

Milan and a Trip Down the Rhine

Bill Sofer

Our regular Wingz driver, John, arrived promptly in his big black SUV to transport us to the airport. As usual he asked whether I had forgotten my golf clubs, an incident that had occurred a year back when I departed for a golf outing in Canada without the appropriate implements necessary to play the game. This time however there was no need for irons and woods, we were headed off on a distinctly different mission. Our first destination was Milan where we were planning to attend the opera at La Scala. Then to Basel to meet our friends John and Nancy. Finally we would board a Crystal river vessel and sail the Rhine from Basel to Amsterdam.

And so, on to the airport. Upon arrival, we discovered that our United flight was going to depart two hours behind schedule. That meant we would probably miss our connection to the Milan flight out of Newark Airport. After a prolonged exchange with her computer, the woman at the United checkin desk managed to get us on a flight that left Newark for Frankfurt, one that was scheduled to depart a few hours later than that for Milan. Of course, that meant that we would have to get from Germany to Italy. She worked her computer skills some more and was able to reserve two places on a Lufthansa flight to Milan from Frankfurt. However, she wasn't able to assign us seats - a circumstance that caused a minor issue after we arrived in Germany.

The trips across the country and the ocean were uneventful. Business class seats on a Boeing 777 were comfortable and during the long flight from New Jersey to Germany I was able to get a few hours sleep, unusual for me. There was a brief hiccup on the Frankfurt to Milan leg (they had cancelled our reservations because we didn't have assigned seats) but we managed to get on board anyway. After arrival in Italy, we made our into central Milan. Like most civilized countries, Italy has direct connections from its major cities to the airport and the 30 minute ride to the Milan station was easy despite having to lift our luggage onto the train. Then we caught a taxi to the



Poster at La Scala

Milanoscala, our hotel, located just three blocks from our primary destination, the Mecca of opera: La Scala.

We spent the next morning, Saturday, slightly jet lagged, strolling randomly around downtown Milan. After a while, we happened on the La Scala museum. Housed in the opera house it was featuring an exhibit celebrating the 150th anniversary of Gioachino Rossini's death. We were familiar with his operas, the Barber of Seville, La Cenerentola and William Tell, but were unaware of his fascinating life story. Born in 1792, he came from a musical family. As a boy, he learned to play the harpsichord, the horn (his father's instrument of choice) and the cello. He wrote his first opera when he was 18 and composed 38 in all. Despite an enormously successful career, both critically and financially, he stopped writing operas abruptly at the age of 37. He died 39 years later.

After the museum, with the help of the concierge, we found a mid scale Italian (of course) restaurant on our way back to the hotel. The next day we toured the Sforza castle and park and explored the city. At about 7:30 we made our way to the opera house. Verdi's Aida was on the bill.

La Scala is impressive. There is a large orchestra seating area surrounded by six layer cake stories of private boxes on three sides. We had purchased costly seats four levels up, on the left hand side of the theater. An attendant led us to our box, unlocking the door to allow us entry. We were in compartment two, very close to the stage. Too close. There were four chairs in the box. We had purchased seats one and two at the front. From seat two on the right (further away from the stage than seat one) we could see the musicians and conductor in the pit but only about a third of the stage. And that was only when we leaned far over the railing. The view from seat one, nearer the stage, had even a more restricted view. The seats directly behind us in the same box had neither backs nor any view of the stage. I thought that they were only there for show. But no. Shortly before the



Rossini's portrait in the La Scala Museum



La Scala theater



Poster for Aida, the opera we attended

performance began, two women, a mother and her daughter, entered our domain. We learned that the younger woman was studying costume design. Naturally, she wanted a close view of the stage, the singers, the chorus and the extras. During the performance she would stand and lean over us in a valiant effort to get a peek at all of the above. We weren't used to persons moving around during an opera in such close proximity. It was disconcerting.

There were some other issues. We were unimpressed with the production. It was booked as a Zeffirelli product. We were familiar with this specific production because we had attended two of his Aida's at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. They were stunning affairs with magnificent scenery, a menagerie marching across the stage, and grand backdrops. What we were watching bore little resemblance to what we had seen. The costumes looked like they had been dragged out of storage and never ironed or cleaned. The swords, spears and other paraphernalia looked like poor imitations of the real things. In addition, compared to the Met, the stage was small and overcrowded. Adding to these problems, the theater wasn't air conditioned and it had been an unusually warm day.

On the positive side, the theater is magnificent, the singers were excellent, the orchestra brilliant. There's a real sense of history and grandeur about the place. Because we were almost directly over the conductor, we got a wonderful look at the full range of his energetic technique. But unfortunately the positives couldn't outweigh the deficits. We left before the final act.

The next day we taxied to the central train station in Milan, built by Mussolini, the largest by volume in all of Europe, and found our seats for the trip to Basel. Rail travel in Europe is wonderful. It's fast, convenient, clean, and efficient. We had purchased first class tickets that granted us, among other benefits, the ability to be served lunch at our seats. I had a surprisingly tasty ratatouille with polenta. When we arrived a shiny black Mercedes taxi driven by a surly driver (he was disturbed because our hotel, the Spalentor, was so close) took us to our lodgings.



The Milan train station



Swimming in the Rhine

Basel, at least the portion of the city that we explored, looked typically Swiss. Everything was neat, clean, and done up conservatively. The old portion of town was right across from our hotel and we spent the afternoon walking through it trying to get a glance at the Rhine. It wasn't until the next day, after John and Nancy AufderHeide arrived, did we manage to actually see the river. They're much more adept at finding their way around. Nancy, in particular, has an excellent sense of direction. We spent several lovely hours at a cafe on the other side of the water, watching, to our surprise, dozens of people slowly drifting down the river, most of them kept afloat only by an inflated rubber contraption tied to their bodies. After lunch we ended up walking 4 or 5 miles on a path parallel to the river. We had initially crossed the Rhine via one of the numerous bridges but we returned aboard a tiny ferry capable of carrying less than a dozen people. Powered only by the watery flow – a cable strung across the river allowed the boat to travel in both directions – we made the crossing in less than 10 minutes. When we landed on the opposite bank, we did some shopping and, after a brief break, had a delightful meal at a typical Swiss restaurant.



Ferry across the Rhine



Wine barrels in the hospital cellar

The next day we boarded the Crystal Debussy, destined to house us for the next week. It's long and narrow, so long that the walk to our cabin, room #227 at the end of the corridor, was about 90 yards from where we entered the vessel. Along this long route numerous maids, butlers, and other ship personnel stuck their heads out the doors as we passed and greeted us with a smiling "Welcome aboard". It got to be wearisome by the time we reached our final objective. Our bunk was small, modern, and functional. The bathroom was tiny with little space for toiletries. There were few drawers but the ample closet was full of hangers. The shower was a thing of beauty, with two push buttons to start and stop the flow. Our luggage fit under the bed.

The biggest issue we had throughout the whole voyage was the food. Not that it was bad. On the contrary. Most of the meals were of very high quality. And irresistible. There was too much to eat for breakfast with too many after breakfast goodies. Lunch was buffet style, with many enticing choices, and unlimited opportunities to take extra portions. There were too many after lunch snacks. And too many before dinner drinks. Dinner, with the exception of one meal, was delectable, with too many courses and too many refills of good wine. And after dinner there was dessert. The finale was a few chocolate goodies added to our cabin after we left for dinner that we devoured before going to bed. By the end of the trip I had gained eight pounds.

Our first port of call was Strasbourg. This part of the world was fought over for several hundred years, with the French and Germans alternating possession. It was French until the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-1871. The war unified Germany – the origin of the German state dates from that period. The French won the city back as a result of WWI. Then, the Germans briefly took control during the second world war. As a result of the allies victory in 1945, the city is now French, but it shows many signs of German influence. In the morning we visited the downtown and stopped at the premiere pate shop in town to sample goose and duck preparations. I preferred the duck although the goose is favored by connoisseurs. We also got to see a wine cellar that was housed in a hospital that profits from sales. We returned to the ship for lunch.



View from the "Philosophers Walk"

Crystal offers a wide variety of "free" onshore excursions and we signed up for several before we left for Europe. However, we must have made an error because we found ourselves committed to a costly activity in Strasbourg in the afternoon. Realizing our mistake, we tried to cancel the night before, but it was too late. So we set out for the city, just the two of us, for the opportunity to visit with a typical Strasbourg couple and observe how they lived. The event was to include some shopping and a cooking lesson. A fancy van took us into town where our guide accompanied us to two stores to buy a few ingredients for dinner. Armed with two bottles of wine, some salami, and bread we strolled over to an apartment building, climbed to the third floor and met Mollie. A pert short young lady, she was an American from Dallas who came to France to study pastry making at the Cordon Bleu and stayed after meeting Francois, a young Frenchman. They were partners. He was MIA, having been delayed at work.

Mollie had me cut up some strawberries. Gail did some stirring. That was the extent of our participation in the cooking process. We soon were at their table eating a chicken dish



Castles on the Rhine

accompanied by some spaetzel. A dish of strawberries, expertly cut up, followed. Francois arrived halfway through the meal. We talked cars because he manages several automobile agencies. We also had an extensive political conversation concerning Macron and the European Union. His point of view was that Macron was conceding too much to the Union and not looking out for France as much as it deserves. But he acknowledged that the city was more European than almost any other in France. It all seemed reasonable and I didn't know enough about the issues involved to advance any counter arguments. We left on good terms. All in all, we had spent a pleasant afternoon, but felt a little perturbed because of the extra cash expended.

Our next stop was Mannheim, our first German city. We climbed the hill overlooking the town, a pretty hefty hike called the "Philosophers Walk" and sweated in the unusually hot weather.

The following day, Saturday, we sailed to Rudesheim. This section of the Rhine is its most beautiful. So full of castles, I gave up trying to photograph all of them. In the city we boarded a cable car to view a Franco-Prussian war memorial. Beside their Riesling wines, the city is famous for its spaghetti ice cream, a concoction consisting of macaroni sized strands of ice cream covered with a red (raspberry?) sauce topped by some sugar crumbs designed to look like Parmigiana cheese. We found that it wasn't hard to make. The counter lady simply extruded some ordinary ice cream through a potato ricer! Although we were still satiated from breakfast, we tried some. I'm not sure whether it was the preparation or the quality of the product but the result was delicious. It's a business opportunity: the inventor of the dish didn't patent it. I'm tempted to sell the idea to Amy's, here in Austin. But I'm going to have to share the royalties with Nancy who came up with the idea of using chocolate truffles as meatballs.

In the evening we had a unique experience. We bused to a converted old Krupp steel mill to attend a concert by a string quartet called "La Finesse", an all female group that played an eclectic mix of music. Their act ended with a laser show and a medley of classical music culminating with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Some months previously, we had learned from the former director of UT's music department, that string quartets have difficulty in standing out among their peers. This group of young women were certainly different than any other string quartet that I've ever heard.



My E-Bike



Golf range

Sunday in Koblenz was bicycling day. I hadn't bicycled in over a decade and it showed. I was unsure and unsteady. However, the bikes that were provided were electrically assisted. The battery operated motor helps only when you're pedaling, not on the straights. Even so, after only 12 miles of e-biking my butt hurt and my thighs burned. Our destination was to a modified golf range. A brilliant concept, one hits the ball up a hill and tries to get it into several aluminum covered containers as it rolls back down. I missed every time. In the afternoon, John, Nancy, Gail and I formed a team and played trivial pursuit. We came in second. Two nights previous Nancy and I played Balderdash. We missed three of the seven words including "pentheraphobi", a fear of one's mother in law.

The following day, Monday, we toured Cologne and its magnificent cathedral. Built over a period of six centuries (construction was delayed for several hundred years in the middle ages and only begun again in the eighteenth century), the Church was the highest structure in the world until the Washington monument was erected. Subsequently, the Eiffel Tower held the record. It was begun in 1248 after some bones of the three Magi were transferred to Cologne from Milan (some were later returned. I'm not sure which ones). These relics attracted a host of pilgrims. A large edifice was deemed necessary to store and display the relics and to offer a suitable religious atmosphere appropriate to their importance. Apparently relics and their associated admirers were big business in the Middle Ages. Big enough to warrant the enormous amount of money and effort required to start a project that took hundreds of years to complete. In the end it apparently has paid off because the cathedral is the most visited site in Germany; 20,000 21st century pilgrims and other visitors per day.

We arrived in Amsterdam early the next morning. At 9:30 we drove to a small village outside of the city where they had preserved some old Dutch homes and windmills. The highlight of the trip was a working sawmill powered by the wind. The



Cologne cathedral



Windmills outside Amsterdam

volunteers loaded a massive poplar log on to the device and we watched as wind power sawed it into planks.

In the afternoon we sauntered along the docks. We stared at the many ancient boats that had been converted into homes. They all had a second vessel between them and the shore that acted as a front yard. Gardens in various states of disarray led to the main abode. All the homes were attached via an umbilical cord to shore power and water.

On our final day we dragged our luggage to the corridor, checked our bill (we were awarded extra shipboard credit making the €500 excursion price moot), and boarded a bus to the Sheraton Airport hotel. From the Sheraton, we took a train into the city, walked from the train station to the museum district, visited the Van Gogh museum and one featuring Banksy's work, ate at a rijsttafel restaurant called Same Sebo (a place that we had eaten at decades ago), and returned via taxi.



The next day we flew home through Chicago on a Boeing 767, not as comfortable as the incoming flight, but OK. On this leg, I watched three movies and didn't get any sleep.

A Few Additional Observations

Here's a list of a few things I liked and disliked on our voyage not necessarily in their order of importance.

Likes

1. The shower on the boat - fed by a push button, it started instantly, came up to temperature quickly, had a great handheld attachment (with it's own push button), and ceased flow on command. I couldn't determine who manufactured it.
2. The smoked salmon - offered for breakfast but available until 6 PM, the lox was only slightly salty and delicious. I must have consumed a pound.

3. Elvir - our waiter from Croatia, he had a wonderful sense of humor and an engaging personality. He gave us invariably good advice about what to eat as well as which wine went with every dish. A good waiter adds mightily to the dining experience.
4. The lectures on board were great. I learned a lot about the history of the relationship between France and Germany and the prospects for the future.

Dislikes

1. Excursion to a typical European family's apartment - several aspects of this activity were disappointing. First, it cost over \$500. We weren't informed, or if we were, it wasn't made clear. When we tried to back out in the evening before the activity, they wouldn't let us. Second, the excursion itself wasn't terrific. The couple that we visited were nice enough but because we were the only guests, the opportunities for interaction were limited. It didn't help that the partner of our hostess showed up late, at the end of the meal. And I must admit that the food was a poor substitute for the meals that we had on board.
2. Descriptions of off boat activities - a full discussion of each of the next day's activities would have been very helpful. As it was, it was difficult to choose among the excursions the next day.