

## **Cruise to Baltic – May 2003.**

Our trip started on Monday May 19<sup>th</sup> from Vancouver Island. Due to oversales on Air BC from Nanaimo Airport, we decided to take our car and cruise to the mainland on BC Ferries.

We had booked into the Delta Vancouver Airport hotel. The rates quoted were \$59.00 CDN and pay our own parking, or \$79.00 with free parking for 14 days. We were going to be away for 21 days, so we had a rate of \$109.00 with free parking for 21 days. Cost of parking was \$7.50 per day!

On Tuesday, we checked in at 09:00 for the 13:40 flight to London, England using our C1 pass. Lucky we were early, as we were advised that the flight had been cancelled due to a lack of interest on behalf of the public – ignoring the fact that 22 cons were listed! The agent suggested going via Calgary and picking up the YYC-LHR flight there. The agent was most helpful and even changed our routing for us.

Our friends collected us from LHR on Wednesday morning, and we spent 3 days with them. On Saturday, we squeezed our suitcases into a Ford Escort; this was a challenge in itself! We drove down to Dover to board our cruise.

Through Dargal Interline, we had booked a 14-day cruise on the Celebrity line “Constellation” (remember those proud aircraft?).

As ‘interliners’, we traveled ticketless and label less, but no problem, we were supplied with a document “Pier pickup” and our luggage was labeled at check-in. The ‘Constellation’ was just one year old and immaculate.

Our accommodations were at the lowest deck. Why pay more than you need too? But the biggest of cabins, complete with a king size bed and a bathroom that you didn’t have to worry about dropping the soap in the shower, in fact the shower could accommodate two – no further comment!

This baby is huge – 2,000 passengers, 1,000 crew. The theatre holds 900, and there is a casino, cinema, meeting rooms, computer room and, as usual, lots of eating places.

We were a party of 3 couples; the other two couples were UK Pionairs and we have traveled as a group many times.

After a full day sailing the North Sea, we arrived at **Oslo**. We took a tour of a glass factory combined with a city tour in a brand-new Mercedes coach. The tour also included a stop at the Viking Museum. There were still signs of snow in the hills, but the weather was warm and sunny.

An alternate to pre booking a tour is to take the city tour bus which parks right on quayside. Cost was \$15.00 USD or 15.00 Euros for a 3-hour tour. Security on the cruise was tight. Everyone was issued an encoded card which was used both disembarking and embarking and no visitors were allowed

Next stop was **Copenhagen**. The “Mermaid” statue was just about ¼ mile away from the quay were tied up to.

We took the free shuttle downtown and walked back to the ship. The weather was just excellent. In the evening we visited the Tivoli Gardens; the price of \$18.00 USD included a bus transfer.

Various Copenhagen stores display a “Duty Free” sign. The store will provide you with a form and you can claim back the duty from a kiosk at quayside when you return to the ship, just look for the “Information” flag. The city tour bus is \$12.00 USD, and when our friends got mixed up with a group from the Princess cruise who had vouchers, they managed to be included for free!

The canal trip was 25 DKK for 1.5 hours and boarded downtown. Copenhagen is a city of bicycles – everywhere, hundreds of them.

Our next port of call was **Rostock**. The ‘Garden of the World’ IGA2003 exhibition was in full swing. This being an outdoor show with massive flower beds and an overhead ski lift crossing the area.

Cost on the brochure was 14.00€, but an agent who boarded the ship had a deal for 7.00€ which included unlimited travel on the trains or buses for a day. The train station is right alongside the quay and runs frequently to Rostock passing the station for the exhibition. At departure time, a local band was playing, and there were crowds of locals to wave us on our way.

Next port of call was **Stockholm**. Here we took a prepaid tour to the Carl Milles Garden and city tour. Milles was world famous for his sculptures, and his garden and house is just crammed with them. Alternate city tour was 190 SEK.

Next port of call was **Tallinn** in Estonia. We again took a prepaid city tour. We were taken to a huge outdoor concert area with a stage which, according to our guide, held 10,000 people, the surrounding slopes held many more. The first foreign entertainer to perform after the Russians left was Michael Jackson. We walked around the medieval town, visited the Orthodox Church and a cemetery. The usual cemetery we are familiar with are graves in rows, but here the graves are dotted amongst the trees in the forest, albeit in an enclosed area so designated.

And now to **St. Petersburg** – a city I have always wanted to visit, and I was not disappointed. Due to visa restrictions, we were not allowed to roam around, but must be on prepaid shore tours. We all had to go through the Russian customs and immigration building at quayside, and most of the officials really are dour and forbidding.

The Hermitage is just incredible, unbelievable that one family could amass such a fortune. It is no wonder that the peasantry rose up in 1917, but surprisingly the palaces were not all ransacked. The ceiling designs of gold and paintings were duplicated in mosaic on the floors.

As the city was celebrating its 300-year anniversary, and the fact that (other) foreign dignitaries had visited just days before we got there, most buildings in the central core had been revitalized.

But just to see the architecture of all the buildings was an experience. We saw several wedding groups. All weddings must be through a civil ceremony which is recognized by the authorities, and many also go through a church ceremony too. One incident we witnessed was of a groom carrying his bride across a canal bridge to the vocal encouragement of his guests. As the groom seemed rather frail and his bride quite buxom, we wondered if .... (Well, perhaps not!).

The good weather is still with us. Several weeks prior to our visit, the cruise ships were unable to get to St. Petersburg due to ice. Our final port of call was **Helsinki**. Here we took another prepaid city tour which included a visit to the ‘Church in the Mountain’. The tour was 17€ for 1.5 hours, and a free shuttle to the city center was available.

To help cope with the vehicular traffic, the city placed bicycles at various places in the city, they were shackled similar to the trollies at the supermarket. For 2€ you could take and ride a bike, returning it to any of the places and get your 2€ back – of course, who would give up an opportunity to have a bike for 2€? But we did see three in a stall near a park.

The main thing we noticed in all the cities we visited was that they were litter free and very clean and tidy. After two days at sea, we finally arrived back at Dover and the White Cliffs, something my wife and I have never seen.

So back home to reality, ready for the next adventure.