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July, 2023

Europe, 2023

Like many people my age, I get a lot of brochures from Viking in my mailbox. That's a Norwegian company that runs cruises on rivers and oceans, catering mostly to Americans and other English-speaking folks. Generally, after our American Queen paddle-boat trips up the Mississippi, I tended to trash that expensive-looking four-color mail. However, in January of this year, one brochure advertised a long-boat trip up the Rhine that came with *free air transportation* (!) to Europe. I guess they were trying to fill some empty staterooms by making that offer.

So, after Jere and I looked over the details of a trip from Amsterdam up the Rhine to Basel, we called one of their agents and signed us up. We made a deposit and started thinking about what to pack. For a little extra (\$100 each), we could extend our free air travel back to Albuquerque for another week or two. This would give us a chance for Jere to see (and me to meet) her "adopted daughter" who lives near Neuchâtel in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. And for me to see (and Jere to meet) a bunch of *my* Swiss friends.

The first problem was to check our passports. Of course, they were both expired about two years ago. So, a trip to the post office? It seems it isn't done that way anymore. The recommended way to renew a passport is to do it on-line. So we had to go to a website named MyTravelGov, and it looked like it was actually easy to do. Well, not quite so, as the necessary photographs were to be uploaded in a finicky way that rejected most of our attempts to provide something acceptable. We eventually succeeded in that, paid our renewal fees, and were told to expect them in our mailboxes in 8 to 10 weeks.

That was on January 14, and time passed without our receiving them. Apparently the State Department is inundated with passport applications, now that the Covid pandemic has subsided. Very much longer wait-times these days, perhaps as long as 13 weeks. So, we had some worry that we might not get them before the departure day of June 26. They did eventually arrive, however, with the date of issuance being April 13. So, not a worry after all.

About two weeks before we were to leave, I recalled that they use Euros and Swiss Franks where we were going. No problem – I also remembered I had some of each in my safe deposit box at the bank. But, on starting to go retrieve them, I couldn't find the keys to that box! Extensive searching for two days, ending when I called the bank to ask what to do. Another "No problem," the man said, "we'll just get a man in to drill out the lock. But we would charge you \$175 to do that." Hmm. I decided to keep looking for

the keys. Or just forget the whole thing, and just buy new Euros and Franks when we get there.

Several days later, after doing nothing, I suddenly woke up at 3:00 AM with “You know, I never looked in my file cabinet for those keys!” So I got up, opened the top drawer of the cabinet and saw there was, inside, a file folder labeled “Safe Deposit Box.” That, of course, was where the keys were. And it turned out there was a lot more money there in Euros and Franks than I thought. They must have been left over from our last trip to Europe in 2009.

Another chore before departure was to obtain Swiss Travel Passes (for trains, boats, and buses). Doing that allowed us to bounce back and forth across Switzerland without having to worry much about tickets, just when to go from where we were and when we’d arrive. (There is a great website to find train times for that purpose; I could access it on my Android phone.) The eight-day pass we eventually bought constrained our visits to friends a bit, but, as you will see, it worked out well in the end.

Finally, off to Europe on Sunday afternoon, June 25 We left that afternoon to drive to a Ramada Inn close to the Albuquerque airport (ABQ). The idea was that on Monday we would get our 7:10 AM flights on Delta Airlines to Amsterdam on Monday, arriving early Tuesday morning. On arrival at ABQ at 5:00 AM, however, the nice lady named Yolanda at the Delta check-in desk informed us that our flight to Minneapolis (MSP) had been canceled! And hence *no* flight from MSP to Amsterdam (AMS) to connect with our Viking cruise before it left port on Tuesday afternoon, June 27. Yuck!

What Delta *could* do for us was to put us on a 6:05 AM flight to Los Angeles (LAX) the *next morning*. From there, after a six hour layover, they would fly us to AMS, to arrive on Wednesday morning, June 28. That is, a day late, and still missing our long-boat. A quandary – should we scrub the whole trip and go home? We did purchase trip interruption insurance, after all.

Well, on Friday before that Sunday I had received an e-mail from the Viking people about what to do in case of a travel emergency. While still at the Delta desk, I called the number provided. The lady who answered tried to see if there was another way we could get to Amsterdam in time to meet the boat. Unfortunately she couldn’t do anything better than what Yolanda was able to provide. She said that we should take it. And we would then be met at the AMS airport outside the baggage claim on Wednesday morning by a Viking representative. Who would then have a driver take us to Kinderdijk, where the Viking boat named Sigyn made its first stop. OK, so that’s what we would do, and Yolanda completed setting up the changes of flights to AMS.

So, we were then staying that day and night in Albuquerque because of the very early flight to LAX. Yolanda eased the pain by saying that Delta would provide hotel and meal vouchers for the stay-over. Oh boy!, we could stay at the Sheraton Hotel across the street, a fair bit fancier than the Ramada motel! Nope – calling up the Sheraton; “Sorry sir, but we are fully booked tonight.” The voucher did not seem to work for the Ramada (an inexpensive \$64) but it *would* for the Marriott Courtyard, a bit further down the road. Calling them, they said they had a room for us, which I then reserved on my credit card for a mere \$270. Assuming that the Delta voucher would arrive at the Marriott and the charge to my card would be rescinded. Fine.

Retrieving the car from the Park & Shuttle, before going to the Marriott, we stopped back at the Ramada (we hadn’t actually been checked out yet) and enjoyed their free hot breakfast. Then on to the Marriott and we were able to even get into our room (at about 9:00 AM). We had gotten up at 4:00 AM, so we were glad to have the opportunity to nap a bit.

Around 11:00 that day we decided to be like tourists and went to the Albuquerque Biopark. This park is home of the Botanical Garden, which we went to first. Plants, a huge model train set-up, a butterfly enclosure, and a living bug house. After a break for lunch, we visited the adjacent aquarium, but I never saw one of its featured river otters. After returning to the hotel, we dined at the nearby Applebee’s, and hit the hay for an 3:00 AM start the next morning in plenty of time to make our flight to LAX.

When we checked out of the Marriott early on Tuesday morning, I asked at the desk if the Delta voucher had arrived. It had not. So the credit card charge for the \$270 reservation was turned from pending to paid. Thus we were *free* to leave the hotel for the ABQ airport with no further charges. After we returned home from this trip, I requested that Delta reimburse me for the \$270 charge. The complaint was lodged on July 17 and is still “open.” We will see what happens.

We arrived at the ABQ airport in plenty of time to make our 6:50 flight to LAX. *Oops!* You might have noticed that six paragraphs above I wrote that it was a 6:05 AM flight. All my fault – I hadn’t read the boarding passes properly and came up with the 6:50 flight time. Needless to say, we went to the gate for that flight *just* as the 6:05 plane was leaving.

So, *now* what do we do? Another call to the Viking emergency lady, and she was able to get us on a 10:05 Southwest Airlines flight to LAX that, because of the scheduled six-hour layover, *was* able to get us on Delta’s 13:55 flight to AMS.

It was an eleven-hour flight, operated in collaboration with KLM Airlines. A nice Dutch dinner, and a mostly unsuccessful attempt to get some sleep during most of the flight.

The most exciting part of *that* was when I jolted awake around 3:00, saying “where is my cell phone?” Despite groveling around on the floor, looking under seats, it was definitely lost! We got off the plane around 8:30 AM Wednesday, June 28. We went through customs, found that our two roller-bags checked earlier in a the Delta counter *did* arrive at the baggage claim. We exited into the public-arrivals area to meet the Viking agent. All that, fully expecting that when we got somewhere appropriate, I would have to *buy* myself a new cell phone. The “good” news in that would be that it would “solve” the problem of my old phone having a cracked screen. And the new one might work in Europe as well as in the States.

There was indeed a girl from Viking who eventually found us and turned us over to a driver who took us to Kinderdijk to meet the Sigyn, our long-boat. We got there in time for lunch. Along the way we there we saw a few *old* Dutch windmills, along with some modern ones that convert wind into electricity. After lunch, we retired to our tiny stateroom for a nap. In the process of doing that, I discovered I *didn't* lose my phone, after all. It was in the holster on my hip, all the time I was looking for it!

That ends a rather long prologue to our European adventure. Suffice it to say the rest of the time on the Sigyn went about as advertised (details on a Viking webpage is you want them). Very nice meals, shore excursions in Köln, Koblenz, Strassbourg, and the Black Forest. We arrived in Basel on July 4, took the train westward to Neuchâtel, where we were met by Jere's “daughter” Valerie. (She had been a high-school exchange student who stayed with the Turners for a year, and they maintained close contact ever since.) That day, the Fourth of July, also happened to be the birthday of her daughter Roxanne. There was, of course, a large family party that evening that we participated in.

Touristically, in the Neuchâtel area we bought a SIM card so I could make calls in Switzerland (hereafter CH) and visited museums. The Latenium is about the ancient lake people and, in La Chaux-de-Fonds, a vast horological collection. Valerie then drove us on July 6 to my friends, Roland and Marie-Noëlle Lombard, who summer in a “chateau” in Praz, not far from Neuchâtel, on the northern shore of Lake Morat. He and I have been physics colleagues for a long time, even co-authoring some papers together. Valerie stayed on for a longish lunch, and about 4:00 or 5:00 PM we retired to the nearby Hotel de la Gare in Sugiez for the next two nights.

My reason for choosing that hotel was, of course, to be near the train station, from which we could easily travel anywhere using our Swiss Pass. Not quite so, as that Gare was in *total* reconstruction. We had to use a bus to get to a more convenient train station.

We did make a trip to Morat and to Fribourg the next day, returning to Sugiez across the lake by boat. It was at this time I learned that my recently-retrieved Swiss Franks were out of date! They were not acceptable currency in shops, hotels, and restaurants. The

switch to the new (smaller-sized) bills took place around 2021. Anyway, everything these days is really being done by credit card.

That evening we had a meal with the Lombards at a nice Italian restaurant. The next day, Saturday, we took a longish train ride to Rorschach, at the eastern end of CH. We were met there by Kurt Zuckschwerdt and taken to their home in nearby Goldach for the weekend. Kurt and Ruth are the Swiss friends Maggie and I came to know back in 1968. We met them on the terraces of Machu Pichu, and we stayed in contact ever since.

Ruth's Parkinson's has worsened since the last time we saw them, 2009. She now has some speech impairment and mobility issues. But she remains a sharp as ever. During one of our "cocktail hours" she brought out a book she had written about dealing with Parkinson's – *and she wrote it in English, not German!* On another occasion I mentioned my problem with the outdated Swiss Frank notes. Kurt suggested that, when he took us to the Goldach Bahnhof on Monday, we stop off at his bank to see if they could change them to the new ones. Indeed they could – not a problem at all, given the right kind of ATM that could make the conversion.

After the weekend with the Z's, we backtracked to Baden, where we were picked up by my old friends, Hans and Marianne Reist. He's a physicist and we first met them when he came to work at the Los Alamos meson factory. After their time there, they came back to CH so he could work at SIN, the Swiss meson factory. They built a beautiful house in Untersiggenthal, a very small town just across the river from the laboratory. We stayed there with the Reists that Monday night. The amazing thing about Untersiggenthal is that it seems *everybody* we met on this trip knows Untersiggenthal!

On Tuesday afternoon we backtracked once again to take the train directly to the Zurich airport. This was the last day of our Swiss Travel Pass. We stayed overnight at one of the Radissons there. Where, despite *now* having oodles of valid Swiss Franks, we found it *impossible* to pay cash for our room or for our breakfast. It was a credit-card-only hotel.

On Wednesday morning we took the 8:30 shuttle (Central European Daylight Time) to the airport to check-in for our flights to Albuquerque via Paris and Minneapolis. This time there were *no* screw-ups and despite the very long day, we hit the hay at our usual Ramada motel around 11:30 PM, Mountain Daylight Time. After the free hot breakfast Thursday morning, we departed the Ramada and drove back to Brookdale, in time for lunch. Whew!

Oops! It was about then that Jere discovered she didn't have her billfold or her eyeglasses. Damn! The glasses weren't *too* big a problem, as we had stopped off at the

Eye Associates to pick up the new pair she had ordered just before we left town. But the billfold with cash and a credit card was a big worry.

Later that afternoon I saw that there was a voice-mail on my phone from some unknown 505-area-code number. It turned out it was Brian from the Ramada front desk saying that the housekeeper had found a few things we had left behind. Calling him, yes, they *were* the billfold and the glasses and a few other things. Beautiful!, all we had to do was drive back Friday morning to pick them up. We did just that, and, as a lagniappe, we got in a lunch at the Range Cafe in Bernalillo.