

Holland and Belgium trip journal

Two nights in Amsterdam at the Movenpick Hotel, then 9 nights aboard the Viking Skadi cruising riverways.

Tuesday, April 23, 2013

We made the decision to travel light -- one checked bag, one rolling carryon, one hand-held carryon for laptop and iPad, and a tote bag. We also decided that since our flight was late in the day and we had oodles of time, we would take the taxi to Alewife and then the T the rest of the way, a decision which saved us about \$45. The trip went smoothly. Door to door to the airport was under an hour, and the lines for bag drop-off and security were short, leaving us several hours to sample the cuisine at Legal Test Kitchen in Terminal A. Our flight left on time and arrived 15 minutes early; we left Logan at 7:20 and arrived at Schipol at 8 a.m.

Wednesday, April 24

Viking met us at the airport and whisked us to the Hotel Movenpick, where we dropped off our bags and headed out to Amsterdam Centraal station, about a 15 minute walk (the hotel also operates a shuttle on the half hour but it must be reserved in advance). We hopped on a train to Utrecht, which runs every 15 minutes and takes 27 minutes, for 29 euros for two round trips.

The trains: very clean, very quiet, very well marked, including upcoming stops on the train you are on, and you can set your watch to their arrival and departure times.

It took a bit of wandering to figure out how to get out of Utrecht Centraal Station, but once we got out and got oriented and were armed with a map, the rest was easy.

Utrecht: a delightful, charming town with some adorable architecture, no cars in the streets (but literally tens of thousands of bicycles), cobblestoned streets and, since it was a beautiful day with sun and temps in the 60s, tons of people out and walking or shopping were in evidence. We wandered

through the town, then hit the Speelklok Museum, which contains perhaps the world's largest collection of automated, programmed musical instruments. Examples in the collection were a flute organ used to teach tunes to songbirds, an automated nightingale that moved in synchrony with its song, a piano trio, a saxophone, and an acrobat that did handstands -- all to a programmed disk, cylinder, or paper tape. The one hour tour demonstrated many of the instruments while the tour guide described the mechanism and talked about the history of the item -- in Dutch and English.

On return to Amsterdam, we decided to eat in the hotel since it was our jet lag day and we had not been to bed the night before, and then call it an early evening. The Movenpick's restaurant, the Silk Road, was outstanding, and we opted for a 3 course fixed price menu for 35 euros.

Thursday, April 25

Our introduction to Amsterdam began with Viking's two hour walking tour of the city, which took us from the hotel to Dam Square, with a fascinating look at some of the points along the way. We heard a lot about April 30, normally a holiday and a crowded celebration for Queen's day, but especially crazy this year because the ceremonies will include Beatrix' abdication and her son Willem-Alexander's inauguration as king. We saw people putting up temporary road closed or no bicycle parking signs, and were informed that the Movenpick was actually rebooking people to other hotels for that day because the security would have been so intense that the hotel felt it was not a guest-friendly thing.

After our tour we meandered our way by the Anne Frank house (which had a very long line for admission), the Westerkirk whose bells she could hear to help mark the passing of time; then we walked along the Prinsengracht, the outermost of the concentric ring canals, to the Rijksmuseum.

Rijksmuseum: we had bought an advance ticket to bypass the lines, but on Thursday there were no lines to speak of. We spent over 2 hours in the Dutch Masters floor, admiring the many Rembrandts, and marveled over the scope and scale and effectiveness of The Night Watch. Some art works need to be seen in person to be truly appreciated, and none more so than

this room-filling painting. We also admired their collection of Dutch doll houses, and found the famous Van Gogh self-portrait.

On the way back to the hotel we stopped at the famous floating flower market, walked along the Herensgracht and Singel canals, and then through Centraal Station and back to the hotel.

The concierge recommended Long Pura for rijstafel. It was a 30 minute walk from the hotel. We opted for the middle-sized selection, about 14 courses, for 35 euros p.p. The selection was fabulous, and since Laura doesn't eat coconut, they allowed us the substitution of one of the "extras", a crispy fish dish, for two of the coconut selections. It was a fabulous experience of unusual tastes and textures; truly a memorable meal. Don't miss having rijstafel at least once if you are in Amsterdam.

Friday, April 26

Since the Van Gogh museum is closed and the paintings are in transit, we had already done our must-see museum. Furthermore, the Anne Frank house had an hour-plus wait for tickets, so today we decided to try some less well known attractions. In addition, this was our day to check out from the Movenpick and check in to the Skadi. After a leisurely and copious buffet breakfast, we checked out, left our bags, and headed into a dreary, rainy, 40 degree day. Bundled up with everything warm that we had brought, we trudged back to the Rijksmuseum on our way to the House of Bols. Another 45+ minute walk, but this one dampened by steady rain and gusty, cold winds.

What a contrast from the day before when we walked by the museum entrance. On a rainy Friday and the start of an extended holiday, the lines snaked around for what seemed forever. But we continued on, to our tour of the House of Bols. Started by Lucas Bols in 1535, they derived the liquor called jenever, a distilled spirit made from malt wine and flavored with juniper berries: the ancestor of gin. The tour was fascinating, going into the history of the product, the 35 or so liqueurs, and a sensory "quiz" where you got to taste and smell things blind, then try to guess what they were. We learned that one of Lucas Bols' neighbors and best customer for his jenever was Rembrandt van Rijn, who lived a few doors away. When

Rembrandt couldn't pay his jenever bill, on one occasion at least, he did a custom painting as payment. One of these Rembrandts is part of the house tour. The tour ends with a design-it-yourself cocktail and then two tastes from the liqueur collection, which included anise, sour apple, banana, creme de cassis, blueberry, kiwi, melon, butterscotch, maraschino, passion fruit, mango, vanilla, triple sec, chocolate, white chocolate, peppermint, bitter orange, watermelon, lilac and elderberry.

After the tour, we decided that the weather (which had improved slightly) and the hour were sufficient cause to walk slowly back to the ship; we arrived in time to get into our stateroom and have our luggage appear, as if by magic. The rest of the afternoon was spent touring the ship, unpacking, and talking to some of the arriving guests. After a brief introduction to ship life by program director Jakob, we had dinner. If all the meals are like this one, we will be very delighted and very fat. We shared a crab and tuna timbale and a cheese puff souffle for appetizers and a wonderful veal saltimbocca with saffron risotto for a main course. Dessert was a chocolate pot de creme and a mandarin cake. A bit of piano music and then to bed.

Saturday, April 27

Our first full day on board Skadi, we had a sumptuous buffet breakfast (boy are we going to be fat), we headed off for a bus tour of Amsterdam, followed by the mandatory canal cruise. You have to see the canals from above while walking, but you also have to see them from a boat. The houseboats alone -- 2500 of them -- are a fascinating story. So are the slanted facades of the buildings so that when they hoist goods and furniture from the boats below, they don't bump against the facade of the building.

We didn't dare look at lunch (maybe we won't be so fat), and instead headed out for a few more off-the-beaten-track destinations. Walking, of course -- no trams for us, we need to burn off the calories! Our first destination was the Gasson diamond factory, which gives free tours on demand. We watched people cutting 49 facets into diamonds so small you could barely see them. We admired brilliant cut 1 carat diamonds that sparkled like the sun.

Since we were near by and had time, we ventured to the Rembrandt House Museum; the house Rembrandt bought for 1800 guilder and lived and painted in for over 20 years, until he went broke and had to sell it and move next door to Bols. The tour included the largest collection of his etchings anywhere; a look at his studio, his parlor where he would entertain potential buyers of his works, and the area where his assistants would mix his pigments from hand-ground minerals. Then it was time to return to the ship for the captain's cocktail reception and dinner.

Dinner was outstanding again. For appetizers we each had the salmon carpaccio drizzled with olive oil and lemon vinaigrette. And for dinner, chateaubriand.

This is our last full day in Amsterdam, so it's time for some overall impressions of the city. Amsterdam is a very people-friendly city. There are few cars since there is no parking and parking is exorbitantly expensive -- 5 euros per hour! So bicycles are everywhere, parked and chained next to anything that doesn't move. So are their riders, who will run you over if you don't cede what they believe is their right of way. The city is quite walkable, and a 45 minute brisk pace will get you between almost any two points downtown. The architecture is adorable, with the classic Dutch roofs and narrow buildings, narrow because their price was based on frontage along the canals. The slanting facades and elaborate decorations add a touch of architectural interest. The canals themselves are serene and picturesque, and with their bridges everywhere crossing the canals, they convey a feeling not unlike Venice. English is ubiquitous; this is perhaps the most English-speaking friendly city outside the US and UK (and sometimes, those residents are harder to understand!). Between its upscale restaurants, seafood restaurants, and Indonesian cuisine, the city offers a wealth of excellent dining opportunities. The shopping is mainstream big chains on the main drag but charming antique stores, jewelers, and just about everything else you could want are just a few blocks away. And for culture, this city is a world class experience, with the Rijksmuseum and Van Gogh museum and the Royal Concertgebouw, which alas we did not get the opportunity to sample. This is a city I could come back to, especially to use as a jumping off point to explore other places reachable by train, which is basically all of Europe.

Sunday April 28

We set sail at 5 a.m. and despite the fact that we are in open water on the IJsmeer (a branch of the North Sea which has been closed off by dikes), it was impossible to feel any movement in the ship at all. This will certainly be the roughest water we will visit, since the remainder of the trip is on rivers, while today we had 1-2 foot seas; so if you are concerned about ship's motion, being on the Skadi was like being in a hotel room. Alas, if you were hoping for some movement, you needed to find it on the jogging track.

We arrived in Hoorn at 9 a.m. and did the mandatory lifeboat drill. Assembly points were on the sun deck and the crew told us, probably with a note of truth, that by being on the highest spot on board, if the ship sank in a river we would probably keep our feet dry!

The morning walking tour was through the historic part of Hoorn. What a charming town! It seemed as if every building was worth a photo. The town is in north Holland and was primarily a fishing center in the 15th and 16th centuries. The feeling on this Sunday morning was of a sleepy hamlet, though activity picked up a bit in the afternoon, but still a far cry from Amsterdam and Utrecht. Some bicycles, some people out strolling, and a chilly but bright sunshine. Besides fishing, though, the town gained fame when two of its residents ventured far from local waters. One sailed around the tip of South America and named the southernmost waters after his town; the English version of this is Cape Horn. Another famous Hoornier founded the city of Batavia, which is now Jakarta in the Indonesian chain.

We had lunch today for the first time this trip. We ventured up to the outdoor lounge where they were serving Dutch specialties (they serve a heftier, more formal lunch in the dining room each day as well as the mini-buffet on deck). We had sauerkraut that was nothing like the German version, and a variety of cheese and beef puffs, a bit of sausage, and an assortment of differently aged gouda cheeses and an aged Amsterdam cheese, plus a profiterole and a beignet. Delicious with cold beer or the house white, with a surprise dram of jenever to boot.

After lunch we did a mini-tour that took us deeper into some of the residential neighborhoods and ended with a herring tasting. The sushi-like

fish is a staple in north Holland and interesting enough -- Laura liked it more than Meyer did.

Dinner was excellent -- beef carpaccio, then duck a la orange, but today I'd rather focus on the amazing diversity of the passengers, so I'll sample a few from our dinner table. All were retired except for me; I seem to be the oddity on this cruise, a still working passenger. We had a retired Delta airlines flight attendant, who had travelled extensively but was enjoying the luxury of having a trip that was entirely prearranged. Her husband designed nuclear weapons. We had an English teacher who changed professions to become a real estate agent, and her husband was a retired lawyer. And we had a doctor and her husband, a company president.

We ended the evening by dancing a bit. We convinced the pianist to play a polka. Actually, I requested a polka and she obviously misheard, because the song that came on was "Itsy bitsy teeny weeny yellow *polka* dot bikini". I tried again, this time got a Norwegian polka, and we did both a Norwegian polka and a Polish polka to the tune, to the amazement of most of the people there.

Monday, April 29

Arrived in Arnhem. We didn't really have any idea what to expect, but Arnhem is a major city -- actually two cities across a river, with the college town of Nijmegen across the river. Together they are nearly a million people. We got a quick bus tour of Arnhem, which is a very old city -- dating back to around the birth of Christ -- but today's Arnhem is mostly modern, having been seriously destroyed during WWII. The rest of our morning's tour centered on the history around the road bridge across the Rhine here. In September, 1944 the Allies, having penetrated the beaches at Normandy, attempted to end the war by Christmas by crossing the Rhine and trapping the Germans in Holland. Operation Market Garden airlifted 14,000 troops to take the bridges and then a massive ground offensive to secure them. It was one of the great Allied losses of the war. 6000 dead, another 6000 captured, many many wounded, and the war went on. The battle is the subject of the movie "A Bridge Too Far" starring Sean Connery, Laurence Olivier and Michael Caine. Our tour took us to the Royal Air

Force Museum; an educational but very depressing view of an especially bloody battle.

Since the morning was cold and rainy, we decided to stay in after lunch, but by 3 o'clock the sun had come out so we ventured out to downtown Arnhem. What a contrast from both Hoorn and Amsterdam. Hoorn is a tiny fishing village. Amsterdam is a big city but with a great deal of Dutch charm, and the wonderful canals. Arnhem was destroyed in the battle of 1944, so now it is a big city with block after block of modern buildings and major shopping opportunities. In all, an interesting historical visit but not a city I would visit on my own.

Dinner was squash soup and shrimp in lime butter, followed by veal tenderloin wrapped in bacon. Following dinner we had a Dutch folklore night; a performing group in traditional Dutch costumes and wooden shoes doing a number of simple folk dances. During one dance, after they had done it once they asked for turkeys to join in, I volunteered. The basic pattern was a Schottische with a storyline. Easy stuff, but my partner was impressed (we actually turned during the Schottische step) and said "you dance gut". We splurged and finished the evening with a wee dram of Macallan 12.

Time for a few Jakob-isms. Jakob is our program directory, a 30-ish Austrian with an ebullient personality. But he sometimes botches the idioms. Two examples: when he wanted to describe something that goes non-stop, he said "like the Duracell bunny". When discussing how we might go out and party because the Queen's day celebrations had already started on shore and we weren't departing until 5:00 a.m., he said that this was an option for the "party tigers" among us.

Tuesday, April 30

Queen's day. For the first time in 100 years, starting at 10 this morning Holland will have a king. Everything on board, like most of the Netherlands, is bedecked in orange (the national color, since their royal family is the house of Orange).

The morning was an at sea break, so breakfast was later and nothing was scheduled until lunch except a brief tour of the wheel house (a.k.a. bridge). We did the tour. The ship has a draft of 2 meters! That's less than the deep end in most swimming pools. Max speed is 15 knots. Two screws and a bow thruster. And a thoroughly modern set of radars and GPS display superimposed on a map of the river system. So the morning was sleeping late, touring the bridge, and watching the inauguration on BBC. It was quite amazing, seeing Dam square where we had stood just a few days before, wall to wall people, no bicycles, no cars, no trams, just a sea of orange humanity.

Lunch was special. Eliot, one of our tablemates on Sunday, had discovered when the head chef came out to introduce himself that he was from the Philippines. Eliot suggested, perhaps facetiously, that we should have Pancit Guisado, a Philippine dish of cellophane noodles, shrimp, pork, and vegetables. Apparently the chef agreed, because today, by special invitation, the 8 of us at that Sunday dinner table were seated at a separate table at lunch with two heaping plates. As someone said, we travelled a quarter of the way around the world to have a dish from halfway around the world, that wasn't even on the menu!

After lunch we had a fascinating lecture in the lounge about windmills and water management, followed by a walking tour of Kinderdijk, a UNESCO world heritage site with 19 working windmills. Although the windmills do work, they now pump water using a diesel turbine and a pair of monstrous sized Archimedes screws. The cap of each one, which has to be able to rotate to align with wind direction, weighs over 50 tons; all the working gears and cogs are wooden, yet some parts of the windmill we toured up close were from the original construction in 1732. We were able to go inside, see where the millers would live, watch the mechanism up close, and see the huge paddles that pump the water from the polder to the river, in order to keep the land inside the polder dry.

We're sitting here in the lounge now, listening the pianist, playing an informal game of Name That Tune, talking to friends, having the drink of the day, and watching the cute little towns go by as we steam toward Belgium. This is a nice way to travel!

Dinner was surf and turf; not our usual New England fare, but a single jumbo shrimp and a massive piece of medium rare beef. Not the most exciting meal we've had here, but quite acceptable. Every dinner is prefaced by an amuse bouche and your choice of the house red or white wine, both Austrian, with your glass refilled when it gets empty. The red is quite nice, fairly dry with a nice nose, not too much fruit, rather a spicy feel. The white is somewhat missable; but on two occasions so far they have had a special house white wine; tonight was a German qualitätswein mit praedikat, very fruity with a generous hint of sweetness without being sweet -- quite yummy.

The after dinner event was a lecture on tulips by our program director, Jakob; quite nice and informative. After that was dancing as usual to our pianist. Laura and I got to do a waltz and a little swing. Then to bed.

Wednesday May 1

Today we arrive in Belgium and, more specifically, Antwerp. Antwerp is a large city, the largest in Flanders. It is the largest refiner of oil and LNG outside of Houston. It also trades 80% of the world's diamonds. The city is quite old, with many buildings dating to 1000 A.D. There is a legend of a giant who lived in the city, named Antigoon. Antigoon would cut off the hands of those who refused to pay his exorbitant toll and throw them in the river, until a brave young hero named Brabo cut the giant's hand off and threw it in the river Scheldt. As the rumor has it, the city is named for the Dutch words for hand ("ant") and throw ("werp").

Our main activity this morning was a walking tour of the old city and then a tour of the Catholic church, which at the moment houses four large Rubens paintings. Our guide went through the church in great detail (perhaps too much detail), and spoke at length about the paintings and the church. After the tour we had an hour of free time, which we spent chocolate shopping.

The afternoon was relatively free. The weather, which started out cold and sunny, became 60 and sunny and just delightful. Many people headed back into town since we were docked immediately adjacent to the old city. We opted to linger over lunch since we had signed up for a tour of the ship's

galley, which was quite a lot of fun. Following that at 5:00 was a lecture on Belgium Today.

Dinner started with a most unusual clam chowder; yellow, not red or white, with the flavor and color coming from saffron. Then a rack of lamb that just fell off the bone. Since I couldn't decide between the chocolate parfait or the cheese plate, I had both. Ah, the calories.

The after dinner talk was an introduction to Dutch cheeses, and included a taste of gouda and a dram of jenever. After that it was time for bed, since tomorrow is an early and very long day.

Thursday May 2

Today our tour started an hour early. We boarded the bus in Gent for the one hour ride to Brugge. It was pouring rain when we arrived so we lost a bit of the sights hiding under oversized umbrellas, which can be a challenge in a group of 50 people crowding down narrow streets which are shared with cars, horse drawn carriages, and bicycles. We made it to our first destination, the Catholic church, which featured a sculpture of Mary and the baby Jesus by Michelangelo. By the time we exited the church the rain had stopped, and though it was still cool and gray at least it was dry. The rest of the time was spent walking through Brugge -- we walked for over two hours -- and some time wandering on our own.

Brugge is as beautiful as they say. The town square, market square and areas all around are filled with medieval buildings and gorgeous decoration. It is a major tourist attraction with lots of interesting shops; you can buy chocolates, lace, frites (Belgian fries, served with mayonnaise), and 130 kinds of beer.

Then the long bus ride back, a quick, late lunch and it was time to board the bus for Gent.

Gent was on our own, no tour; the bus dropped us off near the market square and picked us up 2 hours later. There wasn't much to see. The town hall is large and somewhat impressive but not spectacularly beautiful and the overall feel was of a big city without a great deal of appeal. We headed

back to the ship fairly quickly, after a long day and many miles of walking. Score for the day: Brugge 1, Gent 0.

Dinner was outstanding again. Bruschetta for the amuse bouche, then baba ganoosh for appetizer, and pork tenderloin on a bed of asiago risotto. After dinner was a rather silly game of liar's club. Everyone was so tired after the long day, the lounge was deserted at 10 at we all went to sleep.

Friday, May 3

Another long day, this time with the emphasis on sun, water, and food. For starters, sun! A chilly 45 in the morning found it's way up to the mid 60's by afternoon; the first day it was warm enough to be on the sun deck.

The morning tour was a long one. We started early with a bus trip to Veere, an absolutely charming little town of 2000 inhabitants, but with a beautiful church and clock tower and charming houses and shops in the market square. Very picturesque, and not the sort of thing you find about on most tour books. Perhaps Veere's best claim to history is that the inn in town was where William of Orange had his honeymoon breakfast; apparently, if you ask they will show you the menu he had in 1572.

After walking around Veere the bus continued on to the dam in Zuidwestelijk. Built in 1982 after the horrible floods of 1953, it consists of 65 giant towers and a retractable dam that holds back the North Sea. It took many years and many millions to complete, but the hope is that it will prevent another occurrence in those low lying islands.

We went from there to the Waterspoormuseum in Ouwerkerk, built at the site where three major holes were broken in the dykes by a giant storm coming down from the North Sea, with maximum winds in excess of 110 knots. The resulting floods killed 1800 people, left tens of thousands homeless and destroyed several towns completely. It was a most moving museum, the floods not unlike our Katrina almost 60 years later.

The afternoon was free for us to enjoy the sun. We had a Dutch tea at 3:00, as if we haven't had enough to eat. And we got to watch as we transited two canals. The process is similar to the Panama Canal but it was really

fun to watch. That finishes up food, sun and water; well, more food to come because tonight is the Captain's Dinner.

And what a dinner it was! We started with complimentary champagne or kir cocktails, listened as the captain made a toast, and then had the mandatory disembarkation briefing as well as the usual port talk about what was on tap for tomorrow. Then the captain's dinner!

For appetizers we had salmon caviar with crisp potato cake, then a roasted mushroom veloute, champagne risotto with crayfish, and the main course was tournedos Rossini (grilled filet mignon and pan sauteed foie gras in a madeira reduction sauce. And dessert was white chocolate and cherry pudding. We even got a special house white wine, a fruity and slightly sweet Riesling. Yum!

We dined with the group of friends that have become our close corps for this trip: Vicky and Will, Beverly and Jack, and Eliot and Ilene. It was great company and great food. But perhaps the coolest moment came when our wine steward, Zoran, came by and Laura started chatting with him. We knew he was Macedonian, so she asked if he knew Makedonska Devojce. Of course he did! But he didn't believe Laura did until she started singing it, and he joined in. When they were done our and the surrounding tables gave a huge round of applause. And needless to say, Zoran was impressed! After that, nearly every time we saw Zoran, he would start to sing Makedonska Devojce!

After dinner we were treated to a huge band playing sea shanties and other music of la mer. After that, dancing to the music of our pianist Silvia. And we noticed that the six dinner companions (all but Eliot and Ilene) also happened to be the only ones dancing; or had been, all week. We weren't drawn to each other because we like the swing, waltz and occasional slow dance; but it seemed to happen. As if there's a commonality that connects dancers in non-dance situations. Fate drew us together, it seems.

Saturday, May 4

Amsterdam! Another early start; 8:45 departure for the nearly hour long drive to Keukenhof Gardens. The sun was shining, the temperature already

50 and heading into the low 60s, and rumors were that the tulips, after a very slow start due to a very cold, wet spring, had finally opened.

Were they! There are no words to describe the effect of 7,000,000 tulips, plus countless daffodils, narcissus, hyacinths, fritillarias have on the senses. I had expected row after row of farm-style plantings, but nothing could be farther from the truth. The gardens are arranged, in huge spaces or small beds, with complementary or contrasting colors for maximum effect. Bed after bed, space after space. Some around streams, surrounding a large lake with swans, in tree-shaded areas or out in the full sun. Every color imaginable, and every combination of colors, shapes, heights. If a hybridized variety exists, it is probably here.

Mostly the gardens are outside in a vast expanse of paths, bridges, and streams. A few buildings house arrangements; one had an amazing assortment of orchids, in colors and quantities you never see all at once. A working windmill adds to the Dutch feeling, and you can climb to the observation platform and look out over the surrounding fields, which are working tulip farms; vast stripes of red, yellow, purple, white -- millions and millions more tulips, being prepared for sale as cut flowers or for the bulbs for next season. Many are likely earmarked for Keukenhof next door.

There is no way to describe Keukenhof. It is unbelievable and you have to see it. A great finish to a great week, and a hard act to follow.

We had another bit of serendipity, and a nice kind of closure. On our first day in Holland we went to the Speelklok Museum in Utrecht, and saw a fully automated street organ. And at the entrance (and of course, exit) to Keukenhof, what else did they have but another street organ, by the same maker as the one in Utrecht. Playing, full blast. Our circle came all the way around.

Our afternoon was open, but lunch didn't begin until 2:00 and when it was over, there wasn't time for more than a brief walk into town. So instead we went on a photo documentation tour of the ship, including our stateroom; we checked in with the airline, and we packed.

One dinner and one breakfast left, and then it's back to normalcy, whatever that is.

Our final dinner. Appetizers were shared: meat pate and a triplet of pumpkin -- a curried pumpkin shot, breaded pumpkin, and pumpkin mousse. Followed by Osso Buco, which we both found disappointing, one of the few disappointing main courses. Dessert was not disappointing, however: a poppy seed mousse with rum fruits and an apple cake. And we each has the cheese plate: a gouda, a brie, and an emmenthaler.

After dinner, more dancing with the gang of 6. It didn't last long, though. Bev and Jack needed to have their luggage out at 4:30 a.m. (ouch!) so we called it an early night.

Sunday, May 5

Not much to tell you about in terms of our itinerary today: eat, and disembark. All good things must come to an end, and we were truly sad that this one did. There were quite a few almost tearful goodbyes as we met, then separated after breakfast.

I'll talk about the disembarkation process in a moment, under observations about Viking. But we made it to the airport 3 hours early. Schiphol is amazingly efficient and easy to get through. Short lines to do baggage check, and no massive security lines at all! Security was at the gate for each flight, and since they opened it nearly 2 hours early, there was never a line, because as people arrived they were processed. What a great idea! Delta was great too. Flights actually departed and arrived early. Service was nice, with two meals on each flight -- dinner and breakfast going, lunch and snack coming. Individual movie stations with a large assortment. Complementary wine and beer. Very friendly staff. These international flights are nice, but I have the highest regard for KLM and what it has become, namely Delta for flights to Schipol.

Overall impressions of Holland

This is a great country. The people are very friendly. The scenery is beautiful. The Dutch architecture is beautiful, and very different in

Amsterdam with its large city feel versus the small countryside towns like Hoorn and Veere and the middle-sized cities like Utrecht. It is a country of perfectionists. Trains run on time. Everything runs on time. Everything is well designed, easy to use, and runs with clockwork precision. It is one of Europe's most modern countries in terms of technology, despite being more than 1000 years old. And it is probably one of the most English-speaking friendly countries in the world -- very possibly more so than the UK. Most Dutch speak English as well as many Americans, and at worst, their English is very good. Yet they love it when you try to speak Dutch. Amsterdam is still one of my favorite cities in Europe, and I hope to return. Still haven't seen the Van Gogh museum or the Anne Frank house. And I could definitely eat more rijstafel and eat more cheese and drink more of their beers.

Overall impressions of river cruising, and Viking

It was our first experience, but I dare say it will not be our last. The experience is much more intimate than ocean cruising. The relaxing feel of sitting in the lounge or up on the sun deck and watching the scenery go by is wonderful. The leisurely pace of seeing one area per day and having lots of free time on board to relax is very nice. Having everything taken care of is nice. While we do not in general like the feeling of tours forcing you through a fixed pace and itinerary, this trip worked out really well. The first part, in Amsterdam, we plan our own vacation. We picked the restaurants, museums, tours we wanted, and could decide to walk (we did) .

But when that was over, the river cruise and provided tours were a nice contrast. It was much more relaxing than doing it all ourselves. Most of the towns were small enough that a fixed length tour was fine. When the attraction might warrant more time, there was always an option to stay on and catch a later bus back to the ship, or if in walking distance, to just leave the tour at the end. The tour guides were excellent. They had a neat technology; you each had a receiver and a mini-headset and they had a transmitter, so you could always hear even if you lagged hundreds of feet behind, and they could give the entire group a heads up about an upcoming left turn, or an approaching truck or bicycle or set of steps.

While meals were provided, in many of our destinations it was possible to get lunch in town and sample the local cuisine. And of course, not having to worry about driving in Europe was a real plus.

Impressions of Viking

The Skadi is a brand new ship. As such, the amenities were perfect. Spotless. Everything worked with fit-and-finish perfection. Our French balcony stateroom was small, but very well designed. There was ample storage space, a king sized bed, a bathroom with shower that worked really well. A large screen flat panel TV -- handy for watching the abdication and Willem-Alexander's inauguration. And the French balcony gave us outstanding views and the opportunity to open the slider and have fresh air. We didn't miss having a full balcony because it was rarely ever warm enough to be out. And, you could only see one side of the river. When stuff was going on, you wanted the panoramic view.

The facilities on the rest of the ship were outstanding. The lounge was comfortable and ample, with a section that was outdoors but enclosed in glass if the weather was less than ideal, and a further section that was totally outdoors. There was a sun deck with chairs (both shaded and in the sun), and great views,

One thing that can make or break a cruise is the staff. The Skadi's staff could not have been friendlier, nicer, or more helpful. We got to know quite a few of them. Turns out many of the crew were Eastern European, such as Zoran from Macedonia with whom Laura sang Makedonska Devojce. But we met Romanians, Serbs, and Albanians too. Our cruise director, Jakob of the sugar high personality, was Austrian, as was the first officer. But then they went above and beyond. Look like you were struggling with your purchases while on tour? Jakob would insist on carrying them for you. Want a special lunch? Well, the Philippine chef made it happen. Most of the waiters knew our preferences and we hardly had to order, by the end.

The passengers were, by and large, a very nice lot. Mostly older, though there were a few 20 and 30-somethings, and a number of still working folks. Most were from the US or Canada, though we did meet folks from England (Manchester), Gibraltar, and Australia. Most people were friendly

and we met quite a few folks at lunch or dinner sitting around a table for 8. Cliques started to happen at the end, such as our group of Laura, Meyer, Beverly, Jack, Vicki, Will, Ilene, and Eliot. But the overall feeling was still that of a group of people thrown together by chance, learning each other's names, where they were from, and what they did for a living.

And the ship provided a warm, comfortable home, with every detail taken care of. Coffee, tea and hot chocolate (and my newest discovery, mochaccino) were available all day, along with an assortment of cookies and mini-muffins. The crew would often meet us on return from a walking tour, with hot chocolate, or a cold towel. There were always water bottles and umbrellas and a city map for each city as you departed on an excursion. When you stayed in, there were news summaries printed up each day in the lounge. There was often music, Sylvia's playing and exquisite voice.

We tended to fall into a routine. Breakfasts in the main dining room, with its fabulous buffet and the ability to select eggs made to order, including always eggs benedict. For lunch (probably the weak spot in terms of food on the trip), we went up to the lounge and perused the buffet. That way you could get as much or little as you wanted, and it was quick. Unlimited house wines and beer were available with lunch and dinner. We tended to migrate to the lounge around 5:30 each afternoon, for the cocktail hour, and order the house special cocktail where I would complete the day's entry in this journal while it was still fresh in the mind. Then there was often a lecture, and always a port talk by Jakob for the next day's port, followed by dinner.

Dress was informal. Usually jeans and a polo shirt were adequate. People did dress up for the captain's dinner, but nothing formal; coat and tie, or just tie without coat, or even jeans. Women wore dresses or dress pants but nothing formal either.

And every detail was taken care of. On arrival, we were met by a Viking agent who whisked us away to our transfer to the hotel. At the hotel we were met by a Viking concierge, who gave us an info packet including schedules for the next days.

When we departed, it was as simple as tagging the luggage with the appropriate color-coded tags and leaving them outside the door, then checking out and heading for the lounge. We had breakfast in the dining room, checked out, had a second breakfast in the lounge, and then at 11:00 we had lunch. While eating lunch the concierge came and fetched us because our shuttle van was ready early. She walked us all the way to the van, had us verify that they had our bags, and then left. When we arrived at the airport, another Viking agent walked us to the correct area for check in and then explained where passport control was. Such attention to detail is a true sign of class!

Would we do it again? I think so!! Several itineraries are appealing, including the Rhine cruise, and the Elbe cruise. The 14 day cruise from Amsterdam to Budapest is appetizing, if a bit long. And the newly added Bordeaux trip through wine country sounds wonderful.

To all of you who read this, happy traveling!

Addendum

Kudos to Debbie. The Viking tote bag she got for us was the envy of all those who saw it; especially so for the crew members, who see hundreds of Viking bags go by. They had never seen one like this before and we received several offers to buy it!