

## ON THE MOVE IN NORTHWEST EUROPE

Dear Friends and Family,

August 2016

As mentioned at the end of my Slovakia travelogue, I had three short trips (3 days each) planned to Amsterdam, the Scottish Highlands, and London in June/early July. I say on the move because in Amsterdam I focused my time on the hop on hop off canal cruises, in the Highlands I was on a train trip, and in London I focused on walking to areas that were new to me as well as taking the commuter boat on the Thames.

I used to visit Amsterdam frequently when family was living there (1990's) but I think only once took a tour boat. So I spent my two days repeatedly taking the Orange and Green routes of the Canal tour boats. I learned a little more each time as the commentary varied depending on the captain and how many languages were on board for the recorded portions to be repeated. I stayed in the Plantage area, still considered Centrum but very quiet with the zoo, Hortus botanical garden and Wertheim park nearby. Between the trams and the boats I covered many areas that were totally new to me as well as really internalizing the canal architecture – both on the land and the water. Happily, also, there remains far less graffiti and dog poop than I remember.

Amsterdam was founded in 1250 and the canals were dug originally for defense. There are a few towers remaining of the former city walls which have had upper portions added.



The only natural waterway is the Amstel River which was dammed beginning in the 13<sup>th</sup> C. Amsterdam's "golden age" was from 1600 to 1650 when the population quadrupled from 50,000 to 200,000. The canals were lined with warehouses that stored enormous volumes of goods that were barged (human power) from the ships in the harbor that in those years were

sailing all of the then known world. There was a fun parallel with this when a month later I was on the Thames looking at the warehouses of the other big trading power of the same era!

The three principal canals dug in the 17<sup>th</sup> C had specialized functions and made Amsterdam one of the first “planned” cities. Today a total of 100 km of canals remain with 1250 bridges, of



which 500 date from the 17<sup>th</sup> C. Herengracht was the “gentlemen’s” canal with wealthy residents. Keizergracht was for the middle class and Prinsengracht for industry. The canals are only 3 meters deep and are flushed three times per week with fresh water by opening the 16 locks that formerly were used to regulate the water depth in the harbor.



The canal front houses have many architectural styles and almost all have a hook at the top for hauling goods and furniture. Something I didn’t know previously is that the buildings lean slightly outward making them both seem larger and so the façade isn’t damaged during the hoisting.





Many of the former barges have now been converted into living quarters and are permanently moored along the canals along with some contemporary house boats, a total of 2500 living units with no further



permits being granted.

The city has strictly limited permits for restaurant terraces along the canals and as a result the few that exist are always crowded when the weather is good.



Centraal Station where I arrived by train has ferry docks on its back side for boats headed across the IJ river, plus a 2500 bike storage garage.



Solutions are still being sought to park the other 7000 bikes that come there daily. The station was built in 1889 on 8600 wooden piles spanning three artificial islands.

The canal boat commentary pointed out the plaques attached to many of the buildings and that it often showed the trade of who lived there. I found them very attractive and while many



were old, there were also many contemporary ones.



Another symbol I wondered about were the backpacks hanging on Dutch flags outside buildings. It turns out these are student's school bags hung out to celebrate that they have passed their high school exams!

And there were definitely some humorous sculptures to be found both along the canals and on people's balconies.



I went looking for the Ter Kate market in the Oud West neighborhood. Getting somewhat lost along the way I happened upon the recently opened Westermoskee Aya Sofya mosque which, together with several other mosques, serves the 24% Muslim population of Amsterdam.

In the same vicinity is the new indoor Foodhallen in the former electric tram service sheds, a beautiful building now filled with outstanding quality eating and drinking establishments. And a whole new residential neighborhood is under construction adjacent to it.



Between my hotel and the Rembrandt Plein/Hermitage/City Hall & Opera canal boat stop is a former Jewish neighborhood with a lovely 17<sup>th</sup> C Portugese Sephardic Jewish synagogue (pictured today and in a painting from 1680) and history museum. Before WWII Amsterdam had a Jewish population of 80,000 of whom only 5,000 returned and today the Jewish population has increased to about 15,000.



Among the modern architecture I found the NEMO science museum of particular interest with its boat shape by architect Renzo Piano who also designed my newest (high rise) neighbor in Paris – Cite Judiciaire – seen from my bedroom window. I also liked the EYE film institute



building. And of course there is contemporary housing as well.



And, even though I didn't have companions with whom to share, I did manage to have a rijstafel lunch.

After returning home for about one week I jumped into a very different cultural and physical environment spending two nights aboard the Belmond Royal Scotsman train departing and returning from Edinburgh looping through the Scottish Highlands.



Interestingly we traveled through completely different scenery from that of my first ever visit to Scotland in 2012 when a day trip to the highlands was in the very rugged area near Loch Lomond, as well as the cruise in 2013 when we made three stops along the west coast.



The Scotch broom was blooming which I believe many people are allergic to. It unfortunately made its way to New Zealand on a ship and wiped out a lot of the native plants and is also planted extensively by the Washington State Highway Department to stabilize embankments along highways.

This was 5\* luxury aboard a train with beautiful appointments and wood inlays like the Orient



Express, two chefs preparing all our meals on board in two kitchens and among the other libations, 70 malted whiskies on offer. Right, we ARE in Scotland after all!



We also had a French based Japanese film crew filming our trip for a Japanese travel program.



We kicked off the luxury experience with dinner at the Dome restaurant across from our hotel in Edinburgh. An excellent meal in elegant surroundings originally created as a Physicians' Hall and later serving as a bank.

After being "piped" on we traveled to Boat en the train was berthed each Rail tracks where we scheduled trains private tracks of which were 36 guests, mostly Americans, with a total standard trains because we branches. Of course the followed by music entertainment in the observation car. There is a small viewing platform at



board, and served what I would call "high tea" Garten. Unlike cruises where travel is at night, night. We traveled on a combination of Scottish frequently put into a siding to let regularly (passenger or freight) pass, or we were on there are a surprising number in Scotland. We British and Scottish, a handful of other staff of 10. The train cars must be wider than the often were scraped on the sides by overhanging first night there was a lovely dinner on board

the end of the observation car.





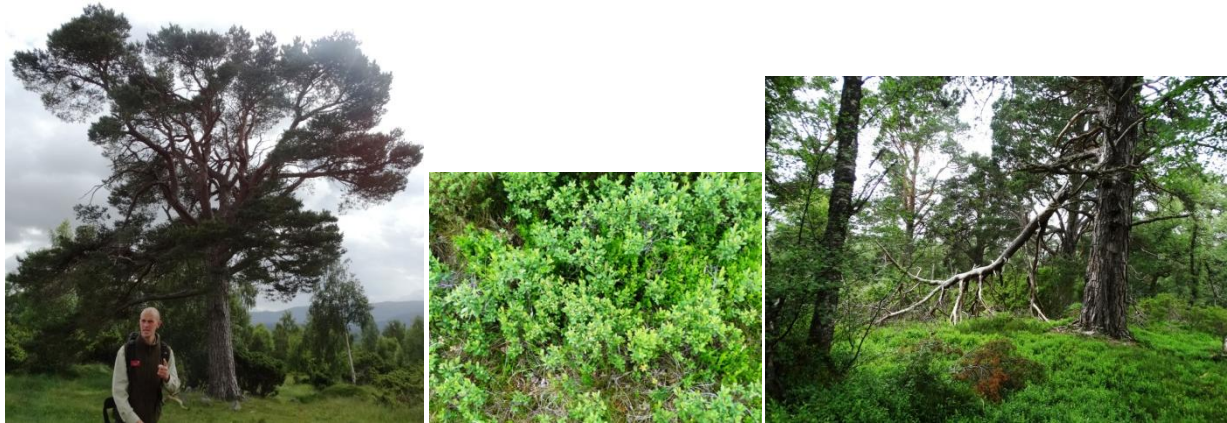


Before leaving Goat en Garten in the morning I went for a walk along the Spey river. And yes those are snow fields in the photo at the end of June. Apparently fishing licenses in Scotland are issued per river and are very expensive. On the other side of the path was a golf course and I saw deer along the way. By the way, all directional signs were in both English and Gaelic languages.



The day's itinerary was very full beginning with a visit to Rothiemurchus Estate. This is a property of 18,000 acres that has been owned by the same family for 500 years. It is part of the UK National Parks system, most of whose lands are in private ownership. This was my first time to visit Scottish Caledonian pine forest which used to cover most of Scotland. While walking with a Park Ranger in the area that is being allowed to naturally re-evolve to its native eco system (from pastureland) I met the bog myrtle which is the plant that provides the "magic ingredient" mosquito repellent in Avon's skin so soft now known as bug guard which is my repellent of choice!





Other members of our group went clay pigeon shooting, trout fishing or bus tours. Learning how the family has managed the property, including creating a ski resort in the 1960's to provide local jobs, currently building a new village for housing because now there is broadband industry providing jobs, all the while being stewards of the ecosystem.

This area lay below 1 kilometer thickness of ice 10,000 years ago and we saw a big rock sitting isolated left over from when the ice retreated.



We had tea in the hunting lodge, built in 1888. Apparently city families came to the country for two months every year. A lodge with many bedrooms and perhaps one bathroom (or outside privy) and large dining area accommodated the family for their outdoor activities. No heat, no winter insulation. I hadn't realized that it was actually Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert who brought the "hunt" (i.e. with hounds) to England from Germany and who bought Balmoral, the Royal Family's country retreat in Scotland. This led to families building these miniatures of the royal family's Balmoral castle and grounds. I had always thought "the hunt" was a British thing.

In the afternoon we visited Culloden, the battlefield where the supporters of "Bonnie Prince Charlie", the pretender to the throne of England, battled government troops (made up largely of Scots and Brits) losing 2500 men to the government's 50. This was the last major battle



fought on U.K. soil, in 1746.

Our colorful guide also instructed us in how the 5 meter long plaid (kilt) is actually hand pleated, folded, and used by its wearer including becoming a total body coverall in



inclement weather (of which there is a lot in Scotland).

Before our formal dinner we made a stop at Strathisla, the distillery that produces the ingredient that is in all of Chivas Regal's blends. I had never visited a distillery before and no photos were allowed inside but I understood the process from visiting "artisan" stills in other countries. We were of course "piped" in and started our visit with a "wee dram" of Strathisla's malt and concluded with a "wee dram" of Chivas 12 year old blend.



The formal dinner was sumptuous, all the men were dressed in tux or kilt, followed by more traditional music entertainment and dancing on the rail platform at Dundee where we were



berthed for the night.

For much of our third morning we were traveling along the east coast of Scotland from the Firth of Tay in Dundee and then the approach to Edinburgh along the Firth of Forth.



Home again for about ten days before heading to London where I hadn't been since 1999. A few changes? YES! First of all the transport system, which previously I thought somewhat archaic is now fast and modern. I guess an Olympics Games investment contributed to making that happen. And of course the Thalys train only takes 2 hours 15 minutes Paris to Pancreas station.

I absorbed some of the elegance of Mayfair where I was staying, and many interesting



sculptures.



I chose again to spend a day on the Thames as I hadn't done that before and I particularly wanted to visit the Docklands redevelopment area to which many of my 1980's developer colleagues had contributed their talents. And there were all the 80's "post modern" buildings with big bank and corporate names on them. When I arrived at Cabot Square there was a large screen televising BBC's Breaking News at noon on July 11 when Andrea Leadsom, the other remaining contender to succeed David Cameron as Britain's Prime Minister announced that she was bowing out paving the way for Theresa May to become Prime Minister which happened that same day!



A Docklands History Museum in a former West India Company warehouse set the stage for understanding the extensive riverfront redevelopment and new development I was to see.



Residential everywhere in converted “wharf” buildings plus contemporary new construction.



Also a style I had seen in Amsterdam – sort of an apartment cum “trailer/mobile home in the U.S.” perched usually at an angle at the top level of a multistory residential building. Curious.



The riverfront residential seems to extend on forever. Of course the population of Greater London is four times that of Paris, but if you include the immediate “urban” areas the two city/regions are roughly comparable at around 10 million inhabitants.

From the Docklands I took the light rail hoping to find some neighborhoods that were not “high



end”. At the end of the

line in Lewisham I wanted to have lunch but didn’t find the center of town so settled for very good fish and chips in Greenwich.

After satisfying my Thames curiosity I wanted to walk. I walked from Oxford Street across Hyde



Park and

Kensington Gardens. There I saw the Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Fountain where kids can play in the artificial creek amid huge security. What a gift to have the 350 acre Hyde Park in the midst of Central London, to say nothing of the many other green spaces as well.



Walking along the Thames there was a series of informative photos depicting and explaining various London traditions. One of them was the “beating of the bounds” when schoolchildren take willow sticks and march the boundaries of their parish.



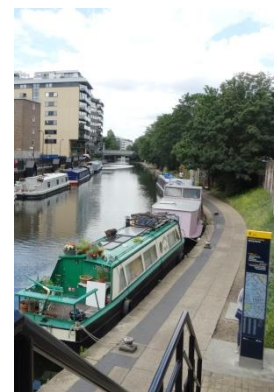
Then my final day a walk outside the center (from my 1990's guidebook) to Islington. The walk starts at Canonbury Square where notables such as George Orwell and Evelyn Waugh lived and to which in 2006 they added a vineyard to the garden plantings.



Then a peaceful wander along New River which is neither new nor a river, but full of vegetation, birds and water features in a quiet residential neighborhood.



The walk took me to the Grand Union canal and for the first time I saw the British canal boats – much narrower than their French cousins. This canal is bordered by a mixture of industrial buildings, converted industrial buildings and residential as well as locks, of course. Obviously many people were enjoying cruising as a vacation. There are areas where you can moor your canal boat for up to seven days free of charge. Children from a local elementary school created a vibrant series of mosaics depicting life along the canal and how its roles have changed.







I finished my visit with another fish and chips meal at the well known



Black Friars Pub! It is clear that London couldn't be more different than Paris, so it is a good getaway.

I was staying next to Shepherd's Market and so had great dinner choices. Iranian one night and Turkish the other, with excellent chefs and service at both restaurants.