

The Christensen Connection

We know. We do not update this often enough – so when we do it is always a really long update. So sorry – and thanks for your patience. We knew we had a big trip coming up in the spring, and so we have been “saving up” in lots of ways.

Last fall, we determined that we needed to go ahead and spend our SkyMiles and go on a European Vacation before the airlines nullify the mileage benefit – and before Brenda’s sister (Linda) moves away from Europe. So we booked it – without really knowing exactly where we would go. But hey – we could plan that later, right? Well, we planned it – but only about 2 weeks before we actually left. There were just too many places we wanted to visit and not enough time, so we were having a hard time making some decisions. Thanks to advice from Linda and our friends, the Tuckers, we did come up with a plan that we were pretty satisfied with. (Well...we had a marvelous time anyway.)

Bret took over 2600 pictures during the trip (which also explains why it has taken us so long to get this updated posted). So the photos that we are posting are just a teeny tiny bit of the things we saw and experienced. We’ll try to keep our narrative brief as well.

We took a nonstop flight from LAX to Charles de Gaulle (Paris) which takes 10 hours – and, frankly, wasn’t as bad as anticipated. Bret actually quite enjoyed it. He loved that meals were served, that he got a nighttime sleep kit (blindfold, earplugs, headphones, etc.). He loved that he had his own personal television monitor, loaded with a wide variety of movies, television shows, video games, -- and oh yeah, CARTOONS!

After landing in Paris, it took us a little while to figure some of the systems out (phones, train tickets, exchange money, etc). After arriving at the Bastille Charonne Hotel and checking into our cozy room, we decided to check out the [Eiffel Tower](#) at night. We arrived not long before the Tower’s nighttime light show (which happens on the hour after dark). While it was quite a delightful spectacle, we discovered another marvelous Parisians delight – French crepes with Nutella, bananas, and “Chantilly” (one of Bret’s new French words). So scrumptious we got another one before we left town.

While in Paris we visited [Notre Dame Cathedral](#) (a funeral was taking place – and the organ echoing through the hall was heavenly), wandered around the vicinity. We spent a few hours in the breathtaking [Louvre Museum](#) trying to take in as much glorious art as we could – being sure to visit the most notable and famous pieces: Mona Lisa, Venus de Milo, and numerous other pieces. Our feet were shot by this point, so we hopped (okay...slogged onto) on a bus and road along the Champs Elysees to the [Arc de Triomphe](#). While there we watched the ceremonial relighting of the flame at the

Unknown Soldier Tomb there. That was an unexpected delight. And it kept us out of a cloudburst that dumped torrents of rain.

The next day we travelled out to [Versailles](#) which indeed earns its reputation as THE most spectacular and grand palace in all of Europe. While today's acreage is just a small fraction of the lands once occupied by the enormous estate (it used to be the size of the whole of modern day Paris – eek!), the Palace and grounds were truly stunning. We enjoyed time at the Petit Trianon which is most famously known as Marie Antoinette's preferred domicile. The gardens there are so marvelously pleasant and not quite as opulent as the precisely manicured and designed gardens nearer the palace. We only wish we would have had more time here. In particular Bret was enamored with the famous and grand Hall of Mirrors.

Our final day we went up the Eiffel Tower – were able to take in the city from above – seeing pretty much everything for miles. Spectacular and breathtaking!

Then we flew to Florence, where we enjoyed more great artwork - most particularly Michelangelo's David on display at the [Accademia](#) (Michelangelo's "Slaves" were an impressive expression of the artist's relationship to his medium.) The grand work of David, however, is truly a marvelous masterpiece – and the "copy" at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas can't even come close! We saw a number of other pieces and even stepped into a small "music museum" that included a Stradivarius violin, harpsichords, etc. – mostly stringed instruments mostly from a collection of the Medici's. The birthplace of Gelato, Florence was by far one of the best places to get the savory treat – to go with every meal! The other great treasure we discovered here is [Crème of Balsamic Vinegar](#), which is like a sweet vinegar reduction – heavenly! In the U.S. it's known as a Balsamic Glaze – we can highly recommend it! We went to the [Duomo](#) whose remarkable architecture and stone work are a true high point in this quaint town. We could see the Duomo from our hotel room balcony, where we spent an evening with Brenda serenading her hubby with Italian arias from operas and other works. (Brenda doesn't do this often, but Florence seemed an appropriate place for it.) While our room was relatively spacious, the shower was the size of a telephone booth – so we had to improvise in order to make sure everything got clean. Bret was tickled to see a real life bidet, but was disappointed that the water pressure didn't allow him to experiment with figuring out how to use it. (Ahhhh the adventures!) We did visit the [Uffizi Museum](#), but found it disappointing having been to the Louvre. But we did eventually find the Birth of Venus painting – which was hidden to force you to go through a maze of 10 rooms with less impressive artwork. Figures. Grocery stores do the same thing with the placement of milk.

We headed by train to Pisa and visited the famous leaning tower and adjacent church, which also looked like it was sinking or something like that. Then we took a train along the western Italian coastline to Rome. It was a pleasant ride, and we visited with some

Canadian college grads along the way. (Lots of Canadians there during May.) The hotel was not far from the main Termini Station in Rome, but it was an interesting configuration. The shower was more normal sized and the room comfortable. We spent our time in Rome visiting the [Coliseum](#), [Palatine Hill](#), [The Forum](#) (where Bret located spots for Caesar's assassination, cremation, and Cicero's orations), the [Pantheon](#), [Trevi Fountain](#), [Spanish Steps](#), and all the winding streets in between in "ancient Rome." We also made sure that we went to The [Vatican](#). We hired a guide on the street (expensive but worth it), to take us through the Vatican Museum. From our guide, an American art history grad who admittedly worshipped Michelangelo, we learned a number of savory tidbits. For example, we had no idea that the Vatican was, for a number of years, a haven for artists – including Michelangelo, DaVinci and a number of other famous names. We learned about some of the wiles of the Papacy through the centuries and how they "acquired" and copied (then melted down originals) many of their works of art. Tremendous pieces – and with juicy, scandalous histories. Naturally, the Sistine Chapel was a big highlight. Not only the ceiling (which was Michelangelo's first painting – ever), which was more grand than we anticipated – but also The Final Judgment painted behind the altar. Oh – the stories about those pieces. You'll have to ask Bret to tell you the stories. They are terrific! Another highlight was the Pieta in St. Peter's Basilica – behind bulletproof glass – and it eclipses all the dead popes' corpses decorating the place. In addition to these marvelous sites, we had fun sampling authentic Italian cuisine – Bret was quite spoiled by the pizza – Brenda preferred the tortellini – and we both savored the mozzarella! (We made sure we both got our daily requirements of gelato, of course.) We both loved the Caprese Insalata (tomatoes, mozzarella, and fresh basil – mmmm, mmmm, good!). A funny thing happened on the way to the Forum – well actually, on our way back from the Coliseum. As we headed to the underground station, a tall, chiseled, gorgeous male model ran after us shouting, "Are those Frogskins?" We were startled (Brenda had to wipe up her drool after gazing on this gorgeous live work of art), and he repeated what he said. It took us a few minutes to realize he was referring to Bret's hallmark green sunglasses (that he got on the cheap somewhere). This "Fabulous Fabio" explained that Oakley had made a limited edition of sunglasses called [Frogskins](#) – that were this same bright green. He had ordered his from the U.S. and was eagerly awaiting their delivery. But these glasses made Bret "the most stylish guy in Rome!" So – aren't you all jealous now? Oh – and if you will watch the photos of Rome, you will see another highlight of our trip. For it was in Rome when we experienced the first rumblings of what we call "the alien." We anticipate a full sighting in September.

From Rome, we flew to Vienna (Wien)– which for Brenda was a very welcome cultural change. Vienna is wonderfully clean – clean air, clean streets, no graffiti, and no loud Italians. While we missed a last chance to get gelato in Rome, we were delighted when we emerged from the subway at our hotel – and there was a Gelateria right there – and across the street from our hotel. Hooray! We took an easier pace in Vienna, and

rode around the RingStrasse – getting a taste of the major historical sites of the area. We visited the [Habsburg Palace](#) and learned a little about the Habsburg dynasty and the family that of Franz Joseph and Maria Theresa – parents of 16 kids, including Marie Antoinette, pretty much all married off to strengthen the imperial ties. (and to enhance the inbreeding – yikes!) We tried to get a tour of the [Vienna Opera House](#) – but the line for the English tour was waaaaaaaaaay too long for the time we had and Brenda’s tolerance for crowds. We did, however, go the tourist friendly [Mozart & Strauss Concert at the Kursalon](#) – which is the elegant “party house” at the Stadtpark (city park). It is where Strauss made his mark playing his famous waltzes for people to dance to. The program, which was wonderfully pleasant, included a number of beautiful and spirited works by the two composers and included a soprano, tenor, and a couple of dancers. Bret knew almost every piece (which is actually no big surprise when you’ve seen his music collection.)! We took some time and went out to [Schönbrunn Palace](#) (only 4 miles from central Vienna), which was touted to be patterned after Versailles. While the exterior seems like a smaller version, the interior is considerably less extravagant, yet still very elegant. The Habsburgs were quite conservative compared to the French royalty, and were willing to take an audience with just about anyone. (Again, a starkly different approach from the French.) We enjoyed watching the Apple Strudel demonstration. And we made sure that Bret got a chance to eat Vienna’s signature dish – Wienerschnitzel. But his favorite was the apple streusel he picked up at a little bakery located in the subway station – by the Mozart Experience Restroom, where you can pee to Mozart’s Greatest Hits for just 0.60 Euro cents! We made sure to stop by the Grand (but not so blue) Danube River – that one of Strauss’ most famous waltzes is named after. It is a biiiiiiiiig river indeed!

We took a train from Vienna down to Salzburg, where Linda and Alan (Brenda’s globetrotting siblings) met up with them. Fortunately, we ran into them as they were about to leave the station. (Phew!) While walking around the town in the evening, Bret noticed that Rayban also had some “green glasses” much like his – naturally making him also the most stylish guy in Salzburg as well. (Wunderbar!) While Salzburg is not a metro area, it is very beautiful and serene there. We visited the [Fortress](#) there, where they host fantastic marionette productions (operas and other major plays – including Shakespeare), and have a little bit of history. We wandered around the old town – and found the gelateria, of course. Saw the homes of Mozart’s birth and where he was raised. We even took [Bob’s Sound of Music Tour](#) with an Austrian tour guide – who showed us a number of filming locations – and also told us “what really happened” in the life of the real Von Trapps. I imagine the next time we watch the Sound of Music film, we will notice things a little differently than we did before. Our guide told us that the Austrians don’t care for the film – not because they dislike the Von Trapps, but apparently they feel that the Gestapo was portrayed to be somewhat civil – which is too generous a portrayal for how they really were. Which places from our photos can you recognize from the film?

From Salzburg, we packed into Linda's Honda Civic (which is a huge car compared to many European vehicles) and visited the [Eagle's Nest](#) – a mountain hideaway given to Hitler on his 50th birthday. While the "lair" is now a restaurant that you can't really "visit," the surroundings are truly breathtaking. You can see Salzburg in the distance, surrounding villages, and majestic, snow-capped mountains all around! From there we drove to [Dachau](#) for a quick visit to the Concentration Camp there. While we missed out on the crematorium, "the showers," and the museum, the barracks and learning about the order there was quite interesting – and naturally humbling/sobering. After finding some more Ais (Austrian gelato), we drove to Schwangau.

While in Schwangau, we stayed at a charming little cottage – on the top floor where Alan and Bret scraped their ears on the low ceilings. We got a great chuckle from that! While our accommodations fit us "giant-types" better once we got to Austria, it seemed there were some places that we were still too big for. Oh well. Part of the adventure! While there, we toured [Hohenschwangau](#) (the hunting castle of the Bavarian royal family) and [Neuschwanstein](#) – the grand castle built by mad King Ludwig, and the model for the Disney Castles. While it has never been finished, the parts that are finished are a lot of fun. Apparently Ludwig was a HUGE fan of Wagner's operas and hosted him as a guest often. Ludwig wanted the castle to be "a proper castle for the finest of medieval times." Because things were still so "new" (relatively speaking) they are in terrific condition – and just fun!

From Schwangau, we traveled up to Rothenberg, which is one of the best preserved medieval towns around. We were sure to catch the [Night Watchman Tour](#), with a clever fellow who dresses as a night watchman and walks people around the village telling them about the history of Rothenberg. Apparently he has a video about the history and was making a video of the tours, themselves. After getting some "ais" – again, we went back to the "pension" which was by far the largest of the rooms we had stayed in on our trip. (But I don't understand the glass door along the tub/shower that only goes half-way the length of the tub – what use is that?) We returned to Rothenberg the next day and visited the [torture museum](#). Shame was a huge part of the culture there. If women bickered, they were both clamped in violin stocks and forced to stay together until they could be nice. If the baker's bread was too small, he was strapped to a heavy chair and dunked in the nasty canal once for each ounce his bread was small. There were also a few pieces of execution tools – those were rather disturbing, so we won't dwell on them. Bret was particularly amused that the "Iron Maiden" didn't contain spikes – it was used as like "sauna torture" for those who had misbehaved. In Rothenberg apparently they have a pub name "Hell," which is a popular choice for many. Plus there are lots of great shops – including the famous [Käthe Wolfhart's Christmas Store](#), an absolute Christmas Wonderland year-round! But it was at a different shop where we chose a cuckoo clock – which just arrived in California by UPS!

From Rothenberg, we drove back toward Frankfurt and meandered by the [Frankenstein Castle](#) near Darmstadt, Germany and visited another one (but don't remember which one) that is supposedly the one most Americans associate with the famous Mary Shelly novels. (Apparently there is some dispute on that point.)

We then arrived at "Linda's Castle" in Kirchmore, near Kaiserslautern and Ramstein Air Force Base. Linda's place was probably the most comfortable of all the places we stayed in Europe. Fully equipped, REALLY spacious, and is a blissfully quiet and scenic country location. Like Paris and Vienna, the sun goes down quite late and comes up really early! (That did throw us off a bit – but was helpful when we had to be on a 5:30 am shuttle to the Frankfurt airport for our return flight through Paris. On our flight home we were in coach with a bunch of French senior citizens on their way to the U.S. West Coast for a tour to places like Death Valley and Lake Powell. (Hadn't really occurred to us that Europeans would have to travel quite a ways to see the geographic variety you can find out here. Oh – our glorious natural treasures.)

After our 2 ½ weeks in Europe, it did take us a few days to adjust from the jetlag – and it was all worth it! And on the whole, things went pretty smoothly – thanks to Bret's superior navigation skills and bravery with asking for directions! We hope you enjoy his marvelous photography as well.

Everything else in life (save the alien encounters) seems to pale in comparison to the wonder and excitement of our trip. We are really glad that we went ahead and just did it!

Update on Bret's garden. We actually haven't planted anything this year – but Bret has a single tomato plant from last year that has taken over the entire garden. And while he hasn't been watering it, it is producing a tremendous crop of healthy, large tomatoes. It produced all winter long and is really kicking into gear this spring! We even made and canned some yummy salsa. Perhaps stewed tomatoes will be next!

We hope you are all well! Until next time!