has an alcohol by volume of 35% (61 degrees proof, or US 70 proof). The recipe has not changed since its creation."

the art of bending glass, blowing glass bubbles, and other tools of the trade.

Following the demonstration, we return to our cabin, but re-emerge at 12:15 for lunch at Compass Rose. At 2:00, the captain finds that our ship is ahead of schedule, so he makes a brief stop at Miltenberg, a town of about 10,000 in Lower Franconia. Lee goes onshore for a bit of sight-seeing and to buy a gelatto (there are three competing gelatto stores, quite near one another). She returns with many pictures of half-timbered houses. (Shown to the right is not one of her photos, but, rather, one downloaded from the internet.)



At 6:00 we go to the lounge for a drink and for information about tomorrow's excursions. At 7:00, everyone is seated in Compass Rose for Chef Aleksander's "Signature Dinner," a six-course extravaganza of excellent food; even the table setting is special, with the napkin folded as if it were a dress shirt with a bow tie. We are seated with Michael and Diane (from Nashua, NH). There is a lot of "theater" associated with the meal. The first course, "Smoked Barbarie Duck Breast," is under a cover that when lifted gives off a puff of smoke (done by burning cherry plywood ahead of the meal). The second course is "Porcini Essence" (with mushrooms and truffle oil). Next came, "Sautéed Deep Sea Scallop," which is followed by the main course, "Land & Sea Duet" (beef tenderloin, sautéed shrimp, vegetables) which is brought to our table by two servers who place a dome-covered plate in front of each of us, then lift the domes simultaneously while shouting *Voilà!* (At a table for eight, four servers are required to perform in unison.) I found it silly, but everyone else enjoyed it. (Alternative choices were "Braised European Black Cod Fillet" and "Eggplant Parmegiana." Dessert was "Chef Surprise Bourbon Vanilla Crème Brulée" for which the room lights were dimmed so that we could see the pale flame on each serving. Of course there was tea or coffee and "Petits Fours & Cognac.")



We return to our cabin at 9:30 where we read and use the internet. We are in bed at 10:30

FRIDAY, JUNE 3

We are up at 8:00 and are greeted by another bright, sunny day (but a spoilsport tells us that rain is coming soon). *MS Esprit* has been cruising since June 1 and is scheduled to arrive at Würzburg at 11:00 this morning. We go to the Panorama Lounge for commentary by Razvan, broadcasting from the sun deck; we order only coffee because at 10:00 there is a buffet brunch being served in Compass Rose. Razvan informs us that of the 68 locks that we'll enter, those on the Rhine and Main will raise the ship whereas those on the Danube will lower it. He also shares a brief history of Germany, stopping (alas) in

the early 18th century when things become really interesting; and he also recounts some of the bloody legends that Gabriella did not relate the other day.

Following the lecture, we repair to Compass Rose for the brunch. We are joined by Marilyn and Jack (from Crofton, MD). Back in our cabin, Lee decides not to go to Würzburg as planned, resulting in a phone call from the desk making sure that we had not forgotten or, worse, died. We assure the caller that all is well. I resume my slow, but steady, progression into Ditlevsen's *Copenhagen Trilogy*, which, as the title suggests, is actually three books in one. Kindle does not have page numbers, just estimates of what per cent of the book has been read, so I consult Amazon. It shows the physical book as containing "only" 384 pages, which seems to be far fewer than what I am sensing. But do I dare question the all-powerful Amazon? No, I do not.

For those who are going on one of today's excursions, there is a wine-tasting at 11:30 followed by bus travel either to Würzburg or Rothenburg. Meanwhile, the ship has set sail at 1:00, with the promise that it will meet the returning travelers when it docks at Ochsenfurt at 5:00 and they arrive by bus. Those of us who remain on the ship can observe on-shore activities: German families having picnics, swimming in the (murky) river, sunning themselves, kayaking, and playing games. Doesn't anyone go to work or to school anymore? The shore line is also packed tight with RVs and campers, as we observed on the Rhine.

At 3:30, Lee and I go to the Panorama Lounge, through whose windows the on-shore scene of fun and frolic continues to unfold. At 5:00, passengers from the tours begin to arrive and they are quite wet as the promised rains have begun. Back in our room, I work on this travelogue and solve today's Wordle, something that we'll continue to do every day of the journey. At 6:00, it's back to the lounge for cocktails; we sit with Diane and Michael, who also join us at dinner at 6:45. The heavy rains are continuing. Outside, not in Compass Rose. Dinner, as expected, is excellent: tuna salad (whose simple name doesn't reveal the artistry involved), cheese soup (ditto), shrimp and duck (ditto, again), and apple crumble with ice cream. During dinner, we tell our companions about the weird couple on our Adriatic cruise who wore sashes and tiaras or crowns throughout the trip. I send them pictures of the couple, as well as a link to *De Duva* (the wonderful satire on Ingmar Bergman films) and a link to my travelogues.

The *MS Esprit* has departed Ochsenfurt at 7:00. At 9:00, there is a concert with Adrian and Benny (one on clarinet the other on guitar) who are not as proficient as Tuesday's trio of musicians. At 10:00 we are back in our cabin - and in bed at 11:00.

SATURDAY, JUNE 4

We arise at 7:00. We have our typically light breakfast* at Arthur's. There are two big surprises: (1) the

*In addition to cold cuts, fruit, cheeses, coffee, and juice, there are canisters of three different dry cereals. On two or three mornings, I'll sample what *looks* like corn flakes but doesn't *behave* or *taste* like Kellogg's Corn Flakes. In particular, the flakes become terminally soggy shortly after milk (even a very small amount) is poured over them. The fact that the milk is "full octane" (i.e., not fat-free) should have nothing to do with this.

egg, which was hard-boiled yesterday, proves to be soft-boiled and cold, today. I am fortunate to have discovered this before making too big a mess. (2) The midges that have been present throughout the ship have decided to have a feast on my sacred body. I don't feel it or notice it, but one of the staff alerts me to the blood streaming down my right arm - and I have the blood spots on my note paper to prove it. Two tiny puncture wounds have produced a copious amount of blood.

Our ship has been sailing overnight and reaches Bamberg at 2:00 in the afternoon. At 10:30, Razvan does an excellent presentation on the history and successes/failures of the European Union. I was unable take good notes on the lecture because I ran out of note paper, an excuse as lame as "the dog ate my homework."

FUN FACTS:

- The national anthem of the EU is the "Ode to Joy," using Schiller's words and Beethoven's music but without giving credit to either man. At least in the U.S., we learn in school that the lyrics for our national anthem were written by Francis Scott Key, but who in the hell wrote the (impossible to sing) music? Wikipedia provides this answer: "The poem was set to the tune of a popular British song written by John Stafford Smith for the Anacreontic Society, a men's social club in London." Oh.
- The EU has 27 member nations (it used to have 28, but the one to the far northwest decided to leave) and 24 official languages. What a headache for the interpreters!

Following a discovery briefing at 12:15 about the two Bamberg excursions, we have lunch at Compass Rose. In Gabriella's briefing, we learn that town names ending in -berg and -burg convey different meanings: berg refers to a hill and burg refers to a fortress or castle.

Lee goes off on her excursion at 2:30 while I repair to our stateroom to read (the tedious Ditlevsen book and *The New Yorker*) and use the laptop to work on this travelogue and to surf the internet. At 6:00, we're in the Panorama Lounger for drinks followed by dinner in Compass Rose with Ray (the geologist), not Ray (the chemical engineer). The food, along with a choice of red or white wines, was, again, excellent: salmon salad, sauerkraut soup, stuffed chicken, chocolate lava cake, and coffee. (My brief naming of the courses doesn't do justice to their descriptions in the menu nor to their excellence in preparation and presentation.) The kitchen staff and the servers are exceptional.

We head to bed at 10:30. The ship, which had set sail at 8:00, will cruise overnight to Nürnberg, arriving at 7:30 tomorrow morning.

SUNDAY, JUNE 5

We rise at 6:45 for breakfast at Alfred's. I have coffee, juice, roll with butter, cheeses, and cold cuts, but *no* faux corn flakes. I do take a chance on the egg, however, and it turns out to be hard-boiled. Whew!

At 7:30, the ship docks at Nürnberg. I decided to take a chance and go on today's excursion, having been promised by Maggie "not too much walking." It's a warm, sunny day as we head to the buses at 9:00. We spend about 1.5 hours inside the Nürnberg Court House, beginning in the room that was actually used for the war crime trials, then viewing the displays in the upstairs gallery. Our local guide (Fiona) is excellent - and easy to understand, as she is Scottish (so what did you expect for a Fiona?), not German. My legs are "complaining" as we walk past the displays, so I take advantage of strategically deployed wooden stools. I miss a lot of the display, but Lee and I had been here in 2012 when we spent a good three hours reading almost everything.

We are then bused to the Faber Castle, the home of the Faber family who have been making pencils and pens since the 1850s. Of course, we have to hear twice (once from our local guide and then from Siegfried, a Faber guide, who is very tall and somewhat limited in English fluency), the history of the family; who married whom, who were the heirs, who settled law suits, etc. The tour consists of some time in the welcome center followed by a Siegfried-led-walk (sort of a Siegfried Rhine Journey) to the castle, itself, during which time it has begun to rain. We tour the family quarters with the surprisingly modern (and enormous) bathrooms used by the lord and lady of the mansion. We see the ball room, business office, and bedrooms of the family. And we finish with a wine tasting. As expected, my legs are screaming for relief, but for most of the tour there is no place to sit (chairs and couches have *verboten* signs on them). I take advantage of sturdy walls to lean against. The good news is that collapsible chairs are provided during the wine tasting. The bus returns us to the ship at 12:15.

FUN FACT: Faber makes about 2 billion* pencils every year in about 100 different colors. They also

*I don't know if Germans consider a billion to be a thousand-million (as in the U.S.) or a million-million

(as in England) but whichever it is, 2 billion is a very large number of pencils.

produce many very expensive pens, some of which are on display in glass cases in the welcome center; the euro prices could be in five figures. They also make slide rules, erasers, rulers, and fine art supplies at 14 factories scattered across the globe. Alas, we don't get to see the manufacturing process (aside from a grainy video) but we do get to hear the history of the family whose patriarch was Kaspar Faber (1730–84). <https://www.faber-castell.eu/> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faber-Castell>

At 3:30, *MS Esprit* sets sail for Regensburg. A half-hour later there is an excellent lecture about the Main-Danube Canal by Anne Hayner-Hefner, an engineer who has lived in Germany for forty years and has become an expert on the waterways. And during the next few hours, we will enter the three tallest locks of this voyage, each of which will lift the ship some 25 meters. While waiting for the lecture to begin, we talk with Razvan and ask about where/when he acquired such excellent (if also heavily accented) English. He credited American television shows, principally *The Three Stooges*. Really?

In the Panorama Lounge, we are joined by Ann and Barbara, sisters who are traveling together because their husbands decided that they'd rather stay home. Ann is from Portland (the west coast version) and Barb from Minneapolis. We also have dinner with them. I arrange to send Ann the same things that I sent to Friday's dinner partners: the Bergman satire *De Duva*; pictures of the tiara-clad, sash-clad weird tourists on the Adriatic cruise; and links to all of my travelogues.

We are back in our cabin at 7:30 where we read and peck away on the computer. We're in bed at 11:00.

MONDAY, JUNE 6

It's sunny this morning, but rain showers are predicted in Regensburg where we expect to arrive at 11:30, but in fact do so at 8:45. (Did someone have a heavy foot on the accelerator?) In Alfred's, where we have a light breakfast, Ray (the geologist) shows me some of the map tracking apps that he has on his iPhone. Alas, it's not available on my Android phone, but both GeoMap and Google Maps are reasonable substitutes.

At 10:00, Razvan, outfitted in toga and sandals, does a presentation on "The Roman Empire and its Legacy." Existing from 753 BCE until 1453 CE, it was the longest lasting empire in the history of the world. The breadth of its reach was enormous, stretching as far as Constantinople in 1453. Among the achievements of the Roman empire are these: a calendar with 365 days and a leap day every four years; aqueducts; public baths; concrete; Roman roads; a courier system; bound books; "air conditioning" (sort of); Caesarean section; a system of law; the Latin alphabet and script; Romance languages; Christianity.

At 11:00, Maggie does a briefing about how Covid testing will be done for people returning to the U.S. where a negative test no more than 24 hours before arrival is required. She hopes that this requirement will be lifted before we reach Budapest and, *mirabile dictu* (see p, 8), it will be as we'll learn on June 10, Thus there's no point in my describing the procedures that she's developed for people returning home on May 12 and, as is the case for us, May 13.

Lunch at Compass Rose offers a wide variety of sausages from different regions of Germany. I return to our cabin while Lee leaves for a walking tour of Regensburg at 3:15. One of the highlights is the Thurn and Taxis Palace, which has nothing to do with rose thorns or taxicabs: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thurn_und_Taxis.

At 5:30 in the Panorama Lounge, four a *capella* singers calling themselves s the Regensburger Spitzegquartett entertain. All had been members of the cathedral's boy choir, but they are now adults (about 30 years of age) in a variety of professions. They are excellent, offering music ranging from Gregorian chant to barbershop. At 6:30, we have dinner in Compass Rose with Susan and David from Keswick, VA.

The ship sets sail for Passau at 8:00, while we stay in our cabin, occupying ourselves with reading, crossword puzzles, and the internet. We are in bed at 11:00.

TUESDAY, JUNE 7

When we awaken at 7:15, we see that it is raining hard, which might make today's excursion (for Lee) miserable. We head to Arthur's for breakfast just as the ship is coming out of a lock. Not having learned my lesson, I try the corn flakes again - terrible (soggy and tasteless). At 8:30 we dock in Passau. On looking out the windows of Arthur's, we spot an enormous traffic jam on the north side of the river. Cars, panel trucks, large semis are all halted and not moving at all. Our assumption of a fatal car accident turns out not to be true. Instead, we learn, later in the day, that some activists super-glued themselves to the pavement. Yep, that will do it!

We have a vivid, but also painful, memory of Passau. In May, 2000 we were on a KD cruise ship on the Danube, sailing from Budapest to Regensburg and en route to Passau. Let me quote from my earlier travelogue:

The day takes an unexpected ... and painful course. At about 9:00 in the morning, Lee and I go to the observation deck to read but decide to play a little ping-pong first. (We had done this on two earlier occasions.) I hit a magnificent passing shot which she lunges for, catching the tip of her sandal in the indoor/outdoor carpet, causing her to fly face-first into the carpet and the side of the ship. (Had this been an Olympic Event, the judges would have awarded her 9's and 9.5's with a degree of difficulty of at least 2.8!) What a bloody mess! She is bleeding from her nose (on the tip, from which she has removed a chunk of skin, and from the inside); her glasses are knocked off; and the bridge of her nose begins to swell and discolor; the hematoma quickly passes to her left eye and later to her right; her hand is covered with blood, but this is from the nose; her left arm is also skinned and bruised as is her left knee and lower leg. One of the passengers (one of the few younger than we) is a nurse, Jan, who commandeers a first aid kit from the ship and another from one of the passengers and begins patching Lee up. By this time we have her sitting on a chaise, stretched out and covered with a blanket. Members of the crew (both those who sail the ship and those who run the hotel) come over with ice, towels, etc. and are most solicitous (probably in fear of being sued by crazy Americans). After a while, Lee says that she'd like to go to the cabin because "I want to see what I look like." "No you don't!" Jan and I shout in unison. What I find amazing is that no lawyer (from among the large number of retired people on board) comes running forth to offer his/her services. Could it be that this is a lawyer-free ship? Nah.

When we docked at Passau, we took a taxi to a hospital. X-Rays of the nose suggested that it was not broken. The English-speaking doctor assured Lee she would not die of the injury. Cognizant of our heading toward the Czech Republic, I wondered if Smetana's "The Bartered Bride" should have been recast as "The Battered Bride."

Well! In the year 2022, no such mishap befalls my lovely bride, so at 9:00 she departs for a walking tour of the city while I remain onboard to read and work on this travelogue. Lee returns at 12:15, quite wet. Lee was very impressed with the local guide, a German-English lawyer who led her group through Passau. A college lecturer and administrator, he makes extra money by guiding passengers from Tauck, Ama, Avalon, and other tour companies, but *never* Viking. He views their clientele as hopelessly ignorant and uninterested in the things they see. Lee reports that the city had numerous groups of Viking passengers whom she described as "down-market" or some such pejorative.

Of course, Lee and I have had occasion to regale people with tales of Viking river cruise accidents that we had observed and read about. We'll learn about a more "delicious" Viking mishap later on the journey. Razvan expresses the idea that Viking specializes in inexperienced voyagers. Unlike Tauck (and others) for whom tourists return year after year, with Viking it's just once or twice before they realize that other cruise lines are much better (and, because excursions and other amenities are included) not much pricier.

Following lunch at Compass Rose, we go to the Panorama Lounge at 2:30 to read while the ship departs at 1:30 for Melk. A lecture by Razvan about the river, which is promised, never occurs. At 3:00, we are in yet another lock, but from the windows of the lounge we can watch the crew as they tie us up at various strategic spots. It is now raining very hard - and those passengers who opted for the Salzburg tour return to the ship when it stops in Aschach, Austria, soaked through and through. One says, that even his underwear is wet. (We take his word, rather than hoping for a demonstration.)

Today is Steve's birthday. I mailed his card and checked the day before we left Gig Harbor, so all that I could do today is to send an email greeting. The internet is a bit slower than it had been, but usable nonetheless. I spend the rest of the afternoon using the Kindle and reading news on the internet. Following drinks in the Panorama Lounge, we have dinner at Compass Rose, in which the main course features lobster bisque, then an excellent piece of beef with barbecue sauce and corn-on-the-cob, finished by an excellent dessert. Our companions are Pat and Jim from Glenwood, NY, a small town about 35 miles from Buffalo. According to Wikipedia, "Glenwood is a hamlet in southern Erie County, New York, United States. Straddling the Towns of Sardinia and Colden, it lies on New York State Route 240 and includes such places as Sprague Brook Park and the Kissing Bridge Ski Area. While it has a post office (zip code 14069), it does not have a flashing light."

At 9:00, three female musicians, who call themselves *Donau 3Klang*, perform for us. They came on board at Aschach and will disembark when the ship stops briefly in Linz at 10:00. The group consists of a pianist, cellist, and violinist. All three are young, but excellent. The music ranged from Mozart to Lehar to Strauss (Joseph, not Richard).

At 10:00, we return to our cabin and then to bed.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 8

We are up at 6:15. Following breakfast at Arthur's, the "power walkers" leave at 8:30 to walk to Melk Abbey while the "sedentary older folks" take the bus at 8:45. I spend time in the lounge while our cabin is being cleaned. I do internet "stuff" and continue my reading of "The Copenhagen Trilogy," which is becoming quite a slog. Lee returns at 10:45, filled with glowing tales of the abbey. My "visit" is a virtual one, relying on these words from my 2010 travelogue:

... the Benedictine monastery, originally built in 830 but destroyed and rebuilt in the 18th century ... The *Rough Guide* describes it as "a flamboyant Baroque pile ... with grisly remains such as skeletons that are fully dressed" and so it is. The most hallowed of the relics, alas not accessible to tourists, is the skeleton of St. Koloman; nevertheless we are fortunate to see a tooth and his lower jawbone (unattached to the rest of his body, I should add) incorporated into a monstrosity: a golden cross with a piece of wood from Christ's cross inside (*guaranteed!!!*) and covered with too many diamonds and other jewels to count.

It is a bright, sunny day (quite a contrast to yesterday) but with some clouds moving in. We have lunch at Compass Rose. The ship departs for Tulin at 1:00. We then move to the Panorama Lounge where Razvan delivers a talk about the Wachau Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage Site consisting of fifty miles of vineyards and castles. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wachau>

The Rhine-Main-Danube river system, 2200 miles long, flows through nine countries and is the only river in the world to connect four capital cities (Vienna, Budapest, Bucharest, and Bratislava). The termini are Rotterdam and The Black Sea. The Danube has seven species of fish, the largest of which are sturgeon and catfish. The river is polluted, but the fish thrive.

This is followed by ice cream and local treats. It was at this lecture that Razvan revealed (without naming the offending company) that, in 2019, a cruise ship had damaged a Danube lock so badly that it was closed for 14 days. Numerous cruise lines were affected, of course, but most managed by busing passengers from, say, a south-bound ship to a north-bound ship on the other side of the lock which turned

around and headed south. Without even checking, we immediately knew that the cruise line was Viking. In fact, it was the *Viking Var* which we actually got to see a day or two later.
<https://www.cruisemapper.com/news/5686-Viking-var-hits-danube-river-lock-germany>

At 2:30, I return to the room (more Ditlevsen on Kindle) and slow internet. And I can announce triumphantly that I have finally come to the end of "The Copenhagen Trilogy." This book received outstanding reviews, but it left me cold. Yes, she had an impoverished childhood and she had to struggle to get her writing and poetry noticed, but the story is told in such a flat unemotional voice that it's hard to find much empathy for her.

At 5:15 this evening, a bus will take us to downtown Vienna and the Pallavicini Palace for an elegant evening of music and food. <http://www.palais-pallavicini.at/en/> The ship will sail at 6:00, arriving in Vienna at 9:00 for our return. Before leaving the ship, we pick up cards that indicate our preference for dinner: veal (red card), salmon (blue), strudel (yellow) and these are to be placed in front of us at the table as a sign for the servers. My card also says "no cumin, no curry" (as if this were needed). Following a surprisingly long walk (puff-puff) from the ship to the bus, it's then an hour-long drive to the palace. One can ascend the elegant two-story long staircase or (like us) take the world's slowest elevator which holds two people and no more.

We emerge from the elevator into a large room in which a violinist and pianist are playing music by Mozart: *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* and a movement from one of his serenades. We are then ushered into a large dining room with tables set for eight people (xxx or is it 10?) I regret not having brought my camera*

*I am reminded of our last night on Tauck's Japan tour where a spectacular dinner was enhanced by a demonstration by two sumo wrestlers ... and I had no camera.

because not only is the room splendid, the dinner is accompanied by musical performances. First, a woman in a Viennese gown tells us the history of the palace, but her accent is heavy and the microphone doesn't work very well, so we lost most of the story. Then, we are treated to music (the violinist and pianist from earlier now augmented by a cellist), a tenor who sings two arias, two ballet dancers who perform two short skits, then a return by the woman who joins the tenor in a duet, and then five more musicians arrive (violin, viola, flute, double bass, drums and triangle). They are excellent!



The food is delicious but not any better than the elegant meals being served onboard by Chef Alexander. (An aside - the only Tauck employees on the ship are Maggie, Razvan, and Gabriella. The rest of the crew - dining, housekeeping, sailing, etc. - are employees of Scylla. Razvan tells Lee that they are the best crew he has ever sailed with. They are largely eastern European, with a few south Asians sprinkled in.) But the dinner service at the *Palais Pallavicini* is a well-orchestrated production. There are five male servers, dressed in tuxedos and sporting white gloves, who move in unison, according to a hand signal from the lead waiter, to deliver plates, then food, then remove food and plates, then deliver more plates, more food, etc. It's quite an extravaganza. We are served green salad, soup, the main course, dessert,*

*The dessert is a Viennese specialty called *Schmankerl-Parfait* (iced cream with caramelized nuts topped with raspberry coulis and chocolate sauce)

coffee, and lots of wine. And between courses, the woman-in-charge returns and announces her presence with a small music box that plays, alternately, Mozart, Strauss, and I don't recall what else. The end of the evening is signaled by the musicians' playing the Rákóczy March, the central European version of "Goodnight Irene" or "Auld Lang Sane" that signals the end of festivities and time to leave.

We return to the ship, now docked in Vienna, at 10:00 and are in bed at 11:00.

THURSDAY, JUNE 9

We are up at 7:15. The morning begins cloudy. After a light breakfast at Arthur's, Lee gathers her goodies for a bus tour of central Vienna and an outing to Schönbrunn Palace, the summer residence of the Hapsburgs.* I work some crossword puzzles and I begin reading Elinor Lipman's "Rachel to the

*As they say, "it's good to be the king." The Hapsburgs also had a center city palace called Hofburg; and probably a host of other residences.

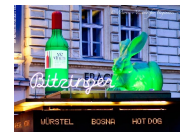
Rescue," another of the Kindle books that I secured by surreptitious means. It will turn out to be an amusing romp through a barely fictionalized Trump White House. The story in brief: Rachel Klein is a recent Duke graduate who secures a job in the White House Communications Office, helping to sort incoming mail; she then "graduates" to taping together the shreds of documents that Trump has created as he tears important papers to shreds. When she sends an email to a friend, complaining about her menial job, makes the mistake of sending it "reply to all" and she gets fired. As she is escorted from the White House, she is hit by a speeding car and winds up in the hospital with broken ribs and a concussion. All hell breaks out when it's revealed that the car is driven by a female optometrist who is Trump's lover. Because our room has not yet been serviced by housekeeping, I spend much of the morning in Panorama Lounge.

Last night, Ann and Barb (the sisters mentioned a few pages back) said that Maggie had informed them that the four of us would be able to get our COVID test onboard the ship on Sunday. The reason for any confusion is that we are staying overnight in Amsterdam and not returning to the U.S. until Monday. So we're not eligible to get tested on Saturday when everyone else is. Today, I talked with Maggie and she confirmed this for me. (As already noted, we'll learn that the COVID test requirement has been lifted.)

At 10:30, the cabin is ready for me to return, so I do some computer stuff and wait for Lee's arrival. After lunch at Compass Rose, we take a shuttle bus to the Albertina Museum in central Vienna. Located between the opera house and the afore-mentioned Hofburg Complex, it houses a superb collection of modern and impressionist art, with a special emphasis on Picasso and Munch. Of course, it also has art from earlier eras, some (but not all) produced in Austria. We spend nearly two hours here, although because my legs are rebelling, I need to sit on strategically placed benches in various galleries. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albertina>



Both Razvan and Gabriella are nearby, guiding people to their intended destinations. For us, he shows us a very long escalator that allows us to avoid climbing many stairs at the museum. Our landmark to locate the bus that will return us to the ship is a green bunny that sits atop a sausage stand. Similar quirky "sculptures" are found throughout Vienna and serve as landmarks for tourists.



The only downside of the visit to the art gallery? I spot my first New York Yankees logo cap. Why is it that the New York Yankees logo is so popular, all over the world? We see them in Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. Dear Reader, do you wonder why I view such things with deep revulsion? Let me 'splain. I've hated the Yankees since I was a boy and a passionate fan of the Brooklyn Dodgers. During my childhood, the Dodgers went to the World Series several times and each time were defeated by the Yankees. Now do you



wonder that I hate them? And I'm not the only one. For example, Joshua Ferris in "To Rise Again at a Decent Hour" reveals himself to be a long-suffering Boston Red Sox fan. He says the following about his nemesis "... the Yankees of all teams – probably objectively the most crass and reviled team in the history of sports, with that obnoxious logo so well known, the interlocking N and Y you can find on swag in every part of the world, a symbol so offensive that only the Nazi swastika compares with it, and yet still regarded by so many as benign, something to admire, even worship, revealing the true extent of the human capacity for mass delusion ... " Couldn't have said it better myself.

Austria is not a place that one thinks of when considering painters and sculptors. The best known Viennese visual artists are Egon Schiele and Gustave Klimt, but I would have trouble naming any others. In striking contrast is the vast number of musical composers who lived and flourished in this city from the late 18th through the 20th century. The first who come to mind are Mozart* and Beethoven* but there are

*Neither was born in Vienna. Mozart came from Salzburg and spend the last ten years of his life in this city where he composed some of his most important works. Beethoven was born in Bonn, but moved to Vienna for his final 35 years. I've been told that some Austrians like to claim that Beethoven was Austrian and Hitler was German when, in fact, the exact opposite is the case.

so very many others: Franz Schubert, Arnold Schoenberg, Johann Strauss, Anton Bruckner, Alban Berg, Gustav Mahler,* and on and on.

*Consider, if you will, these delicious lyrics that come from Tom Lehrer's song about Alma Mahler Gropius Werfel:

The loveliest girl in Vienna/ Was Alma--the smartest as well.
 Once you picked her up on your antenna / You'd never be free of her spell.
 Her lovers were many and varied/ From the day she began her beguine.
 There were three famous ones whom she married / And God know how many between.
 Alma, tell us,– all modern women are jealous--
 Which of your magical wands / Got you Gustav and Walter and Franz?

The first one she married was Mahler / Whose buddies all knew him as Gustav,
 And each time he saw her he'd holler, "Ach, dot is de fräulein I must have!"
 Their marriage, however, was murder / He'd scream to the heavens above,
 "I'm writing 'Das Lied von der Erde,'/ Und she only wants to make love!"
 Alma, tell us,– all modern women are jealous--
 You should have a statue in bronze/ For bagging Gustav and Walter and Franz.

Following dinner in Compass Rose, we are entertained by a Dixieland jazz band that calls itself "Funny Fellows." The program is a mixture of familiar melodies and some slapstick humor that could well have been omitted. But the players are superb musicians. The leader of the band (also the purported comic) played trumpet, flugelhorn, and violin (not all at the same time). He is accompanied by a musician on sousaphone; another on drums/snare drums/cymbals; another on accordion; and a final artist who alternated between clarinet and saxophone. At the end, the leader and the clarinetist played the kazoo. I loved the performance, if not the silly humor.

FRIDAY, JUNE 10

We are up at 7:30 and, because Lee claims to be hungry, have a full breakfast at Compass Rose. The ship leaves Vienna at 7:30 and will arrive in Bratislava at 1:00. Because our room is being cleaned, we stay in the Panorama Lounge for a "Disembarkation Briefing" by Maggie. Part of the briefing includes the complicated procedures by which departing passengers can get their COVID tests while still onboard the boat. She also slyly gives the information (without actually endorsing the idea) of flying first to Canada and then to the U.S.; no COVID test is required if one arrives by this route.

The briefing is followed by Gabriella's autobiographical tale, "Everyday Life Under Communism." It's a fascinating tale of the kinds of hardship, both economic and in terms of personal freedom, that existed under communist rule in Hungary. She tells how her father had to wait twelve years for the car that he had ordered to arrive. I was reminded of the sarcastic jokes about the Yugo, told to us by a couple of tour guides in Croatia in 2015:

Q: Why do Yugos come with rear window defrosters? Ans: So you can keep your hands warm when pushing it.

Q: What do you call a Yugo with brakes? Ans: Customized.

Q: What do you call the driver of a Yugo? Ans: A crash test dummy.

Q: Where does the name Yugo come from? Ans: You go, the car stays.

Q: What's on pages 7-8 of the Yugo manual? Ans: A bus schedule.

Q: What do you call a Yugo at the top of a hill? Ans: A miracle.

Q: What's the difference between a Yugo and a golf ball? Ans: You can drive a golf ball 300 yards.

Following lunch in Compass Rose, we attend an excellent lecture by Martin (no last name?) who is an administrator at the university in Bratislava. (He will also guide the tour that Lee goes on.) He is humorous, authoritative, and practiced in his delivery as he covers the geography, history, and culture of his country. Fun fact: Slovakia is smaller than Kentucky. Another fun fact: Slovakia is not Slovenia; the latter is where Melania Trump comes from. The population of Bratislava is slightly over 400,000.

At 2:30, Lee leaves for the walking tour and returns with glowing commentary about Martin [no last name]. I work on the internet during her absence. At 5:00, she takes advantage of the invitation to visit the wheel house (not to be confused with the fake house), but has no opportunity to steer the boat as we are docked. After the ritual drink episode* at Panorama Lounge, we are joined by Diane and Michael for

*After about the fifth social hour in the late afternoon, Lee decides to drink her way through the entire menu of exotic drinks that are shown on the bar menu. Her first request, Caipirinha (which is Brazil's national cocktail, made with cachaça, sugar, and lime) is rejected by the bar supervisor who tells her that cachaça is very strong and she would not like it. Other requests (not all on the same day) are honored, however: piña colada, cosmopolitan (twice), mojito, whiskey sour, gin and tonic. So many drinks, so few days. As for me, I stick with the single malt Macallan, occasionally opting for a German lager, Warsteiner.

dinner at Compass Rose. While we are all in the Panorama Lounge, Maggie comes in with the good news: the U.S. has lifted the COVID test requirement as of this Sunday. She says that anyone who wishes to be tested may do so, but there is the risk that a positive test would require a five-day quarantine in Budapest. The ship leaves at 7:00, *en route* to Budapest.

SATURDAY, JUNE 11

We are awake at 6:30 and enjoying breakfast in Arthur's. Starting at 8:00, as we sail into Budapest, Gabriella describes the magnificent buildings that we pass by. It is a bright sunny day and the government buildings, museums, etc. look magnificent on both sides of the river. Lee goes to the sun deck to take pictures. But because it is a hot morning, already, she opts not to go on the walking tour of the city. I stay in the room and am surprised when the hotel manager (I don't know her exact title) comes in *without knocking* to distribute gifts to us and the other passengers. These are small knick-knack angels for our Christmas tree.

At 1:00, we go to Compass Rose for an Hungarian-themed lunch. Shortly after, Lee goes into town on her own to shop (what else?) which is a shame because I was determined to spend zero money that might enrich the coffers of Viktor Mihály Orbán. I remain in our cabin to read, use the internet, and begin packing for disembarkation. During the social hour in the Panorama Lounge, the captain gives his farewell and, once again, introduces all of the crew. Dinner at 6:30 in Compass Rose is followed at 8:00 by a "Decadent Chocolate Buffet" in Panorama. The ship then embarks on a night-time cruise of the

harbor to see the buildings of Budapest lit up (but really to reposition the boat for departure of the guests tomorrow). And so to bed for our last evening onboard.

SUNDAY, JUNE 12

Up at 6:30, then to Compass Rose for a buffet breakfast. We finish packing and put our properly tagged suitcases in the hall for pickup at 9:00, then go to Panorama Lounge to wait for our group to be called. The room is full with departing passengers, but over time everyone is gone except for Ann, Barb, Lee and me. We four are flying to Amsterdam (our flight is not until 2:05) where all of us are staying overnight at the Hilton Amsterdam Airport Schiphol. Tomorrow, morning, the sisters will leave for Portland and Minneapolis, respectively, while our flight to the U.S. is not until 2:30 in the afternoon.

We anticipated that Group 12 (ours) would not be called until 11:30, but we are surprised when the car arrives at 10:15. We pass the domed Groupama Stadium, a multi-purpose arena (capacity 22,000), and the large Puskás Arena (capacity 67,000), used mainly for football (soccer). At the airport at 11:00, we are met by a Tauck representative who takes us to a second floor waiting area. About an hour later, he guides us to the ticket counter where we check our luggage and show evidence of COVID vaccination status. The sisters head to the KLM lounge while we, trying to secure a wheelchair and pusher, are directed to a waiting area where, as the name suggests, we wait and wait ... and wait. Finally a driver comes and takes us not to regular security but rather to the special security room set aside for employees and crew. Great, thought I, this will be quick like the pre-check in Seattle. Not so fast, you silly boy. This was the "works" - empty pockets, remove electronics, take off belt before entering the machine, wanded top to bottom because I set something off, take off shoes and have them inspected thoroughly (do I really look like Richard Reid?), and finally we reach the lounge, still on the wheelchair.

An email arrives, announcing a delay in departure from 2:05 to 2:45. Lee asks the lounge staff to arrange for a wheelchair pusher and we are allowed to board the plane first at about 2:05, Seats 2A and 2B. Hooray, a window seat for me! Shortly after, Ann takes seat 1A. She explains that Barb is toward the rear, having refused to buy Business Class seats. As we've seen on previous flights with smaller planes (this is a Boeing 737), the 3-3 seating throughout the single cabin has an empty seat between the window and aisle in the first two rows (the only two) that separate the two classes. Boarding is very slow - the doors don't close until 2:50 and push-back is ten minutes later; we are air-borne at 3:10. An announcement over the PA warns, "In the interest of privacy, you are not allowed to take pictures of the crew and passengers." Is this what is the norm in Orbán's liberal democracy?

We fly over the two stadiums seen on the car ride, one of them open-air and the other domed, and shortly we are over clouds so that the "pleasure" of having a window seat is diminished. I read my Kindle. At 3:25 a lunch box is served. My notes say "see menu provided" but the only one that I can find in my folder suggests that the lunch box contained a tabouleh salad with cheese, tomatoes, and pomegranate seeds; falafel with humus and black sesame seeds; a passionfruit and mango mousse for dessert. The plane lands at 4:55, about a half-hour behind schedule.

There is bedlam at the airport - there are no wheelchairs nor pushers to be found. Correction - yes, there *are* wheelchairs and pushers, but my name is not on their official list. How can this be? Lee ordered wheelchairs at each airport arrival and departure and these were confirmed by Stefan. And, yet, there is no record of our reservation! I tell the sisters to go on without us, as we don't know how long this will take. Our plane has finally emptied and Lee gets a member of the flight crew to help us with our argument with the wheelchair staff. *Finally*, a supervisor announced that she'll probably get fired but she agrees to push us to baggage claim. And she coerces a colleague to collect our suitcases and place them on a carrier.

At its website, the airport Hilton proudly announces "In under 10 minutes, just outside the transit area, the hotel is linked via a covered walkway to Amsterdam Airport Schiphol." No dedicated shuttle bus? No courtesy car?* Not even a general airport shuttle? Ridiculous! Realizing that this alleged 10-minute walk

*We had stayed at this hotel two or three times when they did have a courtesy car on demand for

delivery to and from the terminal. The money saved by ending this service cannot match the frustration created by it.

with suitcases in tow would be too much for me, the supervisor and her minion take us all the way to the check-in desk at the hotel, again saying that she'll probably get fired for this. (We will learn tomorrow that the entire airport is short-staffed because, when the pandemic hit and air travel ground to a halt, employees were fired or quit their jobs; when the restrictions were lifted, many employees refused to return to work.)

We have a large room on the 8th floor with a great view of the terminal and the runways, but certain amenities are missing: no drinking glasses, no wash cloths, very few outlets to plug in our electronics, and no outlet for their own floor-standing lamp (thus rendering the room too dim for reading). We are not hungry, but we did arrange to meet Ann and Barb in the lobby for drinks at 7:00 (our treat to thank them for staying with us as we and the pusher and the pusher's minion walked from the terminal to the hotel).

Back in our room, Lee decides that she is hungry, so she orders a hamburger from room service. She cuts the burger in half when I discover that I am, perhaps, hungry - so I remove the beef from the bun and nibble on the French fries and fried egg. In the evening, I work on Wordle and the Will Shortz puzzle when the hotel calls to tell us that the wheelchair service that they had booked for tomorrow failed to work so we'd have to take a taxi to the terminal. Yes, it's costly, but we have no other choice.

MONDAY, JUNE 13

We arise at 6:30 and head to an excellent breakfast buffet of hot and cold offerings. I opt for a typical English breakfast, here in Netherlands: fried eggs and bacon (too salty), sausage (too spicy), beans, mushrooms, thick slice of bread, juice, coffee.

At 9:50 we head downstairs to check-out. Because our room was so dark, I tell the clerk about the floor lamp that has no outlet to connect to. I have trouble explaining this (a language translation problem?) until I resort to an obscene hand gesture - index finger of right-hand inserting into closed fist of the left. Now, she understands!

Well, whether it got fixed or not, we'll never know because I ask the clerk to call for the taxi that will take us to the terminal. It's a very long wait for the taxi to arrive, but we have a wonderful driver who's probably thrilled at the money he'll get for such a short trip. As we near the terminal, we see an incredibly long line outside the building, apparently people trying to get to domestic flights. The part of the terminal for international flights is nothing like this. The taxi takes us to Terminal 3 and the driver helpfully gets us as close to the doors as possible. The image, here, comes from one of many web sites that were cataloguing the dearth of airport employees at that time (see p. 23).



Inside the terminal, we check our bags and look for a wheelchair. (As before, our "reservation" for assistance seems not to exist.) Lee finds a wheelchair which she has to push through the huge building. Even today (this is written on August 2), she is still feeling the effects of this in her arms and legs. We get to security, which probably proceeds faster than normal because of the "invalid" in the wheelchair. As before, pockets get emptied and I get scanned, but that pales compared to the full body frisking and wandering that Lee undergoes. (She must have a guilty look.)

Looking for the airport lounge, Lee is still pushing me and, alas, making several wrong turns. Finally, we discover that the lounge is at the next level. I take one of the few empty seats in this crowded room while Lee goes to the KLM employees who are in charge of the lounge to ask about the wheelchair and why our reservation is not in the system, not only today but also when we arrived yesterday. There is no explanation, no resolution, but one of the woman gets on her phone to order a wheelchair pusher to appear. An hour later, she is still on hold, unable to get through, so she agrees to push me to our gate,

D52. Lee sends an email to Stefan, telling about our wheelchair "adventures" and imploring him to be sure that a wheelchair awaits us in Seattle.

The airport is *huge*. We pass high-end shops, boutiques of all sorts, spas, food courts, etc. and enter the concourse that has no fewer than 70 gates. The KLM employee pushes me about 1/5 of the way, when she encounters an electric tram that gets us part way to our destination. From there, it's another wheelchair and we finally get to the departure gate.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT AIRPORT BEHAVIOR

- At the very small airport lounge in Budapest, we are seated near a table occupied by three men and one woman, all overweight, low class (I'm ashamed to say that), very loud. The burly men (looking very much like down-market body guards) are engaged in heated conversations or arguments (in Hungarian, of course), but without coming to blows.
- In the Amsterdam airport, both today and when we arrived, these very tall men and women are so intent about their cell phone conversations that they make no path for a wheelchair to pass through. One woman is on speaker phone, allowing me to eavesdrop on her conversation (which, of course, I don't understand as it is in Dutch).

At 1:45, we are in our middle seats 3C and 3G on this Airbus A330 ... and can finally relax and sip the juice that has been offered. As on the flight from the U.S., the "lucky" passengers with window seats keep their blinds closed, thereby impeding my ability to help the captain navigate the route. Even more distressing, the flight-information screen shows TIME TO ARRIVAL 0:00. Really?

The doors are closed at 2:35 and we are air-borne at 3:10. The A330 is a lovely plane, but unlike the Boeing 777s that we've flown on, it provides no places to stash papers and books that will be used during the flight. The initial part of the flight is quite bumpy, but the unease is eased by the offer of a scotch (Dewar's, not Macallan, but we can't be choosers) along with pieces of cheese skewered with a plastic sword. I finish reading "Rachel to the Rescue" (see p. 19) and begin another Kindle book, Fiona Hill's "There is Nothing for You Here."

At 4:00, the meal is served: green salad, soup, chicken, veggies, rolls and cheese spread, dessert. (Yes, a minimal description, but I forgot to save a copy of the menu.). At 4:45, once again I succeed in deploying a catheter without serious complications. I watch two movies, both excellent: "The Outfit" and "The Most Terrible Person in the World."

I move my watch to PDT. At 9:30, I close my eyes and sleep (I think) for a couple of hours. Following that, I do some NYT crosswords and read a bit of *The New Yorker* and the Fiona Hill book. At 2:30, lunch is served: a cheese burger (which I deconstruct by discarding the bun), potato salad, cheeses. Before landing, I ask one of the flight attendants to radio ahead to be sure that a wheelchair is available.

The plane lands at about 3:50, there is a wheelchair, there is a pusher, there is the new and spacious arrivals lounge, there are our suitcases, and there is Jesse to drive us home where we arrive at 5:30. Unlike our arrival from Australia in March 2020, nobody rushes to us with masks and an order to quarantine for 10 days.

READING DURING THE TRIP

In addition to several issues of *The New Yorker*, *TIME*, *The Progressive*, and *Yale Alumni Magazine*, the following books on Kindle: Alexander Vindman's "Here Right Matters," Tove Ditlevsen's "The Copenhagen Trilogy," Elinor Lipman's "Rachel to the Rescue," and Fiona Hill's "There is Nothing for You Here."