

Germany - Netherlands Switzerland - France 2014

For our vacation in 2014 we were fortunate to be able to visit four amazing countries and several old and new friends. We sampled new food and experienced beautiful scenery. We traveled by plane, boat, car and train for three weeks on the vacation of a lifetime.

Kirk and Sheri Tiner

Willkommen in Deutschland

We're in Germany! This is our first visit to Germany and we're already loving it as we find our way across the Frankfurt airport to the train station. The convenience of a train station in an airport is amazing, much easier than trying to rent a car and find your way.

All the advance study of German trains paid off, we were able to find where to stand so we could just get on the right car and get settled. These trains don't stop for long, we actually saw one couple who got split up, she made it on the train, he didn't.

German trains are very nice, especially the ICE high speed trains. It was only an hour to our next destination, Deusseldorf, to meet our friend Robert who has promised to show us around on our first day in Germany.



Neuss, Germany

When we left the train station in Deusseldorf with our friend Robert, our first stop was a walk along the Rhine river in Neuss, the fall colors were amazing. We went on to roam the old town on foot for the next few hours, perfect for fighting off the jet lag.



Neuss was founded in 16 B.C. by the Romans, some of the city walls and gates are still remaining from the 13th century. Robert was an excellent host. After walking the city we dropped off our bags at the hotel and went to dinner.

The restaurant was on the main plaza across from the church and had a typical German menu, I had my favorite Zigeuner-schnitzel (gypsy schnitzel) with peppers and onions, Kirk had Jägerschnitzel (hunter's schnitzel) with mushroom sauce. I also found out it's not possible to get a glass of tap water in a German restaurant. It's always bottled.



A must stop for Kirk was the Haribo factory store. He picked up a huge supply of gummy bears that lasted for the next two weeks and some even made it back home with us. Robert and I gave him 15 minutes in the store. I was afraid he would stay all day without a time limit.



Schloss Wickrath, Mönchengladbach, Germany

Our second day in Germany Robert drove us out into the countryside, we toured a town soon to be completely destroyed by the local coal mining operation which was kind of sad, it was a beautiful place. We stopped in Mönchengladbach for a snack and a walk around the park and happened on the local market day. It's almost like a flea market but it travels from town to town on a specific day of each week. You can buy clothes, bread, spices, veggies and even meat or seafood.



Welkom in Amsterdam, Nederland

We arrived in Amsterdam by train late in the afternoon and stepped into the madness that is the square in front of the train station. It's really fairly simple to use the tram system, once you figure out the maze of train tracks and how to read the signs.

As we headed to our hotel on the tram I start realizing we were not in the right place. I had stayed at this hotel 20 years be-

fore and knew I should be seeing a park on our right. I finally told Kirk "we are getting off now." I asked the driver about the street for the hotel and boy were we lucky, they had moved the tram over a block and we happened to get off at the right stop!!

Below: Dam Square - The Royal Palace on the left, then De Nieuwe Kerk, a 15th century church next to it. Abn-Amro is a large bank.



We dumped our bags in our room and took off to explore the city and find dinner. Kirk wanted to check out a coffee shop so I took him to the only one I knew, the Bulldog. It's in the entertainment district so there were lots of people even late in the evening. I felt so old, everyone was at least 30 years younger. Amsterdam is the ultimate European college student hangout. While Kirk was getting his coffee, I went souvenir shopping for magnets.

We ended up having a great Italian dinner. Amsterdam has a great international food culture. Pretty much anything you could want to eat is available in the city. Even in the touristy area of Leidseplein there are good restaurants.





The Apple Inn is where I had stayed on my first visit to Amsterdam 20 years ago with Paula, Emmanuelle and Mark. We found it through the tourist office at the train station. The location was excellent, right on the tram line, and the price was right. Both of these things are still true but the hotel has been updated and expanded and is much nicer now.

After dinner we went back to the hotel and sat in the lobby having drinks and visiting. It's a great atmosphere for relaxing at the end of the evening.

Kirk had learned from Robert while we were in Neuss that each town has a local beer and it's usually the best. He was warned that even if we liked a beer in one town and it was available in another, don't order it, it won't be the same. So, when in Amsterdam, order a Heineken.



The next morning we packed up our bags and headed to the dock to board our home for the next week, the Viking Longship Guilleg. What a great experience, we just walked onboard and gave our names, no line, no security, no hassle. We were early and our room wasn't ready so we relaxed in the lounge with lunch until they came and got us and escorted us to our cabin. Such service!

Once we stowed our bags, we headed back out to further explore the city. This time it was to the Red Light district to see all the unusual things displayed in the shop windows.





You're likely to see anything in Amsterdam shop windows because there are all kinds of shops. Sex shops, marijuana oriented shops, condom shops, you name it, you can find it.

The ladies in the window were the most surprising I think, or maybe that there were ladies in the windows right across the street from the De Oude Kerk (The Old Church).

It rained most of the day so to get out of the rain we took a boat tour on the canals. It's a completely different perspective and a must-do Amsterdam experience.



Kinderdijk, Netherlands

Our first morning on the river we woke up at Kinderdijk, a UNESCO site of nineteen 17th century windmills. The Netherlands are more than half below sea level so windmills are critical to keeping the land from flooding.

This was a stop on the cruise I was really looking forward to taking photos of. Unfortunately I didn't get my order in for blue skies so everything looked gray. It was still an incredible place to visit. Yes, the miller does wear wooden shoes.



We got to go inside one of the windmills and see where the family who worked the mill lived. It was kind of cramped with narrow ladders to reach the various levels but I imagine it was a pretty great place for a kid to grow up.



Cruising the Rhine, Germany



After walking for an hour we got back on the boat and took off for our first day cruising the Rhine river through Germany. We were really loving how easy it was to get off and on the boat, nothing like the huge cruise ships. There are only 200 passengers and we can wander off and on the boat as long as it's docked.



Cologne, Germany

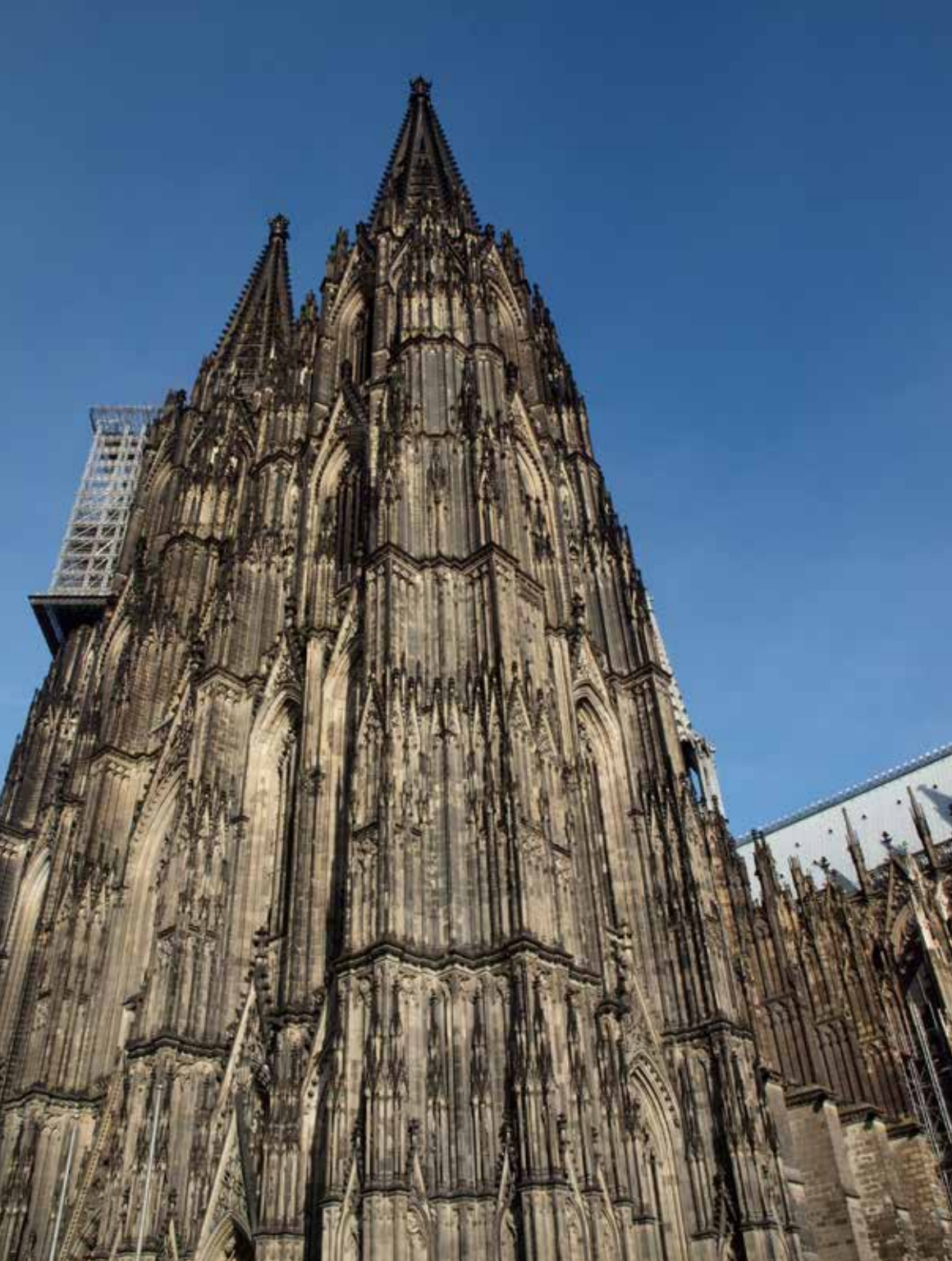
Our second morning on the cruise we arrive in Cologne where we met an old genealogy friend, Ulrich Seeberger. Ulrich and I have been writing to each other off and on since 1994, but had never met. When Ulrich discovered we would be in Germany he said we must meet and that he would come to Cologne and show us around.

It was a real treat to finally meet Ulrich and Ann and to have a local guide to show us around.



Left: Groß Sankt Martin Kirche (Great St. Martin Church) built about 1150
Right - Kölner Dom (Colone Cathedral) begun about 1250, finished in 1880

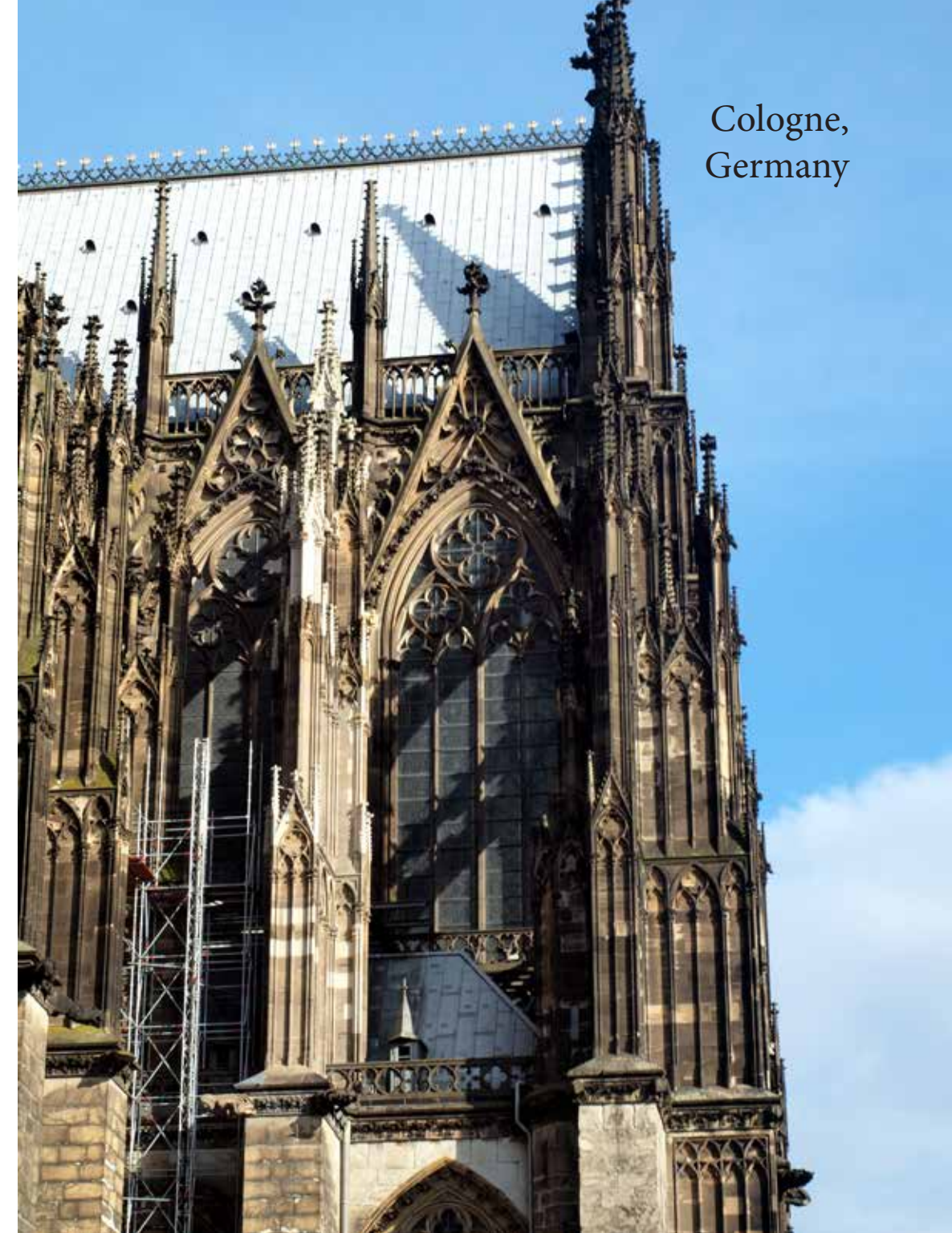
Cologne, Germany



The Cologne Cathedral was the obvious place to meet Ulrich and his wife Anne since it's the easiest place to find, you can see it from most places in the city. We were there on a Sunday and services were going on so we could only go inside and stand at the back. We did get to hear the amazing organ though.

We wandered around Cologne then had a wonderful lunch of schweinbraten (Bavarian style pork roast) and Kirk sampled the local beer.

After lunch we visited the museum of Roman artifacts which were found near the foundations of the cathedral.



Cologne,
Germany

As we were leaving the boat in Cologne we were warned that there was going to be a protest in front of the train station that afternoon. It just happened to be at the same time Ulrich took us to see the cathedral treasury which is entered from the side of the cathedral next to the train station. It wasn't a big deal when we went in, but when we came out the protest was in full swing with SWAT style police and plenty of loud people in the square.

Ulrich told us it was just a bunch of hooligans, not a big deal and he seemed totally unconcerned. I suppose it wasn't of concern to a career military man but it was kind of a new experience for us.

The picture to the right is Kirk and I with Ulrich and Anna as we said goodbye. What fun they were!



We took our time getting back to the boat and stopped in for a last local beer for Kirk. In Cologne the local beer is Kölsch. There's actually a brewery association, the Kölsch-Konvention and brewers not part of the convention can't call their beer Kölsch. I learned way more than I ever wanted to about beer.

It was so nice being able to go back to the boat for dinner then go back out into the city if we felt like it. Pretty often we didn't leave the dock until after 10:00 pm.



Schloss Marksburg, Braubach, Germany



Marksburg Castle was amazing, some of it literally cut into the mountain, it was sometimes difficult to walk around. The 700 year old castle is completely intact, never having been destroyed by war like all of the other hill castles along the Rhine.

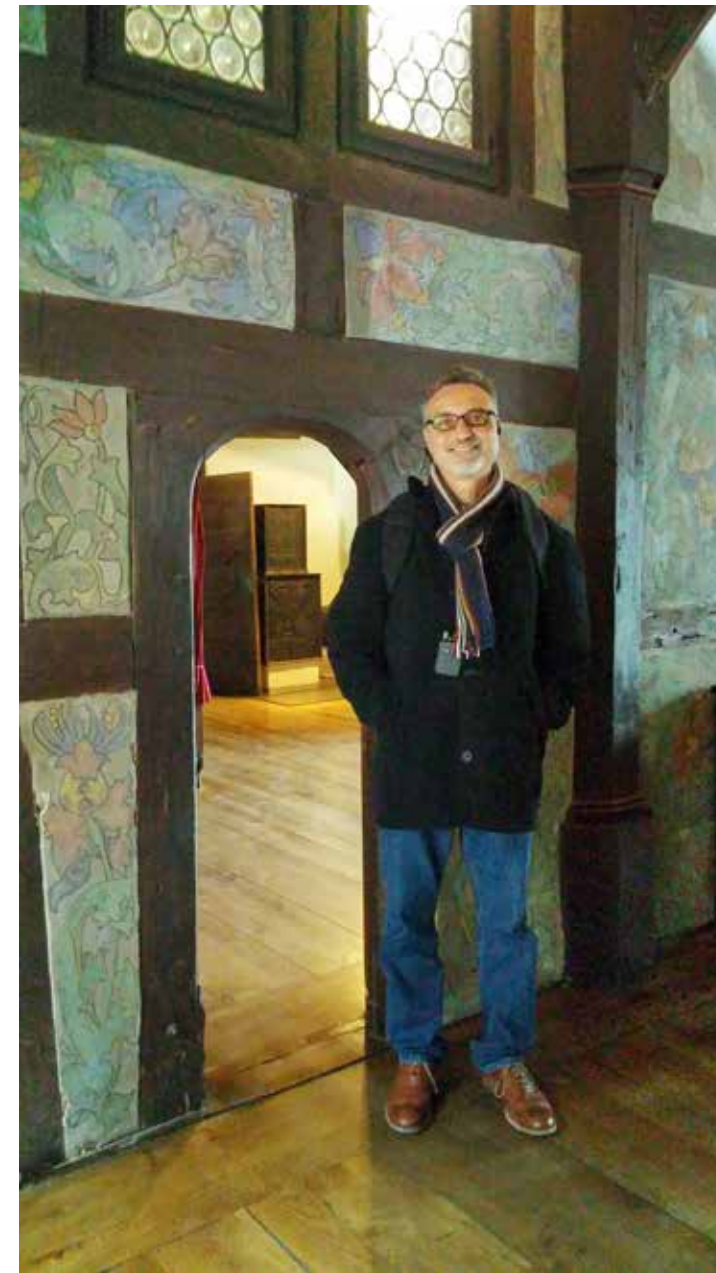
This is where we made friends with Rob and Janet from Delaware, who we had a great time hanging around with during the rest of the trip. They were a couple of the few people on the boat close to our age, most were about 20 years older.



The blacksmith shop was on the lowest floor of the castle. It was hard to tell how many levels there were in total, it was added on to multiple times and seemed to conform to the shape of the mountain top.



While in the great banquet hall we got to view the garderobe (medieval toilet) which actually hangs over the upper bailey of the castle.



The Rittersaal or great banqueting hall. Note the huge fire place and the tiny doors. Only a small part of the room was taken up by the table that seats 20.



Looking down at the river from Marksburg Castle as our boat comes up to meet us. We actually got off the boat down river at Koblenz and rode busses up to the castle. It was just a few minutes to get back on the boat for lunch. The view was amazing as we cruised the most beautiful 36 miles of the Rhine. After

lunch, even though it was cold on the river, it was well worth sitting up on the deck to see the many hill top castles along the way. Boris, our friendly cruise director, referred to it as “castle ping-pong”, looking from one side of the river to the other.



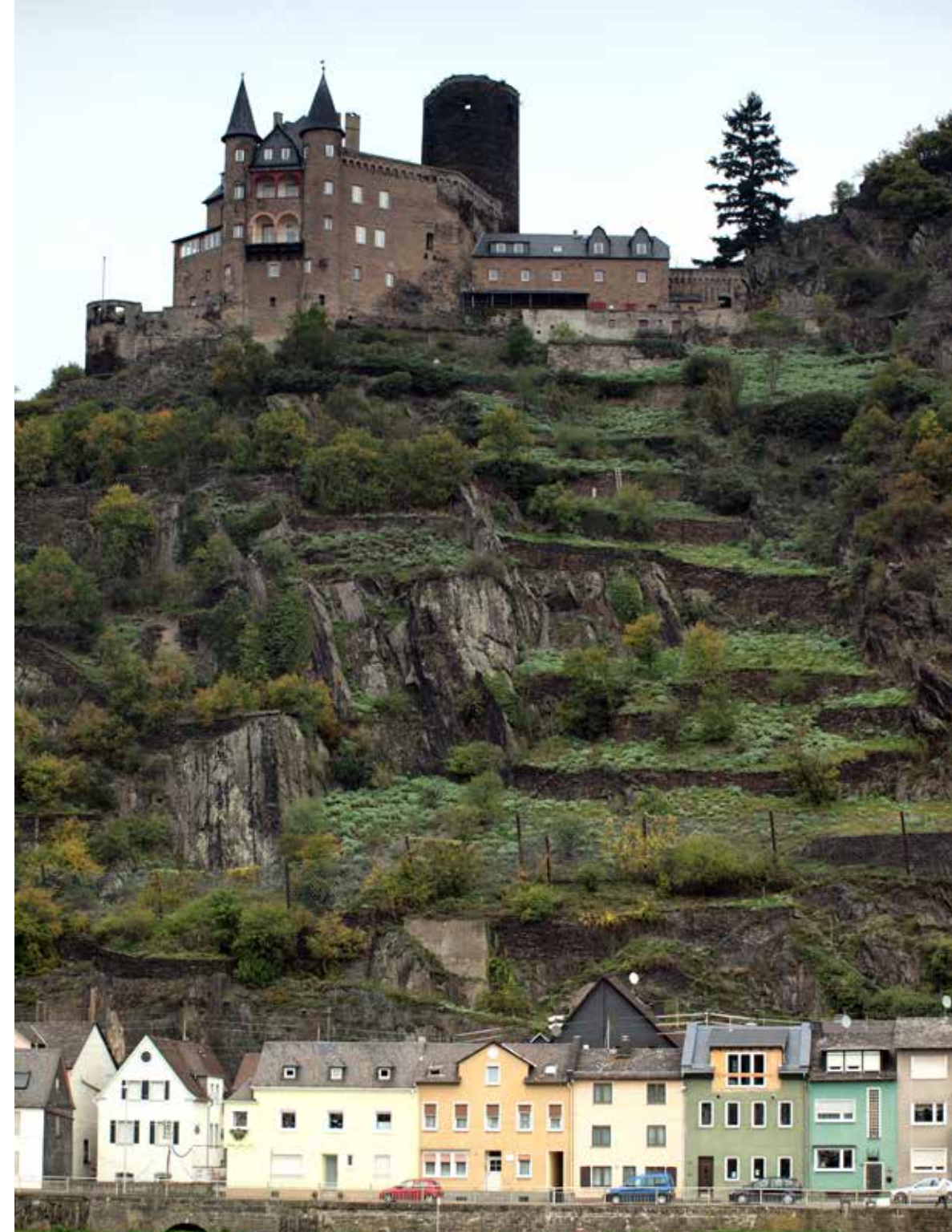
Near the town of Kaub we came upon the Pfalzgrafenstein Toll Station. It was built in 1327 by Ludwig the Bavarian and was used as a toll station until the 1860's.

The land holders along the Rhine charged ships tolls to pass, they even strung chains across the river and only lowered them when the tolls were paid.

Besides the castles there are beautiful little medieval towns each one dominated by a huge church and tons of history. Our cruise director, Boris, kept us well informed throughout the afternoon.

This area of the Rhine also produces about 60% of German wines and the first vineyards date back to Roman times.





Lunch with a view cruising the Rhine. Needless to say with free beer and wine during meals and the great view, we took quite a long time at lunch that day.

Rudesheim, Germany



We arrived at Rudesheim just before dark and walked 10 minutes into town to visit the music box museum. Once we got there we found out where the optional excursion restaurant was so we ditched the museum, picked up a music box for our friend B.J. who was staying with the dogs and headed to the restaurant.



It turned out that the dinner was to be a special sauerbraten (literally sour roast meat) which is one of my favorite German dishes. It was SO worth skipping the museum. We had an awesome dinner for half what the cost for one of us on the excursion would have been and we beat the crowd. If we're ever back in Germany and close, we're going back to Rudescheimer Schloss for dinner!



The castle at Heidelberg was not my favorite. It's an interesting place, kind of surprising it's even standing really. It was stuck by lightening and burned twice then partially destroyed by several wars and only some of it has been restored. Unfortunately we didn't get to see much beyond the courtyards.

I might have liked the castle better had we been able to tour at least some of the ruins. I'm one of those strange people who likes visting ruins and imagining what used to be.

Schloss Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany





Heidelberg, Germany

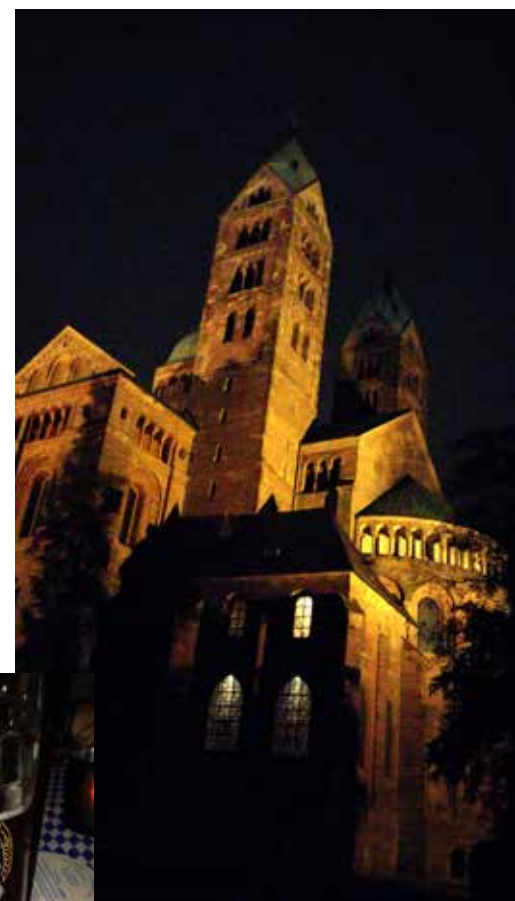
Even though I didn't really love the castle, the old town area of Heidelberg was great. We had the chance to walk around for quite a while on our own, have some lunch and check out the chocolate shop one of the boat crew suggested. I guess he really liked the place because when we walked in, there he was.

The Chocolaterie YilliY Café - Galerie had everything chocolate you could want. I picked up chocolate cubes on sticks for stirring into hot milk to make hot chocolate. I also had the most amazing cup of hot chocolate ever!

I had no idea what to order, the menu is pretty extensive, so I asked for something rich and dark with maybe a touch of cinnamon. What I got was a Spanish chocolate so thick I had to scrape the cup with my spoon so I could get to the last of it. If the shop had been empty I would have licked the cup. Really great chocolate!



Speyer, Germany



We got to Speyer with just enough time to walk to the town square before it got dark. We could have gone on the walking tour with a group from the ship but opted instead to check out the local brew with our friends Janet and Rob. I love how they allow dogs in so many places in Europe. The people at the next table had a dog with them just laying quietly beside the table. We hung out for a couple of drinks then headed back to the boat. It was seriously dark by that time and navigating the park paths got a little challenging, thank goodness for cell phones with flashlights.

Bienvenue à Strasbourg, France

We docked on the German side of the Rhine at Kehl then rode busses into Stasbourg, France. I'd really been looking forward to visiting this city and was not disappointed. It's the ultimate combination of old and new.

Like a lot of places in this region the city was originally a Roman settlement and celebrated it's 2,000't birthday in 1988. It's now home to the Council of Europe as well as the European Parliament and the European Ombudsman of the European

Union. It's also the only place where the entire city center is a UNESCO site.

Strasbourg is also a perfect blend of French and German culture. A lot of signs are in both languages and you meet people with a French first name and German surname. In fact it has gone back and forth between being France and Germany several times.





Just like all European cities and towns Strasbourg has a great huge church. This one is Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Strasbourg or the Strasbourg Minster. It's so tall that it was the tallest building in the world for 227 years, until 1874.

Probably the most interesting thing about this particular cathedral is the astronomical clock. It's kind of a mechanical computer, it can indicate leap year and the equinoxes and even the complicated date of Easter which is something like a Sunday that follows so many days after a full moon etc.





Of course food was high on my list of things to check out in Strasbourg. I definitely wanted to try a tarte flambée (flame cake) or in German it's called flammkuchen. It's essentially a pizza made with white cheese, onions and bacon. I didn't get one in Strasbourg but I did get to try the pain d'épice (gingerbread or spice bread) which was great. I wanted it so bad, I slipped away from our walking tour and into a store specializing in all kinds of 'spice bread'. Really yummy stuff.



Kehl, Germany

This is where we docked for the visit to Strasbourg. When we returned to the boat there was a lovely sunset. It was so nice just to hang out in the park where we were docked and not feel rushed. Smaller river cruises are very relaxing.

There are three public areas at the front of the boat, the top open deck, the lounge below that and the dining room on the next level down. All have wonderful views of the passing scenery. All of the cabins are at the back half of the boat.



Somewhere on the Rhine, Germany

As I was getting ready for bed the sound of the boat changed and I looked out the window to see a concrete wall. We were entering a river lock! I had always been curious about how a lock worked so I threw on jeans and a coat with my night-shirt and headed up top to see how this thing worked.

It's quite simple really. The boat moves into a channel that's blocked by gates at each end. If you are going up you go in low and the lock is filled with water until the boat is even with the upriver water level. Going down river is the same in reverse. Very cool to experience.



Breisach , Germany

We woke up in Briesach to swans swimming outside our cabin window. No idea why there were so many but they were very curious about the boat.

This is the day we headed off to the Schwarzwald (Black Forest). We had about an hour bus ride through the mountains and had an opportunity to stop and take photos about half way through. There just happened to be a “scenic cow” waiting for a picture with a lovely town in the background. I still have no idea what the name of the town was but then it didn’t matter, it was all about the cow.



Schwarzwald, Breitnau, Germany

This is where we stopped in the Black Forest to see cuckoo clocks and cake. I think the clock on the end of this building is one of the world’s largest.

They had a Black Forest cake making demonstration and we could of course buy a slice. Cherries, chocolate, cream and kirsch. Yum!!

While we were there I noticed the name “Seeberger” on their cups. It turns out this is the name of the coffee company. The tour guide suggested I put the empty cup in my bag but that didn’t sound like a good idea so he walked me inside and asked how much to buy a cup. When he explained that this was the name of my grandmother the man at the register just gave me a cup. I was so excited!

When we walked back outside the other cup was gone. Turned out that Kirk had put it in his bag! I came home with a pair of Seeberger cups.



A few years ago I was in France with my friend Carla and she kept pointing out “scenic sheep” and “scenic cows”. The story goes something like this... she was traveling with co-workers, one of which kept asking questions about the local animals. “I wonder what kind of cow that is?” So, after several of these questions, someone in the car finally said, “That’s a scenic cow.” Now all cows, sheep, horses, etc. have become “scenic”.



On the Rhine, Germany

Our last night on the boat was a lot of fun but kind of sad. We made some great new friends and just loved the awesome service and excellent food. Kirk had even gotten in trouble for not telling the chef that he didn't enjoy the fish the first night and sending it back. Now we know they mean it when they want to hear what you really think.



Willkommen in Basel, Switzerland

The crew on Viking boats really take care of you. I had asked the concierge about how to get to the train station from the boat and he said he'd take care of getting us a cab and what time did we want to leave?

The car rental office was in the Hilton hotel just across from the Basel Central train station so very easy to find. (This came in handy a week later.) So we hopped in our VW Golf and away we went.

Kirk was pretty brave as I was navigating the streets of Basel half from memory of my intensive map study and half from the street names he was calling out. Once we hit the freeway it got trickier. Lots of tunnels and interchanges, I have no idea how we ended up going out of town in the right direction.



Somewhere in Switzerland

I read tons of information on driving in Europe but still failed to learn that the major way of navigating the highways is to follow the names of the towns, not the highway number.

Our first stop outside Basel was what turned out to be a typical highway stop. A gas station, pay restroom, convenience store and fresh prepared food. We were amazed at the selection of food available, it all looked wonderful. Can we have this in the United States please?



Sion, Switzerland

It only took going off in the wrong direction twice from roundabout number three (5 possible directions) and asking directions from the neighbors, but we finally made it to our friend Emmanuelle's house. What a beautiful place. They bought an old barn and made a three bedroom house out of it with a beautiful kitchen and lots of windows to take advantage of the amazing views across the valley.

I finally got to meet Emmanuelle's husband Antoine and their three beautiful children. It was pretty interesting trying to communicate as the children only speak French and we only speak English. Emmanuelle's daughter showed me a picture book that has pictures with the English word for the object so I told her how to pronounce the English and she told me the word in French. Pretty cool learning experience for both of us.



Kirk is standing in Emmanuelle's front yard, what a view!

We feasted the first night on sliced serrano ham, salami, assorted cheeses and fresh figs from the tree in the front yard. Emmanuelle made pumpkin soup from home grown pumpkins and Antoine roasted chestnuts. The perfect fall meal with fresh local ingredients. Of course there was good bread and excellent Swiss wine to go with it all.



Sion has been continuously settled since about 5800 BC. There are two medieval structures above the town, the one pictured below is the ruins of Tourbillon Castle, it was built in the 12th century and destroyed by fire in 1788. Since it was a beautiful day to be outside, we decided it was a good idea to climb the mountain to Tourbillon.

It took us a while and a couple of rest stops but, we finally made it to the top where Antoine and the monkey children were waiting. I didn't realize it at the time but, on the way down Kirk told us he had been a little uncomfortable with the heights and slippery narrow trail leading to the castle.

On a previous visit 20 years ago we had climbed up to the Cathedral of Valeria which is on the lower of the two hills and has the world's oldest still functioning organ.

From the castle you can see the whole valley, the town and the many vineyards. It was well worth the climb



Once at the top we took the time to relax and watch the monkey children play. I love Emmanuelle and Antoine's parenting style. They really encourage their children to explore and question their world. I guess that's what you get when the parents are both teachers.

Far right: Cathedral Valais



On the Road to Bavaria, Germany

We hated leaving Emmanuelle's house but we were excited to get to Bavaria to see Crazy Ludwig's castle. Driving through Switzerland, Austria and Germany was great, everywhere we looked was just beautiful. We stopped for a bathroom break and the food at that stop looked so good we couldn't resist. A plate of great food, enough for both of us, was only about \$10 and much better than any American fast food.

Even though Switzerland isn't part of the EU it was no problem to cross borders. At least you could tell where they were. When we drove from Austria into Germany we didn't realize it for a few miles.



After all the exercise we headed into town for a traditional Swiss fondue lunch. I felt kind of guilty about eating nothing but cheese and bread for a meal but it was delicious and a rare treat.

After lunch we walked more of the old town then stopped to get ice cream. We really had a great day with the kids, even with the language barrier they were a pleasure to be around.



Schwangau, Germany

We arrived at Schwangau just before dark and caught our first glimpse of Neuschwanstein Castle. I was getting excited. When we checked in the small family run hotel Landgasthof Zur Post, we saw the dining room and decided to have dinner there. The food was excellent, Kirk had schnitzel and I had a huge cake thing that had raisins and was served with warm applesauce.



The waitress warned me it was large as they only had one size pan to cook it in. I ate about half of it even with Kirk's help.

Of course Kirk tried the local beer. I don't think he found one he didn't like.



More scenic cows! This time they were walking down the street behind the hotel on their way to pasture. We also saw them later heading back to the milking barn.

Next pages: View from Neuschwanstein, Hoenschwangau Castle, Neuschwanstein Castle and the road down from Neuschwanstein to the village.

We were both up early the next morning excited to get to the castles. I had read so much about how to get there, get tickets and about lines etc. It was a pleasant surprise to be less than 10 minutes from the parking and find that there was no line at all. November is the time to travel to Bavaria for sure.

It's hard to describe being at Hoenschwangau and Neuschwanstein. Maybe breathtaking? Awe inspiring? Or maybe just WOW! We bought our tickets to see both castles and recived our tour times. First was the older of the two, Hoenschwangau. This is where Ludwig II, King of Bavaria grew up, it was the home of his ancestors. The wooden floors creak and the furnishings are beautiful, it definitely feels very much like a home.

Neuschwanstein, much grander and newer, actually looks older but is still unfinished inside, all work having stopped when he was removed from the throne in 1886. It's really too bad it wasn't finished, the two floors that were completed are truly a fantasy world. It's really a shame King Ludwig never got to live there.







On the Autobahn Germany

Sick or not, I was driving on a German auto-bahn and I wanted to go fast! Fortunately I didn't have a fever that next morning and when we got on the road I told Kirk to get ready to take a picture, I was going 100 mph legally for the first time. I only wish I had spent the extra money to rent a BMW.

Driving the autobahn you're supposed to stay in the right lane except for passing. You MUST do this. As I'm driving along at near 100 mph several cars pass us so fast it was hard to tell what kind of cars they were.



Yes, 160 KPH is equal to 100 MPH. To calculate it you divide KPH by 1.6. See, math even I can do!



Monday, our second day in Schwangau, was a day of rest so the hotel restaurant and front desk were closed. We stopped at the grocery store on the way back from the castles and picked up a picnic lunch. It turned out to be dinner also as I had started to feel bad while at Neuschwanstein and continued to feel worse and develop a fever that afternoon. I guess I was lucky I didn't get sick before we got to see the castles.

Kirk wandered around town while I slept, trying a few German beers and finding where the cows went home to at night. I was so disappointed, I really had looked forward to walking around this adorable little town.



Birr, Switzerland

Our visit to Birr to see the Swiss Reformed Church of Birr and meet the pastor was only possible because of Ulrich Seeberger making all the arrangements. I really wanted to see the town my ancestors were from but hadn't dared to hope I would be able to see the church where they worshiped or the record books where their births and marriages were recorded.

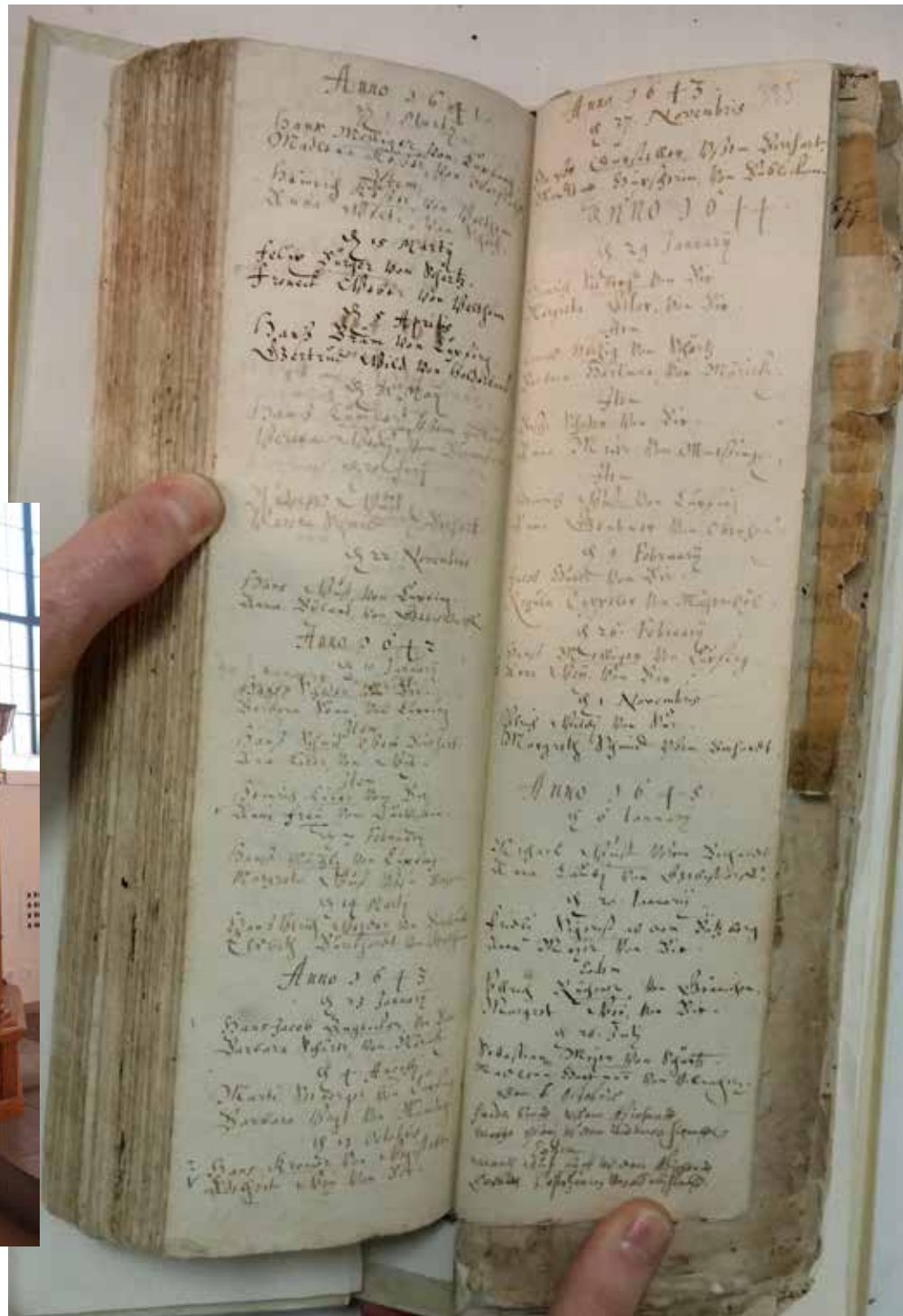
Ulrich contacted the church and made an appointment for us to meet the pastor and even had them get access to the old church records which are now kept in the town hall. I only wish I were not sick that day.



Reverend Luchsinger was almost as excited as I was when he showed me around and told me the history of his church. I think I was the first descendant of an old Birr family to visit.

The current church was built in 1662 and of course has been remodeled since but the pulpit is dated 1664.

After touring the church we walked to the town hall and I got to see one of the books from the 1600's and the listing of an ancestor's marriage. Yes I got to hold it!



I have never been so happy to find a hotel in my life as I was to find the Hotel St. Martin in Colmar. I was so sick, running a fever, sneezing, stopped up and tired I just needed a bed. We stopped on the way into town and picked up nasal spray which helped slightly. I think the chocolate éclair helped about as much though.

I'm really good with directions, I've never been lost, meaning I've always found what I was looking for, maybe just not the quickest way. I almost admitted I was lost in Colmar that night. Being sick, driving in the rain in evening traffic and not being able to see the tiny street signs on the corners of buildings was pure driving hell.

Narrow one way streets did not help the situation. There was one street where even I was nervous, I swear there was only a 6" clearance on either side of the car. I finally made circles until I found the church. I knew exactly where to go from there.



Colmar, France



Our first day in Colmar was very lazy. I went out for croissants and cokes and snapped a few pictures. Only real French croissants could have gotten me out of bed that morning.

The picture on the left is the street our hotel is on and the one on the right is the old customs house.

Colmar is the perfect Alsatian city, a blend of French and German in architecture, food and culture. The city was founded in the 9th century and was part of Germany a couple of times.

The Lauch River runs through the city but in many places it's covered and you can't tell it's there.



The plan when we finally left the hotel was to find lunch then visit a museum and walk around town. It didn't work out quite like that. We walked maybe 4 blocks, found the Bartholdi museum, walked back and went to a restaurant half a block from the hotel.

Lunch was amazing. The perfect comfort food. The menu that day was Estouffade de boeuf which made no sense to me beyond being beef. We went for it. Apparently this is the name for roast beef in gravy and it was served with mashed potatoes and lemon mousse for dessert. it was excellent!

The first lunch was so good we went back the next day. Again, we couldn't read the menu beyond salad of cabbage. It turns out that tartine de foie volaille is chicken livers and the salad was essentially cole slaw and of course fries on the side. Kirk loved it.

I wasn't so brave so I ordered a local specialty, tarte flambée. It's also named flammkuchen in German. Both names mean 'flame cake' but I call it a French pizza.

After lunch we just went back to the hotel and stayed lazy for the rest of the day. Kirk did a lot of business with the small grocery store across the street picking up snacks and drinks.

Even though I thought I'd never find the damn hotel it turned out to be in an excellent location. Everything we needed or wanted to see was within about a 6 block radius.



Our second day in Colmar we finally made it to the Bertholdi Museum. It was pretty special, Bertholdi was the artist who designed the Statue of Liberty that was gifted to the United States by France. We saw sketches of the various incarnations of the statue as well as a photo record of the building process.

Bertholdi also created a sculpture that stands in the church yard in Birr. Actually, his work is spread around the world. This was one of the most special museums I've visited.



The sun came out and I felt much better so we did a lot of walking and saw the amazing blend of architecture that is Colmar and pretty representative of the Alsace region of France. Now I know why it's such a popular tourist destination, it's a very unique place and very beautiful.



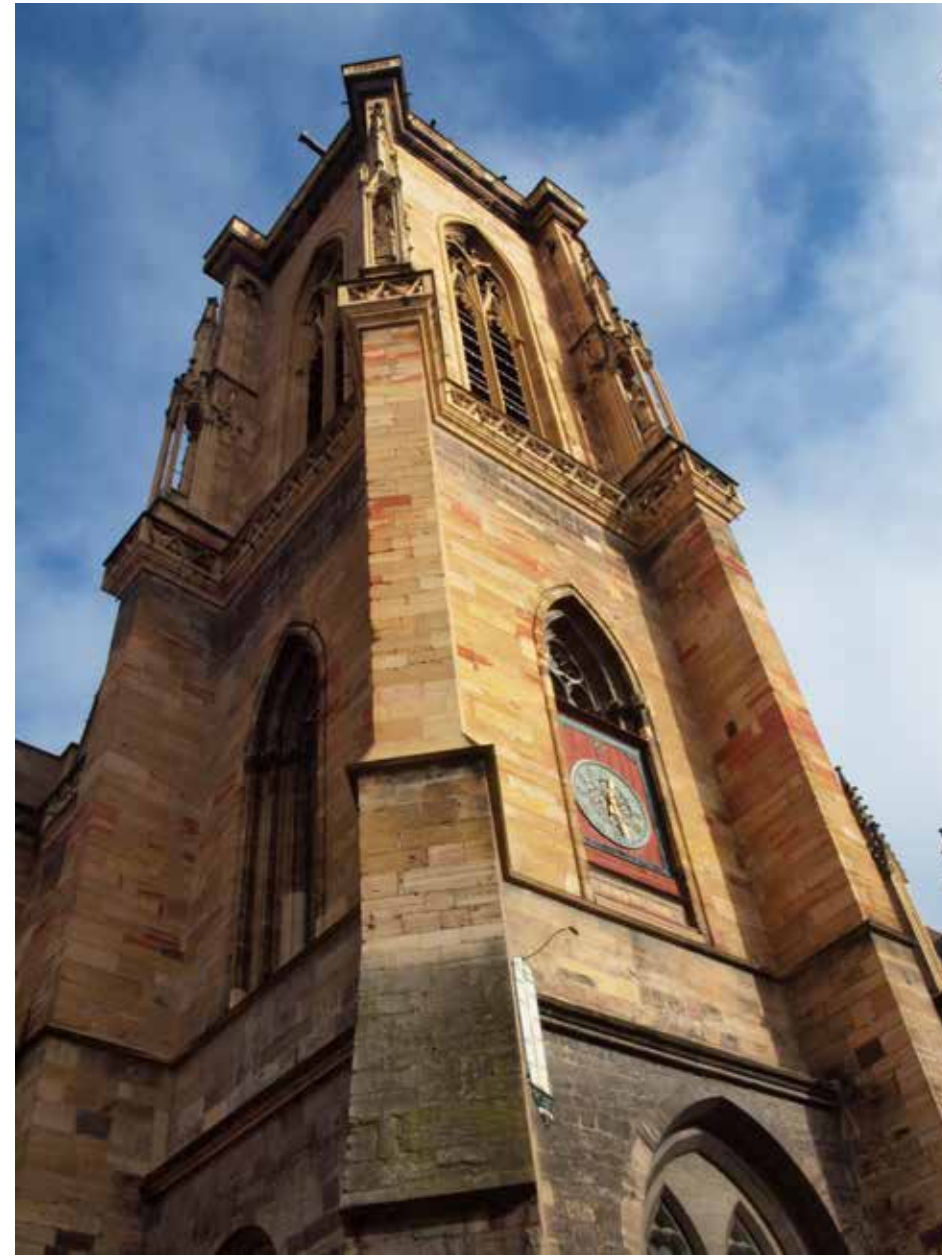


It was market day in Colmar and we just loved wandering the outdoor markets. There is actually a full time market in town, the goods used to arrive by small barge on the river just behind the building. The water was quite low when we were there but you can see how the doors open right on to the river.



There's a part of town where the river isn't covered that is known as "La Petite Venise" or "The Little Venice". In the summer they have small boats floating up and down the river with cafes and homes with lovely flowers on each side.

Locating the Église Saint-Martin (St. Martin Church) was the only way I could find our hotel that first night. I knew if I went behind the church there was only one street to take and if I went to the end and turned right we would be at the hotel. It's good to study the map, it's better to be looking for something near the tallest building in the old town. I love this church, mostly because it was the only thing well lit on that dark, rainy, traffic mess of a night!



This isn't the oldest or grandest church in the region but it's really quite nice. It was built about the year 1000 on top of older foundations. It's a bit large for a the average church, more the size and shape of a small cathedral.

Something you don't see often is a clock inside a church but now we've seen two, the complicated astronomical clock in Strasbourg and now this relatively simple clock in Colmar.

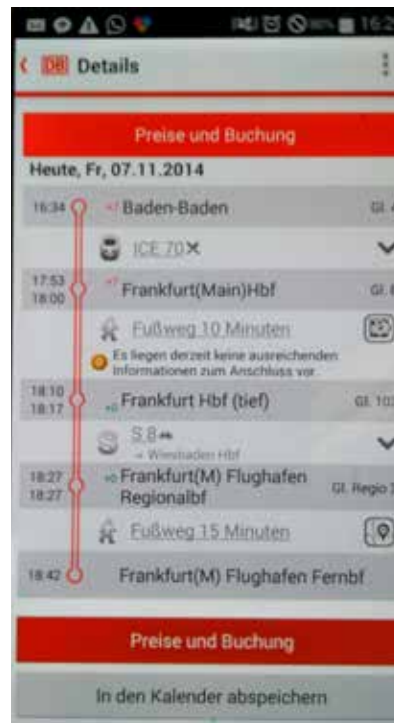


Basel, Switzerland

Our last full day in Europe was spent traveling back to the airport at Frankfurt. I completely forgot write out directions back to the rental car office and got nervous as we approached Basel until I saw the first sign for the central train station. How lucky to have rented a car from just across the street!

We boarded a lovely Swiss train for our final ride of the trip. It was so simple. Well, we thought it was simple, that is until the train broke down in Baden-Baden. The language barrier got us there. We had to find a fellow traveler who spoke English to translate the announcement. It turned out that another train was coming in 5 minutes on the next track over. On top of this we found out there was a partial train strike in Germany that day and certain trains weren't running.

Having no idea where this new train was headed, we were a bit anxious by the time the conductor came along. She was very helpful looking up the route we needed on her iphone and letting me take a picture of it so we'd have a copy. Hand held technology is a beautiful thing when traveling.



Frankfurt, Germany

The Frankfurt airport has an addition that has two hotels, offices, restaurants and shops that cater to travelers. We had quite a few choices for dinner that last night in Europe but we opted for one more delicious schnitzel. Kirk also had one last German beer, a giant German beer. I think it was a liter mug, heavy as hell. I don't know how he drank the whole thing and finished a plate of schnitzel too. I was stuffed!

We did a little last minute gift shopping, picked up snacks for the plane and headed back to our room.



We discovered on our last visit to Europe how nice it is to have a room at the airport the night before a flight home. After the unexpected train changes and the sardine can commuter train from the city out to the airport, we really appreciated getting to the hotel that night. Especially knowing we had no more transportation to arrange and could relax a bit in the morning.

It was also a pleasure to finally leave the bags and backpacks in the room and walk down the stairs to find dinner. I hadn't walked without that darn backpack for more than two weeks.





Home sweet home. I hate the long flight but I love Europe enough to do it over and over again. This trip was so worth the cramped seat and long flight.

We discovered that Germany is much to our liking both in food and atmosphere. The people we met were lovely. Kirk really enjoyed visiting the home of a European family when we stay with Emmanuelle. It's very special to experience a place with locals rather than just staying in impersonal hotels. We got to meet new friends, and re-connect with old friends.

I love driving in Europe, even if I was sick and finding the hotel in Colmar was pure torture. We found that river cruising is like a moving luxury hotel and we are certainly doing it again.

Travel is something special. It's a learning experience, often in un-expected ways. It can be relaxing or challenging, sometimes both in the same day.

Next stop? Budapest!