

If you've read my travel journals in the past, you know I like to report on the unusual and sometimes ridiculous things that happen during our trips. Well, it happened today, and this may be the all-time winner.

After three days in Reykjavic, Iceland, we woke up before 5am for a 5:30am pickup for the airport to catch an 8:30am flight to Copenhagen. We boarded the plane and taxied to the runway and waited. After waiting on the taxiway for quite a while, the captain announced that due to understaffing in the control tower, the airport was closing from 9am to 9:30am and he couldn't move the plane until 9:30am, 20 minutes later. This waiting used more fuel than they originally calculated they would need for the flight, so when the airport "reopened" we needed to return to the gate to refuel before taking off.

While Iceland is still recovering from the financial crisis of the last decade and public funds are scarce, you'd think someone would be able to do the math justifying an extra guy in the tower over shutting down the airport with planes burning jet fuel on the taxiways.

Besides the airport incident, Iceland is a beautiful country with nice people and lots to do. Reykjavic is the world's northernmost capital and is surrounded by mountains and Faxaflói Bay. It is immaculately clean and easy to get around by foot.

We flew to Reykjavic with our traveling companions Debi and Andy Weisman on Sunday, July 3rd, stopping in New York for a layover where we met up with Michael, who was catching a flight to Austin, TX. We had a snack with him before he had to catch his flight, then flew the relatively short five hour overnight flight to Iceland, arriving at 7am and completely exhausted from the lack of sleep and four hour time difference.

We went to our hotel and dropped off our luggage, but it was too early to check in. We walked around Reykjavik, a quaint city where 2/3 of the country's 330,000 population lives. Police carry whistles instead of guns and everyone speaks English as a second or third language. We did a food tour that afternoon which oriented us to the city and the local dishes. However, there was still some confusion with the conversion to the local currency, Icelandic kronas, as Andy tried to tip our guide \$200 instead of the intended \$20. Fortunately she was nice enough to point out his generosity.



After the food tour there was a parade for Iceland's soccer team who returned home to a hero's welcome after beating England then losing to France in the European Cup. This was the farthest Iceland's soccer ever got in international competition, and the whole country was celebrating their newfound heroes.

As if we didn't eat or drink enough during the six stops on the food tour, we went out for pizza at 10pm. The sun doesn't set in Iceland during the summer, and we needed sunglasses on the walk back to the hotel at 11pm.

The next day we went to Blue Lagoon, a spa heated by geothermal water. The warm, silky water has reputed medicinal benefits, and the separate mud and algae facial masks left our skin tightened and refreshed, if you believe the advertising.

On day three we did a full day Superjeep tour of the Golden Circle, visiting a crater, waterfalls, geothermal areas with geysers, hot springs and steam vents, a glacier, and Thingvellir National Park, where the American and Eurasian tectonic plates are pulling apart at a rate of one inch per year. We literally walked between continents. For dinner back in Reykjavik we went to a restaurant serving Icelandic fare and tried Minke Whale, Puffin and Shag, a bird in the pelican family. The whale was good, but I thought they would have served a larger portion. Why be so skimpy when the meat comes from something as big as a whale?

Now we're wrapping up Day 4, exhausted. After arriving in Copenhagen and settling into our hotel, we walked through the pedestrian precinct of Strøget, past Tivoli Gardens, the inspiration for Walt Disney, and had dinner at Torvehallerne, the biggest food market in Copenhagen.



My last journal that I sent out was after our first short day in Copenhagen, Denmark. As I write this our cruise ship is about to dock in St. Petersburg, Russia, for three days. Picking up where I left off, we spent two more days in Copenhagen, a city founded in the 11th century as a fishing village in what was then a remote corner of Denmark. Copenhagen gradually became the country's uncontested political, economic and cultural center due to the importance of its location on the Baltic Sea. We took two different walking tours on our first full day there, seeing different facets of the city: an old merchants' town overlooking the entrance to the Baltic Sea; a progressive city tolerant of a wide range of social behavior; a metropolis that manages to run efficiently yet feel relaxed; and a city with so many architectural treasures that it's known as the "City of Beautiful Spires." Its incredible range of architecture within a small area includes renaissance, medieval, baroque, Dutch style and the ultra-modern architecture with glass and steel.



Nyhavn has its nautical atmosphere with different colored houses so drunken sailors returning from sea could find their way home. Apparently it's easier to remember what color your house is than the address. The Little Mermaid is one of Copenhagen's most famous attractions, in honor of the fairy tale by Danish favorite son Hans Christian Andersen. Our tour also took us to the Free State of Christiania, a commune that declared independence from the rest of the world in the 70's. Marijuana and hash is illegal in Denmark, but here it is tolerated and sold openly on Pusher Street.

Denmark. It was built by Christian IV between 1637 and 1642 as an observatory. The Round Tower does not have an elevator, so visitors have to climb the winding, white-washed Spiral Walk, constructed so the king could be carried to the top in a horse-drawn carriage. The spiral ramp winds itself 7.5 times round the hollow core of the tower. We didn't go inside.

We also walked past the Great Synagogue of Copenhagen, the city's main synagogue, finished in 1833. While the outside is simple and severe, the inside is a treasure. Over the main entrance is an inscription in Hebrew. The words mean "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Photos aren't allowed due to security concerns, and we couldn't go inside because services were in session.



On Saturday we boarded our cruise ship, the Seabourn Quest, for an afternoon departure from Copenhagen. We spent all of Sunday at sea, sailing towards our first port. We all appreciated day of relaxation and stuffing ourselves with delicious food on board the ship.

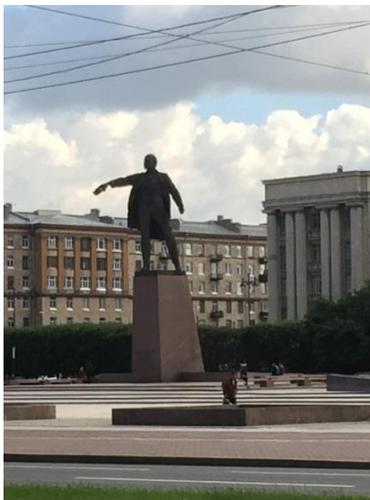


Our first port yesterday was Tallinn, Estonia. Since breaking free of communist rule in 1990 and joining the EU in 2004, the Estonians have created a thriving economy and have restored Tallinn, the capital's Hanseatic Old Town. The Old Town is beautiful and we had a terrific guide that toured us around all the historic places.

I'm now looking at Russia outside our cabin window, where we'll spend three full days touring St. Petersburg and the surrounding area. We hope everyone is well and we miss you all.

Love Lori and Stephen

My last journal entry was written as we were sailing into St. Petersburg, Russia. We're now on our way to Stockholm, Sweden, having spent three days in St. Petersburg and half a day in Helsinki, Finland. St. Petersburg is one of the most grandiose cities in all of Europe. As the former official capital of Russia, it's also the most westernized of Russia's cities. St. Petersburg sprawls along the banks of the Neva River and was once known as the Venice of the North for the many canals there. We saw so many churches, palaces and museums built by former czars named Peter, Paul, Alexander and Nicholas my head was spinning. They all recall Russia's wealthy, sophisticated and powerful past. "Past" is the operative word. St. Petersburg today, while still beautiful and grandiose, is crowded, congested with the worst traffic I've ever seen, and full of people that never smile or accommodate anything. Nevertheless, it's easy to see how any type of nationalistic campaign, playing on Russia's golden age, could appeal to the masses.



Interestingly, we only saw monument to Soviet times, a big statue of Lenin. However, Lenin's pose in the communist memorabilia causes more ridicule than anything else. People say it looks like he's either dancing or hailing a taxi.

Before going on shore in St. Petersburg the first day, we had breakfast on the ship with a couple of the ship's officers. After chatting all through breakfast, I eventually asked them what they do on the ship. The guy across from me, sitting next to Lori, was the head of hotel operations. The guy next to me turns to me (we were sitting side by side) and says "I'm the Captain." I couldn't see his name plate or didn't know what all the stripes on his shoulder were. We all had a good laugh, even entertaining people farther down the table that had overheard the whole exchange. And that's how you get remembered throughout the cruise by the officers.

Our three days in Russia were spent with our private tour guide Danya and driver Leonid, who said he was stationed on a submarine he pointed out to us. I'll swear he was a KGB operative. In addition to all the museums, churches and palaces, we took a tour of the Metro (subway) where I survived an attempted pick-pocketing without losing anything to the thugs that I had to plow through as they attempted to box me in. We also saw where Rasputin, favorite monk of the last Romanovs, was assassinated (just Google it for more information); the nine Imperial Easter Eggs created by Carl Fabergé for the last two Russian emperors; and took a boat ride around the St. Petersburg waterways.



Throughout our tour of St. Petersburg, through personal experience, we developed the five rules that should be followed by all tour guides. They are: #1: Don't lose your tour group. While attempting to navigate the Hermitage Museum, the world's six largest museum and probably the most crowded when measured by humans per square foot, Danya, our tour guide, disappeared. By sheer luck she found us about 30 minutes later and we could tell she was just as relieved as we were.

#2: Read your audience and react. There is so much to see in some places that as a visitor it's easy to get overwhelmed and call it enough. Danya had an agenda and wanted to get to everything whether we were interested or not.

#3: Don't tell your private group to pick up the pace. Related to rule number 2, sometimes the group just can't go any faster for any number of reasons (e.g., exhaustion, boredom, crowds).

#4: Schedule lunch and bathroom stops. Also related to pacing; however, food and peeing are also important regardless of how much is on the agenda. That's just us.

#5: Shower and use deodorant: Self-explanatory. Europeans are known not to shower every day, and our experience is that the further east you go, the worse it gets.



We spent a few hours today in Helsinki, a nice town that the cruise lines determined only deserves a short visit. It rained the whole time we were there, so instead of taking the walking tour we had scheduled we rode around town in a "Hop On Hop Off" double-decker bus. Besides seeing the main square and cathedral in Helsinki at the start of the bus ride, we only hopped off the bus one time at the Temppeliaukio Church (The Church in the Rock), completed in 1969 and carved out of a solid rock and topped with a copper dome. The pantheon-like interior is enhanced by the rugged granite walls. Because of its special architecture, the church is one of the main attractions in Helsinki as evidenced by all the other people hopping off the bus with us.

Tomorrow morning the cruise ship docks at Stockholm where we disembark (a nautical term) and spend a few days before flying home. While in Stockholm we have a bike tour and separate City Walking Tour planned.

We hope everyone is well and we miss you all. Love Lori and Stephen