

Chapter 1

2011

1.1 July

DAY 1 (2011-07-15 11:50)

Tuesday 12 July 2011

We did it!

After four years of dreaming and planning, we're here!

Good flight on Air Berlin to Dusseldorf, customs was no more than a glance at the passport and a welcome.



Roos and Henri's Neerkant home With **weigh** more bags (5) than we ever carry (but it **is** for a year), we were so thankful to be met by cousin Roos (Rose) and whisked away to her cozy home in Neerkant, Nederland, where we greeted her partner Henri and met "best-dog-in-all-Europe" Mabel and were welcomed with a traditional Dutch supper of boiled potatoes, applesauce, the best cabbage ever, and ham-wrapped pork sausage crisped to perfection, succulent and delicious.

They made their guest house available to us, and we were oh so happy to rest our jet lag in comfortable beds.



Henri and Charles



Dian



What a welcoming dinner!



Roos Nicole and Henri

DAY 2 (2011-07-15 11:51)

Wednesday 13 July 2011

We were late to rise but rewarded with a breakfast bounty. If the table wasn't so sturdy it couldn't have held it all. Cheeses of course, seven kinds of breads, five meats, jam, honey, special cereals, fresh espresso, tea, milk, flowing yoghurts. Then we were off to see castles in the neighborhood and lunch at a Cistercian monastery where the calves were friendly enough to let you stick your hand in their mouth (obviously a love thing and not a desire for food).



Roos had been busy on our behalf, arranging to collect our money wired from Santa Monica before we left to pay for our camper home, speaking in German to our man Sebastian about the readiness of our vehicle that we would pick up the next day in Cologne, Germany, and insure/register/pay tax on, and a dozen other details.



But what was that? Roos was saying things we didn't like to hear, even in German. Then she relayed the unbelievable news: our little van had been hit by a large truck, while Sebastian watched helplessly and in shock from the window of the government office where he sat arranging paperwork.

But he told us he would have another very similar vehicle for us the next day to drive for the three weeks it would take to go through insurance and repair it. Unbelievable. What a disaster. But whatcha gonna do?

You're going to let Henri and Roos take you out to dinner at their favorite local restaurant, in de Heerlyckheid, for a spectacular four-course "surprise" feast.

The following day we'd see what awaited us in Cologne.

DAY 3 (2011-07-19 01:58)

Thursday 14 July 2011 The big day, that we drove to Cologne to pick up our car, our tiny home for the next year. It turned out to be incredibly complex to arrange to get this vehicle for a year's time, without paying a king's ransom or breaking international law.



Cologne (Köln) bah-



Went to phone store and researched models then took Mabel the hunting dog to the train station (*bahnhof*) in Cologne (Köln). We walked to the outdoor restaurant across from the gorgeous cathedral and fortified ourselves with schnitzel and... no, not noodles, but we had cream of asparagus soup, cream of vine tomato soup, and Charles had a Vesuvius-looking baked potato. The Americans went into the massive cathedral while our Dutch cousins stayed cozy at the restaurant with the view. Inside was an impressive array of statues and stained glass windows, and an amazing relic, the bones of the three magi. Afterwards we listened to a Romanian quartet play classical music with two accordians, a violin and tuba. Henri (an undercover policeman in years gone by) said to be watchful of pickpockets in crowds, especially around musicians. He said they

are virtually slaves, brought in by organized crime groups so they can work the crowds.



Inside Cologne Cathedral



We were to meet the mechanic Sebastian but he was held up at the government office in a town nearby so we waited... and waited. Finally he came out and showed us the loaner van we could use while ours was being appraised and repaired by an insurance company. He was a DOLL! He had actually flown to Munich the night before to get us a van then drove it back to his town (near Frankfurt), got it PAINTED and fixed up then bought the correct plates at their DMV. We drove to a nearby McDonalds to conduct the business (money part) and then Charles valiantly drove home in the dark/rain/wind/new car/new road rules with Henri while Nicole, Dian and Roos led the way (and thought we each got a speeding ticket by a camera, but as it turned out ours never showed up!) - what a day!



Our "erupting volcano" potato outside Cologne Cathedral

DAY 4 (2011-07-20 14:47)

Friday 15 July 2011



"Let's go to Antwerp!" our Dutch cousins suggested. "But that's a different country"... ?, we naively questioned. So smiling, they drove us to Antwerp, Belgium. The name comes from "hant" (hand) and "werpen" (to throw); according to legend, some guy once didn't pay his canal crossing fee, so his hand was chopped off and thrown into the river. We saw the dramatic statue in the main plaza. Nicole took lots of local street art shots on her new Canon.



Antwerp art From the marina, we gawked through the red light district, got to the church of St. Paul where prostitutes of days

gone by saved paintings by Reubens, Van Dyke and other masters from a fire. Religious statues set in lava rock surrounded the church courtyard.



Henri and Roos took us to their favorite saints' bar which was covered from floor to ceiling with religious iconography. We had a nine beer taste and platters of snacks while listening to a street musician. We picked up famous Leonidas Belgian chocolates and drove home.



When we got back to Neerkant, Holland, Roos whipped up a giant platter of cheese and *tepanadas* which we enjoyed on their outdoor patio. The evening was topped off with some music making and a call to our families in Texas and Washington through our computer.



De-
piction of the hand being thrown

DAY 5 (2011-07-20 14:59)

Saturday 16 July 2011

We got our phones after 1.5 hours at the phone store. Then we got in the van and couldn't put it in reverse – oh *no!* Somehow we made it out of the parking lot alive and drove to Henri's CSI HQ. Really interesting!

Henri gave Charles and Dian a European driving lesson on the way back.



Nicole the sous chef made *tapas* with Roos, and many other tasty dishes...





The three of us went for a stroll with Mabel and saw a hedgehog in the street, which we guided to the shelter of a nearby shrub. *That's* never happened in Santa Monica!

Day 6 (2011-07-20 15:19)

Sunday 17 July 2011

We started the day with an American breakfast made by Charles and Dian. Roadside assistance, fetched by Sebastian, showed up and declared our van's transmission old and cranky but probably healthy, checked our squeaky belt and waved goodbye.



Nicole

canters!



Dian enjoys! We pitched in by weeding the garden while Roos mowed the new lawn before she took us to meet the other family members, Coletta and her yearling Fay, and under Roos' expert guidance we got a chance to ride. We all trotted and Nicole and Charles cantered too, and it wasn't even in a synagogue. Oye! We went out into a field full of foals and had

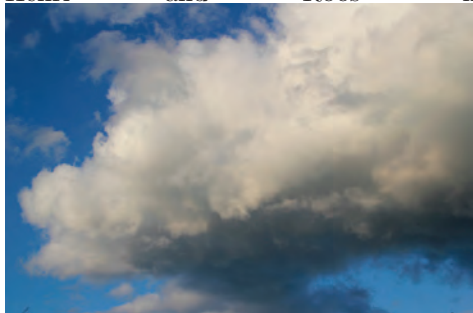
a great experience petting them.



Back home, Henri was firing up the BBQ for our final night in Neerkant. We saw a double rainbow, and packed for Amsterdam the next day.



Henri and Roos' home

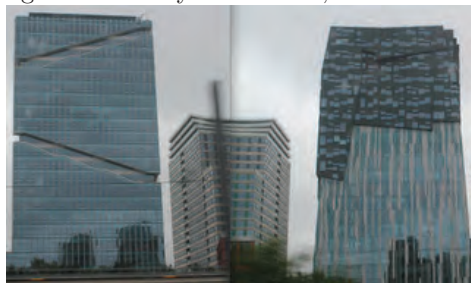


famous Dutch sky

Day 7 (2011-07-20 15:41)

Monday 18 July 2011

We left Roos and Henri's at 11:15 AM. They generously gave us trip provisions, and we drove two and a half hours to Amsterdam in light rain. Truly on our own, for the first time.



Driving into Amsterdam Sans GPS (for now), we made it to the neighborhood of our old friends Deborah and Herman, and their sons Benji and Paolo. We pulled over at a gas station to read a map when a local parked his car, came over, showed us where we needed to go, then said "Follow me, I'll take you there."

A



Touched by an angel We showed up at their house on Watercirkel. Deborah couldn't believe we had such a small van! She immediately showed us around their lovely three-story home, and put out a great cheese platter lunch.



DAY 8 (2011-07-20 16:02)

Charles and Herman We got the grand tour of Herman's dental office, which caters to some 2,000 patients. He specializes in a procedure that only 150 dentists in Europe can do - you could say he is the Vermeer of veneer. If you google "dentistry" he comes up number one.



Dian, Deborah Herman came home, and with Paolo as a catalyst, we decided to see the final Harry Potter movie (which Nicole had been jonesing for for weeks). Nicole thought she picked up a few Dutch words from the subtitles.

Tuesday 19 July 2011

Deborah drove us into the city center to shop and look around. We wound our way to the Amsterdam Dungeon Show, a "horrible history brought to life," where Charles, Benji and Paolo were unwillingly snatched as audience participants. We especially liked the pirate in a pub pick-up scene.



Seriously dangerous! We met Herman for drinks at the famous Cafe Luxembourg, then to dinner at Casa di David, in the building where Herman (whose father was named David) was born and grew up. The food was fabulous but even more impressive was when Herman showed us the water-level doorway where he saw the Beatles pass close by on a publicity canal ride in 1964. How many can claim that? After dinner on the drive home, Herman gave us the Amsterdam by night tour.



Amsterdam has great street art!



DAY 9 (2011-07-20 16:30)

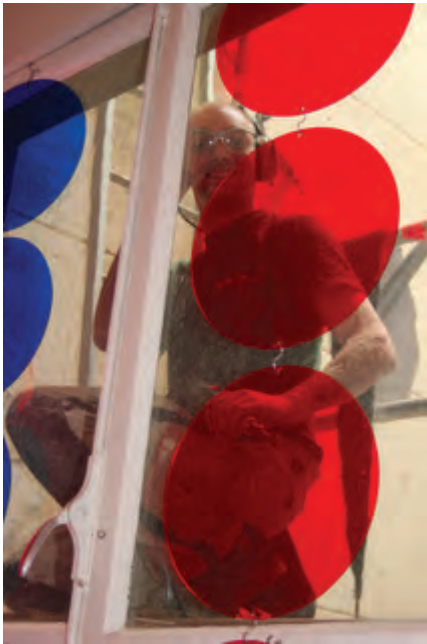
Wednesday 20 July 2011



We got up and took the nearby metro to the Anne Frank house. Very moving. Headed toward the Rijks Museum in no rush we had a great time snaking through the narrow curving city center streets, loving a large helping of Belgian-style double-fried french fries with endless garlic mayo dip, and popping into all manner of shops. We had an especially great time in a music store and a book store.



Sugar and Spice had an amazing music selec-



tion
The Rijks was under construction but still impressive. Rembrandt's "Night Watch" covered a huge wall, and we decided the famous Dutch masters are much better when seen larger than a cigar box. Many masters were on view, but the Vermeers and especially the Rembrandts stood out like Mickey Mantle in a little league game. Otherworldly.



DAY 10 (2011-07-26 12:37)

Thursday 21 July 2011



Upon leaving we had a friendly gesture from a young entrance guard who responded to our request for directions by running inside and bringing back a map printout. We found the right tram, but got soaked when a downpour hit us exiting at the end of the line. Herman came to the rescue by sparing us more tram time and giving us a lift home from his office. A heaping portion of homemade spaghetti gave us the energy to catch up on our blogs!



Brussels We bid adieu to the Smalhout-Gorin family and their beautiful home and set out for Belgium and Dian's dad's cousin Jerry Smolar, San Pedro born and bred but now five decades in Brussels. The drive across Holland and Belgium was very pretty, some small forests and lots of open farm country.



Jerry's home



Upon hitting the the city limits of Brussels we began to look for his street. Armed with Jerry's complete directions, we erred by getting off at the wrong basilica. How many

basilicas does one town need?? THREE HOURS LATER we managed to crawl to Jerry's doorstep and the warm, welcoming arms of him and his enchanting 1960s apartment. Every room was decorated with beautiful antiques and books, books and more books. Jerry is a European historian, and his late wife was a museum director in Brussels, and we had the pleasure of seeing her work there.



Jerry's bountiful Brussels back yardAfter a fabulous multi-course veal roast meal - who knew we were staying with a gourmet cook?! - we retired for the evening.



Jerry has more books per square foot in a home than we've ever seen!

DAY 11 (2011-07-26 12:38)

Friday 22 July 2011



The Mary's Extravaganza:





Belgian chocolate heaven!



Even though it's difficult for Jerry to get around, he drove us to the first ever covered mall, and was planning to drop us for a day of sightseeing, but ended up staying with us. It was a treat to have so knowledgeable a guide.

We asked him what the best Belgian chocolate was, to which he authoritatively and unequivocally replied, "You can't find it here in Brussels - it's called Mary Chocolatier." Although we were disappointed, we jumped for joy five minutes later when we stumbled upon the new Mary opened just months before in the mall. Charles ran back to tell Jerry the good news and he wasted no time rising from his comfortable perch at an outdoor table to investigate. He gave us a tour of the store crammed with delights and chatted up the clerks like he built and owned the place. Have you ever tried 100 % dark chocolate? That and many others were sampled before we made our choice of what to buy for Dian's parents, and for Jerry, and well, yes, a couple for ourselves.



The view from our table in the plaza



He took us to the museum of Brussel's history, and we saw the display his wife had spear-headed. We spent the most time in that room full of costumes from every country, sent to clothe the peeing Little Boy statue that was so famous there. Jerry treated us to beers in the main plaza under a light rain. Oh yeah, the delights of Europe!

We freshened up at Jerry's then headed out for a decadent meal of eel, mussels and assorted fish at a fourth generation fish restaurant called La Marie Joseph. Fantastic! When asked if dessert was wanted we winked and said, "no." (All except Charles, who didn't know that Nicole had bought profiteroles at the bakery earlier. These were a "coupon redemption" from his birthday, three promised treats from all over The

Continent.) When we returned to Jerry's we had a wonderful last night with the sweet taste of the profiteroles and a fine port wine in our mouths.



Our erudite gourmet host Jerry



When Jerry's not whipping up fabulous food in his own kitchen, he know where to take ya!



Profiteroles!

DAY 12 (2011-07-26 12:40)

Saturday 23 July 2011

We were ready by 7 AM for the very long (770 km/460 mi) drive to Berlin. Jerry, in yet another act of kindness and generosity had warm croissants on the table at that early hour and even packed some for the road. We got out of Brussels after a few misplaced wanderings, then felt the whoosh of cars going REALLY fast as they whizzed by us on the autobahn (no speed limits most of the time). At last some chance for good tunes, courtesy of Nicole's iPod – Huddie Ledbetter, Grisman and Garcia, Dr John, Lovin' Spoonful, Of Montreal, Stones, The Harder They Come, Gipsy Kings, Stevie Wonder.....on the road again.

Stopped to use wi-fi at McDonald's but couldn't make it work – almost nine bucks wasted on a bigger, flatter, still-crappy burger. Got gas and oil (old vans often drink oil like water, and a liter - not quite a quart - costs 14-32 euros/ \$20-45), then traveled on with downloaded directions and a not-detailed-enough map.

By 6 PM we were NEAR Mareike's apartment but after three more knuckle-whitening, marriage-testing hours and many friendly strangers with directions lacking one piece of correct information, like sending us the wrong direction when we were 10 minutes away, or saying "follow this street all the way till it ends" and turning around somewhere near Denmark because it never did end and exits are sometimes as rare as English-speaking Frenchmen, we finally bought a map of Berlin (\$12!) that came with more advice that would have been disastrous, but Charles looked at the map and figured it out. We finally understood why all our European friends said you MUST have GPS – it's because most Europeans do not know how to direct you to someplace 10 blocks away (of course, those blocks do look like spider webs).



As was the case with finally finding Jerry's, we three zombies revived with some delicious food from Mareike, and champagne, and tequila for dessert, and after catching up with our friend (all were shocked to realize it had been 15 years), fell into bed... well, Charles and Nicole didn't, because they accepted an offer they couldn't refuse.

They went by subway at midnight to Mareike's friend's gay bar (Serene), and saw the trains packed with nightlife denizens. Per Mareike's description it was a very friendly place where 17-yr-old Nicole and only-man-in-the-place Charles felt quite comfortable. Mareike said she doesn't go that often, but a dozen or more people greeted her like an old friend, and owner Mona and the barkeeps let her scoot behind the bar for huge smiles and hugs. Charles was so happy to be a Berlin NightHawk that he even danced. Then to bed by 3 (4 for Charles and Mareike, who had more catching up to do).



Serene (the club)



Mona, Mareike, and Nicole out past her bedtime - it's Berlin, it's Saturday night!

DAY 13 (2011-07-26 12:42)

Sunday 24 July 2011 After late breakfast and coffee we headed to the train station to buy passes for two days, a much better idea than trying to navigate any big Euro city and pay a fortune for parking. It was a treat to be escorted by our friend from LA, Mareike, a native East Berliner now back living in Berlin. Our walking tour took us to Checkpoint Charlie, where East dramatically met West during the height of the Cold War. The museum there was fascinating, giving insight through photos, films and short paragraphs into what that period was like for post-war Germans trapped, then literally walled into isolation from the Western world. There remained the small wooden white guard station from those days, and a very large photo of a soldier (American if you were facing one direction, Russian from the other) to give you some idea of what it was like then (but without the massive fortifications, soldiers and arms that made it clear you didn't go either direction without permission from both sides).



We went nearby the guard station to get photos, then Charles noticed that the young man in an American army uniform of that era, holding a big American flag, seemed to have a European accent. He then realized this guy was not official, and was there to pose for photos, for a fee of course. Charles turned to him and asked, what nationality are you? "I'm a citizen of the world," he said. Yes, but what country are you from? "I come from the earth," he replied. "That's nice, but you're

wearing an American army uniform. I wore that uniform...” he said, then stopped short of engaging him further, realizing the guy was so clueless that his job involved an offense to everyone who ever risked their life to wear that uniform, that there was no point. (Later we saw more fake GIs near the Brandenburg Gate, flirting and dancing around.) We figured at some point some veteran who actually ducked bullets would probably give this guy a lecture he’d remember, if not a commemorative black eye. We were glad we never had to go through Checkpoint Charlie, as Dian’s parents and siblings did, to visit the relatives we would be staying with in Dresden. It was creepy. We continued our guided foot tour of Berlin, around to the Brandenburg Gate



and the Reichstag. Mareike showed us the building where the Nazi HQ was (Gestapo, 2nd floor), and next to it an open area below which was Hitler’s secret bunker, where he committed suicide. Along one side was a long series of columns with a chronological history of the Nazi rise and fall, with dramatic photos and film clips. We all learned some things we didn’t know, but the overall picture was still shocking. You really saw how the German population was manipulated by this madman (note: not trying to relieve those people, of that time, of responsibility), and that events in our country the last 10 years made us realize it could happen anywhere.



and remnants of The Wall



Holocaust commemoration monument

We headed back and ate at a knockout Greek restaurant in Mareike’s neighborhood of Pankow, then concluded the evening with music (Nicole on bass and guitar, Mareike and Dian on guitars, Charles on vidcam, all on vocals). Mareike sang for us some lovely German folk songs. We finished with “Scarborough Fair” and Dian thought of her mom and dad and their family sing-alongs. Mareike said she would be working the next day, so we would be on our own! We

still needed to figure out a GPS, tent and camera stuff. LOTS of adventures were ahead! Thanks for blogging along with us.

1.2 August



In-
juring her foot after dismounting her trusty
steed, Nicole had to be carried part of the
way home (... not really, she just wanted a
piggy-back ride)

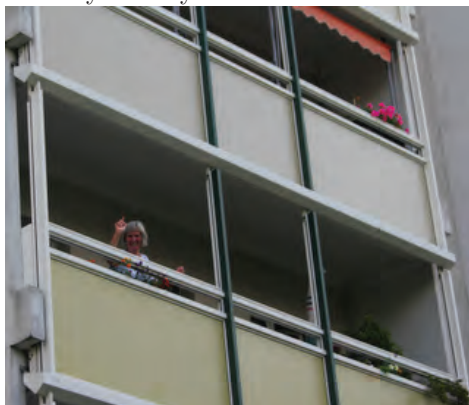
DAY 14 (+Day 15) DAY 15
(2011-08-01 01:27) Tuesday 26 July 2011

DAY 14
Monday 25 July 2011

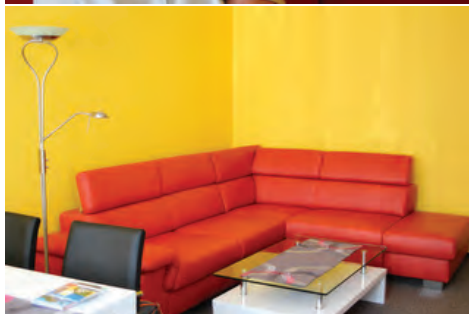


We headed out for a day on our own in Berlin. The furthest point out was the 1936 Olympic Stadium, which we got to walk around. An interesting thing we learned was that the "slight" to American multi-gold medalist Jesse Owens by Hitler seems to be a myth; he was told by the Olympic committee not to shake hands with any of the athletes.

We came back to Mareike at the end of the day and found her preparing dinner, which was just the warm welcome we needed after a day in the city.



"Hallo!" We arrived in Dresden, no problem, and found Robinienstrasse. We heard "hallo!" from Ursula, waving from the balcony. Dian's mom's cousin Siegwand and his wife Ursula were welcoming and immediately set out coffee, tea and homemade cookies. They opened the packages that Dian's mom had sent, of See's chocolates, and we gave them Simpsons beer glasses.





Siegward drove us to our rented flat about five minutes away. We were blown away by how cool it was. After unloading we were picked up by Siegward for a delicious chicken noodle soup and salad dinner that hit the spot. Of course beer was served in the Simpsons glasses.



After dinner Siegward showed us some of his photography which is a hobby, but in many regards shows he is an artist. We listened to

classical music from a local boy's choir that the two have seen perform many times. He gave us a bunch of guide books of Dresden, and after ice cream (which Ursula ran out and bought just for us) drove us back to our flat.



Siegward's photography ©



Siegward's photography ©



©

Sieghard's

photography

Day 16 (2011-08-01 01:38)



After dinner we took a short walk near their place



Wednesday 27 July 2011



We were picked up at nine and started a day of sightseeing in full sun! Ursula's breakfast gave us the strength to visit August the Strong's palace, opera house, platz, and churches. We walked to the river Elbe where the bridge stood, picturesque. Nearby was the new mall where we looked at GPSs for our car (boy, do we need one).



gust

the

Strong's



platz



Lunch was served back at the homestead where Rainer, their son, was waiting for us. After picking up his oldest son, Jonas, we were driven to Freiberg for an organ concert in the cathedral (the organ master teaches Rainer's children).



After walking around downtown Freiberg, we went to Rainer's home where Siegwand and Ursula were waiting, and met Rainer's wife, Ottie, and their two other children Annika

and Leinus. They had a fabulous table full of desserts, featuring a scrumptious cake made only in Freiberg. Annika played three songs on her clarinet and the kids seemed happy with their Simpsons "schwag."



The walk around their property



Annika,

Dian



Jonas, Linus, NicoleDian asked, "can we go for a walk?" Little did we know the paradise that awaited us. The path that ran through the field led to a magical stream with a hunter's hut. Suddenly, something burst through the shrubbery by the river. Was it a deer? No, it was Ottie! She had come to meet us through the back way.



We left shortly after, and were treated to Ursula's famous Koenigsberg. She had sent this family recipe to Amelia and Jason (Dian's niece and husband) for the wedding cook book Grandmother had put together (we say, "try it, you two!"). Music was made by Dian and Nicole with their guitar after dinner.



DAY 17 (2011-08-01 01:55)

Thursday 28 July 2011



The weather was still gorgeous and Ursula stayed home to help with our laundry and go to her exercise class. Siegwad drove us to Pillnitz Castle on the river Elbe. High above the city we could see the field and grounds of August the Strong. We could even see some

of the Czech Republic. We saw the gondola used by August, and a 250 year old Camilia tree given by the Japanese as a gift.



The macho cashier asked Charles if he wanted the "woman's" beer (only slightly smaller in size but much smaller in price), or the "man's" beer. Charles confidently replied, "The woman's!"



We stopped at a beer garden and had delicious wurst, kraut, and pureed potato. We asked, "Are there any roads where you can see the homes of the high society?" Siegwad surprised us by driving into a driveway that looked like a private residence. When we got out, he pointed up to the towers and said "I told them *three* towers, not two!" As though he were the lord of the manor. We laughed when we realized he had actually taken us to a palace that was designated for public use.



Dinner that night was spent at the (500 year old) homey Hexenhaus, just a walk from their house, for delicious Schnitzel!



<- We will never forget our meals with these people
 Nicole at August the Strong's ->
 We were taken to a famous milk bar, est. in 1926 in the Neustadt area. Its elaborate decor almost rivaled that of the actual products being sold.

DAY 18 (2011-08-01 02:03)



Friday 29 July 2011

Nicole, Dian and Ursula went swimming at the nearby water park complete with massive water slide, hydraulic geysers, and pummeling waterfalls. We laughed so hard when Nicole wore Dian's leopard kaftan because she had not brought clothes for the way back. When Ursula asked who she was, she stated she was the "Queen of Sheba."



Note: WE FINALLY BOUGHT OUR GPS!
YAHOO!



the Skippy you could ever



want!



<- Dres-

den had lots of good art to offer, whether it was commissioned or not.

Nicole was dubbed officially insane because of her attire in the cold, rainy German weather.

->

Street

art:





did we know that this couple had kept it for all these years, and in a place of honor around the holidays.



Back at home we devoured a most delicious salmon (lachs) dinner, and played more music.



A Christmas card Nicole had made en masse for her Grandmother to send to people. Little

DAY 19 (2011-08-01 02:11)



Saturday 30 July 2011



Did we mention we're having an incredible time? After breakfast Ursula, Dian and Nicole went to retrieve the laundry in the cellar, and, led by septuagenerian Ursula, did aerobics while they waited for the laundry to finish.

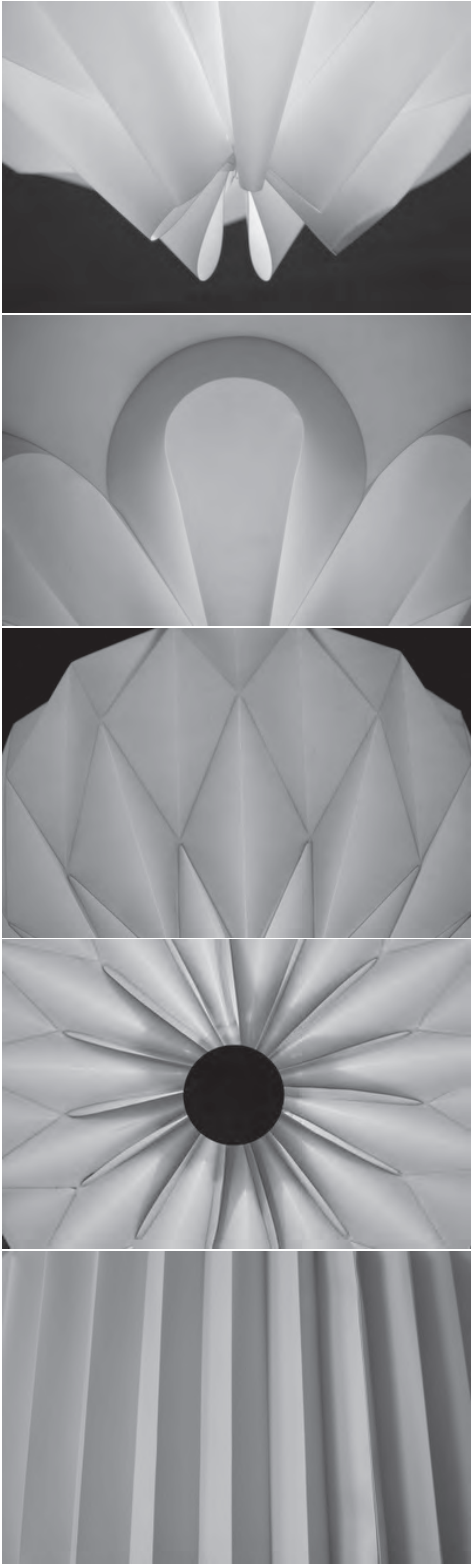
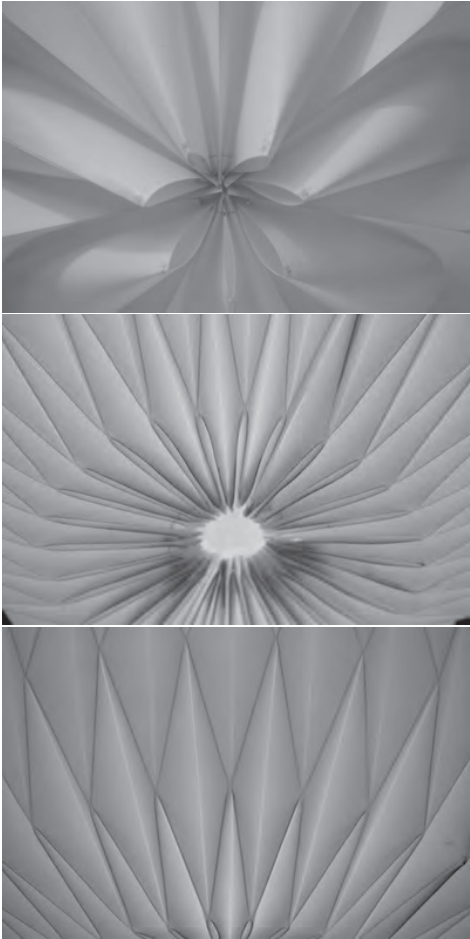


Siegward and Ursula went with us in the light rain to the famous church they call Our Lady. We were lost in a sea of umbrellas waiting to get in – with only a one hour window that day, it was the strangest stage rush we'd ever seen. To us the church seemed like a strawberry and cream confection, different from many of the darkly ornate churches we had seen thus far.



We went back to the store where we had bought our GPS to get a new camera to

replace the one that had recently gone kaput. Ursula took the tram home, and Siegwand took us to Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden Museum where Charles got in free with his press pass! It held the collection of baroque accessories and artifacts from August the Strong, and from the Green Vault. We lingered in every room, there were so many surprising and amazing artworks to see. No paintings! It also had a section from Turkish antiquities, including a tent that we eyed with envy. We came home for our last dinner, again at Hexenhaus. We shared our favorite memories of the visit with each other and all agreed that the laughter and music we had shared was the best.





Siegward and Ursula's lamps



Siegward and Ursula's flowers

DAY 20 (2011-08-01 07:57)

Sunday 31 July 2011

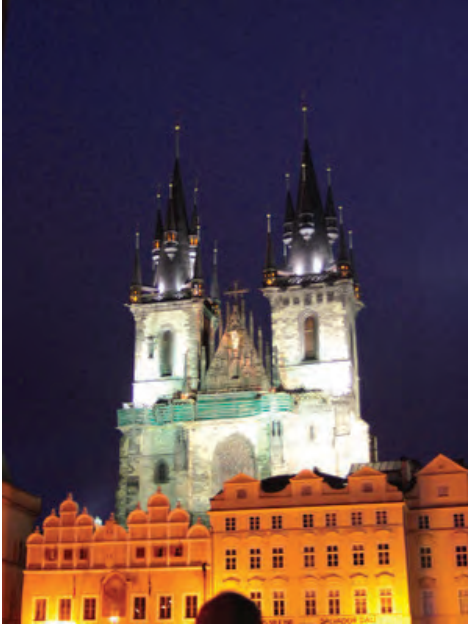
Siegward picked us up after we cleaned our flat and packed up. We had a final fabulous breakfast, then learned from Sebastian via e-mail that our van would still not be ready for at least two more weeks. Arghhh.

We were given a lovely photo of snow and trees taken by Siegward, a magnetic soap holder we were coveting, and a tin of Ursula's home-made cookies. It was clear that all the help Dian's grandmother Martha, and her mom Marie, had given Siegward and Ursula's family during the GDR was unforgettable and appreciated beyond words.

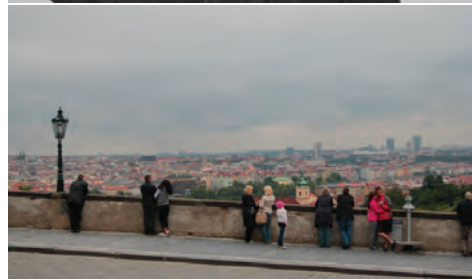
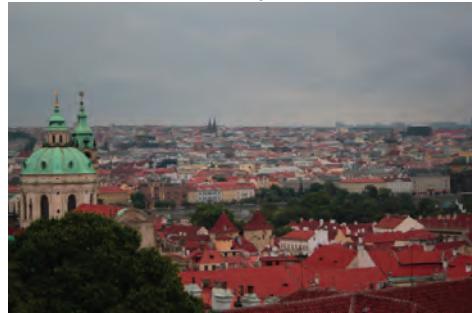


With their escort, we filled up at the gas station near the autobahn and said our tearful goodbyes. With our new GPS "Jill," we drove in a drizzle to our hostel in Prague. Charles parked the car near the train station in a secure park & ride lot. After eating our Hexenhaus leftovers (much envied by the other hostellers), we decided to sieze the day and go out and see Prague by twilight.





We bought tram tickets that took us all the way to the top of the castle where we could hear organ music and began our descent down winding streets to the Charles Bridge. All along the bridge people were making music, and we saw some outstanding performances on a barge next to a jazz club, terrific avant garde stuff all for the price of leaning over the bridge. We even found the marionette shop we had visited (minus Nicole) 12 years ago. Starting from the castle and winding our way down to the center of town was very memorable for Nicole, because she felt it set a great tone for the whole city.



Although we did not arrive on the hour to see the famous city clock located in the town platz, we still had fun gawking at the incredible architecture.



Arriving at the hostel at about 10 PM (no curfew, yay!) we fell into a sound sleep... except for the large family coming in at about 12:30 AM and clearly not getting the memo about "quiet hours."



Street performers on the Charles Bridge

Day 21 (2011-08-07 12:59)

Monday 1 August 2011



The smallest pedestrian street with a light signal. After a nice breakfast prepared in the hostel kitchen, we went out to see the rest of the best in Prague, with recommendations from our friendly desk people Marketa and Karel. The famous moving figures in the clock in the old town square drew thousands, and we too enjoyed the show.



Browsing our way back to the hostel, we gathered our things but could not locate the all-important ticket for the car park. A distressed hour was spent searching everywhere (5x) and freaking out. Will they charge us for a month? - \$1,000? Impound the car? Put Charles in jail? Turned out Charles found a sympathetic guard who only charged us for 24 hrs - "only" \$50, less than if we had the ticket. So much for the low cost of hostels - not if you have to securely park your car.



We worked on the blog before catching the tram to see the famous clock open at noon. We saw the Kafka Museum, where Nicole purchased a keepsake for one of her existential-lit buddies. Had lunch next to the river Vltava and then saw the John Lennon wall which was started in 1980 partly as an homage to the great musician but also in protest of the oppressive government people endured at the time. Of course we contributed – Dian with a sketch of John and Charles and Nicole with quotes: "I'm just watching the wheels go round and round" and "If you want to be a hero, well just follow me," respectively.



We hightailed it out of Prague for the south of Czech Republic, Cesky Krumlov, one of Rick Steves' favorites. (We love Steves, still a cool guy even though his guides and TV show have turned him into an industry.) A gorgeous drive into beautiful wooded countryside, following a river. We finally pulled into our campground, Kemp Vltavan (found on [www](#)), as darkness fell, and settled in with a great, large bowl of lentil soup with sausage (\$1.25). It cost us \$12.50 a night to stay. A giant glass of Pilsner Urquell on tap was 3 bucks. Oh yeah.

DAY 22 (2011-08-13 12:21)

Tuesday 2 August 2011



A group of canoers passing by After some organizing of the camper (this was our first camp!), a very necessary task in such limited quarters, we walked into nearby Cesky Krumlov (1/2 hr) after breakfast. The shortest path was winding between the giant abandoned buildings, a stark contrast to the simple but shiny and well-maintained camp buildings, before coming into a residential zone running along the river. We crossed a long wooden bridge into the old town, defined by the horseshoe the river makes around it.



We enjoyed poking around into a couple of bookstores, one of which held the plum Nicole had been seeking: a Sir Arthur Conan Doyle novel, in English, used. The Hound of the Baskervilles. We had a good ice cream on the town square, and an exchange of currency where we were told the fee was 2 % but were charged 50 kroner on a total of 361. And you thought US math was deficient. But it's impossible to dispute these things in another language, and it wound up being a \$1.20 rip-off, so never mind.



As we crossed the bridge to climb the steep hill to the castle, we stopped to enjoy a flute-guitar duo. We were also entertained by watching all the river people float by on canoes and rafts, spilling through the manmade "rapids" and sometimes capsizing, to cheers from onlookers. The river is a big draw in this beautiful part of southern Czech Republic, and our camp was definitely filled with river people... with all their charms and faults.

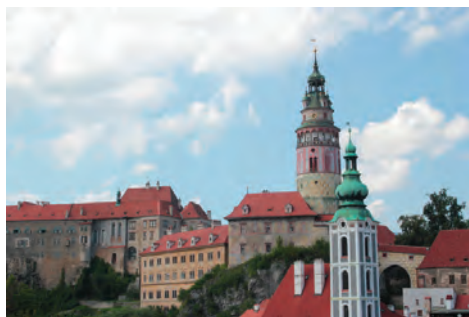


We strolled the grounds and gardens and bridges and ramparts, but found the best treasure in a small marketplace of period costume-dressed vendors in front of the castle: Charles spotted some good-looking crispy potato chips, then saw a pile of freshly peeled potatoes sitting next to it. He observed the two guys throwing the potatoes into a cutter which spit them out straight into big mesh

baskets lowered into a giant vat of hot oil, then out within a minute, a small amount of salt thrown in by hand, and presto – the Best Potato Chips in the Universe. A giant cone of perfectly crisp golden chips for 3 bucks, enough for all three of us to get our fill. When you got to the last few bites it became kind of potatoey, unlike “normal” chips that just crunch into nothingness. Heaven.

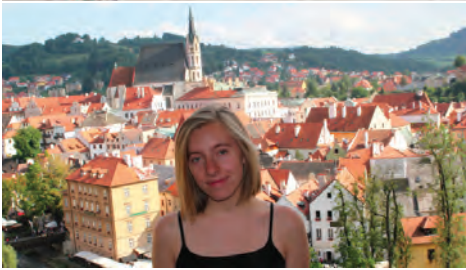


Heading home at dusk, on the return trip we laughed at the sound of a dog whose every bark had an echo. Simple pleasures. Back at camp, Charles was trying to figure out what the soup of the day was. The staff there, except for the managers, spoke almost no English and had little interest in trying to communicate with non-Czechs. A friendly guy in a checkered fedora tried to help. The woman behind the counter was trying to discourage him, saying it was made from innards and we wouldn't like it. Our new friend Lukáš (Loo-kahsh) told us what she said, but said he thought we would like it. Maybe.



He apologized for his limited English (none necessary, we were glad for some friendly assistance) and said, My girlfriend speaks very good English, she has a certificate. Just then the girlfriend walked up and immediately apologized for her boyfriend's having had too much to drink, introduced herself (Gabriela), and two sentences later, after finding out Charles was from Los Angeles, said, Los Angeles?! Will you marry me and take me there? Sure, Charles said, but you'll have to ask my wife, she's right there. We found this an interesting remark because it showed that despite the battered image and diminished standing of the US from decades ago on the world leadership stage, many people from around the world would trade everything to be in America.





some insight into life in the Czech Republic today, then after a break we came back into the dining hall to finally give the European debut to our Boggle, an Andrews family word game fave. Gabriela and Lukáš and young friend Philip came over and asked if they could play. We all were slightly surprised, imagining how hard it must be in a language not your own, and were concerned they would fail dismally. They made a good team and scored points, then we looked up and they had another young member of their river group sitting there, then aspiring heavy metal rock star Jonaš (Yo-nahsh), then somebody's mom. The six-member Czech team gained confidence and points until, in the last game – they won! I think we were almost as happy for them as they were. A great victory for international understanding and friendship.



We tried the soup – Dian liked the tripe a trifle, Nicole and Charles loved the rest – plus two long, thick grilled wursts, with Pilsner Urquell of course, a fine meal. Lucas and Gabriela joined us for good conversation and

DAY 23 (2011-08-13 12:21)

Wednesday 3 August 2011



After we bid adieu to our Czech Boggle friends, we decided to take the day to use the computer to take care of bills and other affairs, and to organize our living space. Taking pictures of the old abandoned warehouses, Nicole was noticed by a staff member who offered to give her a tour, but only after he got off work at the camp. Turns out he got off at midnight, so it didn't work out. Did some laundry by hand and dried it on Roos and Henri's drying rack.





In the evening we took a hike by the river. On the way we saw climbers repelling off a cliff. Once back at camp, we made a call through the computer using Google Voice to talk to Dian's parents and sister, from the alleyway of the camp. Ain't technology sumthin'?



DAY 24 (2011-08-13 12:22)

Thursday 4 August 2011 We left Kemp Vlatavan in the rain and drove to Austria, our fifth country!

We had a key made in the town of Lofer, which was our ultimate destination for the campground Mareike's friend runs. Only problem was it was the wrong Lofer. Luckily, a helpful farmer and his family gave us directions out of the city. Unluckily, we got horribly lost in Salzburg, but were helped by a man about to go into the "Communist Jazz Club." He gave us a map, and that's how we found ourselves staring at the majestic Alps two hours later.



Farmer's place in the *other* Lofer We found Mareike's friend Maria who welcomed us and directed us to Grubhof Camping. Needless to say we had a big "group hug" once we saw the "Grubhof" sign. On the way into the campsite a group of departing boy scouts waved at us and even did "the wave."



What a beautiful location! We parked our van next to the river and even though we didn't partake in the spa treatments offered, we did use the complimentary transportation pass the next day. And the lovely Lily behind the desk let us charge the computer in the office, securely – hooray! No sitting in the phone booth or next to the men's room for

an outlet.



We think we found the next site for Dian's dad to design a dwelling – a spectacular valley, what a view!



Interior decoration for women's downstairs bathroom



DAY 25 (2011-08-13 12:25)

“Fiasco” Friday 5 August 2011



We started the morning with good news from Maria’s husband Robert, that our overnight mail containing important papers from Sebastian had arrived. It was a big help to have their address for Sebastian to send the envelope to.





A lively local Fiasco #1: We trekked to the bus stop, free passes in hand. Jumping aboard the bus, we gasped at our Heidi-like surroundings, then we gasped at the fact that our backpack was missing. We jumped off at the next stop and walked/ran back to the camp entrance. It was to our benefit that the Austrians are not only neat but honest, for there the bag sat, safe and sound. Always ones to make the best of a situation, we caught the next bus, letting it take us wherever.

Fiasco #2: To our horror Dian could not locate her treasured sunglasses, but at this point we didn't want to turn around again so we stayed on the bus.

Fiasco #3: Due to a miscommunication with the bus driver, we got off too early and were stranded at a stop that wasn't getting another bus for two hours. Trapped like the von Trapp's. We trekked to the next town of Unken and explored. The church on the hill led us to a steep meadow where we picnicked and Dian reenacted the opening scene of the Sound of Music (and didn't even sprain an ankle twirling down the hillside singing "The Hills Are Alive").



We nearly jumped for joy when we caught a bus back to Lofer (near our campground) and came upon a military veterans gathering, complete with marching band and groups of servicemen in full regalia spanning Austria's military history. Walking back we chatted with a young fireman in front of his station, who knew where Santa Monica Pier was "from the TV." Our last stop of the day was at a roasted chicken stand where we bought our dinner.





On the way back to camp, Dian's glasses were found in the high grass – not such a fiasco after all.

DAY 26 (2011-08-13 12:26)

Saturday 6 August 2011 The day we skipped der Fuhrer but got straight on to Vlad the Impaler (Dracula, to y'all).



With no email from Sebastian announcing a miracle repair of the car, we decided: off to Vienna. But before we left we saw a little more of the jaw-dropping Salaach Valley. We drove to nearby St. Martin then up the steep, narrow paved road to the 300-yr-old cathedral on the mountain, Maria Kirchentäl. We drove by a line of obviously fit and devoted pilgrims who hiked straight up the mountain, stopping to pray at scattered devotional points We marveled at the sight of this simple cathedral in such an awesome setting, surrounded by peaks and waterfalls.



As we approached, we hit the first of a series

of jackpots: the choir (aged maybe 14-70, all in traditional Heidi/feathered cap garb) was rehearsing, and not only did they sound angelic but the delay (the sustain of the notes in the air) was a rare treat to hear. Dian went close to the altar and a docent motioned to her to come and look behind the altar and she was amazed to see the towering wall of votives (small paintings, many 300 yrs old) and the statue of Christ with half his knees torn away as well as other big wounds and lotsa blood streaming. Nicole and Charles got to share though most pilgrims don't know to seek this out. As we left the organist cranked it up for our processional from another great find.



We'd decided to make the slight detour out of the valley to Berchtesgaden, a slice of heaven so beautiful the Germans bought it from Austria in the 1920s. Charles went there when he was stationed near Stuttgart in 1968, and wanted to show it to Dian and Nicole. It was worth the drive, and as they pulled into town they saw a Market Festival (one day only) with citizens in traditional clothing, several stages for live music (missed that) and crowds packing the narrow streets. We decided to try to reach Eagles' Nest, Hitler's hideaway (if you were the most powerful man in Europe and could choose anywhere, where would you pick?), but our weak little engine couldn't handle the grade and we headed out for Vienna.



We cruised along uneventfully towards Vienna, but at a rest stop some guy pointed under the van. We're leaking. Oil? No, much worse, gas. Oh. No. We need a vital repair and it's late Saturday afternoon. We're going to spend the weekend in some gas station unless we spend a week or two waiting for a hard-to-get Wesfalia part.

It got worse. We'll be brief. We couldn't even call roadside assistance because neither of our Dutch phones was letting us call anyone. On the brink of despair, we asked a man going to his car next to ours if he could call assistance for us. Instead: (Limerick by D &N)

A Romanian man named Cornel

Came over and offered to help

He got on the ground

And fiddled around

And all of our worries were quelled!

It turns out that all it needed was the right wrench to tighten the two spots where it was leaking. A miracle! The gentleman was nice enough to say please look me up if you're ever in Romania (and gave us his number). Another example of the kindness from strangers. But it got stranger!!! Across the way the truck driver (fellow Romanian) who had loaned Cornel the wrenches was watching the scene and drinking beer, a case at his feet, a large man dressed only in shorts and flip flops. We thought he should be rewarded too so we brought cookies over. He said Not with beer ! Then he offered us one. Which we accepted. This was when we pulled our chairs over and started a wonderful dialogue, despite his very

limited English and our non-existent Romanian. The story of Vlad the Impaler, a report Nicole did in 3rd grade, was pronounced complete fiction. "Commercial!" Razvan exclaimed, complete with histrionic gestures, "He was a *good* man, NOT a vampire!" He explained that he only impaled BAD guys.

It was to be our first experience of "free camping" in a rest stop which he assured us would be safe. We ended up having a great evening of music, delicious pork and sausages, and a very high opinion of Romania.

DAY 27 (2011-08-13 18:16)

Sunday 7 August 2011

We found Camp Wien West early in the morning and negotiated a spot in the parking lot for a greatly reduced fee, since we didn't need electricity. During lunch at the camp cafe, we overheard two young guys speaking with an American accent, and when we approached them with a friendly, "What should we see in Vienna?" They said, "Oh, an American accent! We're so thirsty for English speakers." Mac and Seth (codenames Beth and Zach, covering all their sins) turned out to be really cool. We decided to explore Vienna together.



Also in the camp was a tall, thin, dark graffiti artist from Belgium going by the name aSquidCalledSebastian. We talked with him and photographer Jan about their fascinating mobile art project called 9000miles (find it on Facebook spelled this way). They were headed to Budapest for the famous eight-day Sziget Festival where they would be integrating their project on their transEuropean art journey, a group of nine artists in a van covering all media.





First stop, per Mac's hunger pangs, was a kebab stand right outside the metro station. We all had to get one, and we enjoyed them in front of the Vienna Opera House. Following the boys' motto of "If there's a door open, go through it," we stumbled upon Austria's national library and many other cool, lesser known sites. We saw an Asian street magician balance three eggs on his nose, then throw five small tennis rackets suddenly into the air and juggle them all flawlessly. The strains of Jerry Lee Lewis brought us to the next performer down the street who used his piano-playing marionette to captivate the crowd. His movements for the Killer and Ray Charles were uncanny.



We went on to St. Stephen's church, but not before stopping at Starbucks (Is it fair to say that Seattle makes the best coffee? - Dian). Dian sipped her joe while the others explored inside, and where Nicole discovered

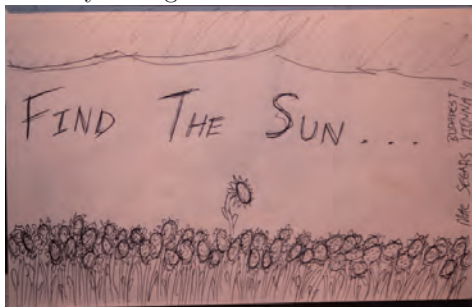
a Tuvan-style throat singer in a meditation room, which the rest listened to for a long time. She also picked up a daily hymn book given out for some extra sight reading material. A light rain and heavy wind helped us make the decision to head home. We had decided to go to Budapest sooner rather than later because of the news of the music fest, and the opportunity to offer the guys a lift. Turns out they had already bought train tickets, but they liked the idea too, and split up with us on the way home to try to get a refund.



We picked up a meal of Chinese food and more kebabs (we were a little addicted), and arrived back at the campsite where we worked on this here blog for a bit. Good news - they got the refund. Look out Budapest!

DAY 28 (2011-08-13 18:17)

Monday 8 August 2011



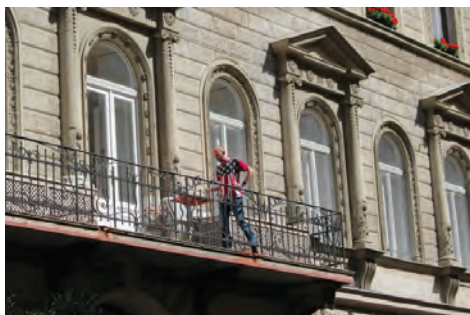
Mac's "farewell doodle"



Seth's Left Camp Wien West around 10 AM with Seth and Mac. Drove to our sixth country, Hungary. On the way we exchanged doodles and e-mail addresses. Though it was a tight squeeze (Nicole can attest to that), the kids were all right. "Jill" (our Garmin) brought us into downtown Budapest where we dropped off Mac and Seth, who kicked in for the gas, and had a last supper together.



New friend Nadine Drove to Haller Campground, did a load of laundry, and met Nadine, also struggling to figure out the washing machine. Our van fit nicely next to a couple from Milano. More on them later.



An American in Budapest? As a sidebar, we would like to note that having to pay to pee is a total pisser.

DAY 29 (2011-08-13 18:18)

Tuesday 9 August 2011



Stalin's



boots

We decided to try the restaurant on the edge of Haller Camp, and it was good and cheap. We shared one Hungarian omelet and two ham and eggs, the remains of which went on the huge rolls they served and made three tasty sandwiches for lunch. We saw Nadine and asked if she'd like to join us for a day on the town, so off we went for Margaret Island, something she wanted to explore that sounded good to us. We walked the full length and took in all the sights, including the rose garden, the ancient ruins, the petting zoo and the fascinating dancing fountain, synced to classical music and opera. One piece was a cappella, a Hungarian-language opera, Nadine said. It

was beautiful.



Despite some kind of serious stomach upset, Nadine soldiered on through a long day and was a master urban navigator, aided by Charles' natural instinct for map and metro interpretation. The next goal, which we really wanted to see and which had eluded Nadine's search earlier was Monument Park, the largest collection (by an enterprising new capitalist) anywhere of massive Communist-era statues which survived the topplings that followed the end of Soviet Communist domination of eastern Europe. As we were walking and trying to figure out how to get there (it's outside of Budapest, and a little obscure), we learned something interesting about Nadine: she's a tour guide at Buchenwald, the preserved Nazi concentration camp near Weimar.

The journey to the park by subway and buses took a good hour and a half, but it was well worth it. We were amazed and amused at these giant statues scattered around a large park. We strolled from Stalin's boots to Lenin's bust and took some photos imitating these ideologically correct figures. Charles' press pass got him in free, so he decided to splurge on a t-shirt you can't get anywhere else, one depicting the great minds of the

failed system as a rock band on tour.





DAY 30 (2011-08-13 18:19)

Wednesday 10 August 2011

We got good news! An email from the Sziget fest press office said that Charles was being allowed in after all! Nicole was still a question mark, and we all really wanted her to get to see Kasabian.



Hello

Tim!



The

Green



Danube

Skittles promotional tree

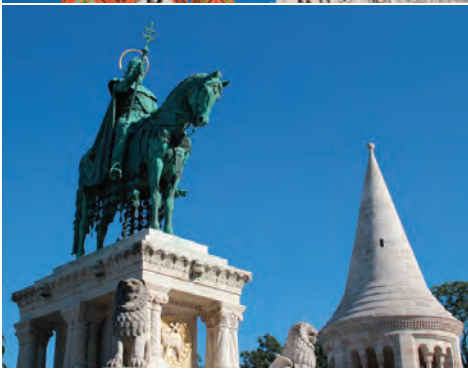
We took the metro to Square of Heroes (Budapest's legendary leaders, national heroes). Strolled around the park, saw modern art installations on the lake (pieces of four checkered cars, floating, a house, so on), picnicked while it was becoming quite windy then took naps. We went to St. Istvan Bazilika and climbed to the top of the tower for a panoramic view of the city. Down on earth we had a coffee and took the bus to the Buda side, to a long area along the Danube with lots of great sights, including the long, stately parliament building across the river on the Pest side. Skittles were being passed out, so with some sugar in our systems we climbed the hill, using a winding series of way too many steps.





exhibit on a

Art
lake



Fisherman's BastionHearing live music we hurried up to St. Michael's Church square and enjoyed a beer while listening to a hurdy gurdy player, (quite accomplished at 17 but had already been playing for 10 years). We thought of Dian's bro Tim, who works at Hilton HQ, as we checked out a famous one there built around excavated ruins. We walked down the other side of the hill through ruins and bunkers and came upon a huge waterfall statue fountain depicting hunters and their prey then continued to the bottom and caught the bus back to camp.



Back at camp, Nicole and Dian were noodling on the guitar and singing, and were beckoned by our Milano camp neighbor to hear some classical and popular favorites of his on headphones. That turned into an invitation to join them for Paula's homemade spaghetti. Ya don't have to ask us twice, especially since we were still without a working stove or fridge, limiting our menu choices. Good conversation, good wine, new friends.





Paola and Paolo, respectively.

DAY 31 (2011-08-13 18:20)

Thursday 11 August 2011

We awoke to a gorgeous day and the fantastic news that Nicole could get into the Sziget Festival at a discount. After catching up on e-mails, blogs and laundry Charles and Nicole left at 3 PM for the island where the music festival was happening. Dian gave a concert at the request of Paulo and Paula (the Milano neighbors) with a promise of homemade risotto and yummy orange peel dessert. At 10:30 as Dian was getting the beds ready, in walked Nicole and Charles with grins a mile wide. It turns out, Nicole was given free entrance and had seen one of her favorite groups, Kasabian.

Sziget is considered one of the best rock fests in Europe. All of Sziget Island, in the Danube in the center of Budapest, is given over to the music for eight days every summer, with almost a dozen stages, art areas, of course lots of food and beverage booths, and large areas for camping. It was a little complicated to get there from our camp, We knew what metro to take but then had to switch to two or three different trams; when we got off the metro we spotted a couple of young women in pink Sziget employee t-shirts and they gave us directions. Aha! We'd been fooled and lost that way too many times, so we decided to just follow them (at a discreet distance), until the flood of young people (not too many people Charles' age at this one) became obvious and we followed that crowd. Leaving was a different story: of course the crowd initially streamed out of one exit toward one transport point, but after that it got confusing because everyone was returning to different places. Amazingly, after an initial error, we corrected and took an alternate route and still got back perfectly. You laugh, but it's a big deal, the difference between arriving back at 10:30 happy to share our experiences, or 1:30 AM, exhausted and frustrated.

Walking across the final bridge (strewn with multi-lingual "Welcome" banners), Charles and Nicole could feel the buzz of excitement. This was a large crowd intent on having a

great time, and there were plenty of opportunities for that. Nicole marched in with her "over 18" pass (for alcohol consumption), which had been pressed upon her with no questions asked. So much for that system.

Their very first impression on the grounds was not musical, but playful with some life-size Kinect game that had people jumping to exhaustion. Charles, a map nerd, wanted to study the layout first but Nicole just wanted to go, and explore. After surveying the scene and listening to a few bands, they finally found the area where their new artist buddy, ASquid Named Sebastian, from the camp in Vienna, was doing his thing in a laid back area where his traveling art collective was set up along with local and other artists. It was an interesting place to hang out and get a different experience than watching one band after another. He was kind enough to show his entire sketch book and explain all the plans he had for those many ideas, and appreciated Charles and Nicole's interest. If he can accomplish 1/10th of his ambitions, you will be hearing from him. Nearby we heard a band from Slovakia named Elvis Jackson, pretty interesting for the constant genre and language switches they made, even within each song. Impressive.



Nicole eating one of the GIANT hamburgers being sold at the fest.

The biggest name playing was Prince, two nights before and prices almost doubled that night. That would've been a treat, but we all had seen him in LA not long before, and still remembered that amazing show well. Thursday was the best night because of Kasabian, a band Charles initially "discovered" because

he received a review copy of their first album, and who became one of Nicole's favorite bands. Neither of them had seen them live, so expectations were high, and they did not disappoint.

Nicole worked her way to the front of the stage about 20 minutes before showtime, and wound up with about 20,000 fans behind her. She befriended a really nice Bulgarian guy, who confessed to not knowing Kasabian very well; by the end of the show she asked him if he was now a fan and he replied, emphatically, "Very much so!" People near the front were having a really good time, with a mosh pit going (Nicole's first), but weren't going crazy – when a woman fell, she was immediately picked up by others. Nicole's new friend was well over six feet tall and watched out for his more diminutive buddy.



When the band played songs from a new album that had not been released yet, it seemed like everyone in the crowd knew all the words, and Charles was impressed that Hungarian hacking skills were the equal of their American counterparts but Nicole pointed out she also knew the lyrics, by looking up live versions of the songs on Youtube. Get hip, Dad, there's more than one way to skin a release date. Nicole, Charles and the Bulgarian agreed it was a tremendous performance, and Nicole could hardly wait for their new album "Volo-eraptor" to be released Sept. 19. (Cough.... early birthday present.... cough....) They saw a few more bands but that was definitely the highlight. They gave Sziget Fest a hardy thumbs up.



Day 32 (2011-08-13 18:21)

Friday 12 August 2011

Our One Month Anniversary in Europe!



After

four great days in our home of Camp Haller, we said reluctant goodbyes to Budapest, and our delightful neighbors and new friends Paolo and Paola (who, after forcing more espressos on us, presented us with a fantastic departure gift: a gorgeous box set of CDs, with huge book, of the genius pianist Glenn Gould), and we took off for Krakow, Poland. But because we wanted to visit Auschwitz and it was an hour west of Krakow, we decided to head there first. This took us through Slovakia and a tiny piece of Czech Republic, making four countries in one day!



Driving north from Budapest through wooded

hills and unending fields of sunflowers, we spotted the bleached ruins of a castle on a rock, and stopped to look. Dian chatted with a woman from the restaurant there, and voila, more magic! She directed us around back in the van and opened the big iron gate so we could drive through for a closer look. We asked some people walking there if they knew the name and age, and we found out Beckov Castle is like most there in the Carpathian Mountains, built by locals in the 12th Century to defend against the invading Mongols, who had never encountered such a defense.



After a close drive by, we discovered the restaurant had Wi-Fi, so we checked for e-mail, and found the worst one yet from Sebastian: his insurance would not cover the accident to our van and he was going to let them scrap it to recover anything, and we would be stuck with the substitute van for the entire year. Dian and Nicole accepted the bad news quite well, Charles had trouble containing his upset. Slovakia had huge rolling farms, with noticeable logging slashes in the hillsides, and some mining ugliness. It got nicer as we climbed in elevation, to magical, spooky, dense forests in the small piece of Czech Republic we passed through. We reached Poland and stopped at a roadside stand for watermelon, but no luck: she only took zloties. We thought euros were

good everywhere in the EU - nope!

It was getting dark and we had no money, no food, and no place to sleep. We had hoped for a rest stop on the freeway, but left the highway long before, and there was nothing suitable on our scenic country drive. We found an open supermarket that took plastic, then Dian started chatting with a group of young locals. She told them we were looking for a place to sleep and after some animated discussion they jumped into their car and led us to a place where the owner, Alicija, let us park in the yard and use the restroom, shower and electricity and even offered to make coffee for us in the morning. A happy ending.

DAY 33 (2011-08-13 18:23)

Saturday 13 August 2011

We shared a cup of coffee with Alicija. Dian did a “puppet” show for Oscar, her grandson using kitchen ceramics (bulldog, rooster), then we left for the horror of Auschwitz. Guided tours were mandatory, and they lasted four hours. We were fortunate to get Marija, with 20-years experience working at the site, who did tours sporadically. She told us they must go through two years of training before being certified, and then continue their education with lectures by historians, linguists and other scholars. So she knew much more than she could tell us even in four hours, Charles remarked, and she smiled and nodded. She also told us her mother lived within 15 kilometers (nine mi) of the camp during the operations, and Dian asked if the stench of the cremated bodies could be smelled that far out, and she said yes, even further.



The entrance gate sign reads "Work will set you free"



When we got to an area with a memorial with plaques, by language, representing each one spoken by some victims of the camp, an American woman named Adrian had the same idea as Charles and they both marched down the

line until finally finding English, on the last plaque out of 20-some. Half the tour was at Auschwitz, the other half at the lesser-known Birkenau, a camp at least five times bigger than Auschwitz, built nearby because the horrific operations increased so dramatically.



One startling moment was when Marija showed us a map of Europe, with lines drawn from every country overrun by the Nazis, from Norway to Greece, with all railway lines leading to Auschwitz. Many did not even survive the cruel 11-day ride from Greece. We also found it interesting what precise scientific investigation has been done to document the facts of the camp, since the Nazi commanders destroyed so many buildings and records as the Allied armies approached, trying to hide from history what had been done there.



Floor in the barracks in Birkenau. Photo by Dian. Marija also explained that the rules forbade anything but documentaries to be shot there, so even Spielberg's Schindler's List had to be filmed in a recreated camp he constructed across the road. It would be too difficult to try to explain our emotions of that day, but Nicole said, "As I was walking through, I didn't really feel anything, I was sort of numb, but it hit me later on." We had a picnic lunch on a stump off the side of

the road, near a church where we heard beautiful singing as many were arriving for the service, only to notice it was a radio broadcast. Actually it seemed like a good way for a small church to sound like a bigger one.



We paid our first toll (not our last) on the road into Krakow, five bucks then found Camp Clepardia with the help of Jill, our GPS, and were escorted in by Kris, who bore a resemblance to Muse vocalist-guitarist Matthew Bellamy. Every camp has a personality, we've found, and we quickly dubbed Clepardia "Camp Bathrobe".

We met Brit Norma, who with her Welsh husband Howard became our revered travel gurus: they've been traveling constantly for three and a half years. They invited us over to their spacious, fully equipped motor home and shared tons of great road advice. Our admiration only increased when we heard they missed the last bus back to camp the night before and walked till 1:30 AM, (and they were pensioner age). Even veterans miss an occasional trick.

We met Germans, Jenny and Peter in the kitchen area (our first chance to cook, with no operational stove in the van. We offered pasta and they provided wine. We observed the merits of sleeping in till noon ("I'm on vacation!" Jenny protested) and going out for nightlife, though we didn't follow suit. Jenny sympathized that, like Charles, she would love to get her hands on a basketball, especially since there were baskets in the park next door.

DAY 34 (2011-08-16 06:38)

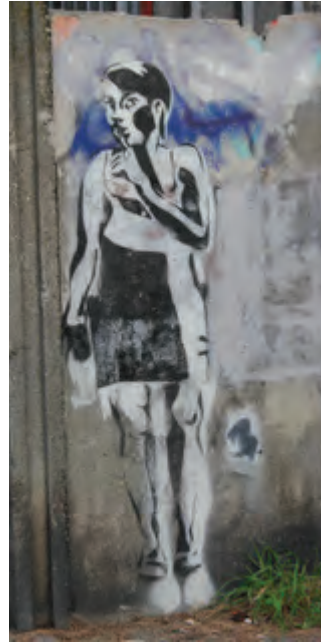
Sunday 15 August 2011



We had a slow day at Camp Clepardia, and since the next day was a big national religious holiday we were told almost everything would be closed. By early afternoon we decided we should get out and see a little of the city, then got as far as the supermarket and said Uh oh, if we don't lay in provisions today, we may be caught with nothing but crackers in Krakow. We bought pierogis and eggplant which Dian whipped into a fine dinner, and inspired by Howard and Norma's good experience of hiring a guide for a city tour, we decided to ask campground employee Kris, who grew up there, if he would give us a tour. Sure, he said, later admitting he had never done that, but we had great confidence.



One must get creative when their computer plug won't stay up on its own (Hint: a car key wedged underneath does quite nicely) At last! Charles got to play some hoops! Sort of. A couple of local youths were on the courts, and instead of standing afar and salivating, Charles decided to ask if he could join them. They were most generous, being sure that each of the three players got to shoot in turn. He introduced them to the joys of Horse, and 21, and played miserably, oh well. In his defense, the rubber ball weighed about 40 lbs and Tomas and Jeremy both ignored most of the hoop rules about dribbling and traveling. Jenny and Peter showed up with their little rackets to bat a ball back and forth, and Jenny gave Charles a most surprised and



jealous look.

DAY 35 (2011-08-17 03:22)

Monday 15 August 2011



Photo session for a weddingAfter a night of rain, we got ready for our first foray into Krakow. We met our neighbors who also had a VW Westfalia and Ravi and Ina turned out to be our mates for the rest of the day. The expertise Ravi had as the one who fixed their van over many years was very helpful and gave us a newer sense of trust and pride in our vehicle. (Nevertheless we arranged a tune-up for it.) We returned the book to Norma and Howard that gave information about ACSI campsites and told them we might make some music later in the evening.

We caught the bus with the help of Ina (who grew up in Krakow) and noted that bus drivers in Poland are famous for being grumpy. Luckily we had the correct change, in coins, because that is the only way one can ride, and not even our Polish friend could loosen up the stare-straight-ahead monosyl-



labic driver. In town we saw a huge hot air balloon that rose

up on a tether for a panoramic view of the city then was pulled down. It was situated on the Vistula River – the largest in Poland. We met up with Ina’s daughter, Nikki and her friend Lizzie, who were both visiting Krakow as well. They asked if we would like to join them for a visit to the oldest cemetery in Krakow, in the area named for King Kazimierz.

We had an extraordinary experience there. The relatives of Ina were buried in the second oldest cemetery in the Jewish quarter and thanks to Nikki’s diligence with offices of records etc, the coordinates of the site were found and she had been there several times. It was a rare privilege. We sat at the foot of the graves as Ina read the Polish words naming her aunts and uncles, only two of whom escaped extermination at Auschwitz. This, as her family lore tells, was because one sister was very beautiful and was about to be let free by a German guard, when she bravely demanded, “Only if my sister can go too.” The gamble paid off and those were the two names that showed death as sometime in the 1980s. Nicole and Dian sang (with their permission) a Hebrew song about brotherhood. After that we walked to the Pierogi Festival in the town square. There were lots of people, stands, beer and live music, and of course the best pierogis.





We tried a riddle that only Lizzie figured out, so her old buddy from grade school days bought her a whipped cream and chocolate waffle as a prize. When 3:00 PM arrived, a trumpeter appeared in the cathedral tower and played an aborted melody, reminding all that once when a trumpeter blew a warning Huns were approaching, an arrow stopped him mid-song. He waved to all from his perch, we presume as a sign that he was all right, ending mid-song voluntarily.



Left:
The riddle winner! Right: Ravi and Ina



We walked a bit more and then split off to have a bus ride around the city. Twice. After dinner the new friends including a few new ones gathered at the outdoor kitchen area for a song fest. Ina, Dian and Nicole were the Polish version of The Goils (or the Andrews Sisters). What a wonderful evening of wine and music.



From left to right: Dian, Ina, Nikki, Howard



Howard, Lizzie, and Norma



DAY 36 (2011-08-17 03:41)

Tuesday 16 August 2011



We found a recommended mechanic nearby for a needed tune-up. He had no time for some of the other things we needed done, but we had to get the basics handled, since it had become our car for the duration. It was about \$85, more expensive than Ruben charges us in Santa Monica (and we even provided the oil). Still: the only thing cheaper in Europe is beer.



We bought a needed pillow, and a lightweight, British-made mountaineering hammock (Polish: hamak). We also made sure the car would be done no later than 3:30, so that when we returned from our tour with Kris, (leaving at 4 PM), we would have a place to sleep that night. It was.

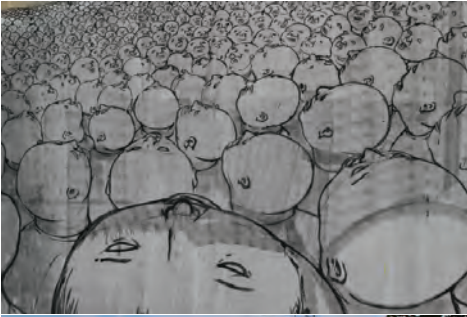


Dian, Kris and Charles



As we walked and rode the subway with Kris, we learned that he was getting a degree in International Economics, emphasis Taiwan (he studied there), and he said when we saw him performing chores around the camp with his iPod in, it was Mandarin lessons he was listening to, not pop music.

The first sight was a square filled with large metal chairs, spaced evenly but far apart, a monument to the Jews who gathered there thinking they would be “relocated,” meaning exterminated, and they put up a losing fight. Next, a visit to Oskar Schindler’s factory site, now a museum. Then, a highlight off the beaten path: a huge mural covering a large building by street artist Blu. It sparked controversy because many of the very Catholic Poles did not take well to the depiction of someone speaking into an oppressive huge megaphone shaped like a bell and covered with the Vatican coat of arms, hovering over a mass of upturned faces. Open to interpretation.



We walked a bit through the center of town but skipped some of the usual tourist sites. What we did not skip was Polish pizza, at the best place in town. Finally we took a bus to a far part of Krakow where there was an old stadium and one wall of it, about four blocks long, was filled with graffiti. Nicole especially was happy to shoot some of the scenes.



We took a taxi back to camp, where Kris's smiling colleagues cheered his triumphant return. We invited him back for a beer and wound up playing Boggle with yet another non-native-English speaker. He held his own, and then we lapsed into scary folk tales, about Smok the local dragon.



DAY 37 (2011-08-17 03:42)

Wednesday 17 August 2011

While we waited for the mechanic to open up, Dian went and bought some rain boots. At noon we took the car in for the final fan belt and filter parts.

When Charles and Dian were squabbling about

which way to get back, Nicole, self-named The Homing Pigeon, often lead the way (coo).



We thought of Grandad when we saw a firehouse by the Salt Mines!



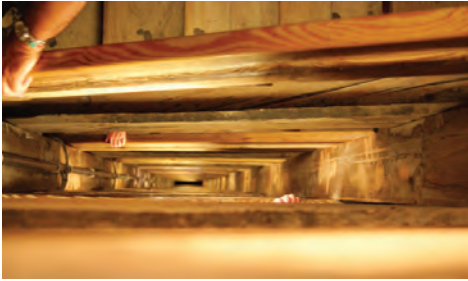
Tunnels leading from one area of the mine to the next. Since so many people (including our guru Rick Steves) had raved about the Wieliczka Salt Mines, we decided to go in our van since it was only a half an hour away. Humming like a Singer sewing machine, we took our van to the famous Salt Mines, the oldest continuously running mine in the world, and the sixth longest operating business in Europe. Charles' press pass got him in free, and Nicole's student status gave another discount. Dating from the 1200s, the miners themselves carved sculptures of various subjects from Copernicus (one of the first tourists there) to Brownies (little mine elves who worked after the humans left) to the

Pope (the Polish one). After taking the life-risking elevator cage up to the surface, we had a ten-inch Duzy, a chocolate and vanilla soft-



serve.





Stairs leading down into the mines





a Duzy!

It's

Driving through Krakow, our rumbling tum-
mies urged us to find an authentic Polish
restaurant. We ended up at an authentic
Chinese restaurant. The food was delicious
with large quantities and good prices (be fore-
warned: when requesting tap water, please
confirm that it is indeed tap water you are be-
ing served, or you will be charged for mineral
water at \$3 a pop – pop would be cheaper).



DAY 38 (2011-08-21 11:20)

Thursday 18 August 2011

We said goodbye to the friendly staff at Camp Clepardia after four nights, our longest camp stay yet, for a long (10 hour) day of driving through four countries to the Dalmatian Coast, through the big Croatian city of Zagreb. Charles bought a much-needed big map book of Europe. (People like Howard, on the road for three and a half years straight, said GPS or no, you HAVE to have good maps!)



A final farewell to Camp Clepardia and Poland We sent out six post cards, postage totaling US \$15 – now you know why you never got one.



Street art in KrakowUpdate: on our long drive, Jill the GPS changed her gender and nationality to become the smooth Daniel of Britain. When he's right, he's Danny Boy.



Fountain sculpture in KrakowWe spent the night at a rest stop.

DAY 39 (2011-08-21 11:21)

Friday 19 August 2011

We bought groceries, car necessities and had a spare key made. Decided to skip the expensive highway vignette and be on the lam as we slipped through Slovenia. An hour later, we entered Croatia, with a real border, and got our first passport stamps since landing in Europe. We drove to the nearby large city Zagreb, found a bank to get some kuno (local currency), where the friendly teller taught us some essential phrases. When Dian said, I have a question, he responded, "Shoot." and we all laughed.



So far we'd encountered what the Europeans had been apologizing for as a rainy and cooler-than-normal summer. We got used to the rain (it never stopped us from doing what we wanted), and appreciated that it wasn't blazing hot. But it soon

became hot - 32+ C in Zagreb, hotter as we went south, into the high 90s F.



We thought the toll on the highway to Zareb was bad enough at \$15, but from Zagreb to the coast was a shocker: close to 40 bucks. Finally reaching the coast, with no air conditioning, we were anxious to dive into the sparkling deep blue waters of the Adriatic Sea, and wasted no time. We also stopped to take a photo of an official road marker for a wild pig crossing – when's the last time you saw that in the US?



We found Camp Michael, a few steps from our van to the water, and settled in. Michael's son Ante welcomed us on the veranda with three very tall (1.5 l) frosted beers, and we found out he's been working there 56 years, all his life. We slept well, with the sound of the water lapping, but with visions of the

bad Speedos we had seen racing through our minds.



The wild pig sign



A fisherman at work. Photo by Charles



Photo by Charles



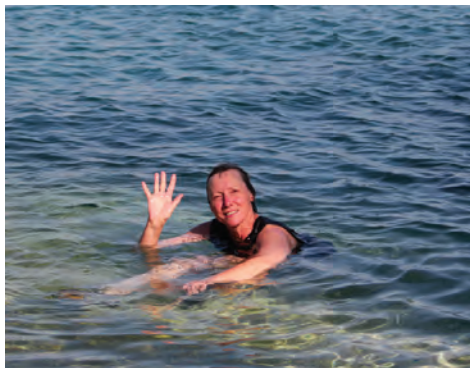
Saturday 20 August 2011



We liked tiny Camp Michael, but decided to move on. By 6:30 AM the temperature was already climbing. Dian walked into town and found a little bakery. We had a quick breakfast of fresh croissants and kefir and continued our drive down the Dalmatian Coast.



The siren call of the cool Adriatic was irresistible. Five times we stopped for a revitalizing dip in the cool waters (it also alleviated some BO problems).



We explored some small villages along the way. A lot has changed since Tito and Communism released their grip in 1989 but they still had the feel of the old fishing villages centuries ago. We stopped at a tourist office in one, and they offered us a taste from three different bottles of homemade liquors (now THAT'S the kind of tourist information we like). One was Raki, the local version of White Lightning. In another seaside village, Charles drove down a narrow lane, based on a point of his European driving philosophy that was proven false: if a car fits, you can drive there. Dian did a great job backing out under pressure with all the locals staring. Only a few towels were run over (why no one said "You can't drive here" was a testament to the Croatian live-and-let-live philosophy). By the way, have we mentioned that everyone assumes we're German because of the plates on our car, and in cases like these we don't correct them. We pulled over right next to the water in a cove and decided to spend the night. We splurged with dinner out at the only restaurant in Marina and were told after a delicious meal of seafood risotto and spaghetti that it was safe and we were allowed to stay where we were for the night. We met our "neighbors," a wonderful German-Croatian couple and their daughter, Elizabeth. Christian and Shelly invited us in for a beer and Dian went in the ocean one final time in its inky blackness.



And also a dip at night Charles sacrificed his ears and music sensibilities for the sake of Internet access, at the local beach bar with high decibel pounding Eurotrash.



Our view from where we would be sleeping



We kept our air vents on the roof open which was fine to bring the temperature down a few degrees, but unfortunately this roadside turnoff was a place where people pulled in and often smoked a cigarette or two. Ugh.

DAY 41 (2011-08-21 11:44)

Sunday 21 August 2011

After we awoke, we got fresh bread and had coffee with the family next to ours. They gave us tips on routes, good as gold, because Christian works at the Auto Club in Munich and is very well connected all across Europe. One last dip before we split to Split. It's a big city and we braved driving in to see what we could see, like Zagreb. Then we went back to the coast where Charles' hard-earned research paid off. A camp he found that looked good turned out to be gooder than good.

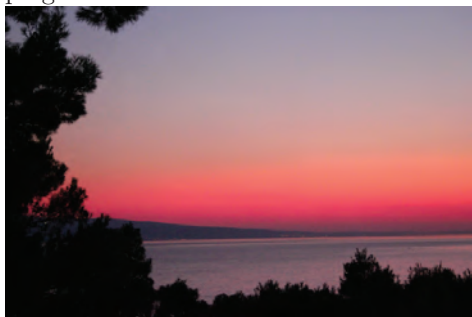


Given that Internet access was becoming increasingly elusive and an important part of where we decided to stay, Camp Serena turned out to have not only that (gratis), but the most spectacular view in a Big Sur kind of way. Luckily for us, they had a few spots open and we chose one with 180° view of the Adriatic. After parking in our sweet spot we all decided to take a dip. Nicole started down one path, and Charles and Dian unknowingly down another. Once Dian and Charles were at the beach they couldn't locate Nicole but weren't too worried. Amazingly they reunited in the middle of the sea. Pretty wonderful when you consider there were 200 campers

and many places to enter the sea from.



The manager, Milan, an animated host, offered us some of his own Raki and sherry with a large die that you could roll to choose which of the six numbered bottles you wanted to taste. We liked the ones he called "Penicillin" and "Antibiotic." His daughters Georgia and Maria also gave the camp a welcoming feel. Charles had an interesting discussion with employee Sanda (a civil engineer) about comparative education systems. We had dinner listening to the wind blowing in the pines, then as the winds died down we listened to live music wafting from the restaurant. We fell asleep to folk songs and distant waves lapping.



DAY 42 (2011-08-24 10:45)

Monday 22 August 2011 We woke up to a fantastic sunny (hot!) day, walked down to the "wild beach" side of the campground and started the day with a dip in the sea. Worked on the blog in the dining room (you can figure out why we get behind), took another dip, walked to the market down the road, where the shop owner said she knew a woman down the road who had recently moved back from San Pedro, Dian's home town (a harbor town home to many Croatians over the years).



We decided to have dinner in the restaurant. The previous night they had goulash featured, for 65 k (\$12), but everything was double that. Charles really wanted the goulash and our merry host Milan said, I think we still have two portions, and we said, Perfect! The goulash was incredibly good and the portions huge, with potatoes and a tuna pate that was outstanding. Milan came to our table plying us again with his six-pack of "medicines," and this time Charles went for the "Motor oil" rather than the "Penicillin" or "Antibiotic," while Nicole and Dian chose #1, the home-made sherry. Later he offered us a marmalade-filled bun as well.



food, we carried back doggie plates for the next day. Dian slept under the stars, knowing that all the garlic she consumed would keep away the mosquitos (and every other living creature).



Milan asked Dian if she would sing something with the band (guitar-6-string traditional mandolin-viola trio with great vocal harmonies), and he suggested “Clementine.” (Note: Dian’s mom and dad sang the same song on a visit to Yugoslavia/Croatia in the ‘80s. It’s very popular here.) After that rousing sing along, with Nicole adding harmony, Milan announced she was a jazz singer from LA, and she launched into “All of Me,” which the band didn’t know but followed masterfully. Her Satchmo scat break brought the audience to a fever pitch (her words), and she had to exit through the crowd back to the table shaking hands and receiving gifts of local sherry and honey from Milan and the staff. A table of Bavarian Germans sent over some fantastic fish (holy mackerel, literally!). So much great

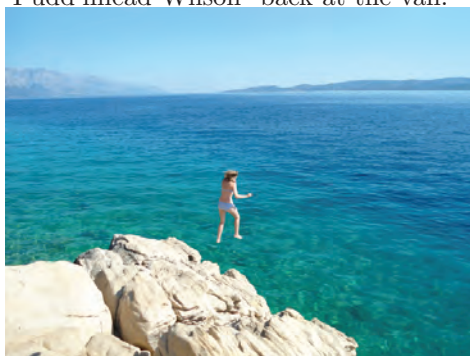
1.3 September

DAY 43 (2011-09-03 03:55)

Tuesday 23 August 2011



Spent a lazy day at the beach. Nicole entered the water via a cliff, and we opted for the "wild side" of the beach which was slightly treacherous to get to, but much more secluded and tranquil. During a walk to the market, Dian found a perfectly good pair of crocs for Charles that had been abandoned on the side of the road. (Note: if you mention this incident to Charles be sure not to use the word "crocs," but rather "water shoes.") We got some post cards and food, then read more "Pudd'nhead Wilson" back at the van.



The Norwegian family that had camped next to us for two days presented us with some olive oil and tomatoes as a parting gift. The wind kicked up really strong (hence the bent over nature of the trees), then died just as quickly.

Wednesday 24 August 2011



Milan and Dian with her Sirena staff rendering. Since Milan was eager to have a journalist interview Charles, and Charles wanted to meet her, we were enticed (by a 50 % discount) to stay another night. Our fourth day at Sirena was filled with doing laundry (which took three hours), painting a picture of all 24 staff members including Milan's two-month-old baby, playing guitar, swimming in the sea, and caring for Nicole's pink eye. There were three German kids who came in to use the computer at the reception office where Dian and Nicole were working on the blog. "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" came blasting from their computer, and Dian started rocking out with them, much to their surprise.



Sirena staff admiring Dian's craft. After presenting Milan with the painting and watching the staff giggle about their caricatures, Dian and Nicole were introduced to the dinner crowd at the restaurant by Milan. Goaded by the three kids, they broke into "Satisfaction." The rock star Milan wasted no time in handing out percussion instruments to all the diners. Nicole played with the band, and we were given a large bottle of homemade sherry and three fish dinners.



Nicole with the band

DAY 45 (2011-09-03 03:57)

Thursday 25 August 2011

Milan came to our van gesturing frantically that we should hurry down to the restaurant where the journalist from Split was waiting. Her name was Mia, and with her entourage, Charles was interviewed. She had a serious attitude and a friendly manner and had been writing for seventeen years.



Approaching the Old Wall After sharing some of our experiences and our appreciation for Camp Sirena, Charles exchanged cards, Milan gave us grapes and cantaloupe, and we left for Dubrovnik. We drove through a piece of Bosnia Herzegovina, our eleventh country, then in the blasting heat we approached the ancient city of Dubrovnik. Parking in the Old Town was so full we had to circle all the way back to the highway and reenter before finding a paid parking spot.



We met a woman from Austria who tipped us to the fact that the Old Wall would be closing in twenty minutes and we would need to hurry if we wanted to see it. Instead we opted to leisurely take the winding alleys and cobblestone streets that led to the fort. When we

came upon it, it was like out of a movie: polished marble floors and thousands of swallows in the air. Since we'd arrived in early evening, the lights were turned on the fort and we were given another whole effect.

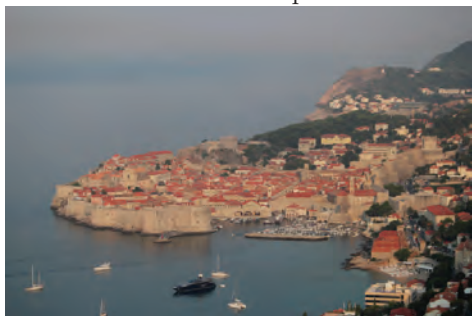


Eating a gelato, we walked from the marina to the apartments where people were still living. There were many stalls and curio shops that Charles had not seen when he visited forty years ago. We drove our van to the adjoining town of Lapad, pulled into a narrow side street, and had spaghetti and pizza for dinner at a nearby restaurant then retired.

DAY 46 (2011-09-03 03:57)

Friday 26 August 2011

Just after leaving Lapad we stopped for breakfast with a spectacular view of Dubrovnik from a few miles straight up from the city. Curving along the coastal roads was harrowing at times because of the flimsy-looking guard rail that was the only thing between the road and a sheer drop miles down.



Looking back on DubrovnikWe wanted one last dip in the Adriatic in Croatia, so we drove down a long country road to Camp Monika (thinking of Dian's sister Monica, of course). Instead of continuing to the actual camp, we pulled into a parking area where we saw a family eating their breakfast next to a van similar to ours, except theirs was adorned with photo-stickers of family friends all around the top part of the van. We met the Dutch family of Mories, Isabel, Miro and Goya and found out they were also traveling for a year... to CHINA! (Bhutan, to be exact.) Since our paths were the same for the next few days and since we were going through some mountainous terrain we thought a "caravan" would be a good idea, so off we went to our 12th country, Montenegro. The huge lake was stunningly surrounded by the majestic "black mountains."



Preparing for spaghetti dinnerWhen we passed through the border and had our passports stamped we were relieved to see that we weren't on the other side where the line stretched down a steep mountainside for at least a mile. Navigating can be tough even with good maps and GPS so it was especially pleasant to just follow the Dutch van. With two boys, aged 10 and 8, it was important to them to dunk in the sea as soon as possible so we found a beach, only to be informed we were on a "private beach" (by two feet) designated by a string in the sand. So we moved over two feet. No international incident. We drove more and later found a tiny camp on the beach and had spaghetti a la Mories amongst 400-year-old olive trees, and lemon, pomegranate and grape arbors.



Montenegro

DAY 47 (2011-09-03 03:58)

Saturday 27 August 2011

We left the seaside camp at noon after a swim (not as hot as the day before, thank God), then avoided an overcharge to both families for our camp stay through Dian's toughness when she went to pay, and headed for "forbidden" Albania.

Near the border we saw a guy on his old tractor, chugging along.... while yacking on his cell phone. We saw women in traditional garb – gypsies? A Montenegrin car suddenly passed and swerved too close to the Dutch van! – did he hit them? We pulled over and talked, they didn't think so, but sure enough there was some paint gone in that very spot. More gypsies (?) We passed minarets, buildings trying to be modern but clueless. Garish colors.

We crossed into Albania (country #13!), aimed for the capital, Tirane. Graffiti featured the scary-looking Albanian black double-headed eagle, and on the side of a mountain was written, in English, "Welcome to Albania – students of Vitrinal." We began to see many Mercedes and gas stations, called Castrati, others named Crappi and a truck graveyard on the side of the main highway to the capital plus a cow in someone's front yard. There was some trepidation about entering a Communist country but we soon found that the Albanian people were gems.



Bruno juggling his two cell phones Stopping at an Internet cafe so Charles could send his articles to the Santa Monica Daily Press, he was treated with exceptional courtesy and customer service beyond imagination, and when Dian and Nicole showed up the owner treated each of them to bottled fruit juices. The rest

of the group took care of errands. Mories had a key made, Isabel bought some things at the apothecary and Nicole was given a container of lotion by the pharmacist who was excited to meet such foreigners. All were greeted with the same friendliness and service.



Goya and Miro Isabel and Mories had needed to find a fitting for their gas canister, so we stopped to check out a store carrying all they could ever want in the way of camping gas, only to find it was closed. We were about to leave when Dian saw it was just opening. Our caravan screeched to a halt.

To make a long story longer, we couldn't communicate with the store owner until a man named Bruno walked up and, speaking Italian and German, was able to translate through Isabel their needs. Leaving on two bicycles to weave through Tirane rush hour traffic more quickly, Moreis and Bruno were successful in finding a second camping store, and what a sight it was to see him come around the bend holding a large can of gas under one arm while steering with another.

Bruno was our new "best friend." He invited us to park near his apartment and use his facilities, and led us to his favorite restaurant across the street where the eight of us feasted on unending rounds of beef, chicken and pork, with all the side dishes and seven beers for a mere \$64. We're loving Albania.



Walking back from the restaurant

DAY 48 (2011-09-03 03:59)

Sunday 28 August 2011



We awoke with the mission to get better drops for Nicole's pink eye. After graciously letting us use his restroom, our friend Bruno assured us everything was open on Sunday (oh yeah, that's right, an emerging former godless Communist state) and we set out unsure of what we would find. What we found was a small pharmacy where the man first offered what seemed to be only contact wetting drops, but after more gesturing and a look at Nicole's eyes he seemed to understand, got on the phone for advice, then got out his ladder and climbed up to take a small package off the top shelf. He said we needed a prescription for it, then at least a passport (we usually had that, but didn't that time), then finally wrote the prescription himself and stamped it with something official-looking, and we were very grateful, though still not sure we had the right stuff. One of our pre-trip nightmares, getting sick somewhere where no one speaks each other's language and trying to get the right treatment, was a reality (but at least it wasn't something far worse).



Skinning

sheep



The recipients of Isabel and Mories' hats We took off from our privileged parking in front of Bruno's place for a long drive towards the Greek border where we traveled some scary high mountain roads (with little or no barrier) the rival of Croatia or Montenegro and pulled over for a coffee refresher at a restaurant with a great view.... of an industrial town way below. The more interesting view was across the street, where a local had three sheep carcasses strung up and proceeded to strip them of their wool coats by hand, then chop off spare parts like heads and testicles (probably for use in soups or something). We were kind of fascinated, but it turned out to Mories and the boys it was old hat because he used to do that when he was a boy on the farm, and his boys too. A wedding party pulled up at the restaurant – we had seen a lot of them that day (again, so much for Albanian communism). Three young boys were hanging around the vans and Isabel asked them if they had caps. No, too expensive, came the reply. So she climbed up top and opened a big silver chest and pulled out Nike hats for all. (Nike was one of her flower shop accounts in Holland, and when they heard of her trip to Bhutan with her Magic Hares they gave a slew of promotional hats to hand out along

the way). Photos and big smiles all around.



What the locals' faces looked like as we were parking







A later stop for gas ended with large miscommunication (to put it kindly) about whether or not credit cards were accepted, and what the cash exchange rate would be for Albanian kuna. It resulted in wasted time finding an ATM in a very small town nearby, after leaving parts of the family as voluntary hostages. War avoided, we decided to stop for the night at a small town jutting out into a very big lake that we saw on the map; Lin, before deciding on our final route towards Greece, through Macedonia or dropping down further into Albania.



With the Dutch family in the lead, we drove down another of those streets that could lead to gold or to getting stuck when the street ran out. Where the street ran out... we found gold, room enough for two vans right by the water. (But Charles had to move the van four times that evening as trucks, big trucks, came in. But no problem, said the smiling locals. Do you think that would happen in the US? No – Hey, what do you think you're doing, camping where we live and work? Get lost!) Just before we got there we were surprised to see a tour group marching along, even more surprised to see our lead car stop and talk with them – they were Dutch, in this small out-of-the-way village, but as Mories later said, sun and cheap prices, that's what the Dutch like.

Turns out this Macedonian-based company brings in groups from Netherlands twice a week, all the way through October. Both tour group leaders advised us to take the northern route through Macedonia, much better roads, so that clinched it.



We quickly made friends with our new local neighbors, learned names and some Albanian words, attracted kids, swam, hung out. This was a real deal village. Goats being milked, an old man bent half over and leaning heavily on his cane, two beautiful toothless old women named Olga and Georgina, Donika who offered us coffee and told us in a very loud voice more than once how she went to New Jersey when she was a young girl, and the genial older man who offered us his homemade raki as we started on our stroll (it was good, and strong). We walked all the way back to the town square, stopping in shops to buy cleanser, beer and food. We passed a small white church on the hill, then on the way back Dian and Nicole went up and were invited in by an older man sitting on the porch, who proudly showed them some fairly amazing artwork, icons and chandeliers, and a 4th Century mosaic on the floor. Fourth Century. Just past the square we saw a man lead his cow down to the lake to drink, gingerly avoiding smoldering fires, and when the old girl had enough he whistled her back to him.



After yet another great Mories dinner, Charles decided to take a late night stroll back up the same road. Just past 9, he encountered maybe seven or eight groups of two or three young people, talking, strolling, sitting in a doorway, and by the time he headed back from the square – no one. He heard some voices coming from some lighted homes, but Lin was definitely done for the night by 9:30. Not Mories: he climbed to the top of the steep rocky hill just behind our vans, but had a bit of trouble getting down because he forgot to take a flashlight. How easily our adventures could turn to disaster, but hey, we were all there because we didn't think life was a spectator sport.



Obama jersey??





other great dinner!

DAY 49 (2011-09-03 03:59)

Monday 29 August 2011



Our van Clifford is on the left. Heard (herd) goats, the town came alive by 6:45. Charles went a few steps to the water to write. It was actually chilly! He said hi to local Loud Donika with a Big Smile. The bright morning light on the lake and hillsides was beautiful and tranquil. Turned out we were camped at a fish market! Little boats came in, out came an old metal balance scale, a new calculator, cash, fish thrown ashore and the fishermen were off. The cell phone for Mr. Buyer rang – getting latest market prices?



Shepherd's

hut





Inside the shepherd's hut



Nicole drawing with the kids



"Kye Kye Kule"



Miro and Goya



The chess referee



Finally with a proper table and chairs, Charles played another game of chess with Goya right by the water. Nicole gave art lesson to three little local girls.



Dian climbed up a steep hill to the top where she found an igloo-shaped shepherd's hut with religious iconography inside. She reverently placed a watercolor she made of "Mary" and two boys (who looked a lot like Miro and Goya) and hoped it would be received in the right spirit by whomever entered next. Meanwhile, Nicole was responding to the call of nature and was terrified to see a small boy come into sight, and he wasn't a shepherd. Goya, seemingly unknowingly, marched forward oblivious to his and Nicole's peril. Nicole cried out "Nay, nay, Goya, go away" complete with histrionic gestures but he seemed at a complete loss for warnings in

any language, until she finally blurted out, "I'M PEEING!" and he muttered "... oh," with a sheepish grin, thus concluding this episode of Bathroom Travel Terrors.

Back at the vans, little Anastasia was teaching the younger kids in the village the "Kye Kye Kule" song. Being a pied piper has its drawbacks, however, as later three of the rascals hung around the van, and on it, and in it, and wouldn't go away until Mories issued a stern warning. Not in Albanian, but it worked.



Dian took another dip then sang songs for the kids and Nicole chilled in the van until her eyes healed, thanks to the drops from the pharmacist in Tirane, the capital. Also her sore throat improved, but all the time no complaints. What a brave traveler. Charles climbed up for another view – love that hilltop – this time to the very peak where the view of the huge lake was 340 degrees. He saw Isabel and the boys swimming way down below on the other side. They came back and said it was great so Nicole and Dian did the same. When everyone finally returned we left Lin, Albania, a village and people we'll never forget. And at least thanks to Nicole's teaching the singing-dancing African song, they won't soon forget us either.

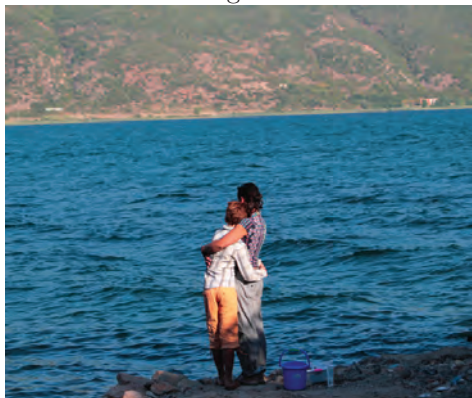


We

wound our way through narrow streets out of town and up across the top of the lake to the nearby border crossing into Macedonia (#14!) then headed to Ohrid, on the opposite shore from Lin, because we heard it had a medieval church and ruins. Parking cheaply in the center of town we explored the big market, buying veggies and.... a basketball for Charles! Sure, it's rubber, and too small, and made in China, but only 6 bucks, and now he's ready.



Isabel cutting Dian's hair



We opted for a short boat ride to the bottom of the ancient sites, and negotiated a very good price for seven passengers with a bottle of the captain's own home brewed schnapps thrown in, all for about \$11.50. Fortified, we took the long, steep hike up, well worth it. The lower chapel and the basilica, from the 9th Century, were in the Orthodox style that we hadn't yet seen on our travels. We could have easily gotten lost on the way down (not really marked in any language we could figger) except for Tom and his two brothers, Germans but veterans of Ohrid streets because their mother grew up there

and they visited every summer, who showed us their personal best route right along the water, cutting through restaurants and private beaches like they belonged there. They stopped to show us where a snake nearly fell on their heads along that path, from high up on a cliff. We drove out of town and once again tried for a great spot on the water but ran out of daylight and patience and settled for an asphalt and dirt lot with a few big trucks, oh well. Too late and too tired for cooking, we nonetheless feasted on Dian's tomato and cheese sandwiches with garlic sauce on good local bread, and retired well-fed and happy with another good day.

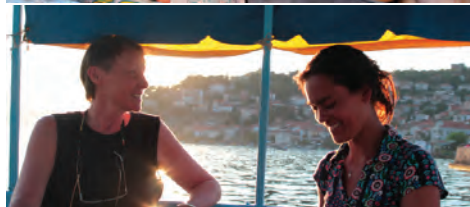




Photo by Charles

DAY 50 (2011-09-03 04:00)

Tuesday 30 August 2011

Isabel needed to make three more Magic Hares and mail them, and they were waiting on important papers to be delivered to Thessaloniki, Greece, so we opted for a chill day and found free parking spitting distance from the water. Unfortunately for Isabel, the post office was closed on Tuesdays (!). We rested and wrote. Dian awoke with a very sore back from climbing the steep hills of Lin (twice), and got some much needed rest.

Charles spoke at some length with the seaside vendor a few feet away. "Alexander... the Great?" Charles asked of the Macedonian, but no, he demurred. However he gave insight as to why Macedonians don't like Greeks—they don't recognize Macedonia's nationhood, which returned in 1989 when Yugoslavia broke back into the six nations it had swallowed. George Bush did recognize them, and signed a formal recognition, and gave them economic aid, and even visited, so Al the Almost Great loved him. When asked his opinion of President Obama, he gave the universal European response: face screwed up, shoulders hunched, hands spread out—don't know.

It was after Nicole had exhausted all the restaurants for their bathroom facilities in the immediate area, that Dian declared she had a craving for a strawberry gelato. Nicole was on a mission. Charles joined her, and they brought back their bounty to the recovering Dian. With gelato at only 50 cents a scoop—the messengers had to indulge, too.

That evening, the weather turned blustery. The Dutch family pulled out their kite, Charles played another game of chess with eight-year-old Goya on the promenade, and Mories cooked a goodbye dinner of couscous and fava beans. Both families' riddles were answered, and an appreciation for the five days we shared was expressed in words and also without.

Charles and Mories went out to find Internet and share a beer, and plan their separate routes to Greece.

DAY 51 (2011-09-03 04:01)

Wednesday 31 August 2011



A Serbian man was playing guitar that morning a short distance from our vans and Dian went over to listen. He was talented, and they enjoyed talking about music. We were glad this little resort town seemed to have better taste in the music pouring out of bars and restaurants than the usual autotune-thumpthump disco, as evidenced by the really good music Mories and had Charles heard as they slaved over their laptops the night before and solidified by a Shirley Bassey tune Charles heard that morning, "and it wasn't even 'Goldfinger.'"

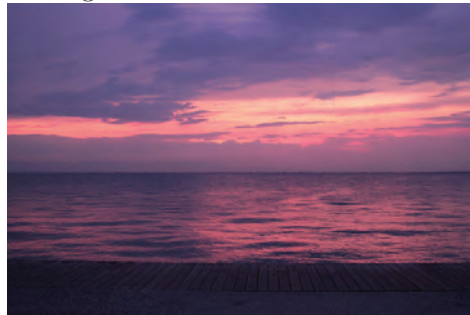


We said goodbye to our Dutch family with warm hugs all around. Isabel presented us with a Magic Hare, that she had made just for us. Using the last of our Macedonia money, we bought pastries, groceries and gas. We crossed the Greek border, where our welcoming customs man was particularly jovial. We opted for a road less traveled into Thessalonika, with so much overgrowth from trees and shrubs that you couldn't stay in your lane. We headed into a big raincloud and

some beautiful countryside, lots of stray dogs and watermelon stands, accompanied by the music of Joni Mitchell.



We arrived in the big city and headed for a good spot near the water. (We'd learned something about "free camping" from the Netherlands). We found a nice spot near a park, which reminded Dian of the Avalon Casino area, where a bunch of youngsters were break dancing for a film crew. Picnicking nearby, we were disturbed by a yelping dog who could only be described as crazy. Nearby was an area with 20 basketball hoops, jammed with players. Charles salivated. We walked to a nearby Greek Orthodox church then settled in for the night, with Charles searching out late night Wi-Fi for needed communications.



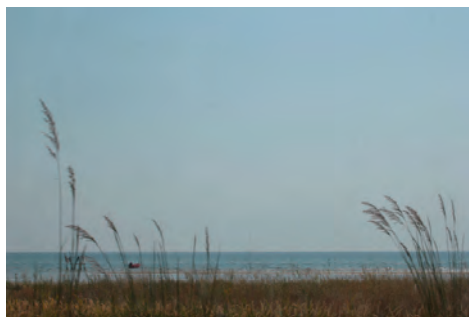
DAY 52 (2011-09-03 04:02)

Thursday 1 September 2011

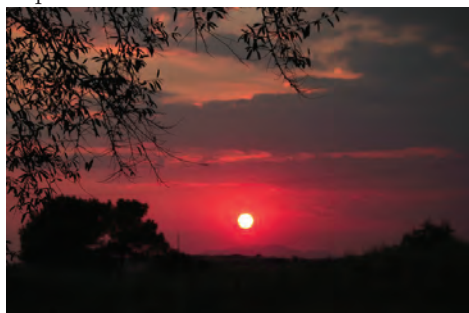
Even though we had hoped a city as big as Thessaloniki would have the camper specialists and mechanics we needed, Charles had found only one listing and so we headed for a VW dealership to try to address some of our car issues. We were taken under the wing of Alexandra, who told us of a camp we had to go to, "Heaven on earth" and marked it on our map. She brought in her top mechanic to check our fan belt, and he pronounced our engine "not good." We left there and passed an electric auto shop, but they couldn't address the fridge/sink/etc. wiring issues either. It's a pretty specialized area, it seems. So we decided to set out for Istanbul.



There were two camps we knew of before the Turkish border so we headed for the first, Camp Natura, wondering if that was code for nudist camp. It wasn't. But it was way off the beaten path, with almost no signage. When we finally found it we liked it right away. Nicole said she felt comfortable, and it even reminded her of Texas. It was, again, lucky us, right on the beach, a small camp run by a Greek man named Costas who spoke little English. But being close to Bulgaria, there was a Bulgarian employee named Lina who spoke good English, and helped explain a lot. No Wi-Fi but Costas said we could use his computer any time, even midnight, and we did. Hot showers, laundry and a kitchen to use, and a beach where you could walk out a football field length and still be only up to your knees in water, really warm, clear water. We parked in the back, with ocean view to the front and a rear view that looked like the Serengeti.



After dinner, Nicole and Dian had a good time playing music from her iPod, far enough away from others to not disturb. Mosquitoes were terrible and Dian woke up at 3 to take a nice hot shower, but still missed her baths. Charles went off earlier for a shower and returned an hour later to say he had run into Lina and three of her Greek friends at their camper and had been invited to come back, so he did and wound up having a terrific time eating, drinking wine and talking music, politics and many other things til 4 AM, with Lina, George, Vasilis and Elaine. He was again delightfully surprised at how Europeans in remote corners are so knowledgeable about music. Vasilis works for the national railroad (when he's forced to, torn away from his beloved beach), and Elaine is quite an artist, with many of her pieces on the Deviant Art website. George was the quiet philosopher of the group, and Lina the smiling proof that not all the beautiful Eastern European women came from Czech Republic. Charles declared it one of his best late nights of the trip.



DAY 53 (2011-09-03 04:02)

Friday 2 September 2011

After a big fried egg breakfast, we said goodbye to our new friends and checked out of Camp Natura heading for Turkey. About 30 km (18 mi) from the border we pulled into a rest stop for the WC, and when we went to leave the car didn't turn over. Certain we hadn't let it "glow" long enough (pre-ignition ritual), we tried again, but nothing. Again. Again. Finally we decided we needed the roadside assistance that came with the van. Once again our KPN Dutch phones failed us, would not put a call through. We hailed a German couple who called for us, and a big white truck came within 20 minutes. He put our red van up on his truck bed and Charles went in the truck cab while Dian and Nicole waved at passing cars from their perch in the van. The best garage in the biggest town was just behind us, but we had to go an hour and a half in order to find a place to turn around and head back.

We were dropped at the VW dealership in Alexandroupoli, which looked like a good bet. Even though it was a half hour from closing time, a team of as many as five mechanics dug in to solve the problem, led by the very short "guru" dressed in black, who was obviously "the man." Ninety minutes later their collective efforts got the car to turn over, but the prognosis was still dismal: they all agreed the engine was "not good," and that their fix might not last more than a few days. We were sure there wasn't any misunderstanding because finally a colleague arrived, to cheers, who spoke very good English, and he confirmed the bad news. They agreed to give it a more thorough look to see if it was salvageable, but that wouldn't be till Monday. Fortunately, there was a camp nearly across the street called Santa Rosa. The price was reasonable and the location lovely, so we told the manager Apostolos we'd be there for three nights.

We picnicked on the beach staring at a ruby red sunset.



DAY 54 (2011-09-03 04:03)

Saturday 3 September 2011

Nicole and Dian walked to the Lidl to purchase some provisions, and it's a good thing they did because the remainder of the day was shrouded by a sporadic downpour with lots of thunder and lightning. During one of the lulls Dian died her hair blonde!



The greek couples around the corner from our spot gave us watermelon, pumpkin seeds, plums, and a pork chop, while we gave them a pear and Dian's inimitable version of "Never on a Sunday," complete with Greek dance steps from both parties. Opa!

DAY 55 (2011-09-06 13:19)

Sunday 4 September 2011

Another slow day where we caught up with the blog (let us take this opportunity to thank you all for reading). Dian found two Euros under a beach chair, Charles hiked over a mile to bring back groceries and a special treat, tiramisu. Nicole worked in her sketch book. We watched a man clean his three octopi in a basin. We picnicked on the beach again, then took a walk along the shore which led us to a temporarily abandoned swanky beach lounge which we explored.



Steeping in her hot shower, Dian came up with a truism: soap is democratic. In other words, a bar someone leaves behind is as good as new after a little bit of lathering, and will be for the next person.

DAY 56 (2011-09-09 02:05)

Monday 5 September 2011

D Day. D for Doom. Would the vaunted VW mechanics of Alexandroupolis declare our transport-home unfixable? What then? The scenarios were dismal. The van started and we drove over, then waited, and waited, and waited for some word. Finally the two Yannis/Johns, service and general managers, consulted and John the One Who Speaks Good English flashed his winning but not necessarily Good News smile (we'd learned) – There are two choices, he pronounced. You can go... and maybe it will be OK, but we think only for a few days. And keep adding those fuel enrichers.. @ \$23 per fill-up. Or we can try to repair, but parts are a big problem.

Call for parts, see how long that would take, and how much, we said. Wait. Big smile. Unfortunately, they do not have these in Germany, too old. How much do we owe for Friday, an hour and a half, 5 mechanics, overtime, pull the valves apart and adjust and finally get the car to turn over? Another big smile from GM John... nothing, no charge. Whoa, that wouldn't happen in LA, I admit. It wouldn't happen in Athens either, he said, but here in the countryside, we're different. Efcharisto!



So we had no choice. We took off for Athens, a nine-hour drive taking two tanks of gas. We tried to keep the engine running, in order to make it to Sebastian's buddy and his mechanic, somewhere south in their little bitty town. The last conversation with Sebastian was encouraging; he really didn't think it was serious, and the worst case was that the insurance company would have to tow us back to Germany and find us another camper van.

We passed Mt. Olympus – quite impressive, a brooding giant behind two other huge peaks. The Spring of Daphne, of Venus... but we dasn't (is that a word?) stop! Tolls! – 29 Euros/ \$42!! Cruised through gorgeous mountain passes. Then we saw a sign for Thessaloniki – oh noooo! Somehow Charles navigated us in a circle, what a time for that!

What next? – the inside electric power was gone! No lights, but much worse: NO GPS! With his last gasps, James Bond directed us back, avoiding toll roads. We drove till we couldn't drive no mo', stopped at a restaurant that turned out to be a Grand-Central-Station-of-tour-buses-till-2AM-nightmare including lots of noise and smoking (did we mention everyone in Europe smokes like they have no clue it's killing them?), and somehow slept. Next day, the Holy Grail (our only chance, slim though it seemed): Sebastian's Greek buddy.

DAY 57 (2011-09-09 02:06)

Tuesday 6 September 2011

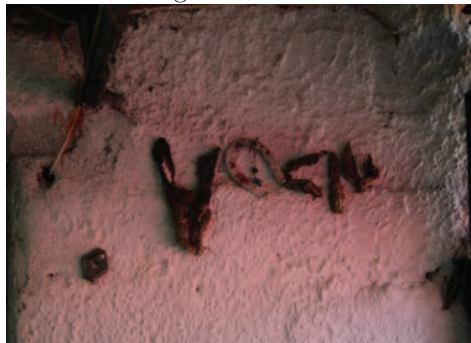
The car started right up (*Hallelujah chorus*), and we left the busy truck stop with the promise of a fixed car by the end of the day. Despite countless old fashioned houses and vast farming areas, we discovered that Greece was still on its game when we passed a field of solar panels.

After a stressful and thus far fruitless odyssey, a saint called Kostas (friend of our VW camper van guru Sebastian), flagged *us* down in the "town center" of Psachna, no doubt designated as such by a tiny old church crammed in the middle of the area. Our savior took us to a mechanic who was a good friend of his father's and we watched with baited breath as the workers talked to Kostas. They almost instantly said they could not fix it, and needless to say we were crushed. But not to worry, Kostas had another mechanic in mind who was also his father's friend.



Like we said, Saint Kostas We pulled into mechanic Bill Talegas' garage, which was more like a private home converted into a business. We knew we had found our answer, because like a real old pro he was running from car to car tweaking this and that, all the while speak-

ing with his employees and customers. After all that, he told us simply, it needed a new battery, and that was it. We had so many more questions, but that was all the one-on-one time we got with the doctor, for he was back to rushing between clients.



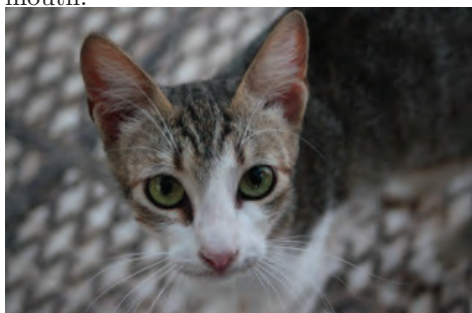
We believe our "Magic Hare" Isabel gave us led us to our next one, hanging on the wall of Talegas' To celebrate our good fortune and Kostas' help, we went out for coffee at one of Kostas' favorite places. He sipped his drink delicately while we gulped ours down (the American way?). Shortly after Nicole experienced the full effects of a strong Greek coffee, and these effects did not wear off or become comfortable for a few more hours. We said goodbye and on Kostas' recommendation went to a beach side community on the island (it shows how lost we were getting to Psachna that we had to be told we were even off the mainland). After a delicious dip in the ocean Dian and Charles explored the area on foot while Nicole slept off the effects of the strong drink.



Dian, Georgia, and the jack-o'-lantern Georgia carved

After scouting for a good restaurant, Dian and Charles struck gold, and all three ate a

delicious dinner of Greek salad, crab salad, and pork chop with potatoes. The service was definitely on "island time," but we were in no rush. At the invitation of Georgia, our friendly waitress, we explored the upper deck of the 58-year-old establishment, which had jazz music swinging from the bar speakers. It was from this vantage point that we were able to look down upon the ocean, the sky, and THE CAT EATING OUR CRAB SALAD! Georgia tried to shoo it away, but to no avail. Too bad, so sad, we were given a fresh crab salad no charge. It seemed that the zoo door had not been closed, because a cat or dog or two were always at our table, always watching our hands go from plate to mouth, plate to mouth.



No

words are needed, it knows what it's done
We walked lazily from our car to the end of the hotels and beach bars, and took the computer to a nearby hotel that had Wi-Fi, where we called Dian's parents and blogged (Day 31 now complete)! That night was incredibly windy, and paired with the crashing waves of the sea, it made for a fantastic cornucopia of natural noises.



A

glowing ocean lit our way home

Wednesday 7 September 2011

"Wanna go for a swim? Wanna go for a swim?" It was 8 AM and Dian had never heard Charles say that before. After crossing the street and swimming they headed over for coffee at the same restaurant they's visited the night before. Unfortunately, no coffee now that the season had officially ended.



ancient Corinth

We left Psachna after paying over a hundred bucks for a full tank of gas. Later, a stop for two cappuccinos was \$9. It's not cheap in Greece. We got off the main highway before the major city Patra, to visit the ancient ruins of Corinth. This used to be the commercial center of Greece, and we saw some Doric columns still standing at the archaeological site.

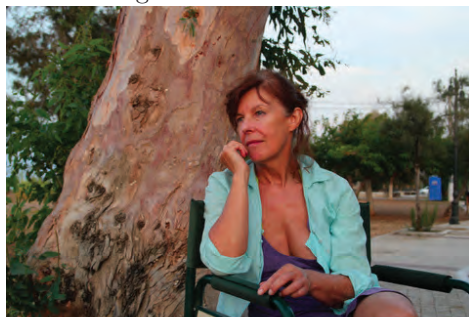
We got a little lost leaving the area and had to go through a tunnel twice that was not meant for cars, let alone our beast. All along the road there were shrines. Some old, some new, with Greek icons and candles inside.

A man's voice on a loudspeaker could be heard from behind us and we were not sure of its purpose. When he passed, we found he was just selling watermelons out of his truck. This, we found, is a common thing along Greece's beach towns.



1,000 year old olive tree

Using our International Campground guide we stopped at a site, but after buying groceries and gawking at their 1,000 year old olive tree, we moved on. It was further down the coast of the Peloponnesian Peninsula that we ran into a wonderful German couple (and 30 year vets of the road), Rudy and Isabella, who were free camping and invited us to join them. We learned from them our van is known as a "bully" because of its bull-like tenacity. They were quick to share retsina and Rudy played music on his double-neck acoustic guitar, then we shared good conversation and travel tips until midnight.



Isabella and Rudy

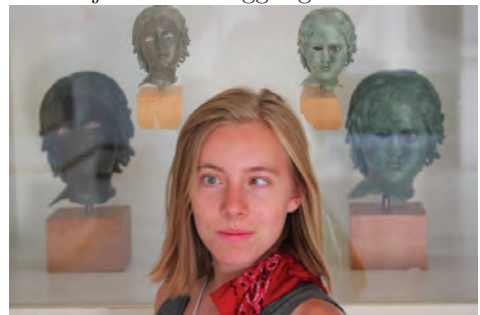
Thursday 8 September 2011



Rudy wouldn't give up. After hearing of our problem with our propane gas system for our refrigerator and stove, he attached and reattached a spare bottle and tried every combination of switches and valves, three times, until finally needing to make their ferry departure he quit. We learned a lot about why it wasn't yet working, and many other good tips about our set-up, from this seasoned road veteran. We waved goodbye, then packed up and took off the opposite way for Olympia, the famed site of the ancient Olympic games.



We all felt this was a very special day. Sometimes a place just reverberates with crucial history. As we trod the ruins and onto the ancient track, through a stone tunnel-like entrance, we could imagine the ancient throngs (50,000 around the running track) and how the athletes must have felt, and even the commoners and slaves privileged to attend this event held every four years, **WITHOUT A BREAK, WITHOUT A MISS**, despite constant warfare in Greece, **FOR MORE THAN A THOUSAND YEARS**. 1,169 to be exact. That's just mind-boggling.





We touched columns that may have been touched by Homer, Archimedes, Pindar. It wasn't just an athletic event but a chance for the greatest political leaders, artists, philosophers, traders, musicians, teachers and other leaders from all over the known world to come together in one place, under a flag of truce, to exchange ideas and make deals. It was the catalyst for the creation of great art and traditions that lasted millennia.

Winners in the few events (5) over the few days (2-5) may have received only an olive branch wreath, but they were often honored for life. When they returned as victors to their home cities they often had a hole knocked in the fortress wall for the athlete to make their triumphant entrance -(a little bigger for the wrestlers).



Athletes had to speak Greek no matter where they were from, and show up a month early for training and constant examination as to their athletic and moral fitness for such elevated competition. Not to mention the tradition of nude competition (makes for some interesting vases).

And we learned a lot in a few hours about the ancient Olympics, particularly from the two museums. Sometimes we skip the museums, but these two were essential. One was the Ancient Olympics Museum which detailed so many aspects most people are unaware of, and really painted a picture of what it was like in ancient Greece. We figured it was best to see that before going to the actual site. Afterwards we visited the Olympia Archaeological Museum, stunning in particular for its display of large artifacts from the site.



The most effective way to keep cool in a public place is to discreetly stick one's head in a sink with running wa-



ter

Charles sprinted to the finish line in the stadium, and Nicole threw the discus there (Dian's folded hat). But we all felt like champions by the time we left. Charles had now spent five months in Greece on two different trips, and deemed this, along with the Acropolis, a must-see experience of the highest order.



Is-

abella had told us about sea turtles in the area so we went looking for them but without much detailed info as to where to find them. We picked a side road to look for a place for the night and wound up in Kakovatis, a pleasant little town which was deadsville since the tourist season was over but with a friendly hotel lobby with Internet and a pro basketball game on TV, (Greece beating Slovenia despite the presence of the NBA's Goran Dragic). So Charles got some work done and figured it was probably as close as he would get to an NBA game till the next season, oh well.



DAY 60 (2011-09-09 02:07)

Friday 9 September 2011

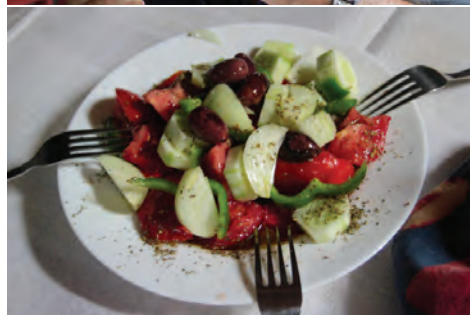


Before leaving our free camping spot in Kakovatos, Nicole attempted to get Internet one last time to check for messages about the ferry tickets—Mission Impossible style. Watching an employee of the hotel gardening the front yard area, she patiently waited until he was away from a flight of outside stairs. Once he was looking away she dashed onto the stairs and tried to connect, but to no avail. Nicole stealthily returned to the car moments before the man returned to the foot of the stairs.



“Let’s keep an eye out for Camp Apollo,” said Dian. It’s a good thing she looked up from her Camping International book because there not 100 meters away was a sign for Camp Apollo Village. We turned in and took a long back

road until we finally reached the site. It was a charming old camp founded in 1956, with eaves for cars to park under, all the amenities anyone could ask for, and a sign cautioning cars to slow for turtles (‘caretta caretta’)! The camp staff informed us that turtles could be seen coming onto the shore and hatching their eggs at around four or five in the morning, and we decided to stay with the plan to see one. We all took shifts either blogging or swimming in the beautiful Ionian Sea, which acted more like a sea we were used to than any other thus far, with sandy beaches and crashing waves. In the bar where we set up computer camp we heard a Greek version of “All Along the Watchtower” which was not half bad, throwing banjo into the standard Greek instrumentation.



Charles redeemed part two of his birthday coupons from Nicole – “Souvlaki in Greece”! All agreed they were delicious, and they went smashingly well with Greek salad and fried feta and tomatoes. It being the off-season, we were the only ones in the camp restaurant. It was a delicious dinner, and with bellies full we went straight to bed in anticipation of waking up to seek out “caretta caretta.”

DAY 61 (2011-09-15 08:36)

Saturday 10 September 2011



After being awakened by Charles at 4 AM we took our flashlights and trekked out to see sea turtles lay eggs on our beach on the Ionian Sea. Too bad we didn't learn till later that the season was pretty much over, so we searched for an hour then fell asleep back at the van. At 9:30 AM we stowed our gear and despite Nicole saying she wished we could stay another day, and a staff person saying we were a "beautiful family," we headed to Sparta.



Working in the camp



bar

Through an area known for Mycean tombs with switchbacks that made “James Bond” (our GPS) look like a Richter scale on its side, we drove past olive groves, cypress, palm and fig trees and grape vines. We stopped at a fruit and vegetable stand and bought ingredients for a Greek salad. In the town of Kalamata (famous for extra large olives) we bought some, and then drove through a fantastic Grand Canyon-esque high mountain region leading to Sparti. The overhangs where dynamite had blasted the road were like rock roofs with no support on the right side. Charles did a masterful job driving.



serious switchbacks Finally as dusk fell we entered the town where little boys of yore were killed if deemed too weak for service in the military and later when the Spartans won all the surrounding territories they couldn't

rule worth a damn because they were fighting machines not thinking human beings.



Huge overhangs So we continued on to Astros, a small town on the Aegean Sea that was hopping with last-day-of-summer crowds. We ate our Greek salad dinner on the jetty then walked around and scoped out a delightful free parking place near the water. Unfortunately the mosquitoes also staked it out and we were THEIR dinner.



Some observations: Dian's mom and dad gave invaluable gifts, a knife and small whisk broom which we used every day. Greek men are handsome in a George Clooney way. Nicole's iPod is a wealth of musical treats for our long driving stretches. Toll roads are a rip-off (we are just in the height category for

trucks). There are no thrift stores. The environmental roadside murals we saw on the side of the highway were as good as Berlin and Amsterdam’s street art, though not as common a sight.



This actually IS Sparta!



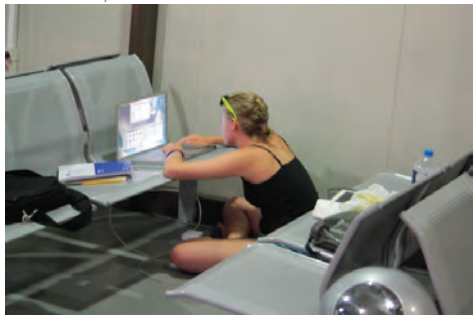
DAY 62 (2011-09-15 08:36)

Sunday 11 September 2011

The 10th anniversary of 9/11 was probably all over the media back home, but on the road not even Charles the news junkie checked in very often. It just didn't seem important to our everyday concerns, which were on a more personal than global level. However we did have the date and the tragedy it marked in our hearts.



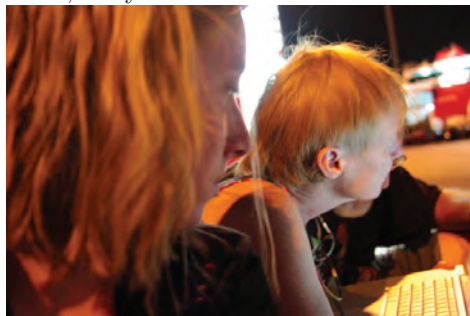
Lambda Pi, or 'LP' We awoke to see Paralia Astros beach/port in the morning light, and though we took a dip in the sea none of us thought we needed to stay, so we headed off to Athens to take care of business: check on our ferry ticket to Ikaria for the next morning, find a big electronics store for needed parts, and if possible take in the National Archeological Museum, one of Charles' fave world museums.



Keeping cool in the ferry waiting room But fate intervened. When we stopped for gas we noticed some leakage, and found a hole in a fuel injection pipe. No mechanic at the gas station so we called Sebastian, and he analyzed the situation, down to telling Charles he had a #17 wrench in his hand (correct!). "It's not dangerous" said Sebastian and he offered to send the right parts to our friend's

island – what a guy. He'd been pretty amazing the whole time, making the best for us of our bad situation.

So we drove to Piraeus, the port of Athens, and found there was no central building for ferry information, no central anything, we couldn't even find our ferry company. For such a huge operation, with giant car ferries coming and going from nine piers, you'd think it would be more manageable for the individual. It was very hard to find a web site for each company, and then no departure info or even addresses. When Charles inquired in the port police office, they directed him to a travel agent.



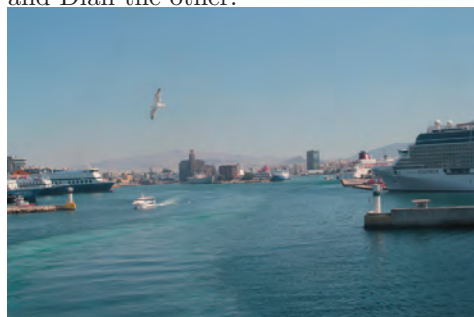
Making a phone call home with the computer on a sidewalk It was steaming hot. We found an air-conditioned waiting room and camped out there, then Charles went exploring. He eventually found the building that housed our ferry company only to be told the reservation we thought we had was not in the computers. So we made a new reservation, found out which pier and what time. Good thing we didn't wait till the next morning to try to do all that. We also decided sticking close by was a good idea, so had no electronics and no time to go to the museum, and lots of down time just trying to stay hydrated. Charles brought back sandwiches and frosty drinks, so that helped.

After too many hours we gave ourselves a nice, smallish dinner out, called Dian's parents through the computer, and retired.

DAY 63 (2011-09-15 08:37)

Monday 12 September 2011

Waking up to the early goings on at Piraeus ferry port, we drove over to where our boat was to leave. Nicole and Dian boarded and saved two tables outside on the uppermost deck while Charles waited to get on with the van which, because of its size, was treated as a big truck. This meant that he had to back on to the ferry while being yelled directions in Greek and German. Finally the three of us united, Charles and Nicole saving one table and Dian the other.



Leaving Piraeus

Unfortunately, Dian made the mistake of getting up to use the restroom, though the table was covered with a bottle of water and a jacket to show it was occupied. A family of gregarious smokers sat down faster than you could say "Socrates" and began pouring her water into their own glasses, much to Dian's dismay as she returned. Being the people person she is, though, she soon won them over and was being offered the people's local bread and homemade goat's cheese. (It turned out they just needed some water to put out their cigarettes).

The day was gorgeous and hot, and it was only fitting that we should see the Acropolis fade into the distance as we headed for the island of Ikaria.



Can you see the Acropolis? Oh sorry, Nicole's covering it.

It was two stops before we arrived at our island, and we all agreed that the first two were either too touristy-looking or totally Deadsville. We were delighted when we came to our stop to see that the island was lush and humbly speckled with fairly small villages. Dian and Nicole searched for our old friends Robyn and David as we pulled into port, but didn't see them. Oh well, we will when we get off, we thought. Upon exiting the boat, however, Dian asked a port official if this was the stop for Ikaria, and he said it was one of two. Suddenly the mood changed from relaxed to tense as Nicole and Dian asked others if this was the right stop, or what port we were entering. The two rushed to find Charles in line with the other vehicles before he could get off the ferry and be stranded for good.

"Charles, Charles, I don't think this is the right port! The official said there were two ports!"

"No, this is the port, I asked Robyn and David."

"Are you *sure*?"

"Yes."

"Positive?"

"Yes."

Thankfully, Charles trusted himself enough to keep driving instead of holding up the line and we soon saw Robyn, doing jumping jacks and yelling, "Over here! Over here!" Dian was overcome with emotion and everyone cracked up as David tried to take a group picture, but kept encountering difficulties with his camera. Before driving home, we shared a lovely moment at a local cafe overlooking the water with the full moon in the background. They

assured us we could relax, for we had nothing to worry about for the next two weeks, and as Robyn put it, "There's nothing here but fresh bread and kittens."

We drove home and Charles parked the car at a neighbor's since it wouldn't be able to make it up the steep hill to their house. A quick shower and tour of their wonderful traditional Greek home (featuring fresco paintings by one of the original tenants, an Egyptian man from the 1920s, that's application is still not understood even by the locals) we left for an early 11 o' clock dinner downtown. We toasted to our arrival and ate our food, along with a complimentary dish of goat cheese.



We could get used to this

A fantastic start to what we were sure would be a great leg of our trip. Ikaria, we loved you already!

DAY 64 (2011-09-15 09:24)

Tuesday 13 September 2011

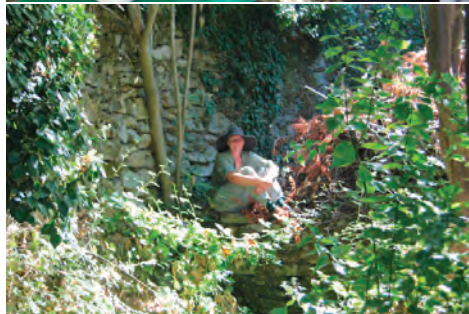


We awoke to one of the nine roosters and one one hen crowing - they intended to get nine hens and one rooster but learning is a big part of Robyn and David's life on the Greek island of Ikaria. It's very lush as islands go and about 25 miles long (Catalina?!).



We had homemade chocolate apple coffee cake and home grown mint tea on the terrace overlooking a 400 year old oak tree, the village below and then the Aegean. We could even see Turkey from their back yard. The bees that David is learning to keep were humming loudly as Robyn gave us a tour

of the Shangri-La they found near a water fall and stream. David loves to garden and be at the beach and Robyn loves music and the healing arts. She told us stories over our lunch of french fries (potatoes dug out by us) and Greek salad (also everything but the feta cheese picked by us), of her days on the road with Milton Berle, George Jessel, Donald O'Connor, Tim Conway and others during her time as a Gold Digger with Dean Martin.



From city slickers to Greek farmers!



his homemade wine with an alcohol content of about 14 % as opposed to the usual 12 %...watch out! We had pasta with sun dried tomatoes, beets and bell peppers then fell into out respective beds- two in the spare room and one in the van (which was parked below).



David called his mechanic who said we could take our van over for a fuel hose and horn the next morning. (David speaks fluent Greek after living on this and the island of Amorgos for a total of 15 years.) We had some of



David's "distillery"



DAY 65 (2011-09-15 15:37)

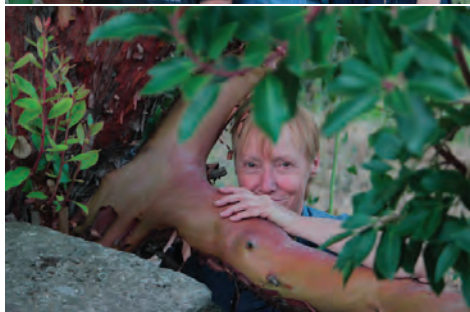
Wednesday 14 September 2011

Business first, that pesky fuel leak. David's mechanic had to be good: he had Communist Party Youth posters on the wall, and an actual hammer and sickle. No, really, metal tools, properly crossed over, nailed to the old walls. (The communist tradition was strong there, until the last election all the elected officials were of the island's local communist party. Years ago, after the civil war that followed WWII, 17,000 communists were exiled to Ikaria, which now has a total population of less than half that. So there you go.) We met Fanouri but his young assistant took care of us. Charles pointed to the leak area, David did the translating, and they left knowing our van was in good hands.

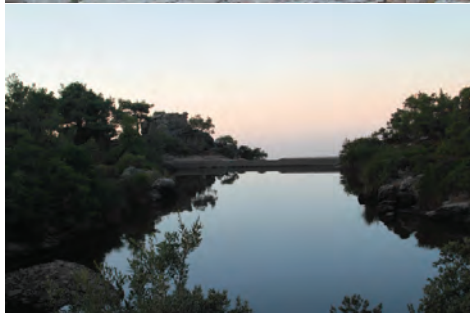


Back home David had to work but the rest of us were able to explore. We took off for an afternoon's drive around the island, stopping first at a dam and hiking up the hill. "There used to be a woman here who sold the best honeyed doughnuts, but I'm sure she's closed for the season," Robyn said. Then we rounded a bend and there in the middle of nowhere was a big trailer, and the woman, and the sweets.

What a treat. She told us that it was her own honey. They specialized in honey on Ikaria, in fact they're said to have the best honey in all of Greece (and therefore, they say, in the world).



The rest of the day was spent hiking and driving and hiking some more. Then we drove back home for another fantastic homemade meal, fresh from the garden. Life was good.



DAY 66 (2011-09-15 15:38)

Thursday 15 September 2011

It was in the wee morning hours when Nicole got up to use the bathroom, feeling a little off (she had felt a chill before she went to sleep). Coming back to her room, she passed out. She awoke to broken shards of a pot around her, and everyone came running to see what had happened. Nicole felt nauseous and hurried to the bathroom. Robyn followed, and started using her Body Talk healing on Nicole. After some deep breathing and sitting still, her temperature lowered to normal and she went back to bed.

That day was a slow one where Nicole rested for much of it, armed with God-sent zucchini bread and mint tea, and Charles and Dian helped around the house and garden by doing such things as pruning the olive trees.

When Nicole asked what she should do about the broken pot, Robyn said "Just make me something else, and be creative!"



For lunch we enjoyed Robyn's hearty homemade tomato soup out on the terrace. That evening Dian, Charles, David and Robyn walked into town down the rocky path (using flashlights) and went to a favorite restaurant of theirs for a multi-course Greek feast. They brought leftovers back to Nicole, who seemed to recover completely, with no ill effects.

DAY 67 (2011-09-15 15:39)

Friday 16 September 2011



The van was spewing grey smoke so we had to arrange to take it back to the communist mechanic. David went to a bee keeping lesson with the local expert, Stenos and Robyn, Charles, Nicole and Dian set out for some magic places on the island. Stopping in the capitol/harbor town of Agio Kirikos for a pita wrap and look at the sculpture of Icarus' wings, they then headed to a place where the water streaming out of the wall was considered "ageless water" (Dian stuck her whole head under).



After filling water bottles we continued on to the thermal pools found on the south side of Ikaria. There we hiked down to Lefkada Hot Springs where we joined a few other people on the rocky shore where the scalding water met the sea. Charles shot Robyn doing an infomercial for her Body Talk business right near the tide pools, with the small island of Fournoi in the background. We only stayed in the water for 20 minutes since it's said to be radioactive (!) but jumped in once more to wash off the natural sea salt scrub we'd given ourselves.



We drove to the middle of the island and also its highest point, seeing places Robyn and David had been shown as possible house choices. (We're glad they chose the place they did!) Finally we got to the deserted shore where Icarus had supposedly fallen from the sky, marked by a gigantic rock (which we all swam to). We sunned ourselves on the hot slabs of rock listening to the KER-THLUNK of water in the blow hole below. Heading home "Costa", "Nikoletta", "Artemisia" and "Ourania" saw the sunset as the goats stood outlined against the pink sky.



Charles had to take the pictures,
but he had to get his shot, too!



Nicole, Dian and Robyn



DAY 68 (2011-09-18 15:40)

Saturday 17 September 2011



Midnight found Charles wending his way back to the van for his turn at sleeping there, and as he picked his way along the narrow rocky path among brush, big olive trees, scattered tiny stone homes mostly unoccupied, barns, ancient stone walls and mounds of flowering plants cascading over them, illuminated by an almost-full moon and a weak flashlight, he was reminded of David and Robyn's words about their chosen home: There's nothing to fear here. There's no crime. People leave things out, unattended, from a bottle of wine to a motorcycle or even cars with the keys in the ignition, and no one, not even bored teens, would even think of disturbing something that wasn't theirs, not for poverty, not for kicks. It's just not in their DNA, formed over 7000 years on this island. There's no murder, no rape, no robbery, no theft. As he walked through the night alone out in the fields on this old path Charles also thought there was nothing there that would want to eat me, no snakes, no snarling dogs, no roving bands of drunk young men looking to take out their frustrations on the "rich tourist." It's hard to describe that feeling of no fear to an American urban dweller, but it explained a lot of why Robyn and David had chosen the island homes they had over the last two and a half decades and the attendant live-off-the-land lifestyle. Their daily lives were quite like anyone's as far as taking care of business, catching the news on the Internet, shopping for food (or more likely picking it out of their garden), keeping up with friends, though the details – learning how to grow corn and identi-

fying the local plants, keeping the water flowing, brushing up on their Greek, going to the massive all-night sing-and-dance parties that happened throughout the summer, starting a honey business – were different and seemed exotic. But the essence of what they'd sought and found, was a simple life with simple honest people, away from the blight of the soul that is part and parcel of the modern Western environment.



Morning brought another meal outdoors on the long patio, overlooking vistas of villages, trees and vast blue water. Robyn whipped together an omelette with garden-fresh zucchini, onions and garlic, and some succulent chicken pieces from the dinner the night before. A couple hours later they took us to their favorite beach, Livadi, where we swam in softly rolling waves of gorgeous green blue, then retired to the sand for sunning and a cribbage game between Robyn and Charles. Cribbage is a pretty old-fashioned card game that they both used to play with their fathers, and Charles brought along the small leather board that belonged to his dad 60-some years ago. We finished the beach day off by climbing steps to a hotel cafe and having coffee drinks and fried calamari with a gorgeous view of the whole beach below.



The rest of the day was lazy, with some naps in anticipation of the evening's panigiri, a community party that happens several times a month in various locations throughout the summer. Not only were we greatly anticipating this cultural event but the locals were too because it was the last one of the season. There was to be non-stop live music and dancing, from 3 or 4 in the afternoon until way past dawn all, of course, Greek-style, no concessions to modern/Western tastes, and much of it particular to the island



Ready to rock the *panigiri* After more than an hour's drive to Mono Kambi, we arrived and somehow found parking on the narrow mountain road, and entered from the top to see several levels below us of closely-packed people, standing-sitting-eating-drinking-visiting, the band and the dance area in front of them was packed even more tightly with dancers. We're not good at crowd estimates, but we figured 1200-1500 minimum, maybe more (on an island of 7000). From young teens to oldsters (and on Ikaria, a lot of people live past 100!), everyone was joining in, singing the words to songs they all knew and loved, and clasping waists and dancing in giant circles. The view from both above and at a long table down on

the dance area where we finally landed was just a part of Greek island life, but culturally staggering to Americans, and what a delight, to see so many come to one place to celebrate the culture they all share, through music. We even recognized a few faces from "our" village, Christos Rahes. Hey, Nicoletta! (the post-mistress). Robyn could not resist the smiling entreaties to dance with Stenos (David's bee guru), who's almost 80 and at midnight was spinning and crouching and kicking his heels in the air like a kid. Then there was the dude in overalls whose braided beard reached down to his ankles. It was a privilege and a lot of fun to be there.



Kitchen staff at the *pani-*



giri



Photo by Dian



DAY 69 (2011-09-19 10:43)

Sunday 18 September 2011

The rock stars (us) woke late the next morning, still recovering from the previous night's panigiri. David fixed his famous Peter Pancakes, made from matzah meal (giving it a uniquely delicious flavor). It was a slow day of painting, pruning, resting and cartooning.



Because Robyn had a work appointment and had to leave, with David as translator, the three of us fixed dinner for when they got back. Charles used some of David's fresh grown cantaloupes and made a refreshing dessert arrangement garnished with mint leaves from the garden. Dian made pesto using Chris' recipe, (our son/stepson who is a gifted chef), and pasta to go with it. Finally, Nicole made roasted vegetables with rosemary, again using David and Robyn's produce.



The dinner was a success, especially for the two of them after a long day of work. The evening was topped off with a few rounds of Boggle and popcorn.

DAY 70 (2011-09-19 10:44)

Monday 19 September 2011

We woke up and had a blender drink and coffee, then watered the garden, pulled the dead vines from the tomato plants, painted a vase, table and icon, then had faba beans and grilled cheese sandwiches on the terrace, but the bees got to us so we went inside.



After some music we went to Artemis' temple where we hiked down to a gorgeous ravine leading to a hidden cove above which stood the ruins of the ancient temple. Dian jumped in the rough water thinking she was joining some other swimmers. When she got pretty far out she saw that bobbing "heads" weren't humans but bouys. Then she heroically (befitting the Goddess Artemis/Diana) swam back in (to applause of those watching on the beach). We had a tour of the top of the island before descending to Robyn and David's.



David made pork chops on the hearth with baked potatoes, Greek salad, and homemade apple sauce. We ate by the light of the lantern. Finally, Charles read three chapters of Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson aloud.



Robyn describes the Greek sunsets as being old and wise. They're not flashy like you might find in Miami or the Caribbean.

DAY 71 (2011-09-22 04:34)

Tuesday 20 September 2011



After Charles took his morning constitutional to get the daily loaf of bread, coffee was made and breakfast eaten. Out for a drive with Robyn, we ran into Nikos, her neighbor. "Is it time to come pick the grapes?" she asked. "Not today, I think tomorrow", he said. Greek island life was like that. People dropped in and if you weren't there they'd sit and wait a few hours and maybe they'd see you and maybe not. Someone says I'll come by in the morning, and maybe they do, or maybe in the afternoon, or maybe tomorrow, and you're either there or not. And no one gets bothered

that "an appointment" was missed, or someone didn't do what they said when they said... exactly. That's just. The way. It is. It ain't LA, it ain't New York. Thank god.

Charles went with David to the pharmacia and got some foot spray. (Do you really need to know this?) What is interesting is that pharmacies in Europe seemed to be run by people with degrees who really know their stuff. It was almost like a visit to the doctor. After a couple of visits, any of our fears about being able to get what we needed medically on this trip were alleviated. Viva la pharmacia!



Wednesday 21 September 2011

Arising groggily at 7AM, the five of us ate a light breakfast and drove into town to meet Nikos for grape picking, but after three hours of miscommunications and bad timing, we went home empty handed and had a late breakfast of bacon and eggs. We got "real" and acknowledged what we had learned from each other and ourselves those past nine days. To work off some of Dian's stored up grape-picking energy (and a double espresso), she tended the tomato vines and removed every single dead leaf and branch.



Robyn took the girls out, shovels and rakes in hand, to weed a new area that she said would be "the Goils' garden." Tromping around in the overgrown outback (Nicole made the poor choice of wearing flip flops), they hunted for bulbs of flowers to "liberate" for their garden. Instead they found a patch of grapes, and the picking urge was at last satisfied!



On the way back they ran into their next door neighbor Nikos (different from the grape picking one), a Greek man who lived in Canada for 40 years and therefore spoke perfect English. He offered a drink and asked if they would rather hear Ray Charles or Eric Clapton. They said Ray, but for some reason or another Eric was put on, which was okay by them!

The visit was cut short by the waning daylight and loud stomachs and Nikos was thanked for his generosity. He put on "Hit the Road, Jack" as their exit music.



Nikos sitting on his sun bathed porch On the way back Nicole and Dian noticed a woman walking right next to Robyn and David's property, by the aqueduct. Robyn explained that the houses get certain week days to receive water for their own property, and that this woman was rearranging rocks so it would go to hers.

A mouthwatering dinner of Robyn's zucchini fritters, salad, fresh bread, and tzatziki (made by Nicole) was accompanied by a homemade plum liqueur.

After dinner we inadvertently staged a scene out of *Little Women*, with Charles reading (and finishing) *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Nicole and Robyn peeling and cutting apples to make ap-

ple sauce, and Dian mending our sleeping bag. Since David had to take a phone call, Charles re-read to him the last chapter of the book as the rest of us crawled into bed, safe from the rain that had just started.

DAY 73 (2011-09-22 04:38)

Thursday 22 September 2011

The Big Question: what would the van look like when Charles picked it up? Would Fanouri follow through, do the right thing? Could he do the right thing? How could the little ol' communist mechanic in the tiny town on the small Greek island have the resources to do the body work and do the painting, which by itself sometimes takes two days to dry, and hand it over perfect, before Saturday, when he's just a mechanic, not Earl Scheib, not Rosie the Riveter?

David called first thing in the morning, per instructions. It's done? Great. – but we can't come over till noon? ??OK.



An

Ikarian Sky

All this has to be handled culturally delicately. It wasn't Santa Monica, it wasn't even Athens. Ikaria has been inhabited for seven millenia and they had their own ways there, still mysterious to our friends despite four years residency and speaking pretty good Greek.



Ap-

ples for making apple sauce

At last visit to turn the van in to the mechanic, the one where Charles learned of our van's sideswipe mishap (but not how, who or when), Fanouri called Charles "my friend"

(about 20 % of his English vocabulary) and gave him the Greek Communist Youth posters off his wall that Charles had been coveting ("the best mementos of this whole trip, if I could have those") and his too-cool red comie lighter right out of his own pocket. Those were rare and generous gestures, the kind of exchange you can only hope for in a culture this insular and so foreign in its nuance to outsiders, in a place where they never say I'm sorry and rarely thank you. Even for a guy who maybe knew who scraped the van but wasn't saying, maybe a friend or even his own employee – Americans want to know that stuff, *need* to know, but on Ikaria it didn't matter. What mattered was he was taking responsibility, and if he smoothed the dents and matched the paint, that was the bottom line, and all would be right in the world. And the Yank had a new friend.

Viola! – perfect match! No dents or ripples! Bravo, Fanouri!! We took pics (Charles was again wearing his Budapest Communist t-shirt) in front of other posters. When Charles expressed interest in the story on the posters, Fanouri rang up a friend, Yorgo, who spoke some English, and within a few minutes he was there, proudly filling Charles in on a lot of history he was unaware of, of the Greek revolution after WWII, the attempts of the British and then the Americans to install their puppet governments, and more. Fascinating, even though possibly not completely accurate, or at least biased... of course, like when Americans speak about world history from the only perspective they know. But would your mechanic make such a gesture, in the middle of the workday? They had different values there for what was important.



Nicole and Dian getting facials from Robyn



Hooray!!! Charles left with the van looking the way he had brought it in but with a full tune-up for which he was way undercharged (cost of parts only, probably), and a life experience money couldn't buy. It was hard for him not to say efcharisto, but the handshake was worth a thousand of them.

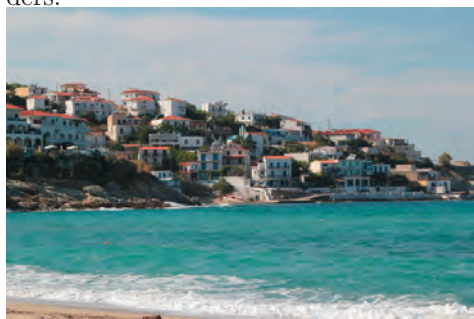


Preparing dinner

DAY 74 (2011-09-29 04:11)

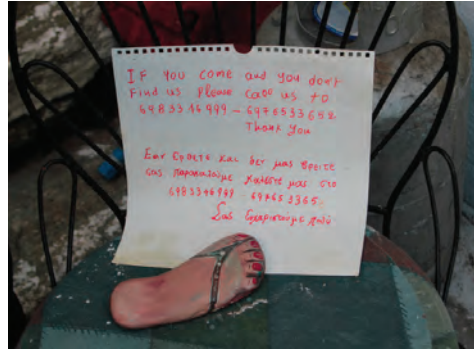
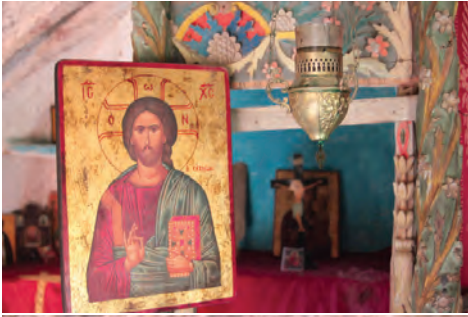
Friday 23 September 2011

We gathered up our towels and drove down to the beach where we swam (David 1200 strokes) and had a nice relaxing couple of hours in the sun. Since we were hungry, we stopped to get kebab sticks, then headed up to a famous Ikarian church built out of two enormous boulders.



The place was empty, but had a peaceful feeling. We had to stoop to get through the cave-like entrance to the interior where the Byzantine artwork was surprisingly lustrous. Much of the surrounding area was dense pine, which reminded us of the high volume of rainfall and natural water on Ikaria.





Outside the church We headed home where Dian finished reading *Siddhartha*, Nicole watered the plants, and Charles gazed at his Communist artifacts.



Driving home

DAY 75 (2011-09-29 05:35)

Saturday 24 September 2011

The fact that it was our last full day on Ikaria hung heavy on our hearts, but we did well to extinguish the anguish by taking full advantage of the day, going sightseeing, swimming and more. We bade a final farewell to the beautiful island's waters by spending a good part of the morning on Robyn and David's favorite beach, which we had all to ourselves because it was the slow season.



David surprised us all with ice cream bars which served as a great pick-me-up, and we returned to their place for the rest of the day. This consisted of packing, Dian, Nicole and Robyn recording their original song "Food and Love," planting some carnations "liberated" from the rock church and succulents in the Garden of Artemisia and Nikoletta, and a massage for Robyn from Nicole.



For dinner Charles and David walked into town to get sticks and pita-wrapped sticks while Robyn made fantastic french fries from the potatoes in the garden. Although Dian and Nicole were too tired to participate, the rest played Boggle late into the night.



DAY 76 (2011-09-29 05:36)

Sunday 25 September 2011

We packed and loaded our van "Clifford" for the ferry back to Athens. (Too bad we later realized we left some bedding on the wall and it had fallen down - out of sight.) Robyn and David loaded us with fresh wild oregano from the hillside, basil and dill from the garden and home canned plum marmelade, sun dried tomatoes and figs and Nicole's homemade apple sauce. We had tuna sandwiches for the boat trip too. We played a little more music including our original, "Food and Love" which goes a little something like this:

E A E *Two people had some cats in the yard
and they were hungry* B A E B A E *For food
and love, for food and love.*

A E B E

*When they grew strong and healthy, they were
so happy and gay*

A E Gb B

*Then they grew rich and wealthy, that's what
the old people say.*

E A E

*Four Ikarian cats came from the wild and they
were hungry*

B A E B A E

For food and love, for food and love.



With two hours till departure we hopped into their car for a sightseeing jaunt up to the reservoir and desolate landscape that many Ikarians hid in from marauding pirates back in the day. Dian kept looking for dracmas in the chinks of walls but to no avail. She did, however, find a cool piece of glass (probably

ancient) from a castle ruin site. Robyn did one last Body Talk video with Charles as cameraman and Nicole as "patient."



At 4:30 it was time to drive to the ferry. We stopped and purchased a gas burner, so we could cook some of our meals, finally. As we pulled out of the harbor our hosts unfurled a giant red scarf and waved it till we were just a smudge on the horizon. One exciting moment occurred when Charles' prized "Jamaica" baseball cap flew off in the wind and miraculously landed on the deck below then was gallantly returned to him by a fellow passenger. We all hunkered down in the lounge and after three Fantas, dozed off. At midnight we pulled into Piraeus Port and drove our van to the same place we'd slept at before.



DAY 77 (2011-09-29 05:36)

Monday 26 September 2011

Nicole and Charles set off first thing on two missions. One, stop by the ferry company HQ to make certain we didn't get double-charged because of the credit card booking. We won't give you the gory details of that encounter, just suffice it to say that bureaucracy combined with lazy and/or untrained employees everywhere is a no-win situation. Mission Two, easy: cereal and milk at the Lidl, good old Lidl's, we love 'em, smallish low-priced German supermarkets all over Europe (9000+! even 17 locations on Greek islands!)

Then we were off for the Acropolis, starting at the Plaka, the big shopping/restaurant area surrounding that prominent hill thrust up in the middle of sprawling Athens. We found a perfect (though illegal) parking space – see how much we've learned about European ways? – and looked around a bit then headed for our main destination. You see every nationality at the Acropolis, truly one of the world's most well-known and awe-inspiring sights. Charles got comped as a journalist, Nicole as under-19, so we had to buy only one ticket, 7 Euros/10 bucks, not bad for a Wonder of the World, not to mention the stunning 360 view of the city and harbor and surrounding mountains from up there.



We paused for a snack on the steps, with the old columns and structures looming overhead, and lunch on the way down. We're not going to go into much detail about the site – you really have to be there to get the impact but hopefully Nicole's photos will give you an idea.



Much restoration was taking place up there – interesting to see an ancient marble block hoisted up by winch with a restorer brushing it gently all around. There were ancient pieces everywhere – what a puzzle. It helped of course to know some history, like how the Parthenon was nearly completely demolished. One thing that had always saddened Charles, since he learned of it on his last visit, was that the gorgeous Parthenon was almost intact from antiquity until mid-19th Century, when the Turks in one of those stupid wars no one even knows what it was about 20 years later, stored their ammunition in the revered structure, and when an explosive detonated it, down came most of that classic structure, that truly belonged to the world. Yes, war is always obscene, and nearly always really stupid.

After wandering around up top for several hours and getting our fill, we proceeded to find an electronics store, and located two huge ones, four stories each, within a block of each other. We scored the camera battery charger we needed but not the cig lighter adapter, but the best part was: free bottled water, ice cold, at one store, Public, and free coffee and cookies at Plasio – allll right! Another bonus, besides the 4th-floor view of Syntagma Square from Public, was their extensive book section, with quite a few books in English. We didn't find our sought-after copy of Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* (his journal of his European travels), but did score a nice hard-bound copy of *Don Quixote* for our next family reading, and for Nicole, *Dracula*. On the way there we popped into a couple of the 5-star hotels on the main square, just for fun, and an exquisite fancy ladies' room ex-

perience at the Hotel Grande Bretagne.

We stopped at the Parliament building to watch the impressive changing of the guard – some ancient pottery we’d seen with high-steppers gave a clue as to the cultural antecedents of this impressive ritual performed in old-style military uniforms (with skirts and big yarn balls on the toes – but we don’t advise making fun of these dudes, as elite a soldier here as the Marines at Arlington).



On the way back through the plaka we found a great scarf from Thessaloniki, for Dian and Nicole to share. We took naps back at our car, probably a mistake, because then when we headed out to find a good place for the night near the National Archaeological Museum, the next day’s destination, we got a bit lost, and it got dark, and it turned into a nightmare of narrow streets crowded with people with barely enough room for our van to fit through. Finally we gave up and headed back to the port and our old safe parking space in the shadow of the huge ferries. Home is where.... the van is. It was only later that we learned they had big riots in Athens that day, over the new government austerity measures. We never saw anything.

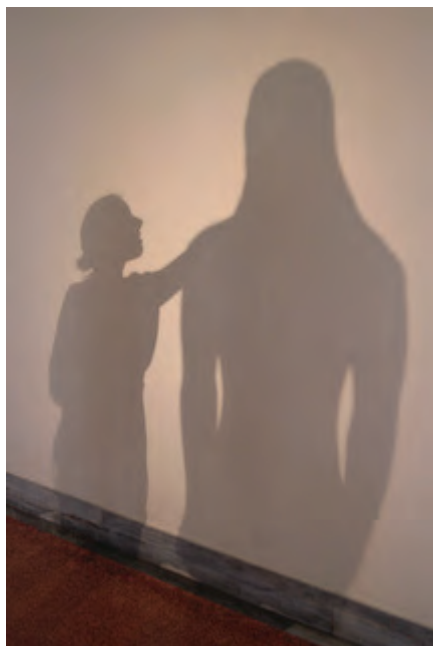
Tuesday 27 September 2011

We awoke early at our Piraeus Port home-stead in the hopes of finding a possible ticket seller for our ferry to Brindisi, Italy. The man we talked to was very helpful and we talked about the characteristics of different parts of Greece and its islands. He agreed that Ikaria was somewhat of a black sheep for various reasons, but mostly because of its resistance to cater to tourists and outsiders.

We bought our ferry tickets and drove to the National Archaeological museum. Soldiers with large guns were stationed at all four corners of the block where the museum was located, and when we asked a local she said, "It is terrible for us here right now, but the museum is safe."



We don't need to go into detail about how incredible it was, but one can imagine, for a country with such rich history, it was a spectacular collection. Even better was that we happened to go on the museum's free day!



Reaching out to touch history After a healthy 3 hours of looking we decided to lunch in the museum cafe. Nicole got a spinach pastry and Charles and Dian each got a large square of ham, cheese and hot dog pizza. We looked around the museum a little more (Nicole had to make sure she had seen every single room, admittedly quite a feat), then we drove out of Athens and headed for Delphi.



It was a gorgeous drive up mountains that were so big people skied on them in the winter. Their surrounding towns were sweet with an "Alpine Village" feel.



Extraordinary Twins, and we conked out.

Street art Coming upon Delphi, we admit sheepishly that, because of the fleeting daylight we whizzed right by the ancient ruins of The Oracle. But the show must go on!

We had three possible camps circled from our Camping International booklet, and cringed when we saw signs for all three saying "Swimming Pool" – a sure sign of chi-chi clientele and prices. We were right, the grounds were well cared for and expensive-looking, almost *toomuch* for what one would expect of a campground, and the price followed suit. Even though the man at the front desk feigned any knowledge of how the other camps were priced, we found them and checked them both out.

Camp Chrissa, the last one we saw, was where we stayed. Cheapest price of the three, too. It was that night that we hauled out our pots and pans and gas burner, and had our FIRST HOME-COOKED MEAL (without the use of a camp kitchen)! Spaghetti with fresh, home-made tomato sauce (chopped tomatoes, paprika sauce and David's homemade sun dried tomatoes, garlic, basil, oregano and olive oil mix, salad and bread. (Is your mouth watering yet?)



Charles read some more of Mark Twain's offshoot of *Puddn'head Wilson* entitled *Those*

DAY 79 (2011-09-29 06:53)

Wednesday 28 September 2011



We slept soundly in our snug little space behind the bamboo break at Camp Chrissa. The view from the camp restaurant terrace was stunning: the valley below Delphi was carpeted with olive trees, so many it's truly hard to describe, with the sea beyond.



After showers and some tinkering with our engine, we headed down the hill to the little town of Nafpaktos where we found Vasilis a young pharmacist who gave us an eye medicine for Nicole's second bout with pink eye. He wasn't too hard on the eyes himself, and when we started talking about music he ran back to the storage room and grabbed his guitar to show us. "I am never without it" he said. Digs the blues. When asked why Nicole might be susceptible he replied that some people are sensitive to the sea water in their eyes and maybe goggles would help. We thanked him and headed on to the ferry port of Igoumenitsa.



bar and after another home-cooked dinner we went to bed. Almost. The “SWAT team” (pun intended) had to finish off a few intruders, then we fell asleep.



We had a lovely picnic lunch of leftover spaghetti and bread at a coastal goat herders shack, or just below it near the water. We then continued on over the spectacular cliffs overlooking an endless carpet of deep blue before entering the harbor. We checked to see when our ferry would be coming in the next evening and after learning that it was indeed scheduled for the time we had been told, we went in search of a campsite. We briefly chatted with a German backpacker who echoed our sentiments when she said, “I’ve been traveling with my boyfriend whom I thought I knew before but now I know him REALLY well.”

The beach just outside of town was gorgeous, and the birds must have been feasting on mosquitoes because they were swooping into a thicket of trees and making an awful racket. We chose a free camping space close to a beach

Thursday 29 September 2011

We had a slow day of hanging out at the beach and doing computer stuff (mostly, catching up and slightly redesigning the blog site), some swimming in the calm, warm, gorgeous green Adriatic – our first dip in the Greek-side Adriatic, after so much enjoyment of it in Croatia and also Montenegro. We ordered a cappuccino, a spaghetti and another 'cino, all the while taking in the unending stretch of sea before us, but hey, sacrifices must be made. (Joking, but we do count our Euros pretty carefully, or we wouldn't be making this trip at all.) The Kentrikon, a bit north of Igoumenitsa, was one of the classiest beach bars we'd encountered – restrooms alone could win design awards. The slow day also gave Nicole a chance to rest her poor pink eye, which seemed already to be improved, thanks to pharmacist Vasilis.

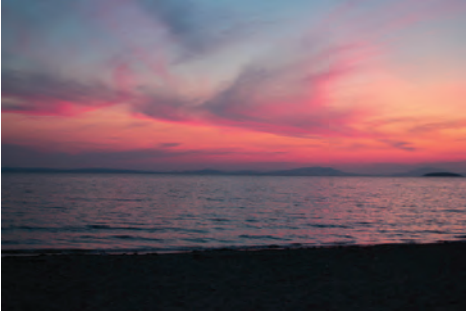
The weather was a major factor for us every day. We knew we'd soon be dealing with colder and colder weather as we drove north in Italy toward the Alps, and that we would encounter some challenges, until we got further south (Morocco, we were hoping) where the weather was similar to good old Santa Monica. But where we were was gorgeous. Charles had to shed jeans for shorts and flip flops. The last three days on Ikaria were, just as David predicted, the beginning of winter, the end of beach days. Sleeping in the van was more difficult in warm weather, especially when there were mosquitoes about (nearly everywhere); you couldn't open windows and it got pretty steamy. We dedicated our imaginations to creating some kind of screen made out of mosquito netting, not easy with the van's set of sliding doors and windows that didn't open. We vowed to prevail though. Those mosquitoes didn't have a chance, especially against lightening quick and ruthless killers like Nicole and Dian.



Finally we headed into town for a bite before having to validate our ferry tickets. As we cruised the short main street, we were driving opposite a demonstration on the other side, a peaceful, organized march, it seemed, most likely about the Greek economy. Not wanting to leave our van in the area, we grabbed some souvlaki pitas, ate them in the car and headed for the port.

Then began the long, not-funny show. Let's just say this ferry departure was, in comparison to the one out of and back to Pireus/Athens, like the difference between the Marines and the Cub Scouts. Maybe they're all like this out of Igoumenitsa, but we definitely recommend avoiding the company Endeavor for your sailing displeasure. With three different inquiries at their office that night and one the day before and three different arrival/departure schedule electronic signs posted inside and out at the port office, not one single piece of information agreed with any of the others. Where the loaders at Pireus were frantic yellers and arm-wavers to get the vehicles on and off, the ones at Igoumenitsa were doing it two at a time, chatting with customers and their co-workers, not even noticing when there was a huge gap. Dian and Nicole waited for almost an hour in line, arms loaded with sleeping bags, pillows, water bottles etc, then got hassled for their passports (only one other person was...hmmmm) and by the time they took off, the boat was four hours late.

1.4 October



The inside looked like a disaster movie, with bodies literally everywhere, on every available floor space, trying to settle in for a long night's passage (seven hours). Nicole and Dian cleverly found a nook outside but with no exposure to cool sea air that had a wicker bench to sleep under, but it was a little too clever: Charles couldn't find them when he finally got on board with the van and he and Dian wandered the decks for 45 minutes, unable to locate each other while Nicole stayed at "the fort" and tried not to worry until finally a cell phone message went through and did the trick of reuniting the Happy Trails Gang.



Sleeping on the ferry

Friday 30 September 2011



One last kypseli-keepsake from Greece



After a long and arduous journey on the ferry to Brindisi, losing one of our cell phones was not what we wanted to start the day with. It was first realized that the phone was missing when we were all in the car ready to exit the boat, and though Nicole ran back to the spot where we had slept, her search was in vain.



View from their city apartmentA customs officer mutely handed us our passports back after inspecting them and we were glad to be on our way to see Greg and Fiorella. It was a pretty drive to their town of Ceglie Messapica and we decided to stop at a small cafe for coffee and croissants. Our friends were on their way to meet us, so we explored the city during that time and walked its narrow, cobblestone streets, admiring its church and castle. Our timing was just in sync with the town’s siesta, so we had no choice but to window shop in all the closed stores.



Our car, their



car
Fresh cactus juice from Greg and Fiorella’s plantsA customs officer mutely handed us our passports back after inspecting them and we

were glad to be on our way to see Greg and Fiorella. It was a pretty drive to their town of Ceglie Messapica and we decided to stop at a small cafe for coffee and croissants. Our friends were on their way to meet us, so we explored the city during that time and walked its narrow, cobblestone streets, admiring its church and castle. Our timing was just in sync with the town's siesta, so we had no choice but to window shop in all the closed stores.



An old stone wall expert working for Greg and Fiorella explained he had "*****ed his back" because of all the years he spent bending over and lifting stones



We were met by Greg who took us to their apartment in the city, heated year round by the 150 year old bakery below. The smell was excruciatingly tempting. Saying goodbye to the city, we left for their home out in the country and got a tour of the grounds and home, which were earth-friendly to the core, "Everything has a purpose," Fiorella said. After enjoying fresh, homemade cactus fruit juice, we settled into one of the trulis.



truli-style We went into town for dinner, and while Greg and Fiorella took care of some business at their apartment we walked through the town again, but with all stores open and welcoming. We had been needing a lighter for our portable gas stove, so we stopped into a store with assorted sundries. There were a bunch of great ceramic plates and bowls with a folk-art style rooster on each piece, including a solitary bowl which, after some deliberating, we purchased! We told the storekeeper we were from LA and his eyes widened. We let him know the bowl and all its counterparts were beautiful, and at the very end he threw in a matching milk pitcher, no cost. He asked us to say hello to LA for him, which we promised we would.

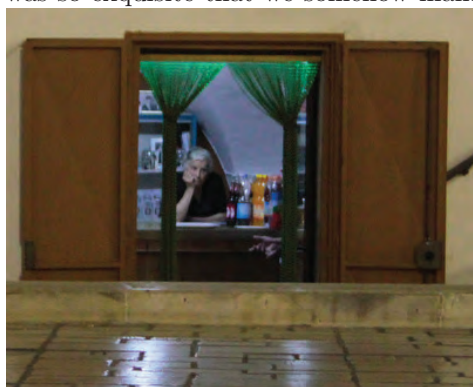


Style is not lacking for Italians, for everyone out that night, young and old, was his own Dapper Dan. It was a curious thing we saw sitting in the piazza: two old men seemed to be walking right to us, but just as they came upon our bench, they turned on their heels and walked in the opposite direction. We looked at each other, wondering what in the world we had done to offend them, but just when they had reached the other side of the square they turned around again and walked back in our direction. Looking around the entire square we noticed other pairs of men doing the same thing, and it

dawned on us: they were doing “laps.” We told Greg and Fiorella about it later, and laughing they said it’s a common thing the men do, in their town only, on that piazza only.



”Lap men” Our friends’ first two restaurant choices were closed, but we happily went to a place they lovingly called “Grandma’s Kitchen” where we had an antipasto extravaganza. Ordering two of this 12+ dish option for five people was more than enough, so much so that we didn’t even order a main course. But had a cornucopia of local liqueurs instead (this included walnut liqueur and limoncello, among others). It was at times difficult to concentrate on dinner while a steamy soap opera played loudly on the TV behind us, but the food and company was so exquisite that we somehow managed.



A woman waiting We could have rolled home for how full we were, but for the sake of time we drove. NOTE: Sleeping on a belly full of Italian food almost guarantees a great night’s sleep.

DAY 82 (2011-10-05 04:05)

Saturday 1 October 2011



We got up by 7:30 to drive the van into town before 9 which was when the mechanic would be open for business. Ceglie Messapica is only about 10 minutes from Greg and Fiorella's place out in the country. Puglia is known for its old cone-shaped domiciles (trulli) and many are whitewashed and renovated.



Making cactus fruit juice. At The Peace Garden, as they refer to it, we each were given a task (per our request) and the novelty of picking cactus fruit with fireplace tongs or collecting walnuts from the ground made the chores easy to accomplish. Our breakfast under the pine tree was espresso, tea and best of all biscotti from Anna's bakery. (She has the space directly below Greg and Fiorella's apartment/office in

town). We learned about each of our Mayan calendar aspects and enjoyed reveling in the synchronicity of life. All while taking cactus splinters out of our hands with tweezers.

Before going to the harbor town of Otsuni to visit their boat, we picked up the van in Ceglie (which had received a new fuel line as the old one had a small hole, and the charge was only \$40!) We hoped that would finally solve our spraying fuel problem, and it seemed to. We bought picnic provisions of prosciutto, local cheese called cacao cavallo and beer to mix with lemon soft drinks.



Charles and Greg going to the sail boat in Greg's electric-powered skiff.



We connected with the harbor master on duty through Dian's girl scout knot tying skills and he gave her a nice piece of rope to keep practicing with after demonstrating a few of his own. Greg ferried our quintet to their beautiful 32 foot sailboat in an inflatable dinghy with electric motor (not gasoline putt-putt – another of their live clean and simple innovations they hope the locals will catch on to) and after a reading of Dian's book *Neptune's Tavern* (now we've heard it in Dutch and Italian!) everyone chowed (no pun intended) down then took a nap to the gentle lull of the waves. Since Fiorella had an appointment we opted not to leave the harbor for a sail although we heard

some great stories about their harrowing adventure in a storm off Corsica.



Outside the Peace Garden



artsy with the trulliBack at the ranch (which measures six hectares), we filled two giant buckets with walnuts after Greg climbed the tree and shook the branches raining nuts on Charles and Dian. Their dogs actually crack the walnuts open and eat the meat.

Gettin'



Pre-historic bone?? "No, just a rock," Greg said. When dinner time rolled around we were delighted to have pasta with homemade pesto, olives from their trees, a chard-like green and tomatoes, with Anna's bread curls and homemade wine. It don't get better than that! Nicole and Dian were requested to play some music, which they did and that was the perfect capper to a lovely day – our first full day in Italy.



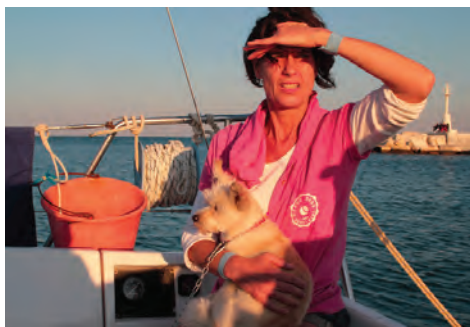
DAY 83 (2011-10-05 04:57)

Sunday 2 October 2011

A slow-starting day that ended spectacularly. Morning and early afternoon were devoted to scraping out the insides of cactus pears, a prickly delight ignored by most of the locals (probably because it's labor-intensive) but oh so delicious and healthy when crushed into a pulpy juice. Then the phrase we'd heard before that we always jumped on: "Want to go to the boat?"



Greg and Margarita When we arrived at the marina not far away we met their friend Yolanda, a Dutch woman living in the area for some time, a healer associate of Fiorella's. We all dinghy-ed out to Fiorella and Greg's beautiful sailboat "13 Moons" and were just settling in when Yolanda got a call: it was her friend and fellow expat Nederlander Margarita, with whom she spoke earlier in the day and mentioned she was going to the local marina, and there she was, standing on the dock after driving six hours from Rome! Greg of course dinghy-ed over and added her to the crew, and a lively addition she was, an old seafarer (her parents gave her a boat when she was 16 and said, take off, have fun) who pitched right in on boat duties and was full of good stories in three languages. Between her and Yolanda, likewise delightful, and of course the Dutch family we traveled with for five days, our estimation of the Dutch both domestic and abroad was way up there.



Yolanda



After some lively renditions of sea chanties (well, Sloop John B, What shall We Do With a Drunken Sailor and others), which Greg joined in on solidly because his mother taught them all to him, the Italiano ladies eventually departed for massage work and the trip back to Rome. Around 6 PM we got a wonderful surprise from Greg: he came back and took us out on the open sea, a thrill on a boat like that, and we spent a couple of hours pitching in (Dian was given the privilege and responsibility of the tiller and did a stellar job) and just enjoying the gently rolling sea and the sunset light fading to gorgeous colors over the horizon.

We then surprised Fiorella with a shirt Dian had illustrated of John Lennon with lyrics from "Imagine" written on front. It would be

difficult to put into words her reaction, so here is a photo series to explain:

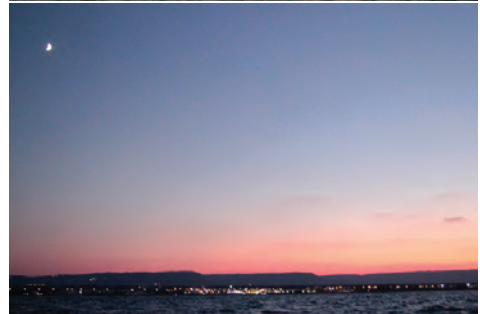




(We think she liked it)



After we returned, we were treated to a concert put on by Fiorella using seven crystal bowls. We found ourselves meditating to the ethereal resonance of these instruments. She is a master, and one of the first to learn how to play them.



Yolanda stayed for a dinner of lentil soup and fresh bread. That night we slept soundly.



A

fireworks display on the water

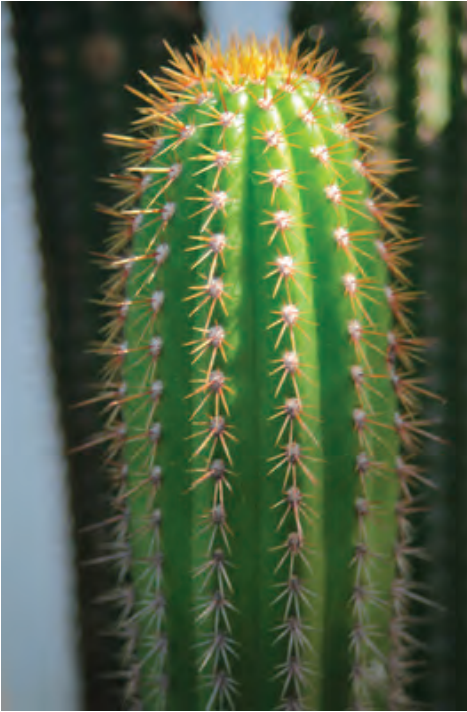
DAY 84 (2011-10-05 04:58)

Monday 3 October 2011



Before leaving Greg and Fiorella's, we took some shots of Charles and Fiorella in their respective John Lennon shirts, and they loaded us with fresh mint and a blessed candle. Since they were already planning to go to town we followed them in, and they offered to take us to breakfast. We agreed, but before anything else happened we *had* to buy some of Anna the baker's onion, and pepper flavored biscuits and other goodies for the road.

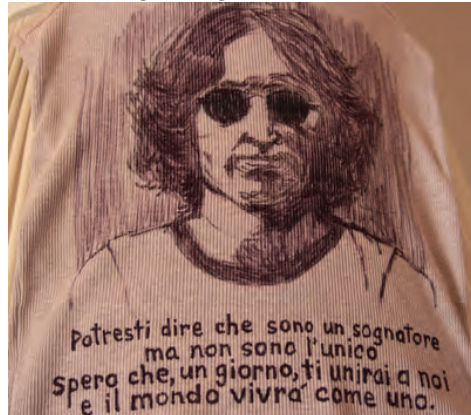




Anna the baker. Photo by Dian Walking to their favorite breakfast spot we saw a storefront of Daisy Duck apparel, and while the storeowner (and all its patrons) gawked at Dian after Greg told them who she was, Nicole tried on one of the sweatshirts. It fit, and we got it! (Can this count as a tax write-off?)



The famous gelato joint Alas, the restaurant was closed, as was their second choice! It was with a heavy heart (yeah, right) that we had gelato for breakfast at a nationally recognized spot. We said our final goodbyes and watched Ceglie Messapica shrink into the distance. After a bit of driving we found Camp Vascellero for 12€ a night with hot showers and free WiFi. Amen and goodnight!



Did we mention the lyrics were translated (by Greg) into *Italian*?



Tuesday 4 October 2011

blame.



Af-

DAY 86 (2011-10-05 04:59)

Wednesday 5 October 2011



We had eggs for breakfast, then began our quest for the castle Charles had researched, located in a dramatic ocean setting. It took much longer to drive there than we expected, so we arrived at closing time.



Street art on the wayRather than pay for

15 minutes of looking, we walked around the perimeter just as the castle lights were coming on, which gave the building a completely different effect. Two women sharing a cigarette on the rocks told us the best restaurant to eat at in town was Trattoria De Mario. We drove there post haste.



Already seated, (and the only other people in the place), were an English and Dutch couple, Vick and Christina. We asked them to join us and ordered our first Italian pizza! Nicole and Charles shared a vegetable pizza, and Dian had a seafood combination plate. It was fun to hear about their travels by sailboat and their intention to continue for at least another year.



We drove them back to the marina where their boat was docked, and we parked nearby, seeing that another campervan was already there.

DAY 87 (2011-10-11 12:24)

Thursday 6 October 2011

Before leaving the marina we introduced ourselves to and shared coffee with seasoned campers Wolfgang and Gisella. They generously gave us a map of Europe, and another highlighting all the good FREE camping spots in Italy.

We said auf wiedersehen to the couple and drove on.



Home is where you'd least expect it. Along this road

we also saw signs for "Florida" and "San Diego". Feeling a bit peckish, we lunched outside a Lidl that looked out on a castle on a hill. We had to leave the sea momentarily in order to end up on the opposite side of the coast, so we boldly went through small, unpaved roads that more often than not turned out to be under construction or a dead end, and we even forded a mighty river (or 6-inch stream, depending on how you looked at it) with Nicole singing the theme to Indiana Jones in the background. Let us remind you that we do not have 4WD. It was unavoidable traveling through the congested city of Calanzaro, and just when we were about to give up on GPS-James Bond and the labyrinth of streets he was failing to navigate, 007 emerged in the flesh. He spoke no English, but un poco espanol, which Dian and Nicole were able to understand. After considering the thought of telling us how to get out of the city verbally, he thought better and actually acted as our personal escort out of town in his own car.



The sights were beautiful thereafter and because of the waning daylight, we settled into a town called Scario, where we free-camped. The town was quaint, and we chatted with a few of the storeowners. One man explained that the surrounding area had many caves holding archaeological artifacts, but the people there were "not smart enough" to protect them or make something of them. Our last stop was at Anna's grocery store where we bought a chocolate muffin to share for dessert. Pasta and "Puddn'head" summed up our evening...except for the church bell that sounded every. fifteen. minutes.



Tile artwork in Scario

Friday 7 October 2011



One of the many beautiful hill towns above the coast



Another view of the dashing Clifford, driving along the coast. Waking up to the church bells, Dian took a walk on the beach and then up through town, winding back to the van to collect Nicole where they went in search of a restroom.



Nicole took the opportunity to try on her new outfit while we were rained in.

After a light breakfast we drove through hill country and farmland until we came upon a flea market where Nicole found a dress and jacket and Charles bought some local cheese. As we continued along the coast we got caught in a huge thunder and lightning storm, so we decided to pull over and watch the show while munching on sandwiches from the safety of our van (too bad there was a little leak by the door).

As quickly as it came, the storm passed through, and we headed to Paestum, a Pompeii-like site full of ruins from Vesuvius. We stayed for a couple of hours, free of charge, with umbrellas at the ready, though we never needed them. In fact, the sunlight on the temple columns was even more striking after the rain.





A camp we read about in the Paestum area near a river gave us the heebie jeebies, so we hightailed it the 40km to Salerno. Then all hell broke loose. Charles had to drive, white knuckled, through the busy, narrow streets, in the rain at night. When we finally found another camp, we learned that three football (soccer) teams from Nigeria were staying there with their families, and would be returning from the game that night, either deliriously happy (loud) or completely dejected (loud). We opted to drive on to Pompeii.



And you thought Italy was romantic. FINALLY by 9PM we pulled into Camp Pompeii, directly across from the ruins. Even though the WiFi wasn't free and the price was steep, we were in no position to bargain. After pulling into a space, we walked up the

driveway to have pizza and beer. Big beers. Our first pizza chef to throw the dough in the air and catch it.



We're saved!

DAY 89 (2011-10-11 13:00)

Saturday 8 October 2011



Showers were the first order of business at Pompeii Camp. Next we checked out, sent an e-mail from the camp restaurant, and walked across the street to buy tickets to view the ancient city of Pompeii. Charles got in free!



We entered the well preserved skeleton of a town, destroyed in 79 AD by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, which ironically perfectly preserved it underneath the ash and volcanic rock. Nicole found it especially interesting to walk around its streets and into old homes because her Latin textbook's characters had been set in a time when the city was thriving.



Nicole's Latin textbook followed a character (based on a real person from Pompeii) named Caecilius Iucundi

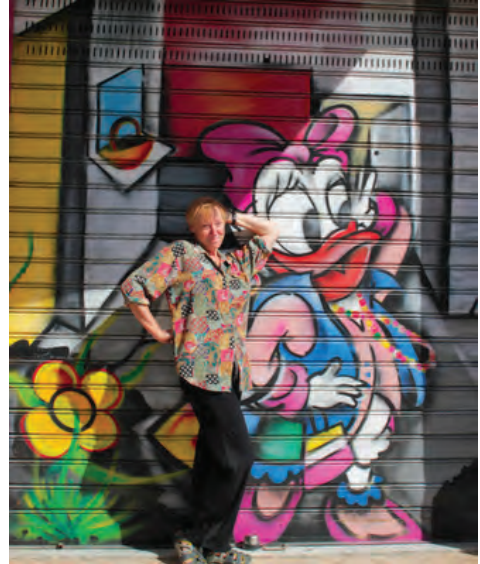




After roughly three hours of walking amongst the ruins, we set out for a closer look at Mount Vesuvius. We got up about three quarters of the way for a spectacular view of Salerno, but decided to skip walking the mouth of the crater.

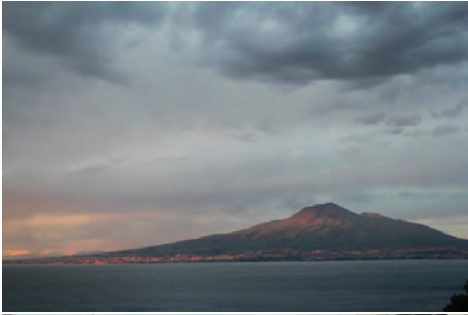


Pompeian peasants running from the lava run-flow



By evening we had found Camping Villaggio Azzurro nestled in a crevice below a hill town at the start of the Amalfi Coast. We were greeted by a gypsy, who it turns out was a woman in costume for a pirate-themed birthday party for her son. Next we met Woody Allen, or at least he looked like him to us. He said we could use his Internet, and told us he had run the camp for over 40 years- (Woody Allen probably wouldn't have lasted that long).

After a cold beer and hot soup we fell into bed, listening to the light rain pattering on the roof.



DAY 90 (2011-10-11 13:01)

Sunday 9 October 2011

Thanks to Nicole's urging us all to travel along the Amalfi Coast, no matter how treacherous the drive might be, (interesting, considering she would NOT be the one doing the driving), we left camp Villaggio Azzurro and began the journey.



Ciao, Vesuvius





It was undeniably breathtaking, and Charles even said that the drive was fine compared to going through the streets of Salerno. Dian had to stop the car to get a closer look at what looked to be mini-houses on the side of the road, built into the rock. Sure enough, they were miniature buildings with people inside or in tiny boats. These sweet characters (which were possibly representative of real townspeople) showed us a side of the blown up commercial towns along the Amalfi coast that we hadn't expected to see from an area that receives so many visitors.



Though we didn't stop in most of the towns, we finally paused in one, which by the plethora of similar shops, we deduced was famous for its ceramics. We knew we couldn't just leave our rooster bowl by itself, so we bought another that was decorated inside with pomegranates, sunflowers, lemons and grapes.



After a full day of challenging driving, we hunkered down outside a small town's church and free- camped. A hot soup warmed our chilled bodies from the cold outside.



Those Extraordinary Twins?



Double rainbow all the way across the sky!

DAY 91 (2011-10-11 13:10)

Monday 10 October 2011

We awoke in our little church parking lot sanctuary to an elderly woman gesticulating and speaking rapid Italian in earnest. We took it as the church Altar Society giving us their blessing before we moved on.

Heading for Manfredonia, a town on the peninsula of the Adriatic Sea, we set our GPS for Camp Lido Salpo. James Bond, our navigator (Garmin) couldn't have foreseen the road blocks, but a local at the port forewarned us and said to continue through. Boy were we glad we did! Off the beaten path, but with a beautiful layout ten feet from the beach, we had hot showers, laundry, WiFi, and (drum roll) our very own pizza kitchen! We decided to stay two days.



Photo by CharlesCamping can be relaxing, but our schedule has had us staying only one night in most cases. At Camp Lido Salpi, we relaxed by doing laundry, beach combing, and building a shelf in the closet of the car. The weather was blustery and at one point Nicole thought we could reenact the scene from Lawrence of Arabia where he's trudging across the Sahara. We settled for whistling the theme song while picking sand out of our teeth.



In the camp restaurantThe computer was charged up, and we even got to talk to Dian's mom and dad for 30 minutes on Google Voice. We had pizza for dinner (two mushrooms and one four cheese) and yes, this chef obliged us by throwing the dough in the air. We sent out an e-mail and got many responses in return, which was so heart warming. Nicole and Dian put together a set list for their performance in Umbria, and all the feral cats harmonized.



Photos by Charles



DAY 92 (2011-10-12 02:53)

Tuesday 11 October 2011

A relatively lazy day, that got downright exciting by night.



Charles camped out at the beach for a couple of hours, lounging on a small float boat sitting on the sand and listening to the surf roll in, with endless blue and the city of Manfredonia in the distance. No people to speak of, no ships, just blessed sea and sky. Huge white clouds that eventually burned away, leaving it actually warm with a nice breeze. Nicole drew and walked around and swung on the swings and put up four blog pages, yay! Dian painted rocks she had found while beachcombing, and (by choice) spent the first half of the day in silence. In the afternoon Nicole and Dian rehearsed some songs for their upcoming gig in the village of Piegaro. They decided to give it a trial run, and after ordering the most exotic pizza



the menu, strolled into the kitchen and serenaded the chef Matteo as he rolled and tossed, with "Funiculi, Funicula" and "Santa Lucia" finishing with the very American "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy/Route 66" combo. He was so delighted he not only treated us to our "strong" pizza, he let us name it! We decided to call it "Olive Me," a play on a song Dian has always performed (maybe Charles' very favorite – he fell in love to that song), and with not much English being understood, they got the joke (and by the next day newly printed menus listed it – what an honor, to get to name a pizza in Italy!!).



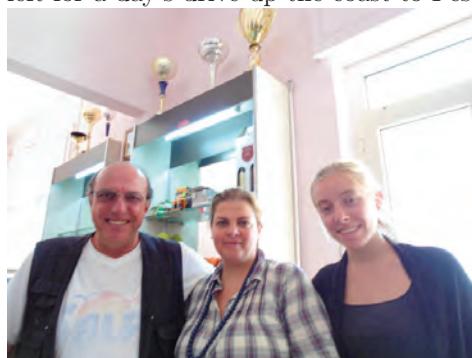
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DAY 93 (2011-10-18 08:18)

Wednesday 12 October 2011



Charles and Dian went to get coffee at the camp cafe and chatted with Monica, one of the camp staff, while Nicole lingered in bed and read *Dracula*. True to his word, the chef officially named our pizza "O'Live Me," and even let us keep a copy of the menu. With that we bade farewell to camp Lido Salpi and left for a day's drive up the coast to Pescara.



Nicole and the camp staff



Strange, stilt-fishing shacks unique to the region. Inspired by Dian's sister Monica, we set out on a mission to find gelato, and find

it we did. Pulling into Marina di San Vito by chance, the *first* shop on the left we saw happened to be a hoppin' gelateria! Screeching to a halt, we jumped out of the car and each ordered a cone or cup: Dian, two chocolate scoops, Charles, one scoop of bittersweet chocolate and one scoop lemon, and Nicole, one scoop hazelnut and one a local chocolate and nut mix. We unanimously agreed it was one of, if not *the* best gelato we had ever had.



Poster for the puppet show! Treats in hand, we strolled around the town and onto the water's edge. There was a good vibe from the whole place, in part because lots of children were playing happily in the street, couples were sharing coffees, and there were even advertisements for an old style puppet show the next day, which would be held in the local library.

Eventually we left, though we still threatened to come back the next day for the puppet

show. We were on the outskirts of Descara when we parked next to a park, deciding to free-camp for the night.

Walking along the fairly upscale strip, Dian and Nicole ducked into a restaurant to use the WC, but upon perusing the oh-so-reasonably priced menu, we decided to eat there, lest we should disturb the residential area we were parked in with our cooking in the van.

The waiter, Enrico, spoke great English (he had been to LA many times as the employee of a cruise ship), and patiently waited as we decided whether we wanted the €1 antipasto or the €1,50. Instead we got a big pizza and some house wine, which was still well within our budget. A hard lesson was learned, however, when the bill revealed there was a *coreta*, a cover charge, which greatly "enhanced" our tab.

Avoiding the man randomly trying to sell Charles an industrial-sized roll of toilet paper, we left the restaurant. Getting back to our van we saw no other cars were on our street anymore, Though we could not see any signs saying otherwise, we thought it best to move on, and settled on a parking lot a few blocks away.

DAY 94 (2011-10-18 08:19)

Thursday 13 October 2011



Broken fan beltSome of us got up on the wrong side of the bed – (Isn't it funny how time clouds the memory?) We decided to leave our little parking place by the community park and look for the elusive gas can for our stove (still not usable for cooking). An easy task no? NO! After driving to two places we continued the day's downward spiral when at the toll booth we went through without getting a ticket. (In Greece there's always a human and after we pushed the help button we were so glad the gate went up that we didn't look back.) Unfortunately at the toll booth on the other end, the man wanted about \$85.00 for a 15 minute use of the road.. He let us go through with only 3 euros to pay but then we read the whole receipt. (Lots of fines if it wasn't taken care of.) We then started smelling burning rubber so we pulled over at a gas station in a tiny town where our map for caravans and campers had shown us a place to buy the gas can. Strike two and three. After looking everything over and determining that nothing was radically wrong in the engine, we decided to leave the coast and start hightailing it to Colleen's villa in the middle of Italy before we got stranded and missed our rendezvous with her on the 16th.



Stranded in "paradise" The grape arbor was a nice place to wait for the tow truck (which was our second time for that experience) and the driver wondered why we were on such a God forsaken road. His name was Tommy and he had spent his high school years in Oakland, California. He towed us to his hometown of Orsonia where a group of mechanics went to work diagnosing our problem immediately. Definitely different than most garages in L.A. – the immediately part. Whilst they were doing that, Dian and Nicole were asked by the owner's wife to come to her house and speak English with her daughter, (a 17 year old named Francesca). We were escorted into her room which began to fill with family and friends and while her nails were being done by her friend, Anna, we chatted. The birthday of her one year old nephew was that weekend and when we asked how many relatives would attend she said about 100! The visit was a slice of how a cool teen in a small Italian village lives.



The cell phone rang and we were told the van was almost ready and had a new fan belt. When asked where we might find a safe harbor for the night, they pointed us in the direction

of town and a peaceful little parking lot adjacent to a gym. It thundered and lighteninged (is that a word?) but with spaghetti in mushroom and caper sauce and pastries Charles had procured on his walk-about, we ended the day with a few rounds of Boggle which Nicole dominated...again.



Sugar never tasted so good

DAY 95 (2011-10-18 08:19)

Friday 14 October 2011

Our tranquil little parking lot was not far from a crawling street market that had sweaters, tangerines, and everything in between. We pulled on our jackets and walked through the throngs until we found ham and cheese triangles at the patisserie (the baker gave us a free one, since she recognized Charles from buying pastries the night before).



Nicole spotted a tomato soup colored cashmere sweater that she HAD to have, and even bargained the vendor down a whole euro. Riding high with the brand new fan belt, we drove to the "Blupoint" building just outside of Chieti to settle our dispute about a fine given to us after our toll mishap. Lo and behold, Charles and Nicole met a man who not only spoke fairly good English, but dismissed the fine altogether. Woohoo!-we mean, lesson learned.

We bought a port-a-potty for the van, and Dian bought porcini mushrooms from a roadside stand. We say "mushrooms" and not "mushroom" because he generously gave her an extra mangled one in exchange for the two-

Euro coin she had given him (they usually deal in kilos).

We were on our way back to see the puppet show when the car started to smoke. We stopped at a gas station and gave it a rest and looked at the fan belt, but it seemed okay. We nixed the idea of the puppet show, though, in order to head inland and be closer to Piegaro, where Colleen had invited us on the 16th.



Limping into Camp Rio Verde with squeaking fan belt and wheezing van, the proprietress smiled, saying she was officially closed, but would let us stay, and would even call a mechanic the next morning. NO ONE was at the camp...except for an Austrian couple who came rolling in not 15 minutes after us. They, too, were happy to find a safe harbor for the night.

It was bitterly cold, and we were bitter that the car was in such a state. Again.

DAY 96 (2011-10-18 08:20)

Saturday 15 October 2011

After a blustery night in the country we knocked on the camp owner's door to see if she would call a mechanic for us and explain our situation. She set us up with a mechanic of hers who would be ready for us whenever we came, so we had a light breakfast and, since the only other people in the camp were leaving about the same time we were, we asked if we could follow them out, just in case we broke down and had no means of leaving. They said that was fine, and sure enough, we broke down in the middle of a rural road. They kindly drove Charles to the mechanic while Nicole and Dian waited with the car.



View from atop the tow truck



Riding in our car on top of the tow truck was exciting, but not exciting enough to warrant sheer joy

While waiting for Charles' return, they saw a pair of hunters with dogs, dressed in camouflage, coming back to their car. Dian asked what they were hunting, and one of the men opened a small pouch, revealing a mound of fresh truffles. Tow #3 at least had a picturesque drive for Nicole and Dian as they sat in the van all the way to the mechanic.



Stepping into Assisi



We had come to realize that the third time was a charm when it came to mechanics, and sure enough, this one solved the *real* problem, a loose bolt, and even gave it a little test drive around the block to make sure. No more

squeaks, no more broken belts - we hoped.



With our confidence restored and the car in good shape, we decided to take a trip to Assisi, St. Francis' home. There were posters all around the town announcing that Papa Benedict XVI would be visiting on the 27th of October, which hadn't happened since 1986. After parking the car and entering the city, we barely got past the gates when Nicole saw a poster of Steve Jobs on a wall. We all read a speech that was printed from his 2005 Stanford Commencement Speech, and we were very moved. His motto for life was to "Stay hungry. Stay foolish." With his words swimming around our heads and the knowledge that he had passed on, we walked through the town.



Weapons next to holy items?



Charles mapped it all out for us, and we went from the Basilica of Saint Claire to the Duomo of San Rufino to the Basilica of Saint Francis through the non-touristed route. It was humbling to see relics from St. Francis and St. Claire, such as her hair which she had Francis cut when she entered his order, his blood-stained clothes, and his tomb.

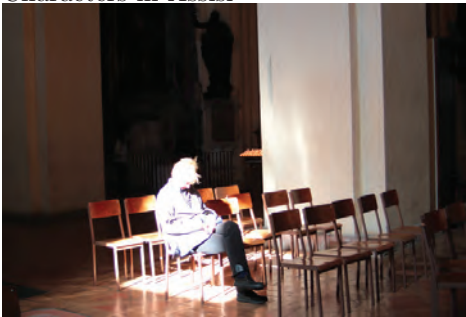




Dian and her new scarf in front of the large church



Characters in Assisi



Once we stepped outside again it was fairly windy, so Dian bought a wonderful, soft brown scarf. Near that shop we wandered into another, full of wonderful, unique wood carvings of all sorts. The artist sat sedately behind his desk, and we overheard a pair of American women lamenting that they could not buy everything in the store.

We felt it was time to go, so, taking a different route back, we left for our car. Unfortunately, this route led us outside the city, making us circumnavigate on foot along the outskirts. Dian needed to rest, so Charles and Nicole hiked aaaaaalll the way back, and picked Dian up in the van and headed towards the camp. The camp was alright, but we could not help but shiver in anticipation for what awaited us at Colleen's.

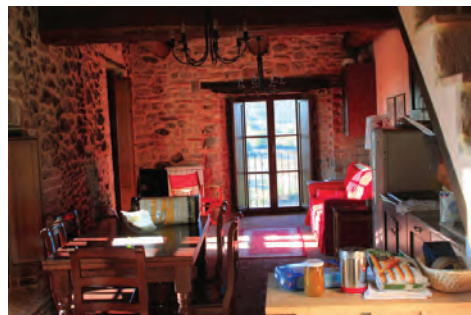


DAY 97 (2011-10-18 08:22)

Sunday 16 October 2011

We got up early (6:45 AM) and had some of Roos and Henri's hot cereal packets which they had sent along with us at the start of our journey. Checking out of Camping Villagio Assisi where we were charged 30 % less thanks to Dian's Camping International card, we headed to Piegaro. We skirted the capital of Umbria, Perugia, and arrived in Colleen's village at about 10 AM. The van wasn't squeaking or smoking at all and we were glad to have finally made it to L'Antica Vetreria.

The vendors were just opening up for the final day of the 10-day Chestnut Festival and we were escorted to Colleen's villa by not one but two locals who kindly called out at both Colleen and her friend Lisa's doors, but to no avail. Charles called on the cell and the next thing we knew, Lisa was getting to know us over a cup of cappuccino and we were learning about her and how she came to live in Piegaro.



Our home for the next 2 weeks



Nicole's room

We met Colleen at her apartment and found her to be in great spirits despite being stuck in a wheel chair after breaking her ankle a month earlier. She is quite a dynamo, and admitted she considered her fall in Assisi to be a wake up call from Saint Francis to slow down. She gave us the keys to our two story apartment with kitchen and balcony overlooking the pool, and valleys and hill country beyond, then said she'd meet us with Lisa for a quick walk through the festival before going to Mass.

The church was small but had some interesting reliquaries and a giant cross that the young men carry through town once a year. The experience of following along with the prayers in Italian but knowing by heart the words in English was interesting for Dian and Charles (who share a background in Catholicism.)



There were enough sweets at this festival that you could forget where the chestnuts were! The festival was in full swing when we emerged from church but we opted to have lunch at di Juni's, one of Colleen's favorite haunts and one of two four-star restaurants in that small town, which was featuring dishes made with chestnuts. Delicious!!! Charles especially loved the chocolate-chestnut cake filled with chocolate truffle.

We took in the sites and a mesmerizing glass blowing demonstration by two masters near the venerated glass museum – showing artifacts from the town's heyday of glass production starting in 1295. They had a photo exhibition by local artists and our own Lisa had two in the exhibit (featuring only 20). The age old craft of weaving baskets around the bottom of the blown glass vessels was also being demonstrated. Charles and Dian bought some gifts of glass for family and a magical ring for Nicole as an early birthday present.



One ring to rule them all



Miniature caricatures of old glassblowing folk



We brought some clothes up from our van which we left parked at the edge of the “old town” and after putting things away, sat on our balcony in the early evening chill to watch our first sunset. To quote another of Colleen and Tom’s guests, “We had one foot in paradise and the other foot in heaven.” We joined Lisa around 10 PM for the dancing and live music in two tents (thankfully we were no longer TOO TENSE), but only stayed a little while as we were tuckered out and ready to hit the beds with down comforters. After a quick spaghetti snack we fell asleep to the church bells of Piegara.



Weaving





Monday 17 October 2011



Rising late we had scrambled eggs for breakfast (thank you, good kitchen and refrigerator), then dashed out to get supplies before the shops closed for afternoon "siesta" time or that night's dinner at "our place" with Colleen and Lisa. The custom-cut pork chops came from the nearby butcher, who, Colleen later told us, was so respected people came from as far away as Rome to buy from him. After an expensive trip to the PO (postcards home cost \$2.15 each!) Dian went out on the hillside to prospect for "ancient artifacts" (castoff glass shards).



Dinner was a smash, with the pork chops covered with rosemary (picked just outside our door), cous cous and a corn and fresh red and yellow peppers combo. Dessert was a special treat, vanilla ice cream with a chocolate sauce made from one of the See's candy bars Dian's parents had sent from San Pedro. We all ate on decorated place mats Nicole created out of plain paper that afternoon. As Colleen and Lisa arrived Nicole and Dian brought smiles with their duet of the new song, "Food and Love."



Lisa had to leave a bit early for her Italian pronunciation class, but the rest of us shared a special wine Colleen brought and talked on about our lives, getting to know each other a bit better. The wine was from Castello Monte Vibiano, a nearby winery we had originally passed on for a tour, until Colleen filled us in on some background, and we were hooked. Run by friends of hers who were for centuries the ruling family of the area, in operation since . . . well, let's just say if Jesus had changed water into this wine, it would've already been a quarter of a millenium old!



DAY 99 (2011-10-18 08:24)

Tuesday 18 October 2011



The morning was slow, but it wasn't long before Lisa knocked on our door telling us it was time to leave for Castello Monte Vibiano, Colleen's dear friend Count Lorenzo's winery. The winery is unique in that it is carbon neutral, and takes great care not only to keep a minimal carbon footprint, but also to retain the quality of wine it has had for so long. You can read more about Castello Monte Vibiano's vision on their website by clicking [here](#).

Colleen got a call on our way there from the DSL deliveryman saying he had our package from Sebastian containing our table for the van! Because packages coming to Piegara must be picked up by the recipient, instead of having it delivered straight to their doorstep, we made a slight detour to pick the table up in the parking lot of a mall.



For a while we were the only ones at Castello Monte Vibiano that day, so while Colleen and Lisa relaxed on the patio, we got a private tour of the winery. This was followed by a free wine tasting. Colleen told us it is Lorenzo's philosophy that all his wine tastings and tours should be free, because wine is subjective, and he would not want someone to walk away unhappy because they personally did not have a good experience. He's right, too, no one can argue with something free! Our wine taste consisted of all the best wines they have produced each year, an incredible selection of cheeses, and also a sample of their fresh olive oil also made in the vineyard. The olive oil was exquisite to say the least, and even a little bitter because of its freshness. The olive oil is sold only in groups of small capsules, because olive oil should never be left opened for a long time if it is to be used in its finest condition. Of course we were hooked, and bought a bottle of their 2006 MonVi, and a pack of their extra virgin olive oil.



It was in electric golf carts that we drove to the site of the vineyard, away from any roads, located past the ancient olive grove where they make their oil. We got to see Colleen and Tom's "vine" which they bought and now get a percentage of profit from, and looked, though without any luck, for Robert De Niro's vine.



We left the vineyard and went to Lake Trasimeno for a lakeside dinner. Unfortunately we arrived after the sun had set, but we still enjoyed the flavors of a local eatery. Lisa lamented that the restaurant did not still have a vending machine where one could buy underwear. Home to *our* castle where warm beds awaited us.



Day 100 ! (2011-10-19 19:24)

Wednesday 19 October 2011

"La dolce far niente" means a sweet day for doing nothing. That's what we had and it was delicious. Since it was a celebration of our 100th day on this adventure, we were thinking of driving to some hill town but as the day wore on and Dian reported a big bump on her forehead from banging into the rock wall behind the bed the night before, the Happy Trails Gang decided to stay home. We had fun reading books about Umbria, Rome and Florence and Dian and Nicole took some pieces of glass and an antique beer top Dian had found to the museum and the curator said she would be interested in them for the museum collection!



An extra photo from the glassblowing demonstration

Throughout the day a bean soup with peperoni was bubbling on the stove and we sat down to big steaming bowls of it with fresh bread and cheese.



Bean soup on Nicole's homemade placemat After dinner we went up the street to the gelateria but alas the tubs were put away for the winter so we had to settle for Nutella, a pre-packaged sundae and a beer as our 100th day celebration treat!!!



Thursday 20 October 2011

Our fairly early start out toward Orvieto, an ancient hill town less than an hour straight south of Piegara recommended by both Colleen and Rick Steves ('nuff said!), meant grabbing breakfast on the way, which meant a stop at the bakery. (We have pretty much left traditional heavy American breakfasts behind in favor of the light European ones.) But of course we had to grab coffees and fresh mint-from-our-patio tea first.

Often it was difficult or impossible to park in those ancient towns but we charged on in and after following the traffic nearly back out of town without finding a parking space, Charles declared, "What's wrong with this?" and pulled over tight against a wall, careful not to block any doors, windows or driveways. Despite some trepidation, it followed our rule: if it fits and cars can get by you, and there are no obvious signs saying No Parking, go for it. It worked: no towie, no tickey.

Orvieto was delightful, more upscale than we figured, with way too many tempting shops.



But looking was free, and fun, and we ran into the marketplace in the square just as they were tearing down, time enough to check everything out and sample and buy cheese and dried fruit, even got a lagnappe (unexpected gift) from the fruit guy and a posed photo from the cheese/meat guy.



We

ducked into a couple of bookstores as some rain fell, still searching for that elusive English-language copy of Mark Twain's (Charles' and Nicole's cousin through Charles' mom - a Clemens) *The Innocents Abroad*, but no luck. Then we found a gem: a small side street shop called "Il Mago di Oz", which was what the jolly proprietor, Guiseppe Rosella, called himself. We were drawn in by the large Betty Boop cutout outside, but inside was amazing and a bit beyond description. Packed floor to ceiling with cartoon figures, toys, old-timey everything, collectibles, and hundreds of music-playing devices you couldn't imagine existed. Guiseppe spoke little English, used much dramatic hand language, and his brochure seemed intentionally vague - but he delighted in winding things up and pressing buttons and showing us how they played, some with more than 100 tunes programmed in, most synced to movable figures. The shop was lined with photographs of famous patrons. We think he made all these himself, or at least had them made, and he customized it to your life story. We left feeling we had truly



met the wizard behind the curtain.



Orvieto duomo Finally we made our way to the duomo, the major church with an amazing facade rife with intricate architectural touches. We peeked in but skipped the entrance fee (later finding out from Colleen that we missed a remarkable work in a side chapel, oh well), also opting to skip the caves tour. Ya gotta make choices, and we tried to balance cultural opportunities with budget responsibilities. We saw the amazing 12th century salt mine in Poland and planned to hit the catacombs in Rome; our cave budget was temporarily spoken for.



Feeling a bit hungry and happy with our Orvieto excursion, we headed for the van and decided to try for Civita del Bagnoregio, a very small mountain peak town about which our travel guru, Rick Steves waxed poetic. The weather was a question mark. It looked threatening. After a 20-minute drive we pulled into a Steves-designated lookout point and couldn't see Civita, or anything. The only way to get to the town was over a very long, very steep footbridge. Did we want to chance that in that kind of weather?



The only way to get to Civita del Bagnore-



gio

Adventure won over reason and we were magnificently rewarded: the light misting rain and heavy fog made the not-that-long, not-that-steep footbridge traverse a wonder of mysterious atmosphere. When we reached the top Charles declared, "I don't even care about the town, that walk over the bridge was worth the trip." But Civita, dating back to really ancient pre-Roman Etruscan time, was a delight of really old-looking doors and arches and walkways, remarkable in a land where everything was old.



We love Rick Steves! We bumped into an American couple outside the church and took a photo for them, and found out they were from our part of SoCal. Then we later found them in a little "bar" (bars here serve sandwiches, coffees, etc.) and were all amazed at what we

had in common: they live in Idyllwild, we are often there staying in our getaway trailer, Wes's high school played Samohi in sports, he's a retired fireman like Dian's dad, Debbie has family in San Pedro (Dian's third generation), and more and more. We offered to drive them back to Orvieto rather than have to rush to meet their bus, and not only had a nice chat but the special experience of plunging into a herd of sheep on the road, including darling little babies and that special rear view of a herd of wagging tails, flopping ears and swinging butts of wool. With no other cars on the road, and no shepherd in sight, we just crept along and got lots of photos. Finally a guy in a black Nissan pickup came around our left, honking and yelling, and we realized he was the shepherd, and he headed them off the side of the road back to their home pasture. OK, we're sentimental softies, but we all loved stuff like that, that you can't get at home.



Back at our Piegario home, we delighted in hot soup and a game of scrabble on our homemade board.

DAY 102 (2011-10-23 01:21)

Friday 21 October 2011



One sweater to rule them all! It was an easy day, picking up some groceries for Colleen and ourselves. Nicole and Dian practiced a bit for their night of singing at Juni's four-star restaurant.

Lisa generously took Nicole and Dian to her house to pick out some flashy "performance clothes", which helped spice up the two a great deal. She even let Nicole keep the dress she had picked out, though she gave back the necklace given to Lisa by Desmond Tutu and the fabulous jacket Nicole is now on a quest to find one similar to.



The sweater Nicole borrowed, next to a great painting Lisa did of her kids and her. We all ate a splendid dinner at Juni's that evening, filled with fantastic seafood to warm up any singer's throat to their finest. We were joined by Lucia, Colleen and Lisa's fellow ex-pat from Australia. We found out later, to our surprise and delight, that we had been comped!



Nicole and Dian got up to sing a few songs, but were soon joined vivaciously by a table of Dutch tourists. It was all in good fun, and they shockingly knew just about every song the duo played! They even took to suggesting some later on. A slight negative to the rowdy crowd was that Dian and Nicole strained their voices a little too much in order to be heard, resulting in sore throats the next day, but all

is fair in wine and busking.

As a farewell gift Dian gave Juni a Vava LaVoom CD, which she seemed very grateful for.

Great food, great company, great music-making, great day.



Dian, Lisa, a local kid and Nicole

DAY 103 (2011-10-23 01:22)

Saturday 22 October 2011

"Goodbye Summer!" Colleen called out as we put away the patio furniture and Charles helped the pool man, Luciano cover the pool. Many hands made light work so by noon we were in the car and on our way to the flea market in the neighboring town of Tavernelle. Alas, the arrival of the winter tourist season had caused the flea market to end, and so we drove on to Panecale. The architect who restored Tom and Colleen's glass factory and made it into the stunning villa we were occupying, and other sweet suites, had graciously offered his childhood home to them during the renovation. Having left behind a couple of items, we entered and were overwhelmed with the feeling that this abode had been "frozen in time." As we exited we could see the shimmering water of Lake Trasimeno below.



Can't Stop Me Colleen,
Charles, Nicole, Dian, in Umbrian hill coun-



try

We had a wonderful lunch of wild boar, mushroom crepes, shrimps and clams in chick pea soup, and a trio of bruschettes all around that was sensational, all prepared and served by Colleen's friend, Max. He looked a bit like a whirling dervish but then after a half liter of good wine things do seem to whirl.



We popped into the local church which was from approximately 1525 (Roman numerals on a plaque) and when we entered we were in total darkness. Lisa put € .10 in a slot and all at once the hand of God or whatever caused the whole place to light up, all at once, for a short time. It was quite a dramatic effect and we had to do it once more, this time with our cameras ready. Lisa called it our "10 cent miracle."



Fruit-laden altar Upon our return to L'Antiqua Vetreria in Piegara we helped to clear out the rooms of bathroom and kitchen things that the guests had left. This job was actually quite fun and made us feel like we were dividing up the spoils – which we were. Nicole even got two pairs of brand new Sketchers out of Colleen and Lisa's generous sharing of the booty. We had a quick nap in preparation for the evening concert at 8 PM.

When Lisa came knocking, we were all spiffed up for the FREE dinner and concert across the street at the glass factory. We were very interested to see what the Perugia Blues Foundation would serve up, and they didn't disappoint. We were served wine by a tuxedo clad waiter as we entered and then had olive tapenade bruschetta and gnocchi in truffle

sauce followed by tiramisu. Then we headed down to the underground level of the museum, a three-story arch-vaulted brick room where chairs had been set up for the capacity crowd (mostly non-Italian visitors) and listened to a brother/sister act called Black Sheep Duo. They performed songs from the American songbook beautifully, with the brother on white Fender Stratocaster and the sister on vocals.



Performance in a nearly-1000-yr-old glass factory. Afterwords, Lisa helped us plan our itinerary for trips to Rome, Florence and Venice over a cup of coffee and when she left we called Dian's family on Google Voice to share the day's adventures. When the expression, "It's an embarrassment of riches" flew from Dian's mouth, she amended it to say, "It's riches."

DAY 104 (2011-10-23 20:27)

Sunday 23 October 2011

Mass and overdue laundry on a Sunday, the perfect Italian-American blend. (Though in male-dominated Italy, you don't often see the men doing the laundromat dance. Charles got a few stares from strollers-by that turned into smiles and waves.)

Charles took charge, knowing that machines with instructions in an unknown language are fraught with peril no matter how innocuous they appear, and it was a good thing because he was about to scream when it appeared his € 7 investment was irretrievably lost, but then frantic but savvy button-punching saved the day/the load and it was a happy and clean ending. (Though drying was still incomplete after another € 7 dropped in, and the giant load had to be hauled back to the patio for drying rack finishing. Total investment, one load of laundry: € 14 = \$19. Ouch the budget.)



"Our" church in Piegara

Tending the load meant missing mass, and when he heard the report he was sorry he did. Apparently one of the altar boys, around nine, was a totally entertaining distraction. It seemed he could barely remember where he was and what he was about, much to the consternation of his fellow acolytes, and the amusement of the congregation. He would shuffle his feet, stretch, lounge, pick his nose, put things in the wrong place, ring bells at the wrong times. But kindly Fr. Don seemed benevolent in his guidance of his little loose canon, and perhaps that was the most powerful sermon of the day. It was a mass to remember.



We chilled out for the rest of the day – we were getting good at that, and loving it – till our night-time rendezvous at Lisa's cute apartment for a four-course Italian dinner with sing-along, joined by our new Italian-Aussie friend Lucia, a part-time resident of Piegara, like Lisa. Good food, good wines, good music, good night.



(Left to right) Dian, Lisa, Lucia, Nicole



DAY 105 (2011-10-26 04:23)

Monday 24 October 2011

Nicole stayed home while Dian, Charles, Colleen and Lisa went to Tavernelli for the day. Charles was on a mission to open a bank account with the oldest bank in Europe, Monte Dei Paschi Di Siena, founded in 1472. We figured it would be a pretty reliable place to put our money. It would have been impossible to set up without Colleen's help with translating and advice, and we have her to thank for that. While Charles and Colleen were at the bank, Dian and Lisa spent their time at a massive open air market. They came upon a vendor who was more than pleased to sell them his baby artichokes, and after he had finally convinced them to buy, he checked in the back and with a mortified expression said, "Oh, I'm soooooorry! I have no more! Oh, I'm so soooooorry!" He then proceeded to chase after the last person he sold to, but to no avail. Dian and Lisa bought a few different things, and he even threw in some celery tops and parsley for free.



Among other finds of the day, Dian bought a vintage Saks sweater vest for Nicole, a vintage dress for herself, and a classy shirt for Charles. The four had a light lunch (mostly consisting of gelato for us), but treated the gang to whatever they wanted.

The last stop was to take Dian's brown shoes to be repaired, which they had refused to do in Greece. The shoemaker took them right

away, and we went home for the remainder of the day which was a quiet evening.

DAY 106 (2011-10-26 04:24)

Tuesday 25 October 2011

One doesn't take umbrage in Umbria no matter how bad it gets. Therefore when Dian slipped and sprained her ankle she immediately made R.I.C.E. (rest, ice, compression and elevation.) This is not to say that she didn't let a few expletives fly as she went down, with Colleen's recent BAD ankle injury running through her head. Charles thought of that too, as he watched her, right in front of him. The ankle brace Lisa loaned her was helpful as was Charles and Nicole's keeping ice and pillows at the ready. Thankfully the ankle didn't seem broken, so we decided to give it a rest and reconsider our planned foray to Rome that Thursday (accommodations were seemingly non existant anyway).

After a nap, Dian used the last of David's sun dried tomato sauce (from Ikaria) and some fresh tomatoes Charles had bought at the local grocery store for spaghetti dinner. Nicole delivered a hand painted thank you rock to shop keeper Christiana and helped Lisa sort linens in the villa apartment. When Lisa came by later that evening, she helped Charles check the web and call places for staying two nights in Rome – sitting side by side with laptops blazing, they were determined to find a solution that didn't involve king's ransoms, flea-bitten dives or places so far from Rome they spoke French. Even the convents and monasteries were either full or charging like they were offering Heaven along with a clean cot. Giving up, we all had a rousing game of Boggle and the last of the spaghetti.



Colleen loaned Dian some earrings made by our dear friend Pam, to wear to the 26th wed-

ding anniversary dinner out the next night. She was understandably concerned about Dian's well being but we assured her that with some R and R all would be fine. (Colleen's ankle injury happened in Assisi and our family was heading there when Dian fell. Was Saint Francis trying to tell us something?)

DAY 107 (2011-10-26 04:24)

Wednesday 26 October 2011



The Queen and King



The 26th anniversary celebration started early, really early, with Dian waking at 3:30 AM in need of ice and sympathy which Charles gladly provided. Plumping up strategically-engineered piles of pillows for her injured ankle, he decided to stay up for a while in case she awoke and needed something. He had given her the king-size bed all to herself, for comfort's sake. He continued the fruitless search for any way to see Rome short of asking the Pope for a spare bedroom, and decided to see how Dian's ankle was when she awoke before committing to anything. He called his buddy Joel back in Santa Monica, through the computer, and they had a nice 4 AM conversation (7 PM Pacific time, previous day).



When Dian awoke we decided Rome, the Eternal City, would have to wait just a little longer. We wanted her injured ankle to be strong enough for hiking around Florence the following Thursday (we already had our tix for the Uffizi online, 80 bucks worth). Charles hiked to the grocery store (30 meters from our front door), and as we were enjoying breakfast Nicole presented her secret project she had been working on in her room, and D & C were blown away: it was a watercolor portrait of the 26-year couple, using a sneaky photo she had taken of them the day before in their new anniversary clothes, and it was really, really good. Like any good portraitist, of course, she lightly dealt with wrinkles and gray and thinning hair and made them look handsome and 20 years younger.



As they toddled of to dinner at a highly recommended local restaurant, they were a tiny bit jealous of Nicole and hoped their meal could match hers: she was invited to Lisa's for hamburgers (fresh ground by the famous local butcher), french fries and beer-batter onion rings. Yes, there is an American cuisine, and that one sounded yummy to everyone. But the dinner at Di Ilio's was memorable, starting with a glass of prosecco (sparkling wine), a huge antipasti selection for two, then our excellent choices of pasta with funghi (mushrooms) and with tartufi (truffles) with a local red wine, finished dramatically with dessert, a surprise plate for each of us of a small slice of all three cakes being offered. Di Ilio's is a funky, charming place that used to be a stage coach stop a century and a half ago, and had odd decor touches like old antique typewriters and a collection of stylish old cigarette lighters. Our maitre d' was a classy Italiano with a 'do that wouldn't have been out of place in Vegas in the '60s. You can have your baccarat with the stars at Monte Carlo or skiing the alps – this is our kind of fun, and we felt blessed every day to experience it. Happy Anniversary and here's to 26 more!

Thursday 27 October 2011

It was another easy day, with an outing to Tavernelli and Citta Della Pieve with Lisa (sans Nicole). It was a drizzly day and Nicole was happy to stay in a toasty bed.

Lisa went to visit a Piegaro local, Maria Pia, in the hospital while Dian and Charles tooled around the town, got groceries for themselves and Colleen, FINALLY exchanged the left over Croatian money using our new Italian bank, then picked up Dian's shoes at the shoe-maker. Upon being resoled, they were as good as new!



We invited Colleen and Lisa over that evening for a simple yet hearty lentil soup, with a special ice cream dessert garnished with fresh mint leaves from outside our window. The lentils there were smaller than we were used to, but are a local staple. Nicole recounted her slow yet splendid day of reading, playing music, and enjoying the good life.

DAY 109 (2011-11-02 09:27)

Friday 28 October 2011



Saint Francis of Assisi lived other places but most people haven't heard of Saint Francis of Cortona. Undeniably, he spent time there and we visited his monastery tucked into the hills below the mist. Colleen, Lisa, Charles, Dian and Nicole all piled into the car at 10:30 AM for a drive that could have taken place anywhere, it was that foggy!



As we entered the area that a wealthy landowner had given St. Francis and his followers back in 1211, the clouds began to burn away and there was "Le Celle." Two workmen were eating their lunch with legs dangling over the wall leading to the church. For some reason, (preparations for All Saints Day?) the church was closed, but Saint Francis' little chapel adjoining his cell was open and we

sat for a few moments in contemplation. At some times of the year there's a swift running stream that passes right outside his window but when we were there it was nearly dried up. The grape ivy that covered the bridge was a brilliant crimson and the birds were chirping loudly in that sacred place. Dian met a monk who came out to greet a few tourists (from L.A.!), and Charles bought a few souvenirs.



Workers taking a break on the side of a wall. With the other Frances just a few kilometers away, we made a side trip down the road to the home of Frances Mayes, author of "Under The Tuscan Sun." Her terraced garden and house above were beautiful but we didn't stop. Instead we headed into Cortona to have lunch and pick up a map that Colleen had had framed. The shop owner, Ivan, was kind enough to let us see and shoot pictures of his ancient well in the basement of the store. He had fish backlit by a beam of light and an old urn resting on the bottom that made for some interesting shots by Nicole/Ansel Andrews.



We ate in a lovely restaurant across from the theater and had pumpkin/vegetable soup, lasagna, truffles with melted tomino cheese and a pseudo Greek salad among other selections. Have we mentioned how good the food is here in Italy?



Back at home we took a siesta then prepared for karaoke with Lisa at the local bar. We hit a home run with "Country Roads" and tried valiantly to sing along with the kids who knew every Italian song, and performed them with gusto! At midnight, when the local ordinance required them to shut down the music, the small crowd was treated to mussels, shrimp, pizza etc. by the bar owner. Dian gave her a hand-painted rock.



DAY 110 (2011-11-02 09:28)

Saturday 29 October 2011

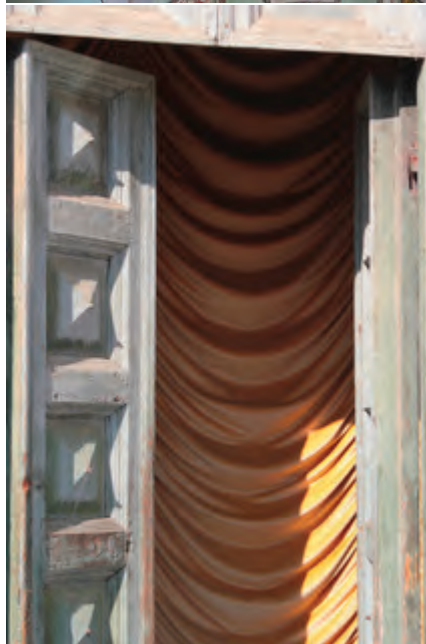
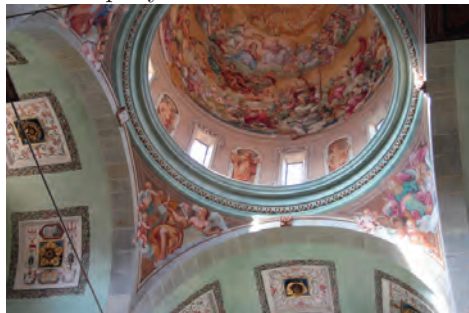
"Want to tool around with me? I want to go hiking and try to get to this convent on a hill I've never been to." said Lisa, and we never hesitated. Turns out we never got to the convent – it was off limits to the public, we confirmed, because of structural damage – and we never really hiked.



But we had a great day, driving the back roads of the Umbrian hill country, through villages frozen in medieval time. We stopped at one early on and it was absolutely charming, with old wagon wheels lined up against a wall, ancient passageways still being used, cobblestone streets of course, bright fall-colored vines adorning stone walls, and hardly a native in sight, certainly no tourists. As a bonus, we found an abandoned stuffed armchair in the parking lot, and after the crew of garage sale vets determined it was salvageable, we stuffed it into the car and drove on.

We wound up at a large monastery (The Seven Brothers) now serving as a B & B and *agriturismo*, (the designation of a place that is still a working farm where people can stay and participate in the lifestyle, usually unchanged for centuries). It turned out they

were preparing for a big chocolate festival the next day, but didn't mind at all our poking around the displays-in-progress. Fascinating old tins, posters, equipment etc. from the century-old, world famous Perugina Chocolate company.



We settled in the "back yard," with fruit and olive (technically a fruit) trees, strawberry plants and grape vines stretching out before us, to enjoy our picnic lunch. One of the people who worked there, a charming young man named Francesco, came over and started chatting with us, and when he asked if we would like some *bruschetta* (toast spread with olive oil or other good stuff), our enthusiasm was obvious, and it was delicious, spicy because it was made from the first olive pressing. He joined us at our table and we talked some more then offered him some pieces of a See's candy bar

Dian's mom had sent from San Pedro. We were happy that this man hosting a Perugia Chocolate Festival smiled with approval when he tasted it. Score one for the New World. We did make a final stop at a park area near Piegara and just walked, sat and took photos, a perfect ending to our day of "tooling around the hill country."



Back home, Lisa invited Nicole over to her place to look over tights, and gifted her with two pairs of them. Dian also reaped some Piegara generosity when Christiana, at Maria Pia's fascinating, jam-packed general store, let her have some wrapping paper with old maps of Italy on them. When it came time to decide whether or not to drive to nearby Citta della Pieve for the last of the fall music series, held each Saturday night in a different town in the area, soldiers fell rapidly. First

Colleen declined (having a tough time with pain from her injury), then Lisa, then finally Nicole opted for a quiet evening alone, tired after a long day. Dian and Charles decided to go it alone.



Garden where we had lunchOne of the reasons for reluctance was that Mr. and Mrs. Andrews didn't have reservations. Through a mix-up, they didn't call for them until mid-week and then it was too late, the free show was "sold out" (maybe because it also included free dinner and unlimited wine bar). When they got there they recognized the two ladies in charge whom they'd met at the concert at the ancient glass factory in Piegara the week before. Charles got in line and Dian went up and whispered to one woman (pulling the LA journalist card), and she leaned over and whispered to the other woman, the keeper of "the list." When Charles got to the table she looked up and admonished, "I told you last week to call me!" Then she immediately said, I think I have two cancellations, and they were in!





The featured act was a stylish young jazz singer, Simona Bencini, performing with her skilled "4tet" in the sumptuous old theatre. They had seats in an upper box, and were looking over their shoulders for John Wilkes Booth to come bursting through the red velvet curtain. He didn't, but Bencini wasn't on an original level that held their interest after a long day, so they snuck out.



Photos by Charles

She had a tough act to follow, because the "warm-up" act blew them away. Paul Venturi is a young Italian blues aficionado so deep into it that he went to the deep south to study, and came away with a deep understanding that translated to the real deal. His playing was ferocious, especially on slide, his body movements indicated total immersion, and his vocals, at first a tad odd for a very slight Italian accent, soon revealed that he not only had da blues pronunciation but felt it to his toes. He was a true talent, who had performed at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage festival, and deserves a wider audience in the US and anywhere real blues is appreciated. His accompaniment by bass player Max Sbaragli was a wonder, and he added licks many times that drew everyone's attention. Charles and Dian

chatted with them after the show and both of them were warm and enthusiastic to talk about music. Paul gave them a copy of his excellent new album *Cold and Far Blues*.

As if that wasn't enough, the meal featured saffron and truffle risotto and morsels of chicken in saffron sauce, plus local red and white wines, coffee and dessert of sweet mimosa with almond dots. That night, "the other royal couple" felt no place on earth had a better offering.



DAY 111 (2011-11-02 09:28)

Sunday 30 October 201

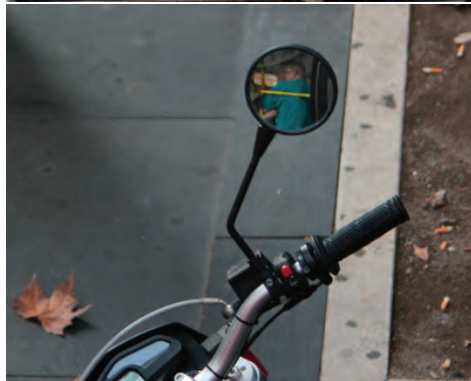


We awoke quite early Sunday morning so we could spend as much time as possible on our first day in Rome, though we did not yet know quite how early we actually were getting up. Because of daylight savings, we had lost an hour, making it 5:00 AM instead of 6:00 AM! Charles and Nicole napped more in the car and Dian drove. We got to Happy Village camping where we were able to get a discount thanks to Charles' press pass. We took the next shuttle, offered by the camp for free, into a train station then to Rome. We could not help but notice all the beaming faces that entered the bus, but we guessed that was all a part of the "Happy Camping" experience.



Our first stop? The Spanish Steps! In days

gone by, people would have been asked in this spot by artists to be their models. Dian drank from the fountain and we climbed the steps. It was a gorgeous day, even hot, and we ducked in the church at the top for refuge. Outside, we peeled some of our layers of clothes.





Descending the steps, we walked a short way through the chi-chi shopping area, and into the Prada store, where we got a bag!...Well, a paper carrying bag one of the employees kindly gave us to replace our ripping plastic one. Nicole tried on a handsome cream sweater, but they left without any purchases.

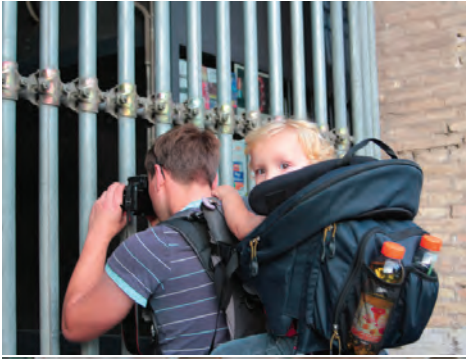


Trying on a sweater at PradaNext stop was Termini station, where many tour buses originated. In the metro station there was a bookstore with English books, so we tried again, without success, to find Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad*. It had gotten even hotter at this point, so we took a moment in the store to rearrange the clothes we had shed into our bag.



Circus Maximus





With the recommendation of a tourist information station, and thanks to Dian's parents Joe and Marie Michell's treat, we took the red, 110 Double-Decker, audio-guided, good-for-48-hours tour bus that drove us to almost every one of Rome's major sites and attractions. We had a little down time before the bus arrived, so Nicole walked around and shot pictures of a statue depicting Pop Benedict XVI.





We got seats on the top level of the bus and enjoyed not only the sites and audio tour, but also not having to drive in Rome! Among other sites we saw: The Colosseum, Circus Maximus, Victor Emmanuel II Monument, Hadrian's Arch and The Forum.



Sitting under an open sky, it began to get a little chilly, so Nicole started going through our bag to get her orange sweater and scarf. They were nowhere to be found. Our minds raced trying to remember where they were. Luckily, Nicole saw the sculpture of the Pope, and we ran back to where we thought the items might still be in the bookstore. Success! There the clothes were, laying next to the clerk behind the counter. We thanked him vigorously, and his honesty boosted our opinion of Romans once again.



Dian hiding unnecessarily in shame Stomachs grumbling, we lunched at a real local eatery with good food and great prices. It was mainly Indian food, and the portions were so good we even had leftovers! As twilight descended, we took a "night" tour on our bus again, stopping at the Colosseum. Sadly, it was closed, but at least we got to see it up close along with Hadrian's Arch.



Taking a walk around the area, though a bit more removed from the teeming crowds and incessant vendors, we met Mario, a musician playing classical guitar music with a beauty and maturity so great that we sat and listened for a long while.



We walked back to the Metro station closest

to Circus Maximus, but Dian was finally snagged by one of the street vendors selling scarves, and she bought a beautiful cut velvet one.



Finally arriving at the stop where the Happy Village shuttle came, we were *just* too late, so we waited around the hour and a half for the next one, with a scoop of gelato to pass the time, we eventually got home. All in all it was a great introduction to Rome.



Mario

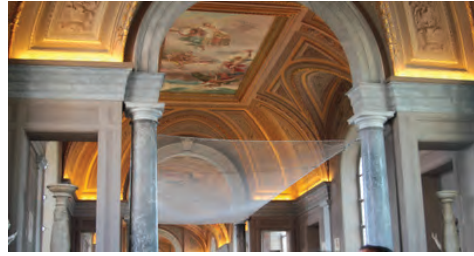
Monday 31 October 2011

We woke up and hurriedly showered and dressed to catch our shuttle at 8:30. It was amazing how many people and baby carriages could be packed like sardines into our free Happy Village Camp bus that took us tearing around corners to the train station. On the way we ate bread, cheese and coffee from the thermos, then after switching to the metro, arrived at the Vatican at 10. HOLY GUACAMOLE! The line stretched at least six blocks and would have been at least a three hour wait. Dian and Nicole went to the end of the line while Charles went up to the front to see what his press pass could do. As Nicole said, "Yeah, right. I'm sure they get lots of journalists waving around their credentials." But a miracle happened. She looked up and exclaimed, "There he is!" The journalistic entourage hightailed it up the street and were in by ten oh two!!! We were told that tickets were full price but when we said Nicole was a student the ticket man winked and said, "She's 15, right?" We of course agreed.

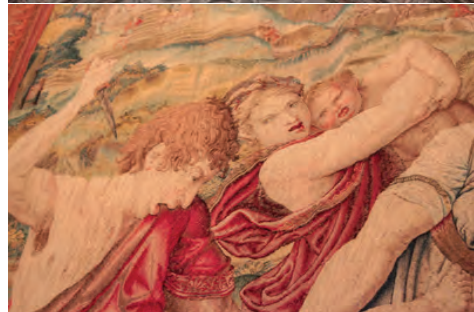
Inside the Vatican museum we wasted no time covering as much territory as possible but also took time to savor things. What a magnificent collection of "the largest treasure trove of art in existence." Nicole gave us the treat of announcing that lunch would be on her. We entered the Sistine Chapel from the museum and marveled at the work of Michelangelo. To the repeated cautions of "Silence!" and "No Photos!" we enjoyed the ceiling as well as the people watching. (How many people took photos, we lost count.)



This whole trip is just a big bust...



A net to catch the crumbling plaster!

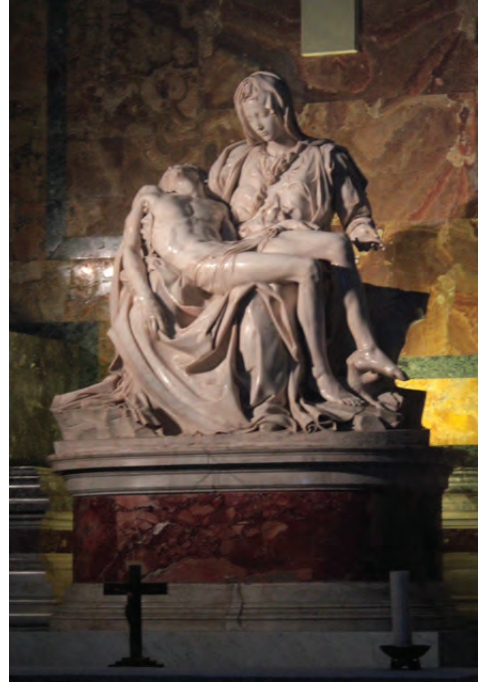




Instead of going directly into Saint Peter's Basilica, we were re-routed by guards who explained that the Pope was next door and all entry was prohibited. Well, it IS his house. So we opted to have the lunch Nicole promised us in the museum cafeteria. It was delicious pork, pasta, vegetables, dessert and bottled water. We really needed the lift and speaking of lifts, that's what we bought tickets for: the dome of Saint Peter's. It had an amazing view of Rome from the top and inside another amazing view of the inside of the basilica from high up. On the way down we became dizzy from the slanted walls of the spiral stairway.

We entered the basilica from street level and were floored by the size of Saint Peter's. The pieta, carved in marble by a 24-year-old Michelangelo, was stunning and touching in its depth of feeling, and the Raphael

paintings and Bernini altar columns were incredible. There were lots of people and we were glad it was the "off season," only shaking our heads at how the crowds would have been at the height of the tourist season.



Getting ready for All Saints Day





Mosaic

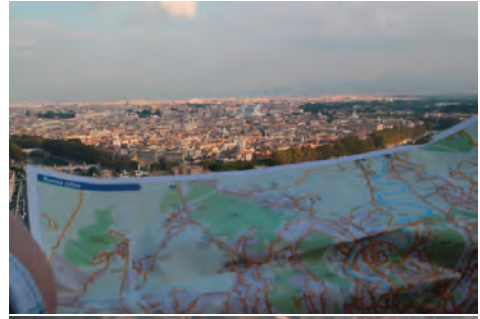


Channeling our Ancient Comedian sides



This woman just strolled on through past the Swiss Guard

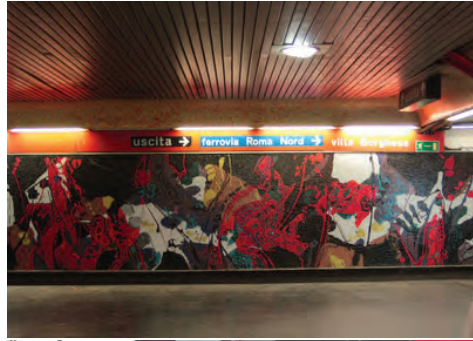




When we exited the bells were ringing like it was "all hallows eve"... hey, wait a minute, it was! We saw the trailer for an official Vatican City (our 17th country) post office. We bought a postcard to mail from this tiny country and when the change came, one of the coins had the pope on it from 2010 - a collectors item and treat for former coin collector Charles. Homing pigeon Nicole got us to the tour bus we had paid for the day before and we continued our tour of Rome from the top level of the double decker with a new perspective of beautifully lit sites. We caught the metro and despite having to wait for the Happy Village van for 45 minutes, we were HAPPY when we arrived back at our van and had homemade lentil soup.



Vatican City Euro!



Just about the only sign of Halloween we saw



DAY 113 (2011-11-02 09:29)

Tuesday 1 November 2011



All Saints Day, not much for U.S. Catholics, but a major holiday/holy day in Catholic Italy. A day for families to gather. So, shortened holiday schedules and lots of things closed all day. Could the Andrews still make the most of their last day in Rome?



Bernini's Triton fountainArrived around 10, as usual, after shuttle bus/train/metro rides from Happy Camp, and after pausing to gaze at Bernini's wonderful Fountain of the Triton we went straight for one of our top undone to-do's, the famous baroque masterpiece Trevi Fountain. It's such a huge, spectacular creation that it's hard to imagine

it was pretty much overlooked until the movie made it a star. We gawked and took photos and tossed our three coins in the fountain, guaranteeing we would all come back to Rome someday.



We then turned around and marched up and into the church of Saints Vincenzo and Anastasio, the parish church of popes when they lived up the hill in the Palazzo de Quirinale. Supposedly built on the spot where the beheaded St. Paul's cranium bounced to the ground (and a spring immediately burst forth) – although there are two other sites that also claim this – it's also known for a macabre claim to fame: the hearts and intestines of a couple centuries worth of popes are preserved there. We didn't see (nor smell) them.



Sign outside Capuchin monasterySo we then marched up the hill to the Quirinale, home to popes and the kings of Italy until the end of WWII. Another huge and magnificent monument there, and Dian went horizontal on the cobble stones to get a great shot. Charles had to warn her of a fast-approaching, unsmiling policeman bent on preserving the dignity of the place. There were many of them around the palazzo piazza – did we mention all Italian uniforms are reeeeeeally stylish? – police and army, because it turns out their HQ are there, and just down the street, the Department of Defense.

Having narrowly averted carabinieri incarceration, we took off for another post-Halloween sight, the Capuchin monastery on the Via Veneto, formerly the street of movie stars and other glitterati. For a mere one Euro donation, you can see what the monks did with the bones of 4,000 fellow monks when they had to relocate their burial spot: they turned them into art, with half a dozen rooms and ceilings covered with skulls and bones, vertebrae and entire skeletons in brown robes. We loved their explanation of the spiritual reminder you're supposed to get from all this calcium: "What you are now, we once were; what we are now, you will be."



Roman street art

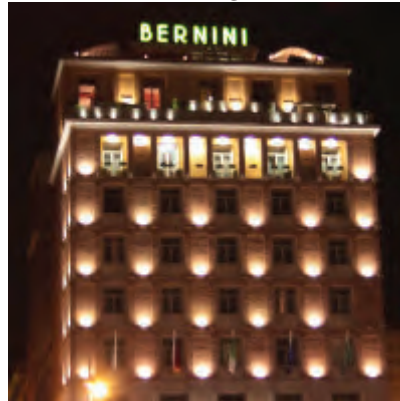


Charles had gone there on his European sojourn 40 years ago and wanted the girls to experience that unusual site/sight, and also another that impressed him, the catacombes. So we hopped the metro for the closest stop and switched to a bus for the ride down the Appian Way to where three catacombes bump up against each other, choosing to visit the renowned catacombe of St. Callixtus, burial (under)ground of 56 martyrs, 16 popes, 18 saints and half a million other Christians.

When the heat was on the Christians would celebrate mass in the 'combes, and if the Man got word he would send Roman imperial soldiers down to find them and wipe them out. If they had some warning they could hide in the huge labyrinth of tunnels, if not, well, at least one pope was slain there as he was saying mass. Also it was the site of the tomb of Saint Cecilia, patron saint of sacred music, who survived the maximum three strokes of the ax on her neck and walked away, but died shortly thereafter. It's hard to be a saint in the city.



Stain glass window



The ride down the Appian Way was an unexpected treat, a delightful country lane with walls on both sides that took you way back: it was the main thoroughfare of ancient Rome, stretching all the way to the coast at Brindisi, and you could easily imagine an endless column of troops clattering down the cobblestones on their way to conquer Greece or Macedonia or Turkey not to mention the merchants.

But we had more fish to fry and we tried to make it to the Colosseum to go inside, but

no bus went very close and we got off at a wrong stop and had to hoof quite a ways. Our journey was made pleasant, though, by our walking companion Roberta, a local woman ("born in the center of Rome." she proudly declared) who not only gave us directions but went with us, on her way to visit her 88-year-old mother. Alas, the joint closed at 3:30 – !?! – maybe because of the time change and early darkness, maybe because schedules in Rome seemed pretty random. But we made the best of it with a recommendation from sweet Roberta (in her broken English: "give a kiss to LA for me when you go back.") for great pizza in the neighborhood. We didn't find the exact spot she was telling us about but did find a great little place with outdoor tables on a small piazza filled with families. We splurged on a pizza and a drink for each of us, fully rounding off our last day in the Eternal City.



Finding angles everywhere



Our dinner



Dian, Roberta and Charles
in front of the Coliseum

DAY 114 (2011-11-02 09:29)

Wednesday 2 November 2011

Grateful to sleep in after a few rather grueling sightseeing days, we were about to leave Happy Village Camping when a German camper, with a father and son, stopped right in front of our van to start digging in the back of their camper. Dian was a little perturbed that he was blocking our way and we were just sitting there ready to go, but after a little while he pulled out two bottles of prized Stuttgarter Hofbraü beer from his hometown, where Charles had been stationed during the Vietnam War. Unbeknownst to Dian and Nicole, Charles had had a discussion with the man about the area, which is how he knew Charles would appreciate the beer. He handed it to us, saying, "Please, for you and your wife! Auf wiedersehen!" We thanked him and sped off to find an Ikea where we could buy comforters for the oncoming winter.

At Ikea we bought two extra warm comforters, covers for those comforters, and bigger towels than the ones we had been using. Dian and Charles had a cappuccino and muffin and Nicole had a vegan sandwich in the Ikea cafeteria, and we left for Piegaro...we thought.

Unfortunately, James "GPS" Bond had a nervous breakdown (possibly poisoned by some femme fatale/spy). This resulted in us CIRCLING Rome for over an HOUR. *Finally* he returned to normalcy, and we got home, listening to the CD of the blues duo Charles and Dian had seen live. Although the episode resolved itself, it made us a bit nervous for James' reliability, since he was purchased not two months before and should not have had problems like that.

We thoroughly enjoyed our trip to Rome and it will surely not be our last. After all, we did put three coins in the Trevi Fountain which pretty much guaranteed our return.





One last bonus: we nervously waited for the last train to leave and watched our watches hoping to make it back for the 8:30 PM shuttle bus back to Happy Camp, and not have to wait for the last one at 9:30. Oh joy, the driver waited an extra 5 minutes and we made it. Happy.

DAY 115 (2011-11-04 16:43)

Thursday 3 November 2011

We got up early for our trip to Florence with Lisa (who had an early plane to catch the next morning, back to the States). Using Colleen's car and our GPS we entered the city near the train station and found our cute little hotel situated within five blocks of the Ponte Vecchio (the covered bridge dating from 1345 that was the only one not destroyed by retreating German soldiers in World War II).

We dumped our stuff in the room and hurried over to the Uffizi Gallery where we had reservations for 3 PM. The ceilings and halls were decorated with all kinds of cherubs and scenes while the gallery walls were hung with the masters like Michelangelo and Rembrandt. One room even had a continuous loop of movies that were filmed in the Uffizi – by director Brian DePalma, "Room With A View," a George Hamilton/Sandra Dee flick etc. We went up to the terrace and had an espresso, (remember NO CAPPUCINO AFTER TOMATOES) then went down to the gift store where Nicole bought three books in English.





Strolling around we took many photos of the Arno river with the city lights reflected in it. In Firenze – how did we get “Florence” out of that? – we were able to watch artisans still working in their shops late in the evening. It felt like going back in time to see patterns and wooden hat forms in a milliner’s shop run by Tobia, who graciously helped Dian try on some hats.

As anyone can tell you, dark chocolate is the best panacea for tired “ffizis,” so we indulged in four pieces to save for a bit later, when dinner was done. We found a great restaurant near our hotel that served cream

sauce with gnocchi, spaghetti and tortellini (more north, hence the cream-based dishes). Then came the meat/fish course, which we enjoyed despite the tables of English-speaking tourists right next to us. Dian felt slightly less exotic with the familiar accents but admitted that sometimes it’s a welcome sound. We crashed in our respective beds and while Charles worked on the computer in the lobby, Lisa, Nicole and Dian chatted like girls at a slumber party.



Tobia, the young apprentice designer/milliner



The Ponte Vecchio



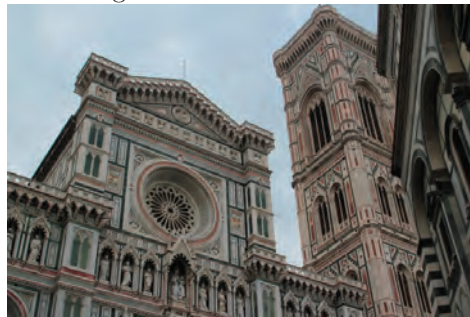
bia and model

DAY 116 (2011-11-04 16:44)

Friday 4 November 2011

Morning found Dian's ankle begging for a rest - "All museum-ed out," she pronounced - but Nicole and Charles were up for the renowned Accademia, home of Michelangelo's titan David statue, so off they went without reservations, hoping for the best. Dian leisurely enjoyed the neighborhood, an espresso, second-hand shops, art store, and mailed a package of family Christmas presents.

The Accademia departure was delayed while Charles attempted to find a safe (won't get a massive ticket, or towed) parking spot for Colleen's car. When the culture hounds arrived after a long walk, pausing to take in and take photos of the immense, breathtakingly beautiful Duomo with its alternating stripes of black and white marble behind a facade so intricate you can hardly believe it, they found a long, long line. Will it work again? Do the drill: Nicole secured a place in line, Charles flashed the press pass, and bingo, not only side door immediate admission, but his ticket was gratis. Love it. That degree was worth something after all.



Once inside they walked into the first room, lined with impressive works of large scale (as is most of the Accademia). Most places save

their best for later, let you build up to it. But after a slow cruise around, Nicole asked, "Would it be terrible to go straight to David?" Just as Charles was agreeing that might be a good plan, they spotted the museum of musical instruments off to the side, and couldn't resist. Glad they did, they saw gorgeous instruments nearly 400 years old, two by Stradivarius, and realized in this one small room was millions of dollars of irreplaceable instruments, the recognized pinnacle of the craft. There were two beautiful hurdy gurdies with carved heads for handles (an old painting showed us they've been around longer than we thought, and we were reminded of the teen we heard skillfully playing in Budapest), and an odd instrument from 1793 that must have been the world's first key-tar.

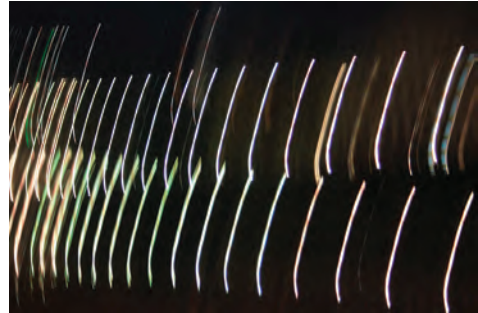
So, where was that pesky David? They walked into the next room and were stopped in their tracks. There, far away but looming dramatically above the admiring crowds, was the unmistakable shining white giant. "I didn't imagine the statue was *that* big," Nicole said. Five meters, 17 feet tall. To get to him, you had to walk past the perfect preview, a series of unfinished statues by Michelangelo lining the long high-ceilinged hall, primal figures trying to contort out of their marble prisons. Some believe he intentionally left them unfinished, to illustrate the process.

And then they came right up to what many consider the finest statue ever fashioned and one the greatest artworks in existence. Words fail as you gaze upward, then circle around. Michelangelo's achievement was astonishing, a gigantic creation in marble that seemed beyond lifelike. They snuck back for several goodbye peeks before finally leaving the grand museum. David was the star of Accademia, but there were so many other great works. Nicole was later gratified to find one she particularly examined in a guidebook, with greater explanation. Art 101. Or maybe 401, since it was in person.



Upon exiting they remembered that on the same street was a recommended gelato place that served Sicilian-style. Charles' tiramisu-chocolate mousse cone was way rich, a treat but he'd rather have the other kind several times a week. It was Italy!!

Back to pick up Dian, who circled back to the hotel just before they did, with her shopping bounty. On the way out of Florence we had to stop nearby the Duomo so Dian could take a look. One more astonished onlooker. Then on to Siena and back to Piegaro.



Dian always had an inkling Siena was a town we had to visit; Charles wondered if they really needed one more ancient gorgeous Umbrian hill town. Dian was right. Siena was beautiful and charming and held memories for the Andrews: the New York City transplant in her bookstore with many English titles (but not Twain's "The Innocents Abroad"), a terrific lunch on the patio with great views and a chef whom we saw pick the fresh basil for Nicole's spaghetti marinara, and, at dusk, probably the greatest piazza in Italy, Piazza del Campo, massive enough to host the horse races they've held there twice a year for at least 350 years. Nearly empty, at night in the off-season, it was spectacular.

This very full day got us back to our beloved

La Cantina in Piegaro late enough to fall thankfully into bed. (Thank you Colleen, for making beautiful L'Antica Vetreria available to us. We will never forget.)

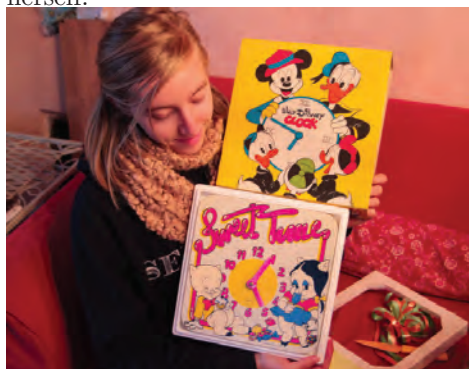


Street art we thought by Blu

DAY 117 (2011-11-06 03:57)

Saturday 5 November 2011

Yet another slow day in our Piegaro Palace. The sun was out, and Dian and Nicole walked down to Christiana's store to look around (it is quite a store to look around in, with tons of knick knacks of every shape, size, and category) and buy a few gifts for the holidays and for friends. Nicole found something to give her friend Lisa whom she would be seeing in a matter of days and got a great old clock for her own room as an early birthday present to herself.



Walt Disney box, but Warner Brothers characters? Because she was closing soon for *pranza* and we didn't have enough money with us, she said to come back later to pick up the clock. Nicole had been eyeing a hair clip, and Christiana said to keep it.



The hair clip! Dian and Nicole came back with money and a bag of sour candies for her, but they wanted to explain that they were sour before she tasted them, so Christiana handed Nicole an English-Italian dictionary. She could not find the word "sour", so instead she searched for "tart." After showing Christiana the word, she looked puzzled, and tried to explain that, as in English, there was a double-meaning for that word, as in a woman of ill repute. We laughed after she told us, and Nicole finally found "sour," thereby making Christiana comfortable enough to pop one of the candies in her mouth.

Charles had gone to pick up some groceries, so Nicole and Dian met him at the store, then went to the butcher to possibly pick out something special for dinner. We settled on .5kg of pork and beef, which they ground right in front of us and even pressed into patties for our dinner. They offered to add some spices, and the result was *delizioso*!



Now that's quality.

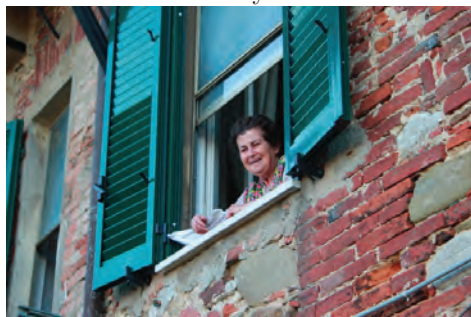
Day 118 (2011-11-06 14:23)

Sunday 6 November 2011

Not much to report that day, and what's wrong with that? With only three full days left to enjoy our gorgeous L'Antica Vetreria digs in Piegaro, digging them we were, the only occupants left in the off-season.



After Charles whipped up an onion omelet with a touch of fresh garlic for breakfast, he sorted through some old paperwork he didn't want to lug around any more. Nicole got some coveted uninterrupted laptop time and finished up her blogs and otherwise just noodled enjoyably, and she and Dian decorated some more pine cone Christmas ornaments before Dian took a walk down the hill to explore the cemetery we could see from our northern windows. She reported it was covered in flowers, left by families on All Saints Day.



A local waving hello Then we got busy, Dian and Nicole attacking the bathrooms in all the units, as promised to our generous benefactor Colleen (now back in Seattle till February), while Charles took a large bag of dirty laundry to the laundromat. Having the previous experience of figuring out the machines, he strategized drying cycles so one wash and two drying loads cost only (gulp) 16 Euros – about

22 bucks. He decided he'd have to drink a lot of cheap Tuborgs to compensate for that extreme expense.

Dinner by Dian was a healthy pasta concoction sauced with fresh tomatoes, baby peas, parmesan reggiano cheese and spices from the terrace. It looked like we'd have a good portion of leftovers, but no one could resist nibbling after the plates were pushed away. Would Charles' weight loss/increasingly concave stomach suffer from this domestic indulgence in Piegaro? We would see. Soon we'd be back on the road with fewer eating choices and more walking, but so far all his pants still fell off without a tightened belt. Hooray! More trivia book grilling from Dian and compliments for her travel mates for their wide range of knowledge. Next year, LA, look out Jeopardy.



The spread



The dish

DAY 119 (2011-11-06 16:59)

Monday 7 November 2011

Rain and "Pietro's Stories" a favorite book of Colleen's, plus decorating Christmas ornaments gave us another *dolce per niente*. What a pleasure it was to have a whole apartment to ourselves.

We had homemade pesto with spaghetti, corn and fresh bread for dinner, and finished the night with a reading of the final pages of the "Science and Nature Trivia Book" book, a gem because it's from 1985 and so... charmingly outdated. Especially the computer references.



day 120 (2011-11-14 08:09)

Tuesday 8 November 2011

"Hey Nicole, want to take a day-long drive to go see two more old Italian towns, stop four times to try again to get that elusive bottle of camping gas and the proper adaptor after we first run some errands in town? – or sleep in and enjoy this beautiful villa, all to yourself, doing what ever you want to do?" You guessed it.



Photos by Charles



So Dian and Charles took Nicole's boots in to be stretched by the Spanish shoe guy in nearby Tavernelle, and also deposited some money in their new Italian bank account and got Dian signed on too (thanks, Francesca!). They took off first for nearby Perugia, the big capital town of the area, hoping to see some sights but focused on first finding the right camping gas store. Let's make this painful story short: four places to try, no success, and the last stop James GPS Bond led them to was some tiny place that looked like it hadn't been open in decades and was right in the middle of the Old Town, which meant narrower and tinier streets where they were squeezing between cars and stone walls with centimeters of clearance (more gray hairs), and possibly a big fat ticket because you're not allowed to drive in there without a permit ("They took your picture, I'm afraid," a couple strolling their baby informed us). By the time Dian and Charles got out we had no taste for another moment in Perugia.

So on to Gubbio, where they did enjoy strolling the town, peeking in churches, having a couple of cheap but good espressos and a pizza that was great, then off for home, but one more treat. Looking for the turn-off to Piegario and our home on the hill, Dian signaled when she spotted the place she had seen

before that said "olive oil for sale," and they pulled in to what looked like the driveway alongside a house.



It was, but behind the house was the whole operation, the real deal: local farmers in trucks dropping their harvests off, a young woman forklifting the mounds of green fruit back to an open area with a hole that emptied onto a belt that transported the olives up to an enclosed area and into a large open vat with two very large metal wheels circling constantly, to crush the just-picked olives into very fresh olive oil. So fresh that when Charles and Dian got their two liter can, the woman filled it from one of the large standing vats that had just been filled and stuck a label on it. It don't get no better (or fresher) than that.



DAY 121 (2011-11-14 08:11)

Wednesday 9 November 2011

The day before leaving L'Antica Vetreria was bittersweet. Bitter because we hated to leave our Shangri-La of 25 days and sweet because of all the memories of people, places and food we had experienced. We finished packing and loading our stuff in the van so that we could leave bright and early the next morning. (One can always hope, right?)

Dian went down to Christiana's store to purchase a 3D puzzle for her nephew who is a crack jigsaw puzzler. In addition to wrapping the gift, Christiana threw in a pair of socks as a going away present and Dian presented her with a VaVa LaVoom CD. Next, she bought a salami and some tomatoes from Micheli's grocery store and also gave him a CD. We were so glad to have met the folks of Piegaro, who still greet each other and walk slowly around the piazza or up to the bakery along the cobblestone streets.



The completed puzzle, courtesy of Zach and TessaCharles took the stroll along the path below that he had been meaning to explore. With a last photography outing Nicole captured more memorable images of the woods near Tom and Colleen's villa. We left a hand painted card of their town by Dian, along with

a hand painted plate by a local artist depicting the church tower of Piegaro.



After a final packing of the van (no easy task after living in La Cantina almost a month) and a simple pasta with butter and cheese dinner, we turned in.

DAY 122 (2011-11-14 08:12)

Thursday 10 November 2011



"Ciao, Piegato" Vowing to get a really early start toward Venice and actually getting away were two different matters. We had so many last-minute things to take care of, as the last folks remaining at L'Antica Vetreria, that the sun was way up before we spun outta there. Goodbye, beautiful Umbrian oasis; hello again to the road and living in the van. But unless you move away from paradise, you'll never find the paradise around the next bend.



We retraced the previous day's route up through Perugia (ain't stoppin' there!) and Gubbio toward Urbino, a town recommended by too many people to ignore. It wasn't different enough from all the other ancient Italian hill towns we'd seen to keep us there for long, just long enough to walk up and back down the extremely steep main road, check out the beautiful church which featured a number of

manger scenes (but no El Caganer), and sit on the steps watching the pigeons. One club-footed pigeon who we imagined had walked all the way from Cincinnati joined the others, a little late, but fought valiantly for his share of the rosemary bread. It's a university town teeming with students.



This photo is deceiving. It was much steeper. We swear.





The road there was misty and twisty and often beautiful with bright fall colors. We were relying on our GPS James Bond but were a bit puzzled when he said we were there but we had not seen any signs announcing it. We stopped to talk with two women picking vegetables from the field and they said No, it's farther up. The city or the country? We decided to trust Bond and assume we had hit the country of San Marino, until a bit up the road, already bound for Rimini on the Italian coast and the route to Venice, we saw a sign that read, Republic of San Marino, 10 km. It was getting dark but we decided to nail it, so off we went.



Locals- we mean miniature models of locals, inside a church



San MarinoWe found it, we were definitely in San Marino, in fact as we rounded a bend on the hilltop city and saw an official sign beckoning, Camper Park, 48 hrs – never has a nation provided a nice park-side lot and invited us to stay two days for free – we couldn't resist.



We drove on towards our goal of country #18, San Marino. Never heard of it? It's only a speck, a large town and a small bit of surrounding countryside, known to Charles from his boyhood stamp collecting days. (Those tiny principalities literally used to live off their sales of stamps and coins. What do they do now that no one collects?)



Not much there, a small bar (European "bars" serve coffees, croissants, sometimes sandwiches as well as drinks, and the whole family goes) where we got an espresso, but when we returned to our van we encountered another large camper pulling in, and when the driver strolled by and motioned that our lights were still on, we beckoned him over, chatted and invited him and his wife to dinner.



Realizing we didn't have enough dinner for five, we walked across the street to a small market and got a bottle of wine and a tomato and cheese pastry, and took it to their camper. Their spacious, luxurious, warm, well-lit, fully outfitted camper. (Sigh.) Jean Louis and Jacqueline were from Alsace, that region of France where some of Charles' family on his dad's side lived until WWI, that has forever bounced between German and French domination. We had a great visit and came away with much good road advice especially about Morocco, which they loved and had spent much time in. They provided very specific and valuable information, and even gave us their USB wi-fi stick, which was cheaper to reload than to buy.

We retired early, it was chilly but we were toasty under our new Ikea comforters (and

Dian's mink coat, sent to Piegaro by her folks). Who's roughing it?



DAY 123 (2011-11-14 08:13)

Friday 11 November 2011 – 11/11/11 !!



A Primary Day! Nigel Tufnel Day! A day to get up and off really early to get to Venice. While Nicole snoozed in the back we drove through early morning fog/mist through Italian countryside, more and more watery with rivers and canals and swamp as we got closer to Venezia. We opted off the tolled autostrade, only 20 minutes more, and more scenic.



We got to Camp Venessia by 10. "Classy," camp vet Nicole quickly observed, and when we

later saw the restrooms, that cinched it, the nicest, most spacious we'd seen, piped in music, lots of showers, the works. These things were important (well, not the piped in music). But they were indicators of price - this was one of our most expensive camps, at 31 Euros, nearly 44 bucks. Free wi-fi! – but we learned, available only in a small circle on the patio, outside, freezing.



Venice? Sinking? What
would make you say that?



Worse: after registering we went outside to drive into the parking area, and Clifford wouldn't start. Two nice guys from the camp office came out and looked at the engine about as cluelessly as Charles, then muscled

in to push it for a jump start, but no go. Then Charles got into a very frustrating four-hour odyssey to get roadside assistance, with a phone with very little credit left and computer calls that were always iffy and cutting off. Roadside assistance really screwed up and a supervisor later apologized profusely, but that didn't get Charles back the hours he wanted to spend in Venice, nor the gray hairs added.



Singing

gondoliers



Realizing quickly this would not be easily resolved, he sent Nicole and Dian off for Venice. We picked the camp because it was only a five-minute bus ride from the edge of the ancient island city. When the tow truck finally arrived, Charles sat in it for the ten minute ride to the mechanic. Turns out the truck driver was also the mechanic, Georgio, and the kid at the garage was his son. Just the two of them. After some time, some very boring strolling around the small garage, punctuated by worrying about the time, Georgio declared it was a bad starter – made sense, with the history so far – and that he could have one by morning and have it installed by noon. Hooray! – sort of.





That meant no sleeping quarters for the Andrews, but Charles had prepared for that eventuality by reserving one of the last bungalows at the camp, very plain, two sets of twin bunk beds and a small shower. But with electricity to charge devices, and a heater! Very toasty! And, an additional 26 Euros, but we had no choice and were lucky to have that.





By then it was after 5 PM, and the Happy Trails Gang had a plan to meet at the Ponte Vecchio at 6, or missing that, at 8. After a ride back to camp and a quick finalizing of bungalow rental, Charles walked quickly to the bus stop, where it was just pulling out as he got there. Sweat, sweat. 15 minutes later, another bus, the five minute ride, but then came the trek across Venice, really difficult with an inadequate map and narrow, crowded streets often unmarked heading in spider web directions. Head down, barely knowing he was in Venice, many stops for directions, Charles charged on. "It's just five minutes away," he was told, great! Can make it. On and on and on, ask again, "Only five minutes away." Again, OK, can relax a little now, look and enjoy, even stop to buy tangerines at a nighttime street market, picturing offering peeled ones to the girls as they met at the famous bridge.



Occupy Venice



Next stop for directions: "It's only 10 minutes away." What?! Ten now?! Panic. Didn't want to spend two hours alone in Venice when the family was right there, and certain they wouldn't either, they might already be Veniced out for the day. Charge again, sweat, panic, FINALLY make it there at one minute after 6 – surely they'd wait and look for him. But no one knew Ponte Vecchio not only has two distinct sides but a middle separated by shops, and that there would be teeming crowds even at that hour in the off season. So, six points "at the bottom of the bridge," to check. Back and forth, up and down, more sweating, true panicking now, and it was 6:20 – they may have moved on.



Dian signed as Daisy in the Disney store for an employee



Suddenly, at the top of the middle section of the bridge, there they were!! Nicole spotted Charles at the same time he spotted her. They weren't going to give up either. A joyous reunion! Then off for another hour and a half of Venice at night and we were all pleased to ride back to camp and slip into warm bunk beds.



Nicole and Dian's day in Venice: The gondolier who sand O Solo Mio as he passed below the bridge was Dian's favorite memory (she sang along!) Nicole loved the photo ops in the grand old city as you can see.



Saturday 12 November 2011

After a good night's sleep in our bunk beds and a hot shower (right next to the toilet with no curtain or door, just water going down a drain), we had a quick coffee and cake then checked out of Camping Villagio Venezia and were picked up by Luca, the son of the mechanic who had fixed our starter.

We were told by Giorgio, the mechanic, that the refurbished starter had a one year guarantee, which of course wouldn't do us any good after leaving Venice but at least he seemed to back up his work... to the tune of about \$540! As Dian backed out she heard the hated fan belt "squeal" so he tightened the housing, and with a slip of paper for insurance purposes explaining that he couldn't get all the parts to completely fix the van in three days, we were off with fingers crossed.

Charles had sacrificed his day in Venice to babysit the van the day before so while Nicole and Dian waited in a nearby gas station that was closed, he took the Grand Canal boat ride ("best six and a half euros I ever spent," he said) and thoroughly enjoyed his two and a half hour whirlwind tour of Venice. On his year-long trip 40 years ago Venice was skipped, so he did not want that to happen again. Together with the couple of evening hours he squeezed in the night before, it was enough.

By 4:40 PM we were headed to Lugano on the autostrada, about six hours away. Since the van didn't sound quite right, we were eager to get to there and "deliver" Nicole to her friend Lisa before anything else broke down. Charles had been in touch with our German ace mechanic and he was trying to figure out the best solution for a van that had had four tows in four months. Along the way were beautiful, over the top Christmas decorations on giant malls, but other than that the drive was uneventful and not very picturesque.



Lisa's

gift from us, a vintage Luney Toons Speedy Gonzales brush and comb. At 8 PM we entered our 19th country, Switzerland. Without a greeting of welcome or even a smile from the border guards, we were told to buy a vignette (highway pass) which cost \$52, the most expensive one yet. This was our first clue as to the pricey nature of the Swiss lifestyle. Since only francs are used we had to change money at the border and then continue on past Lake Como glittering in the night air and finally to Lisa's dormitory at Franklin College in Sorengo. Unfortunately, as Charles was turning the van around the van stalled sideways in the middle of the street AND WOULD NOT START! In a Fellini-esque moment Dian saw Lisa running up the hill in slow motion while Nicole and Charles looked frozen in the middle of the road. Just in time (before a line of cars came careening around the corner to Dian's waving arms), the van came alive and we drove to the lower lot of the campus, saving our hugs and hellos till we could relax. Would Clifford ever start again?

When Nicole left to sleep in Lisa's dorm room, Charles and Dian braved their first night in below 40 (F) weather in the van.



DAY 125 (2011-11-14 08:16)

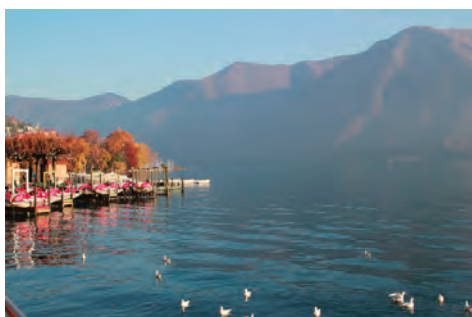
Sunday 13 November 2011

Charles and Dian's day:

"H..i..i...." The voice on the cell phone at 9 AM was very groggy. Bless her heart, Nicole had heeded the request to call the next morning, not too late, so we could all get together for her pre-birthday lunch sometime before the sun went down. We were anticipating that the newly-reunited Samohi buddies Nicole and Lisa might stay up really late jabbering in Lisa's dorm room at Franklin College in Sorengo, Switzerland. So much to catch up on. Charles was touched by her dutiful effort and told her to go back to sleep, birthday girl, and thanks, we'd see them around noon.



At noon the four of us took off for Lugano (the much larger lake town down the hill from Sorengo) to search for a lunch spot, something fitting to the importance of the celebration, but without spending more for lunch than we did for her birth and education combined. Not an easy task in the land of \$20-up spaghetti plates but we finally found a nice panini place with an extensive menu, on the sidewalk right across the street from the lake. Score.



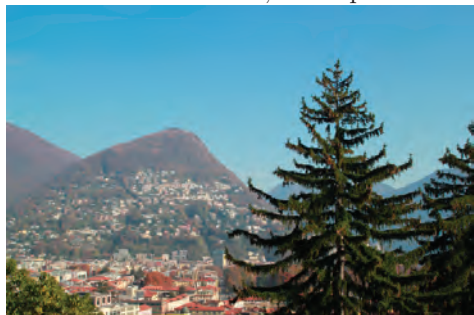
Nicole

wearing her new necklace made by Dian from a pottery shard Nicole lucked out by ordering hot chocolate – she got *densa*-style, thick enough to require a spoon, for eating not stirring. Presents were presented: a small box of Ferrero Rocher, her favorite chocolates, a cool "18 Year Old" cartoon card in Italian, and something special – a pendant her mom fashioned of a piece of ceramic Nicole found on a beach in Italy, hung from a chain her mom and dad picked out in Piegaro, at their favorite little store. She seemed pleased, and put it on right away. And everyone enjoyed their paninis (Italian toasted sandwiches).

They strolled a bit after lunch but Lisa announced she had a paper to work on, so she and Nicole headed back while Dian and Charles strolled on, window shopping in the land of Cartier and Rolex (all closed on Sunday) and searching for the perfect special cake for the actual birthday the next day. They held out and finally found a winner, a fantastic-looking pear and chocolate mousse with dark chocolate frosting. Dang, we were glad we had that baby – you can't just go out and buy a cake like that for yourself for no reason.



Back at the van we faced what turned out to be a very cold night. At 9 PM we heard a knock at the window and bounced outside to talk with a couple of nice RAs who were walking the campus, doing their job of looking out for the students. Usually small college campuses in Switzerland do not host camper vans in their parking lots. Fortunately, at Dian's urging, Lisa had sent an email to the administration alerting them that her visiting friend's camper had died and was stuck in the lot, and Dean Leslie Guggiari had responded, "Thanks for the notice, not a problem."



Dian survived the chill; Charles, always sensitive to the cold, thought he would die and vowed from beneath his layers of covers, Not one more night like this!

Nicole's day:

Apart from the morning festivities of a *delizioso* lunch and present-opening and walk around the town, Lisa and I headed back to her room. She eventually left to work in the library, but after about seven hours without hearing anything from her, I began to wonder if she'd died, or if she knew I was about to. Luckily, one of her neighbors, came in to invite me to an event going on in another building. He contacted her and as it turns out she had barricaded herself in with a friend to

study. I was shown where the room was, and after Lisa apologized (and was chastised by her friends) I brought a book and iPod back so I could stay with them until late. At the stroke of midnight, one of her friends asked, "Guess what time it is?? It's your birthday!" and played a birthday song and celebrated briefly before cracking down again.

I finally called it a night a couple hours after, but Lisa didn't finish working until 7 AM.

DAY 126 (2011-11-14 08:17)

Monday 14 November 2011

Dian and Charles's day:

Woke up and it was f'n cold. Charles and Dian dressed up to meet Dean Guggiari, who replied to Lisa's email that "all was fine" regarding leaving our van in the lower campus lot. We hoped we wouldn't meet someone who was unsympathetic to our plight and were delighted to find the Dean of Students to be warm, empathetic, fun and informative to talk with, and glad to e-mail her staff that we should not be towed. After leaving her office we paid a visit to one of Franklin College's ace recruiters, Raymond Orinoco. He gave us an overview of the campus and some brochures that Nicole might find interesting. With a student body of 430 plus full accreditation in Europe and the US plus an emphasis on travel what's not to like? We were impressed with Franklin College, and appreciated their kind consideration.



When we got back to the van who was sitting there but THE BIRTHDAY GIRL. We caught up then lit the candles on her chocolate/pear cake. Yum!!! Nicole and Dian bought a few groceries at the deli across the street, then she left for Lisa's residence and Dian and Charles napped or blogged for the rest of the afternoon.





friend Sonja have become quite good friends with the lunch ladies due to their frequent visits.

A few of Lisa's friends came over later to celebrate my birthday, and I was flattered by their hospitality.



Lisa hiding in her blankets

Later we had spaghetti and rolls followed by a mean game of Scrabble (decided on the very last play). We rolled the van into a more private space in the lot and went across the street for a cappuccino. Too bad we just missed Nicole and Lisa who had brought quiche and potatoes by (but at least we didn't miss Lisa's previous visit when she brought a blanket for Charles).

Fingers crossed for a warmer sleep.



Lisa got a telegram from her friend back home! Nicole's day:

I brought back a couple slices of the cake for Lisa (and another for me!) and she continued to slave away on her paper. I wrote about the previous day for the blog, and we ate later at the school's dining hall, where Lisa and her

DAY 127 (2011-11-16 07:23)

Tuesday 15 November 2011

Charles and Dian's day:

Another day to kill in dear old Lugano. We tried to make the best of it, and these intrepid travelers will always find the gold underneath the plastic.

Charles survived the frigid night with the help of a blanket from Lisa and advice on layering everything we had from Dian. It worked. He concluded the problem the night before was that he worked on the computer in the van late, without blankets, and by the time he put his frozen toes in bed it was too late and he could never get warm. Lesson learned.

After a breakfast of coffee and (not birthday) cake, Dian and Charles set off for town, walking down the hill from Franklin College where their van stalled, with a mission. Well, one had a mission. The one who realllly loves second-hand stores and has found so few of them in Europe. Unfortunately this one was not notable so they moved on to downtown and across the main street to a tiny deserted pier sticking out into beautiful Lake Lugano and had their picnic lunch, accompanied by swans, who swam right up to their sunny little oasis. After stretching out in the sun, Dian was off on mission #2, to see if the Eisenhower silver dollar her dad recently sent her would fetch a fortune in the local coin and stamp store. Charles, a boyhood coin collector, warned her not to get her hopes up, not to buy that Bulgari necklace yet, and sure enough the Swiss numismatist's first words at seeing it were: "Spend it." (Try saying that sentence five times fast.) Can't argue that the Swiss don't know money.

Two disappointments in, they knew the day could be salvaged with a nice cappuccino at the bakery that produced Nicole's superdelicious birthday cake, and there they scored, even nabbing extra sugars with cool Swiss scenes on them. To go with the sugar packages from Venice that had titans of modern history pictured (they might dispute the inclusion of Maggie Thatcher with Ghandi and MLK, but the new Meryl Streep movie might

change their minds... if they ever saw a movie over here, save the absolutely required *Harry Potter* in Amsterdam). They also picked up two dark bread loaves that they knew were exceptional because they got one the day before. One for Nicole and Lisa. And people watched, and Dian did a great sketch based on one of the sugar packages. Someone will get it for a birthday card.



Fortified, they window shopped some more then checked out the two "supermarket" possibilities for needed groceries, the recommended Coopertiva, and the supposedly more upscale Manor. Coopertiva was no Santa Monica cop; pretty fancy. Loved their selection of beers: a slew of off-brand UKs, Tsingtao from China, Budvar (as good as Pilsner Urquell, also from Czech Republic), Beelzelbub, Sam Adams, Corona and.... Duff Beer! D'oh! Turns out Manor, five stories tall with the Gelson's-style food store in the basement, was not that different for prices so they shopped there, even treating themselves to escargot from the deli section. Two. Escargot. One snail each. Hey, just for fun.

Walking back they stopped at Lisa's to give them the yummy bread and some apples, then continued to their home in the parking lot, later feasting on risotto and lentils, brown bread, and.... an escargot. What good fortune to be having these adventures. The simplest things can be an adventure, if you hold them that way.

Nicole's day:

This was Lisa's busiest school day, with the most classes, so I finished reading *Heart Of Darkness* and began *Arabian Nights*. Much to our surprise, however, Charles came through our door mid-afternoon! He dropped off some

bread and apples, and I whistled to Dian to say hello.



The donuts served at the collegeThat night Lisa, Sonja and I had dinner in the dining hall and shared riddles with each other, so I now have a few more good ones in my arsenal.

DAY 128 (2011-11-17 03:55)

Wednesday 16 November 2011

Dian and Charles's day:

To paraphrase the soul song, We've got to make the best of a bad situation. We are.

We found ways to enjoy our unintended week in Switzerland, by walking into town and exploring, using the library at Franklin College, playing Boggle and Scrabble, sketching, catching up on the blog, emails, and other business and giving Nicole time alone. Dian walked to a nearby small lake in the early morning, and saw a sign for a train that looked like it had been there a hundred years. Sure enough, a moment later, the train to Lugano came 'round the bend, within touching distance.

We locked ourselves out of the van but had our computer so we Facebooked Lisa (for Nicole, who had the other key) and she responded right away, "We'll be there in 20 minutes." After they left Charles and Dian had leftover lentil and risotto soup for lunch, then sorted photos from our camera in the warm student cafeteria. For dinner they decided to celebrate their time together on this part of the trip with a special bottle of wine they'd been saving from the Monte Vibiano winery toured with Colleen and Lisa, near Piegaro. With spaghetti, a chunk of parmesan cheese and brown bread Dian and Charles were satisfied.



We were about to start a game of Boggle when we heard the familiar family whistle. Nicole had come by to collect our laundry for washing at Lisa's dorm. Charles went to the library just up the walk from us, which Dian just discovered that afternoon, and computed away till closing time at 1 AM. Memories of student

days.

In response to one of our blog followers who asked for more tips, Dian had three: 1) when buying gas, make sure you're not in the full service lane (yes, they actually still do that here) unless you really want that, because the price of the gas will be considerably higher, and all you get is a windshield cleaning and the nozzle started 2) a little smile opens lots of doors (as nicely articulated by Nicole recently) and 3) when living in a tight space, stow immediately.

Nicole's day:

Lisa and I walked downtown to get some groceries, which I helped out with, and looked around the shops. Most were pretty upscale, and definitely not in a college student's budget, but we looked in the unfortunately underwhelming second-hand store (the tip-off was a pair of old but pretty nice looking shoes, priced at 232 francs/ \$250 US). I checked prices for a nose piercing at a place where Lisa had gotten a few ear piercings, and the prices were not terrible to have it done with a gun, but fairly expensive for a needle. I told them I would have to think about it.



Meeting up with Lisa's friend, Ian, we ate dinner at the Irish Pub near the school, and we ordered some really good hamburgers, which both of them had been craving all day.

DAY 129 (2011-11-17 11:03)

Thursday 17 November 2011

Charles and Dian's day:

Charles appreciated being able to stay up past 1 AM in the warm and wi-fi-ed library the night before and not wake up from a forced early bedtime at 4 or 5 AM and have to toss and turn till 8. He's a NightHawk by nature. After breakfast of coffee, yoghurt, bananas, bread and cheese, apple, milk and cereal (don't always have milk, or have it cold, and a box of cereal in Switzerland costs 5 to 8 bucks - this trip has made us appreciate so many little things we take for granted back home), it was into the too-warm rec room at Franklin College, to work on catching up the blog. Almost got there.

Then it was time to hike into town, with a quick stop to leave a Va Va LaVoom CD for Dean Guggiari, whose empathy for our "stuck" situation made our lives sooo much easier during the week. We took some slightly different routes to see more of the town, did some browsing and window shopping, and had our picnic lunch right next to the lake. Dian bought some wire spirals to be used with the glass she found at L'Antica Vetreria to make pendants.



A documentation of how the inside of Clifford looked. She then decided it was time to drop into UBS, headquartered in Lugano. They're a huge international financial corporation, and we're hardly one of their high-profile clients, but nonetheless we wanted to say hello to the folks who invest our nest egg, and thought it would be fun to send an email from there to our local manager, longtime family friend Bill Creedun. Charles was reluctant to support

this latest brainstorm of Dian's, but as usual went along for the ride at the last moment, and as usual was glad he did. They treated us well and sent us up to nattily-dressed Fernando on the fourth floor - ALL the UBS-ers looked Armani-clad - who not only let Dian use his computer to send the email, but brought us two cups of delicious coffee and Swiss chocolates on a silver tray.



Then it was off to Coopertiva supermarket to buy coffee we ground on the spot, a gift for family, and some exotic beers. We had decided to treat ourselves to fondue (after all, we're in Switzerland) at a restaurant for dinner, but after checking some menus on the way we couldn't bear the thought of spending 35 bucks per person - how much cheese can one eat? So we found a package at the market, and with our fresh bread cut into cubes and two long forks, we feasted like Swiss but kept our shiny francs in our pockets. (Did we mention the very independent Swiss are not part of the EU, and your euros are not good here?)

Dian swore she got a buzz off of a "cannabis" iced tea (from Switzerland?! she found in the market ("cannabis" flavor, aroma; extract - .016/liter), but Charles definitely got a little light from an 8.8 (percent alcohol) beer he picked up there. In Switzerland!? Ya just never know what's next.

Nicole's day:

The day was slow after a long slumber, much needed after staying up so late, and was filled with a hearty breakfast of waffles, eggs, bacon and cereal, and awesome fun happy happy joy laundry time! This was no matter, though, because I had Indian food to look forward to

in the dining hall, a Thursday staple for the students of Franklin College. The food did not disappoint, and after stuffing ourselves with curry (and one of their Homer Simpsonsque donuts), we retired to our quarters...But not before keeping Ian company (and on track) whilst he attempted to begin and complete a 10 page paper due the next day.

DAY 130 (2011-11-19 08:37)

Friday 18 November 2011

Dian and Charles's day:

We awoke at 11 AM. How could that be when the gardener with the leaf blower started his chores at precisely 8 AM each weekday morning? We guessed we were tired, and also Charles had been in the library till nearly midnight the night before. An R.A. had passed along the complaint that some students weren't comfortable with a man they didn't know being in the library at that hour. So even though invited to use the facilities by the dean, and having asked the okay of the desk staff there at the library, Charles left the warmth and late hours of that sanctuary to come back to our COLD van. But we understood and as Dean Guggiari put it in an email, we all wanted the students to feel comfortable. While Charles stayed around campus to catch up on emails and blogs, Dian walked into downtown Lugano again. The trek was made in about 25 minutes since no wrong turns were made on her fourth trip into town. She bought some groceries and poked around in shops, including the many bead and jewelry stores, then visited a library and headed home.

At around 4:30 Dian got back to the van and Charles was there surrounded by clean, folded laundry. Nicole had come by with it and left a note. Dinner was bowtie pasta with tomato and bell pepper sauce, fresh bread and Parmesan cheese. Despite the free theater performance of *The Odd Couple* right across the parking lot, Dian and Charles opted to keep a low profile and retired early.



"Laundry delivery! Sorry I missed you" Nicole's day: Another easy and rather uneventful day

except for the fact that, upon walking down to the Franklin College post pick-up with Lisa and her friend Ashley, I got to accept my birthday present from Lisa! A beautiful Moleskine travel journal, complete with pages for short trips, long trips, itineraries, and more. It was a perfect gift for the trip. Not only that, but Lisa received a telegram from her friend back home! Who knew you could even send those still?

DAY 131 (2011-11-26 19:37)

Saturday 19 November 2011

Charles and Dian's day:

Up at 9:15 – no 8 AM leaf blower! Maybe because it was the weekend, also possibly because the dining hall (and restrooms) were closed (till noon). So we went to our fall-back refuge, the Tamoil gas station across the street and its eating area so popular for morning cappuccino and croissants with the local elder crowd. Oh well, there wouldn't be many more five buck coffees to buy while we wrote postcards and waited in line for funky community Internet access, when our new van gets us the heck out of Switzerland. With gratitude for the understanding of Dean Guggiari and the rest of Franklin College, we were more anxious to leave than they may have been to see us go.

Still wanting to keep a low profile and not cook in the van or even be there so much, we finally visited the deli store up the street for their highly-recommended paninis (sandwiches), and threw in a couple beers and even indulged in a very rare bag of chips. Livin' dangerously. The afternoon was spent with a massive sewing project for Dian (a new cover for "The Worm") and Charles going over all the "extra" expenses involved for our errant vehicle, in anticipation of The Arrival of Sebastian (sometimes known as The Second Coming). For dinner we really indulged: dinner out...at the student dining hall, a really good chicken curry rice dish (don't ask how much it cost). Then to sleep, with visions of sugarvans dancing in our heads.

Nicole's day:

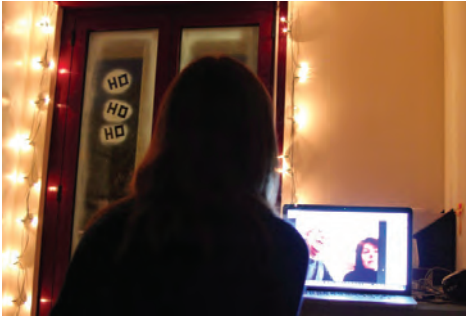
Because of the state the community kitchen had apparently been in for quite some time, Lisa and her friends read a heart wrenching e-mail sent out by their RA: The kitchen would be closed for the rest of the semester, which of course would include Thanksgiving! This especially threw a wrench in our plans to make dinner ourselves that night and save some money on her student card for when her boyfriend Gio came to visit.



Bus station After unsuccessfully trying to search for a hot plate on the website of the local supermarket, Lisa, her friend Sonja and I walked downtown to hopefully find and buy one. We were successful, and they bought a hot plate with two burners for a reasonable price, and I bought the groceries for the dinner. They also had to buy Christmas lights and fake, snow-in-a-spray can to add to the holiday ambiance. Instead of lugging our supplies all the way back to the school, we opted for the bus, which got us there in record time. Strangely, we heard mostly Americans on the bus, and wondered what they were doing there, but Lisa remembered there was a Franklin College reunion going on that week, thus attracting all the old Lugano ex-pats.



College cookin' Back home, we made an early dinner of pesto pasta with sun dried tomatoes, broccoli, tea and bread, and after we left Sonja's room we decided to watch "Death at a Funeral," a hilarious English comedy Lisa had never seen. Later on Sonja popped back in with peanut butter, chocolate and milk for dessert, and we enjoyed this immensely as we chatted.



Chatting with Lisa's parents Lisa had not Skyped with her parents for a while, and we got a request to video chat with them, which was nice. I could tell Lisa was comforted by their presence, and they hers. A little later we also had a video chat with Lisa's cousin and my friend Carolina, who was also in my film class at Samohi and helped run the film festival. She told us she was enjoying NYU immensely, but couldn't wait for a film class reunion with us.



My ingenious plan to create words in the "snow" with an expert use of tape, executed by Lisa and me.

DAY 132 (2011-11-26 19:38)

Sunday 20 November 2011

Dian and Charles's day:

The long awaited day of Sebastian and the van's arrival was a long one but in the end a victorious one. Charles and Dian were up at 9 AM, having slept well despite the cold. Dian had gotten it down to two pairs of socks, two pairs of pants, two shirts, a jacket, a mink coat and a wool cap for sleeping attire, and with the new Ikea comforters the chills that radiated from her spine were minimal. She wondered how Saint Francis did it with nothing on his feet and basically a long, burlap hoodie.



Goodbye, Clifford Nicole stopped by and we decided we would leave early the next morning (provided the van arrived), in order to take full advantage of Paulo and Paula's kind offer to see Milan. Charles and Dian had the leftover panini (sandwich) and played Boggle.



And good riddance At 11 AM Sebastian called and said he was only five or six hours away, so by 5 PM when we hadn't heard from our White Knight we were beginning (oh, let's be honest) - CONTINUED to fret until around

6:03 when the phone rang and Thomas, Lisa and Sebastian were in Lugano!!! Charles guided them into our parking lot and within two hours Sebastian had our van purring like a kitten. He really has a knack with these Westies, having grown up with parents who loved them and took the kids traveling in them throughout his youth. Now Sebastian and his buddies are scout leaders and so they were PREPARED to rescue us - they even drove through the Alps instead of a major tunnel in order to test the readiness of our new van.



Lisa, Thomas and Sebastian With the transfer of all our accumulated belongings and instructions on everything and how it worked in the new van, they were off to have pizza in Italy, since the three of them had never been there, and Charles and Dian stowed everything in preparation for an 8 AM departure. With smiles on our lips and David's homemade raki in our bellies we fell asleep with the new heater at full force.



Nicole's day: Woke up, got ready to pull my stuff downstairs the next day to see our new White Steed!

DAY 133 (2012-05-28 19:39)

Monday 21 November 2011



Stand by your van (Excalibur)



Paolo Having spent the night in our "new" heated van, we wanted to be gone before 8 and got up at 7:40 to do it. Drove down the road to pick Nicole up at Lisa's dorm, and she said she was really excited to see our new ride. White and very tall. We said goodbyes to Lisa and hit the road for Milan, straight south, and a reunion with our next door neighbors from the camp in Budapest.

We might not have tried to experience Milan without the invitation of Paulo and Paula, with its reputation as a very big city with not so much antiquity and other sights to recommend it. But with the enticement to be shown "his Milano" by a renowned architect, we wisely said sì, and it was one of our best decisions so far.



So back quickly to the border of the Italy we had come to love, and as we pulled over to get our documents in order we looked up to a most interesting sight: a gigantic Christmas tree flying through the air, high above us! It was at the end of a very long rope or chain or something attached to a helicopter, probably headed to some city in Switzerland to become the town tree in the town square.



Digging a heel in this bull's crotch is good luck



We managed to make it to GianPaolo Corda's office without too much difficulty, and he immediately started making it easy for us by sending us around the corner (out of our poorly-chosen illegal parking spot) and into his building's gated lot, where we took his spot and left our motor home secure,

and hopped into his comfy Mercedes. Then we were off to a driving tour down the main boulevards of this famous city, with expert commentary from our gracious host, a lifelong resident, benefitting not only from his knowledge of Milan's long history, but his perspective as a city planner, who literally knew every street.



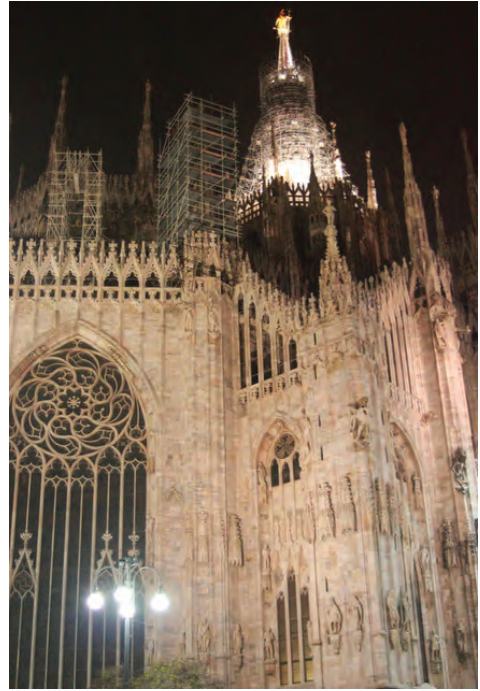


We finally parked for the walking part of the tour, past piazzas never named for the person whose statue was there, to a massive galleria that combined allegiance to city and church, past a building very dear to his musical heart, La Scala. (When he said he loved to go there and attended at least one performance every season but was not among the most wealthy who had season tickets – often passed down through many generations – Charles said he understood: he told Paulo he watched the Lakers faithfully on TV but couldn't afford

to attend many games in person. Who knew Staples Center was so much like La Scala?)



Elaborate window displays are not only for looking: One could look from the outside while a worker inside showed you what you wanted to see upon request



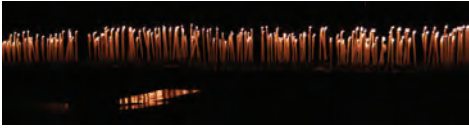
After catching our breath at the sight of the incredibly ornate facade of the famous duomo, Santa Maria Acuna (fourth-largest cathedral in Europe), Paulo put aside his plan to save the inside for the later tour and said we could take a "quick peek," which turned into more than a half an hour of wonder at the acres of art, much of which we might have walked by without the appreciation he offered. A priceless gift. Before much longer Paula was on the phone asking, Where are you? Lunch is ready! and we headed for their home on the edge of the city, the penthouse on the 11th floor, a warm welcome and incredible lunch from the multi-talented Paula, and an introduction to their family friend houseguest, young musician Giovanni, according to Paulo (and he should know) a most gifted jazz

saxophonist, and an engaging, enthusiastic conversationalist.



After lunch (the big meal in Europe, late in the afternoon) we drove him to the train station, then continued on our walking tour. We cut through the famous fashion district and covered a lot of kilometers and centuries and wound up walking the entire length of the ancient city, to the old castella, and considered looking inside at a late-in-life *pieta* by Michelangelo but it was starting to rain so we headed for the metro, back to the

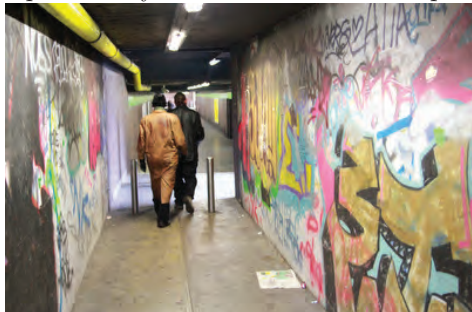
car and home to another fantastic meal by Paula. Did we mention they had invited us to stay for a couple of nights? Impossible to consider saying no.



Tuesday 22 November 2011



The breakfast spreadWaking up to a gorgeous breakfast spread put out by Paola and Paolo, we were brought all the way up to cloud nine when we realized we could each take a BATH. Don't worry, we've taken plenty of showers this trip, but Dian especially had been missing her baths, and we knew we were in the lap of luxury when this became an option.



Paolo's favorite church in Mi-

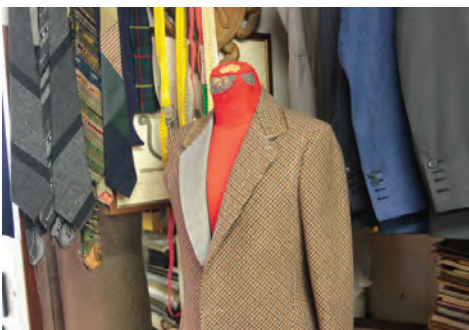


lan

Coming by Metro into town, we visited what is in Paolo's opinion the most beautiful church in Milan, architecturally. True, it did not have the same glitz and glam as most world-famous churches do, but it became clearer as Paolo explained the architecture and its origins how special it is.



We'll miss this sightBecause we wanted to get a start on driving to Montpellier earlier than later, we began walking back to the Metro station when Dian stopped in front of an old tailor's shop. He was the only one in there, and was surrounded by antique irons and thimbles, not to mention racks and racks of clothes he had made. We all squeezed in to have a look around, and the man was very nice and, as we learned, was a big fashion figure in the 70s, and even did work in Japan for years. He is famous for creating a sport coat out of only one piece of material, minus the attachment of the sleeves and exterior pockets.



We wished him luck, and stopped quickly in a music store, where Nicole was sad to see no new Kasabian album, but Paolo found a CD he liked, and Charles decided to treat him! With that we left for the station.



Getting on the Metro, Paolo's phone rang. After a bit of talking, he said it was Paola, wondering whether we wanted noodles or meat for lunch. We did not even think we would be getting another fabulous meal, but after looking at each other wide-eyed, Charles meekly said, "Meat please?"

Of course the STEAK meal did not disappoint, and we were left rolling from the table again. As *another* parting gift, the couple gave us three bracelets, a necklace and a mini good luck elephant for the van, not to mention a bundle of food for the road! With this we said goodbye to Paola, and Paolo walked us to our car. With the confidence of a new great friendship having been made, we didn't say goodbye, just "see you later."

Drove for a ways, then stopped for the night in a rest stop.



View from Paola and Paolo's

DAY 135 (2011-11-26 19:41)

Wednesday 23 November 2011



The world was full of wonders and our "Happy Trails Gang" - to quote Dian's mom - was experiencing as much as they could. Sometimes this felt like the top of the world and other times like the pit of Hell. What became apparent in writing the daily blog was how the "bad stuff" made the most interesting stories, and if we could let loose of some of the anxiety WHILE going through the fire we'd probably have our story and fewer creases on our foreheads. But tell that to the fight or flight instinct. Anyway, November 23rd - Dian's sister's birthday- was a mixture of highs and lows.



Awakening at our busy bus and truck rest stop near the Italian Riviera, Dian used a squirt of the "Eau de Toilette" perfume which was offered in the restroom - getting close to France - and within the hour we were in France, then Monaco, then France again- countries numbers 20 and 21. Tolls were adding up but we wanted to get to writer Ed Ward in Montpellier, France by late afternoon, so after three border crossings we stopped in Arles for an hour and saw the Roman arenas and some of Van Gogh's stomping grounds. Arles impressed us with its singular light, also sought by the Impressionists. We wandered through a Romanesque/Gothic church with all sorts of relics; Nicole wondered how they could divide up so many and Dian and Charles, who grew up Catholic, said that sometimes even a thread from a saint's robe or splinter of bone would qualify. It was interesting to note that more than a few of our acquaintances brought up the way churches in the past who might have been needing a boost in membership would find a saint's relics and put them on display.

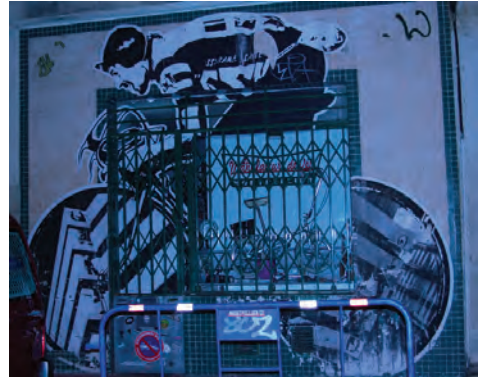




Ward, Charles and NicoleThe French seemed very friendly, despite the chiding (to each of us!) from the Best Western hotel employee who said, "You have to ASK me to use the restroom!" - followed by a glower.



art exhibition



Driving into Montpellier we found a Muslim woman and her family who were definitely friendly. We had come dangerously close to running out of gas - Charles had said, "the red light isn't on yet" to which Dian screamed, "what if it doesn't work in this van!?" We finally found a station, but our card wouldn't work. This woman put 20 Euro on her credit card and we paid her back in cash. Dian gave the daughter a hand painted rock with a heart on it.



Ed

3D



We called Ed and announced that we had arrived but the next hour was spent looking for parking and figuring out how to pay for it. Just after Charles and Nicole returned with a ticket which was good till the next morning, a woman informed us that the lot was free after 6 PM. Oh well.



We found Ed, one of the early music critics at Rolling Stone, Creem, Crawdaddy and others, and a founder of the South by Southwest festival in Austin. He was among a handful of writers who were an inspiration to the young music enthusiast sitting in Albuquerque and reading this revelatory prose that treated rock and roll as an art form in a cultural and societal context. As Charles put it, this was akin to when Dian got to meet Peggy Lee. (Charles and Ed had only corresponded through Facebook, but he graciously invited us to stop by when "in the neighborhood.")



As soon as we met up with Ed, he "put in the cassette" and gave us a fascinating, informative tour of his adopted city. We came upon an art opening and saw more original people to watch than art, but on the narrow streets there was lots of good stuff. (Nicole was very impressed by the art, and felt *tres bien* to be amongst so many swanky French art types.) We met Ed's friend who owned an English products market who had been robbed that morning, being distracted by children while showing their mother some expensive whiskey. It was sad to think that the kids were involved in the thieving and we offered our condolences. Around 10 PM we had a fabulous French dinner at La Cheneraie (Oak Tree), and with a good bottle of wine swapped stories of his life as a writer for Rolling Stone and ours AS rolling stones.

Back at the van, we slept peacefully in the parking lot dreaming of Dian's sister Monica celebrating her 58th birthday in Texas.

DAY 136 (2011-11-26 19:41)

Thanksgiving Thursday 24 November 2011

A real early start for once (after threatening it so many times and never delivering), up at 6:10 and outta Montpellier, France by 6:30, hitting the road to try to make the rest of the trip to Valencia, Spain in time to find Uncle Enrique and get the keys and into Pilar's mother's house in time to fix SOMETHING for Thanksgiving dinner, and computer-call or Skype the family in Arizona, to lessen the pain of our rare absence, maybe even to have Charles offer the grace as had been the tradition for many years. From halfway around the world - that would be cool.



Explaining how the meat is sliced off the leg



An ambitious but seemingly doable goal, but as our friend Don Snowden, ex-pat music journalist we knew in LA 14 years ago before he took up residence on this Mediterranean coast of Spain, later repeated to us as the mantra of explanation (of everything) there: Oh well.... it is, after all, Spain.



Don had been giving us very useful European/Spanish/Valencian advice by email for months and we were in touch with him by phone/text on the way in, but.... no Uncle Enrique. We hit town, parked the van on a major thoroughfare near Pilar's mother's place, and kept trying. Don came over to meet us, on his way to a Thanksgiving dinner with friends from Austin; he tried without luck to speak to a neighbor of Pilar's mother, and also in Uncle Enrique's building, so then he took us over to his friends' place to try their Internet connection to reach him, and send more messages (unanswered) to Pilar in LA, and kept phoning. Nada.



So we trooped off to check on our van and find someplace to eat, and boy did we. We took care of some pressing business, to get duplicate keys made for our new transport, and the key maker gave us a lead on a good restaurant, Torre de Utiel, that turned out to be

very good, and not that expensive. It was a Thanksgiving dinner to remember, because the menu and setting were so untraditional. We asked the waiter for recommendations, as we usually do, but it seemed there that gave them a license to take over and make all the choices. So we not only missed out on pondering the extensive, exotic menu, but we weren't sure we'd be getting things we liked. We finally surrendered to the experience - after all, they had walls lined with newspaper and magazines articles about them - and ordered a round of Carlsbergs.





What a meal! First came something common there but new to our eyes: jamon, paper-thin slices of ham carved with a very long knife straight from the boar's roasted leg, held upside down by clamps on a large wooden platter, hoof and all. Served with cheese slices, it was melt in your mouth, almost sweet. Then came a large plate of small snails - escargot, mind you, in an insanely good juice so thick you'd almost call it gravy. We used toothpicks to pluck out the delicacies, and our bread to soak up the gravy. Next was something we were all questioning, despite our waiter's vigorous assertion we would love it: fried salted codfish. Uh huh. But it was neither salty nor even fried-tasting, just tender and surprisingly flavorful. We were sated but there was no stopping the last course, tournedos of beef tenderloin on a layer of scalloped potatoes, done to perfection. When finally we finished off the last piece, they brought us a treat on the house, glasses of sparkling fruit juice.



But the real treat came just as we were getting ready to leave, and that was that Uncle Enrique finally answered his phone, and said he'd be right over (he lived on the next block).

Hooray! We didn't have to sleep in the van on Thanksgiving! Turns out he had just gotten back from 10 days in the Canary Islands, and didn't know exactly when we were coming. Oh well.... it is, after all, Spain.



Uncle Enrique and Charles

DAY 137 (2011-11-26 19:42)

Friday 25 November 2011



Downtown Valencia After a rather unconventional yet unforgettable Thanksgiving, we all decided to soak up the wonderful place we were staying in by laying low, blogging, painting and writing.



The main train station



Outside the bullfighting ring In the late afternoon we were picked up by Don who had offered to give us an overview of Valencia with a walking tour. How lucky we are to have such knowledgeable friends in such fantastic locations! The tour helped us get our bearings, but also showed us the true flavor of Valencia. We stopped by the main post office, a beautiful building with a pair of lion's heads outside for dropping letters, the main train station, also a beautiful old building that had thankfully been well preserved and the bullfighting ring, plus many more sights.



Nicole observed that the people seemed altogether regal. They were self-confident, with an air of antiquity that could only come from living in an old city such as Valencia. The city was alive, too. It wasn't just old people sitting around or young kids, it was a mix of all ages and styles.



Charles drooling over the numismatist shop



After a quick stop at Don's place in the Carmen district, we walked back to our neighborhood to meet Heino and his 17-year-old daughter Aitana (named after a mountain Heino climbed) for dinner. We talked about many things and the food was delicious, making it a great evening shared by all. Since Aitana had to get home and get to bed because she had school the next day (it was 1 AM at this point), Dian and Nicole opted to go sleep, too, but the three guys stayed to share a

drink and talk some more.



Nicole and Aitana



Saturday 26 November 2011



We walked to the Farmers Market in what was reputed to be the largest covered market in Europe. The scene was amazing and slightly overwhelming. With seafood, meat, sweets, fruits and vegetable stands covering a space the size of a small stadium, enclosed by arched ceilings and tile decorations, we wended our way along the stalls with Nicole busily snapping away on her Canon.



A jazz trio was just finishing their sound check when we exited so we decided to stay and hear a couple of tunes. After "Summertime" and half of "All of Me" (what does that leave?), the police came and broke it up. To the jeers of the crowd and scurrying of the other illegal vendors, we departed for more street art images that Nicole had seen by night but wanted to capture by day.





We stumbled on a nice piece of synchronicity while wandering the old section, when we happened on a European rarity, a second-hand shop (Dian's great hobby, and expertise) strangely named La Senora Henderson. When one Spanish owner detected American English through the pretty good Spanish, she called to her American-Spanish partner: "Sonia! English!" She marched over, we told her we were Americans, and she said "Oh me too, I'm from New Mexico."



Looks a bit like something out of Radio city! Then it started. She not only hailed from Charles's New Mexico (Espanola) but went to UNM as well. Though they attended in different decades, while there she was on the student entertainment committee that booked all the concerts, like the one Charles covered while working at the daily student newspaper, the Lobo. They shot off names of professors and student and civic leaders,

local hangs and New Mexican landmarks, and especially the food, oh the New Mexican food, they both started almost crying and even Dian and Nicole were getting hungry and homesick just hearing about it. Hatch chile, blue corn tortillas, sopaipillas....



The jazz trio before they got kicked out



Policeman kicking the trio out



Trio kicking it out

We ended up shopping at the vintage store she and partner Maria had opened only a few weeks earlier and over beer, shrimp and olives acquired some nifty items - including old photos of a Spanish family, and a basketball with the name of a Valencia team on it (a gift from Sonia). We invited her to dinner later in the week.



Sonia in the middle We had our farmers market cheese, bread and Dian's pesto pasta for dinner and after looking through Nicole's photos, called it a day.



Did we mention the intersection of a busy street where a man was openly groping his wife (or girlfriend)? It reminded Dian of the book Don Snowden had loaned her on the famous Fallas Festival of Valencia held each spring where huge constructions are burned

in the streets signifying death and rebirth and mostly bawdy partying. We're pretty sure the man was getting a head start on the randy part and she didn't seem to mind one bit.



DAY 139 (2011-11-28 22:14)

Sunday 27 November 2011

It is true we have had strange sleeping patterns on this trip, especially in countries that have a "siesta" schedule. This explains Charles taking a 2:30-4:00 AM walk. Nicole was still awake to say goodbye to him, and Dian was up early enough to welcome him back!



In other news, Dian dyed her hair again. She had had her fun as a blonde, but it was time to go back to her "roots" as a redhead. It was perhaps a little brighter than expected, but Dian wore it well and it seemed to suit her complexion that looks nice with fall colors and earth tones.



View from Claire and Bill's at night

Another day of catching up, doing art and reading, we readied the big box of holiday gifts we were sending to Dian's parents to distribute when the time came, and hold a few presents back for themselves! After leaving a message for Chris and Christina back home, we met up with Don who walked us over to Bill and Claire's for dinner.

Although they apologized for breaking the dinner party rule of "never making something you've never made before," the oven-baked salmon, vegetables a la Don, wine and more were *DELICIOUS*. The couple had a great dynamic and were very funny, not to mention good at telling stories. We enjoyed the evening very much, and loved admiring the plethora of postcards, giraffes and other art scattered around the house.



DAY 140 (2011-11-28 22:15)

Monday 28 November 2011
Charles slept till 10. (Of course, he was up till 2.) Every so often we remind ourselves that some mornings, when all necessities of life on the road had been arranged.... there was no need to get up early. There was nothing that had to be done by a certain time, no schedule, no alarm clock required. Dian went downstairs to the bakery next door (turns out the shopkeeper lived directly below us!) and brought back some slices of thick layers of vegies on a hard crust for breakfast. Different, and quite good.



Then we all took off for the local market, very large and wonderful but not impressive compared to the Mercado Central we'd already experienced. However, this one had a treasure just a few steps inside - Lucia, the Egg Lady. That's all she sold in her stand, but we noticed her shells on display, all sorts of characters made out of egg shells and decorated and painted. An entire school! Dian found out from her that she made and painted them herself, then immediately noticed that one of the figures had Lucia's face, which she confirmed with a delighted grin.



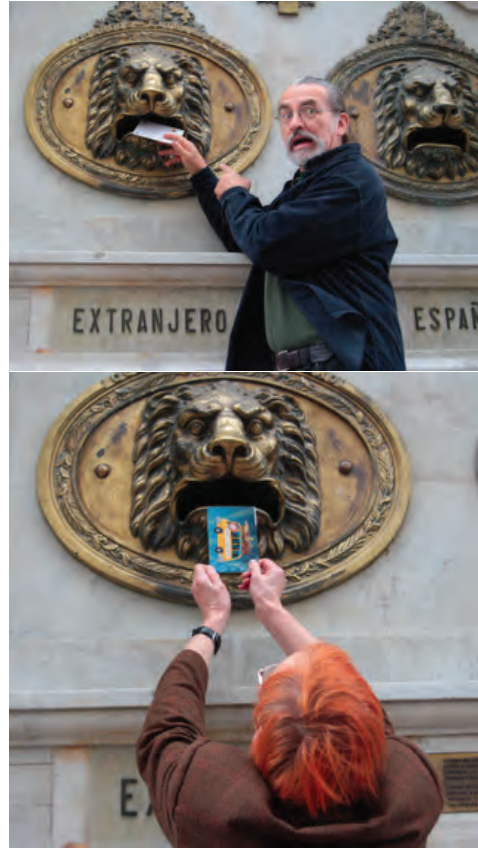
Lu-



The ever-daring Dian could not resist the opportunity to throw out our "egg carton" riddle, but of course had to do it in Spanish. Amazingly, it worked! She let Nicole take the lead, since it was her riddle, and with Dian's input they not only puzzled Lucia for a while (to the point where she was ignoring customers and telling them to come back later!) but totally got the solution across. That must have been even harder than trying to tell a yolk, uh, JOKE in another language. Then Lucia came back with her own riddle, which the Latin-speaking American ladies sort of got, better when Lucia whipped out a pen and paper for illustrations. All were delighted by the very special cultural exchange.



Sending mail!



Then it was off with homing pigeon Nicole to find the main post office, where we took a number and sat and sat until our turn came. We prevailed upon the patient clerk to put three kinds of colorful stamps from Espana on our package home, rather than a machine-generated strip, and it looked festive indeed, and hopefully would bring smiles to Dian's parents when it arrived. We took photos of each of us mailing a postcard by sticking our hands in the lion's mouth mail slot, and were led on to the grand market. We bought an antherium plant there as a thank you gift for Pilar's mother for letting us enjoy her beautiful home in her absence, and Nicole picked up a perfectly-fitting pair of jeans. Dian found a cool cap, then we headed off to find La Senora Henderson again, our "New Mexican" vintage store.



On the way we paused, as always, for Nicole to shoot street art she found worthy, and when Charles moved some dumpsters for her to get a better shot of a wall on a narrow little street, Dian made her move because she spied something behind sitting on a ledge, which turned out to be a thin wooden candle holder carving of Saint Peter.



Carmen on the left, St. Peter on the right. We found the store after some indecisive wandering, and picked up an item we left there the last time, and a couple more scores: some

more of the fascinating old photos (1963) of some unknown Spanish family, and a very colorful long scarf for Charles, exactly what he had been looking for to wear in Valencia and upon our return to show our Spanish neighbor Mariano in Santa Monica that he's not the only stylishly dressed European man in the neighborhood. We met Sonia's mother Ernestina, and she and others in the shop declared immediately that our street find, San Pedro was a piece of quality work, and that it was a fairly common occurrence to find things like that in Valencia, if you had your eyes peeled.



Lucia's mother helping Charles pick out a scarf, and tie it correctly



Hunger beckoned us home for pasta, then Dian napped, Charles strolled and Nicole had some uninterrupted computer time. Then Charles proposed they finally watch the doc on his old journalism professor and world-famous mystery novelist Tony Hillerman, posted by his daughter Anne on Youtube, and that he had a surprise for the family: microwave popcorn to go along with the "movie." First time for that in four months, a treat that Nicole enhanced with slivers of Parmesan cheese carved off our big block. We called

Dian's dad, then later her mom too when she returned home, had some fresh-off-the-stove lentil soup with onions and beef chunks, got busy posting lots of pics to the blog but with many to go finally called it a day. Another really good day.

DAY 141 (2011-11-29 16:07)

Tuesday 29 November 2011



Art-

work from ValenciaBang! Bang! Bang! Frantic shouts from where and from whom? It turned out the next door neighbor had been locked in his apartment and couldn't get "*trabajar*" (to work). Thankfully, after freaking out a groggy Andrews family and handing the key from his balcony to Nicole's (what could he be after?) we figured out the situation and let the wild beast out. He assured Dian this was the first time THAT had ever happened. Uh huh.

Since we were up we decided to stay up (it was already about 9 AM but we were on Valencia time). Dian went for groceries at the market and when the minimum wasn't quite met for her credit card, a kid in line put his pastry on her bill and gave her the 1 euro it cost enabling the transaction to go through. When Dian thanked him he smiled knowingly and tapped his "*cabeza*" as if to say, that's using your head.



When we stopped at our Goya Horno bakery to get a breakfast pizza, Elyssa the proprietress informed us that the paella would be ready at doe-say-ee-may-dee-a but Dian heard doce-ee-may-dee-a so when the family arrived for picnic paella at 2:30 PM she was closed. Our friend, Heino had already gone to get his car so in order to save the day, Dian knocked on the window until Elyssa stopped sweeping and let the hungry family in. We were lucky to get three containers of chicken paella and four pizza slices to take in our tupperware containers to the gorgeous wetlands near the Mediterranean that Heino knew about.



The aquarium On the way out we saw the new architectural structures that line the waterfront, an opera house, aquarium, a huge 3D theatre among other buildings. They were impressive but Heino said the architect got paid about 15 million euros and was living in Switzerland while the project was going way over budget.

When we arrived at the protected waterway area we saw many blue heron, egret and seagulls, even a hawk. Our late afternoon lunch was accompanied by a bottle of wine and guitar music, then we went for a walk. Over the dune were fishermen catching big fish but Heino wasn't so sure how clean the water was.



Paella on the beach with Heino

He returned us to our neighborhood as the sun was setting and as the trio trooped home a store selling ridiculously low-priced canvases and acrylic paints was spotted and a large sackful was bought. Feeling happy and care-free we got in our elevator and when the door shut we pressed our usual fourth floor. Nothing. We didn't panic but Nicole did come up with the word "socorro" – HELP! We pressed the alarm button and a woman's voice came on asking where we were and other identification questions which we answered as best we could in limited Spanish. The neighbors managed to open the door and we huffed and puffed up the stairs to safety. A while later a

repairman knocked to say the lift was fixed.



tin' at the dock of the Sit-



Two herons we saw, including a Blue Heron, for Monica!



Wednesday 30 November 2011

Dian arose early and went for fresh bread from the bakery – why not? when it's just out the front door of the building and three doors to the right. Horno Goya – we'll surely miss it when we leave. Owner Elyssa has been very nice, treating us like old customers rather than newbies.

Dian worked on her portrait of her dad until it was time for us to meet a friend from LA, Christine, who was in the area visiting her ex-pat mom Doreen who lived south of Valencia, in a mostly-Brits area. They gave a call when they were near and we set off on foot to meet them in the center of the old town, in the square in front of the cathedral.



Charles and Christine



Nicole and Doreen We rounded the corner and.... there they were! How nice it was to see a friendly face from home, way over in Spain. They had snagged a nice table outdoors and we all had coffees, but Nicole felt adventurous and added a dangerous-looking brownie, with ice cream. It did not disappoint.



Doreen was a delightful elder British lady with a quick and wry wit, who enjoyed jousting good-naturedly with her daughter, no slouch herself in the dry repartee arena. But we wanted to tour the cathedral and had to leave Doreen and her limited mobility behind; "I'll be fine," she insisted, and was. There was a fee for seeing the old church and having been through so many we weren't always ready to spring for tickets, but Christine insisted, and treated, so we picked up our headphones and ventured forth. It was a very wise choice.



It was a beautiful old repository, dating from the 13th century, not unlike others but with some unique twists. One, a couple of Goyas, excellent and large and right there, the one depicting demons whispering in the ear of a dying man being most memorable. Always

fun to see demons in a church. Another was the ceiling of the cupola with its recently uncovered frescoes of angelic musicians on a celestial blue background; whatever was there before covering these up was clearly a bad decision – they were not just gorgeous but spellbinding, somehow grabbing most viewers in the way such art is always intended but doesn't always achieve. They were painted in 1471 and church officials so disliked them they refused to pay the artists; 150 years later more church elders ordered them plastered over. Thank God an unknown laborer took it upon himself to build a false wall instead, and when art historians in 2004 heard a pigeon making noise behind the wall they investigated and discovered and restored the lost art.



The other noteworthy feature there was a pretty good one: the Holy Grail. Or, at least, one of about a dozen in the world claiming that distinction. But most historians are of the opinion that this one had the best credentials for that claim. Seemed interesting to us that it was on display in a side chapel without a guard present. Oh, and on the wall were the chains that bound St. Peter in Rome as he was led away for execution. Just in case, you know, the Holy Grail wasn't

enough to hold your interest.



Delighted with our tour we went outside and claimed Doreen, none the worse for wear, and found a spot for lunch. We waved them goodbye afterwards, and headed back home to Pilar's apartment by way of the Grand Market area, where we finally located something we'd been searching all over for: a fire extinguisher, for the car. Now you can rest easy, Grandad (retired fireman). We stopped by the new second-hand store of Sonia from New Mexico, but she wasn't there.





Photo by DianLater our friend Don came over and delivered a package he received from Dian's sister Monica in Austin and we had a nice visit. A comfort food dinner of lentil soup ended a good day.

DAY 143 (2011-12-01 10:49)

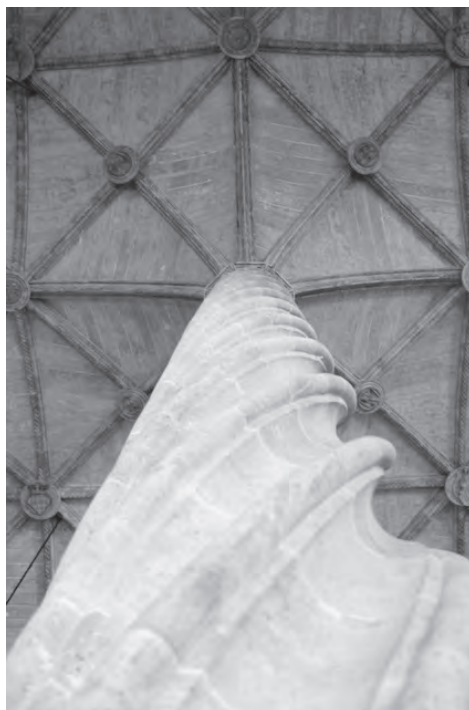
Thursday 1 December 2011

After a fancy omelette a la Charles, Bill came over to walk us on a little tour, to fill in some gaps from his personal knowledge of Valencia. Despite our initial expert tour from Don, and the afternoon we spent with our friend Christine of LA, in to visit her mum Doreen, which included a tour of the cathedral, Bill managed to add to our knowledge and fascination with this elegant but laid back city.



We got to the cathedral just in time to catch the water court, the Tribunal de las Aguas, the oldest democratic institution in Europe, a board which meets every Thursday at noon behind one of the huge side doors of the old church to settle water disputes, verbally, no written records or lawyers of any kind, and they'd been doing it for.... more than a thousand years. Most Valencians, including Bill and Don, knew about it but had never been, and you had to be on time: if there were no disputes, and there often weren't, the whole thing could be over in three minutes. Almost as soon as we arrived the judges in their black robes were shaking hands and

smiling and everyone was taking pictures. We realized much of the crowd consisted of tourists, and that the country people who used to frequent these meetings didn't really have issues anymore.

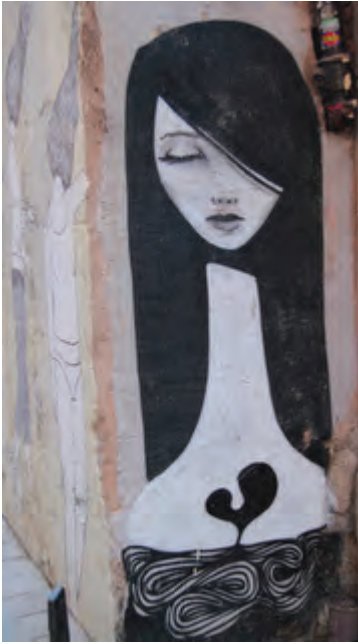


Even though Nicole had a look of, "See, I told you this was going to be boring," we moved on quite cheerily through some of Bill's favorite parts of town. Winding our way back to the Grand Market, we toured the old Silk Exchange just across the street. Its interior was timeless and beautiful with its swirling columns and gorgeous tile floors and carved ceilings, and Charles observed that it was nice being able to get up close to the details of a historic edifice without the barriers a museum would have.





"Sorry this is not art"



We continued walking to a folk art museum that was mysteriously closed despite posted hours to the contrary, and found some good street art for Nicole to shoot, then Bill got a call from Claire saying she was about to get off from the English lesson she was teaching and could meet us for lunch. She caught up with us as we were leaving the Silk Exchange and led us through a street art goldmine she had spied on her way to us! Nicole was especially grateful, but everyone enjoyed seeing the art. Then we went to a modern museum.... that was just closing, at 1:30. Not the way they do things at home, but this was, after all, Spain, and that was normal.



Back at the homestead we cleaned Pilar's place for her arrival the next day and put some photos on some of the older blog days (<- click to go back!).



Walking by a few of Claire's favorite spots, we decided on lunch in the park. Picking up a few things from a bakery nearby (fish fry, fish-chicken casserole, macaroni and seafood paella – yes, at the bakery), we got a couple more things (chicken paella, salad, fried potatoes with garlic mayo and a big pitcher of sangria) at a nicely located outdoor bar in the park. What a feast! The sangria made Dian a little sleepy, and admittedly the rest of our group was a little lethargic from the lavish layout, so we made our way back home whilst burning off a couple of unwanted calories.

DAY 144 (2011-12-03 07:31)

Friday 2 December 2011

While Charles was brushing his teeth, the crown from a tooth came off. Our new friends Claire and Bill, two Austin Texans long living in Spain, recommended their dentist, and Bill even met Charles there saying, "I didn't recognize you without your crown!" The dentist had recommended getting it back on sooner than later and asked if Charles could be there in 10 minutes, and since it was only three blocks away (!), he could. After a short wait Prince Charles was recrowned, and the fee: 30 Euros, about \$43. How would that scenario play out where you live? there's a lot to like about Valencia.



Nicole and Dian continued cleaning up for Pilar's return. When the drizzle became a light rain, Charles went alone to return the key to Uncle Enrique at 3:00 PM. He came back to say that Uncle Enrique would like to have the whole gang over for a drink and some sweets. Since we had done a thorough cleaning and idiot-checked twice, we each grabbed a few bags, piled into the elevator, and said goodbye to the gorgeous abode of Pilar, our home for a week.

One block over at Enrique's, we admired his walls of paintings and sculpture from Mexico, Spain, Portugal and other places. As he said, "I like *cosas* (things)." We could tell we were in the hands of a great and practiced host as we drank a good brandy and nibbled at local cookies. At the end we all sang "*Las Mananitas*." Since Bill and Claire, our new hosts, were expecting us around 5, we bid Enrique adios, and walked the six blocks with our essential suitcases.



egant sophistication in Valencia

Once settled in at their apartment in the Rusaffa neighborhood, we went out for tapas and wine at a book bar. Dian found a Spanish version of *The Night Before Christmas* and bought it for one euro. Nicole noticed that the street artist Hyuro we had seen the other day had done artwork in the establishment. After 10 most of us retired, but Bill and Charles continued late into the night swapping stories.

El-

Saturday 3 December 2011



Have we told you about this couple who invited us to stay with them in their home for a week? Claire was living in Valencia first, teaching English, and Bill followed her here after falling in love. He's retired, from working for the state of Texas for almost 20 years, testing newborns for genetic problems. Claire still teaches, kids and military and private lessons. They're friends of our American friend in Valencia Don Snowden (noted music journalist), who took us straight to their place nearby when we landed in Valencia and couldn't connect to get into our intended place to stay. We used their phone and Internet to leave messages, and later that night we were able to get in. A couple days later we got an email inviting us and Don to dinner at their place, and after a terrific meal (perfect salmon! veggies same!) and even better conversation, the next day another e-mail from Bill inviting us to stay at their place for a week! And so here we are. How's that for Texas-Spanish hospitality?



After another late night jaw session with the usually early riser Bill, we rose at 11 and marched off with him to the local market in their becoming-hip Russafa barrio as Claire went off to teach – she works a lot, which is good, but also exhausting at times for her, but doesn't seem to hurt her demeanor nor cramp her outgoing style. It also meant we spent more time with Bill, who was delightfully wry and self-deprecating and really funny. He and Charles wound up sharing much early morning chat with coffee and late night conversation with wine. (Much of it Dian's great find at the Dia supermarket, where we're now members: La Mancha, cool for our reading of *Don Quixote*, and tasty and amazingly priced at one Euro a bottle, that's a buck 40! – find something in the States for four times that, that won't make you sick. Ah, Spain.)





Back at their place we had Bill's famous lentils and olives and cheese on toast (tapas). For dinner, butternut squash tostados, then off to the only cinema in town that showed movies in their original language with Spanish subtitles, not dubbed, and Roman Polanski's latest, "Carnage," a spellbinder with only four actors in a single room, a la "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" Oscar noms, if not wins, we predicted, but then it was the first movie we'd seen in five months besides the final "Harry Potter".



Af-

terwards, they took us to the famous Portland Ale House, which served authentic American hamburgers (no thanks, we'll make our own), drunken chicken sandwiches and fresh cut fries, and their own micro brews plus many other excellent ones. They had a trivia contest Sunday nights which Claire thought would be fun for us.

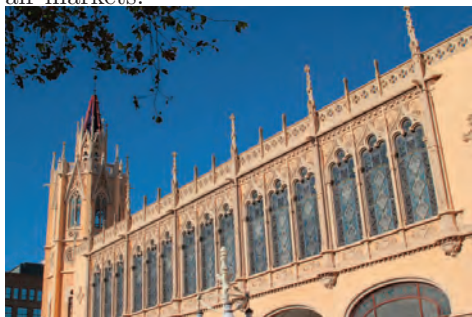
Sunday 4 December 2011



Flea market goodies



Up at 11, we watched Bill make tomato and garlic tapas, with coffee to go with it. So simple yet so delicious! He grated tomatoes (wing wing wing!), a splash of olive oil, and chopped garlic to go with it (ya' can't go wrong there). Then it was off to the big swap meet we had heard so much about that took place every month by the football (soccer) stadium. It was a bit of a hike, but we finally made it and the market was in full swing. It was refreshing to see antiques and cool, random knick knacks instead of the usual cheap plastic ware and clothing we had generally seen in open air markets.



We acquired great booty, too: a stuffed giraffe and giraffe-patterned cup and saucers set for Bill and Claire, a beautiful bowl decorated with Asian art, a Shin Chan bottle (a cartoon character Dian voiced) and a caganer for Dian's brother, Tim.



After moseying on back to Bill and Claire's and seeing some real-life LARPs (Live Action Role Playing, a very nerdy pastime), we had a fantastic lunch of New Mexican chili soup with chicken added in, guacamole, and squid prepared specially by Bill. It tasted different from other squid we'd had, so much so that Charles asked for the recipe so we could make it at home.





With walnuts and ice cream and 10 rounds of Boggle (sans Nicole for most of the rounds), we walked to a nearby jazz club to hear some live music at Club Mercedes. It was good, but we weren't blown away, and after a long day we left fairly shortly.

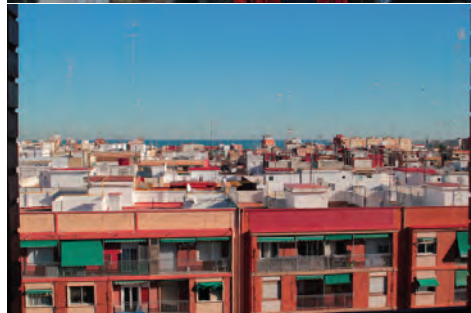


DAY 147 (2011-12-05 08:53)

Monday 5 December 2011



One of the many many many traditional dress stores in Valencia Up at 10 AM, Dian walked to the market to get flowers for the house and enjoyed looking at antique stores full of old Valencian furniture, paintings and artifacts along the way. Nicole and Dian joined Claire on a visit to her friends Amparo and Ajfan (both English teachers).





Amparo, Ajfan and Claire



Colorfully tiled houses were a common



sight



They had tuna and Spanish tortillas (very different from Mexican tortillas), and gave their "good vibes"

to the new flat overlooking the Mediterranean that Ajfan had just moved into. After lunch they walked with Amparo to the beach, took off their shoes and socks and walked in the powdery sand. Afterwards they took the bus close to home, and walked part of the way back.



Back in downtown Valencia, the three of us visited Pilar, whose home we had stayed in. She greeted us at the door looking elegant in pearls, a dress and low heels. We chatted over lemonade and when we asked if our clean up

job had been satisfactory her eyes widened and she exclaimed, "Wow!" She told us it looked better than when she left it. Dian was especially touched that the painting she had done of what turned out to be Pilar's mother was placed right next to the original photo on her shelf.



We were about a block and a half away from Bill and Claire's when Nicole stopped in her tracks – "Isn't that Heino?" she asked. Sure enough, it was. He was sharing a drink outside a cafe with a friend. We thought it was amazing that of all the people we don't know in Valencia we should see someone we knew!



Back at Claire and Bill's we had four delicious homemade pizzas, followed by a chapter of *Don Quixote* read aloud by Charles. We called Dian's parents Marie and Joe, who said they wanted to treat us to a bus tour in Barcelona in honor of Nicole's patron saint, Saint Nicholas (December 6). We said *gracias* and sure thing!

DAY 148 (2011-12-07 05:25)

Tuesday 6 December 2011

Happy Saint Nicholas Day, Nicole!! In many Catholic European countries, your namesake saint's feast day is almost as important an event as your birthday. We don't go quite that far but we did remember Nicole with two small indulgent guilty pleasure gifts: a big bottle of Coke, and a can of Pringles (sour cream and onion), all for her alone.



But it was another's birthday, or rather two people's, so Charles and Bill set out late in the morning to find the bakery where two cakes had been ordered, plotted after Charles discovered Facebook had busted our friend Don Snowden as having not just a birthday Dec. 6, but one ending in a zero, therefore requiring a celebration, no matter how reluctant the birthday boy might be. Once we started plotting, Bill and Claire started inviting people under the pretext of another one of their popular "happy hour" parties (happy hour wasn't 5-7 PM, more like 9 til midnight or so), and when she invited her friend Ajfan she found out it was her birthday too! So two cakes were needed and Ajfan did the ordering but now they had to be retrieved.

They must be good cakes, Charles thought, since the bakery was packed! He and Bill got an additional slice of pizza and an empanada and strolled off to a beautiful plaza with a large fountain to savor, talk, and people watch. This is how they do it in Valencia, in Spain, and most of Europe: the pace of life is slower not because people are lazy but because they

value such things over work-work-work for just the acquisition of more money. Sure, Bill's retired and Charles is taking a year's break, but we'd seen it everywhere, the shared value of people, art, open air, leisure, family, culture, green space, friends, over frenetic activity to get ahead. Ahead to what? Lots of money when you die on your last day of work? Europe and America had things they could learn from each other.



Working on the blogPeople started arriving around 8:30 PM and an hour later there was a crowd of more than a dozen in the smallish apartment, Spaniards of course but also Yanks, Brits, Germans, Poles. Claire and Bill had prepared their signature chicken curry wraps, Dian and Nicole whipped up a pesto pasta, and arrivees brought more food and of course lots of wine, even a bottle of local sparkling stuff. Good music was DJed by Charles from Bill and Claire's collection, specifically to what he figured Don's taste was, lots of new acquaintances were enjoyed and the Andrews felt privileged to be welcomed into this outstanding Valencia community.



Don, Charles and Heinz



Then the lights were dimmed and the cakes brought out and yes, HB2U was sung, but as a special surprise present another song was sung by Nicole and Dian, written that afternoon by Dian: a ditty about both Don and Afjan, sung to the tune of the Doors' "People Are Strange" (which LA Don later said was his very favorite Doors song). Both seemed delighted by the tribute. The crowd thinned out later and Claire and Bill brought out yet another special treat, a bottle of the good stuff, Taittinger champagne. It don't get much better than that.



Wednesday 7 December 2011



Nicole and Dian got up to walk to the car back near Pilar's place and pick up a few things for dinner at Dia, our local supermarket. This was, however, no ordinary dinner Dian was planning. It was a blowout American extravaganza meal! Amongst other necessities (milk, eggs), they bought multiple packs of ground meat, hamburger buns with such a lack of nutrition one might as well be eating cotton, a jumbo pack of pre-cut french fries, BBQ sauce (a must), avocados, tomatoes, chocolate powder and tiramisu ice cream. All this would eventually equal a burger, fries, and a chocolate shake to die for.

On their way back home, who should they run into but Pilar, our former hostess! They chatted for a bit then went their separate ways. They stopped at a local Chinese Bazaar and bought paints, canvases and envelopes.



Lunch was a simple yet perfect lentil and sausage soup Bill had made, but Dian wasted no time in starting her culinary coup. Claire did not get off work until much later and had already planned on seeing a play with some friends, so she did not take part in the bodacious buffet with us, though we saved her some leftovers (and boy, there were plenty of those—yum!).



DAY 150 (2011-12-07 17:29)

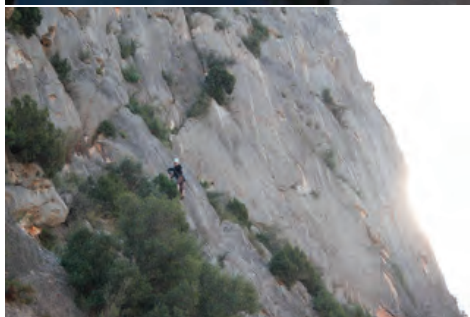
Thursday 8 December 2011



Ana and Bill The last morning with our terrific hosts Claire and Bill was hurriedly spent packing up and loading into our van and the car of Adolpho and his wife Ana who generously offered to give us a lift to the BBQ. Charles, Bill and Nicole followed Adolpho, Ana, Claire, Don and Dian to the town of Jerica (not where Joshua fit the battle) but a pleasant hill town where we stopped for coffee with about 30 cyclists (who were mostly having beer, olives and peanuts). We thought of Chris (not because of the beer, well, okay that too) but the bike riders all seemed to enjoy this ritual and Chris had described similar bike clubs he had been a part of in the past.



After saying goodbye to Ana who sketched a lovely scene of the plaza, the rest of us went on a short hike around the perimeter of Jerica which was beautiful. The walking trail led us past a stream and a tall watch tower then back into town where we stopped for an empanada at the local bakery.



Jerica: A popular spot for rock climbers



The convoy drove to Mike and Marta's ranch nearby and the BBQ was already fired up and guests were on their second cervesas. We got the tour of their property by Marta (an English teacher and friend of Claire, Bill and Don's) and were served drinks by New Zealander, Mike, her husband. After taking our van down the hill to another new friend's cabin (Ajfan - whose birthday we had celebrated a few days earlier), Charles joined the party and we all ate sausage, chicken, tuna and pork chops perfectly grilled by Adolpho. Don's guacamole was sensational and the sweet potato empanadas and baked apples were to die for. Dian, Nicole and Claire walked down to the pre-fab cabin where we would be spending the night and while checking it out decided a siesta was in order. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Charles was watching a cricket match on the front lawn.



As the sun was setting and many of the guests had to catch the last train back to Valencia, the guitar came out and Dian traded off with Stanislaus, a well known poet who sang some bawdy verses of old songs with the gusto of an eight year old in a Christmas play. We sang country songs and Christmas songs and

finally said good night and adios to our new friends.



Heading down the hill through the olive orchard with head lamps and flashlights we entered our accommodation for the night. With no electricity we lit the lantern and candles and were surprised at how warm the one room cabin stayed. Charles read some more Don Quixote aloud and we drifted off to the periodic rumble of the train which passed only 500 feet from our front door.



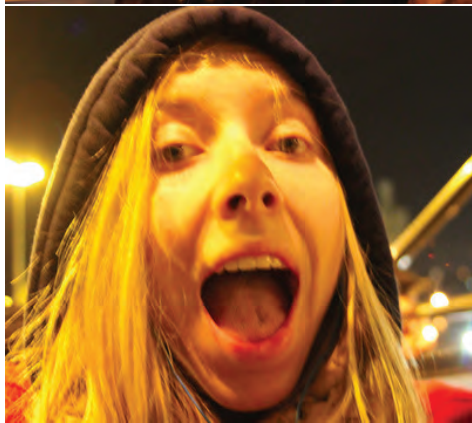
Dian and a new friend!

DAY 151 (2011-12-14 19:13)

Friday 9 December 2011



1:45 AM, nature called, Charles answered, stumbling outside Ajfan's cabin, wow! Heavy fog, sitting everywhere. But the short, modern-looking trains (like most we'd seen in Europe – why only four or five cars long?) we thought were cool, flashing by so close to us. Then only silence, short trees and a gray blanket of fog.



We wanted to get an early start to Barcelona, get up maybe 5:30 (since we turned in at 9:30),

so when Charles opened his eyes and saw the beautiful bright colors of dawn he figured it was about right, till he looked at his watch: nearly 8 AM!

Then there was the long job of "putting the van together," after moving nearly everything out to go to Claire and Bill's then kind of throwing it all back in quickly. Next, we couldn't find the oil, a five-liter jug that shouldn't be able to hide in that small space, but did. Finally, we left at 10:15, with no chance to take Marta up on her invitation to stop by for coffee.

Halfway to Barcelona, Dian pulled out a treat, three big leftover burgers on American buns and some of the garlic fries. Sounds terrible cold? No way, that's great campin' food, baby.



Through a GPS programming error we wound

up at the wrong camp, closed, but called the right one and they were only five minutes away. The "right one"? We'll tell you later why Estrella de Mar gets our unanimous vote as the worst camp ever.

We got nowhere trying to whittle the sky-high off-season rate of 32,50 Euros/ \$48, plus another 8 Euros for the wi-fi for 24 hours (most places it was free, and they charged the same 8 Euros for only two hours usage), and tried to pay with our usual credit card but it was declined. So we went with our backup card (which charges foreign transaction fees). More on that later.

We headed for town on the bus, a 40-minute ride (not 25 like the camp advertised) through some unsightly countryside and suburbs until finally reaching Barcelona. We hate to be tourists, but we headed straight for the Bus Turística, the double decker open top bus that cruises the city's sights and gives you commentary through earphones. It was a good way to get an overview of a spread-out city, as we found in Rome, and you could hop on and off. It was a welcome treat from Dian's parents (as was Rome).



At the booth our card was again declined so we paid cash and hopped on the red line, up top of course for the best view. It was nearly

5:00 and getting dark but the plan was to see Barcelona by night, then the next day in sunshine, with our two-day tickets.



All the headphones people throw on top of the bus stop after their tour Barcelona's a pretty big city, about five million, and it looked it, with NYC rush-hour-crowded streets in some areas. We enjoyed the many sights on our two-hour ride but didn't do any hopping off – it was also pretty chilly up there. We saw a towering statue of Christopher Columbus, the harbor, much art in parks and plazas, a mucho fancy McDonald's, La Rambla walking/shopping avenue, the site of the 1992 Olympics, significant palaces, churches and government buildings with centuries of history. The Gaudi buildings, the main reason we HAD to go back to hit Barcelona (sorry, Pau, not you), lived up to our expectations, surreally wavy and earthy in the twilight, but we wanted to see them in the daylight the next day, and take the blue bus tour route that hit maybe the two most interesting sights: his mammoth, still-being-completed La Sagrada Familia cathedral, and the Park Guell.



We headed home tired and a bit chilled, made dinner in the van at the camp, then around 11PM we cranked up the Google Voice phone on the laptop to try to straighten out the credit card blockage. We thought and hoped it was Capitol One screwing up again and

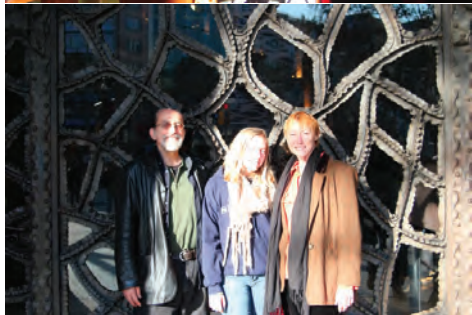
blocking charges because they were coming from Europe, even though we informed them just a few weeks ago we were staying another seven months. But no, we had joined the millions who have had their card number stolen. There were charges and attempted charges in Spain, the US and KUWAIT. But only a few, and these were small-minded crooks, no Mercedes or cases of Cristal. We finally got a supervisor named Stanley who took care of us, and arranged to get new cards sent to us within a few days. We finally finished at past 1 AM, not fun. But at least they caught it, and we did have another card to use in the meantime (though it would cost us more). Life on the road.

DAY 152 (2011-12-14 19:13)

Saturday 10 December 2011



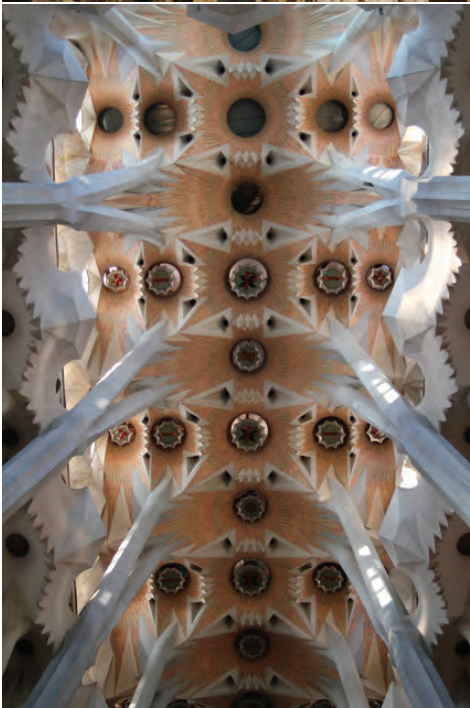
Gaudi's work Croissants milk and bread were the fuel for our last day in Barcelona, though we did not hurry to leave the camp and catch a bus into town. Instead we took the morning slow, showering, organizing the van some more, and other such tasks.



That day in Barcelona was one to remember once we finally did get there. Taking the other line of the tour bus which stopped by more of architect Gaudí's works around the city, we were amazed at his, albeit zany, vision. We stopped at his Sagrada Familia (Holy Family), a church he designed which is still in the process of being built, though the man died in 1926. It's worth noting that just outside the edifice a small hodge podge of stands were set up selling various nativity scene elements and, more notably, tons and tons of caganers! Not just the traditional kind either. There were caricatures of celebrities, politicians, football (soccer) stars, cartoon characters and more! Yes, they even had a Hello Kitty and a Barack Obama caganer.

We weren't sure whether we wanted to pay the €10.50 per person entrance fee, but Nicole urged us all on and boy, were we glad she did. Unlike most traditional (specifically Baroque or Gothic), grand cathedrals and churches, where one's eye could be overwhelmed by ornate designs and pieces of art from floor to ceiling, the Sagrada Familia was undoubtedly and overwhelmingly spectacular, but in a different way. There was really nothing to look

at on the floor, nor the walls. It was the ceiling that blew us away. A person could get a neck ache from looking at it for so long.





Asking a docent if he could tell us but three things about the church we might not know without taking the tour, he went off like a rocket explaining many things not only about the inception of the design, but its current state, the special materials used to build it, and where it would go as construction continued.





Someone's nativity scene

Continuing on our Gaudi extravaganza we took the tour bus near the park he designed and walked the 10 minutes uphill to get to the entrance. Not because it was garish or fake in any way, but it reminded us all of Disneyland in the best way possible. There was a child-like freedom amongst the people visiting, and the buildings and staircases were whimsical and colorful, not to mention great pieces of architecture. We enjoyed our leftovers from the "American dinner" with a view of all of Barcelona framed by the setting sun. Time was running out on our bus tickets, so

we hopped back on and rode all the way back to its origin at the Catalunya plaza. We were close to one of the chain department stores El Corte Ingles (The English Cut), where protesters happened to be marching, displaying their anger towards the cuts in the health-care system, we snuck in past the "mob" and bought some groceries.



Meanwhile, back at the ranch (or campsite), all the campers flocked to the social club center to watch the huge football (soccer) match between Barcelona and Madrid on a big screen TV. We didn't stay for the whole game, but got a good taste of what it was all about. There was no need to watch the game anyway, because firecrackers went off each time the home team scored a point, and many went off after Barcelona won! Luckily for us there was not as much late night partying after the game as we had feared, and we were able to drift off with the unusual undulations of Gaudi's work swimming through our heads.



Holiday street lights

Sunday 11 December 2011



Well now we know that when Barcelona's futbol team wins against Madrid, the firecrackers and celebrating go on long into the night. We had croissants, fruit, milk and coffee for breakfast and were checked out of Estrellas de Mar campground by noon. Saying goodbye to Barcelona and especially the mind-blowing Gaudi contributions to the port city, we headed to Figueres the home of Salvador Dali.

About three and a half hours later we were standing at the impressive Gala-Salvador Dali Museo. We learned that in order to see the home he shared with his wife Gala in Cadaques we would have to have had reservations and since they would be closed on Monday - the following day, we opted to soak up the Figueres collection in the remaining two and a half hours they were open. This we did.



There aren't too many words that aptly describe Dali's surrealist style but Ian Gibson, who authored a large book on the subject did a pretty good job...of using too many words (just kidding, the book was excellent and Dian read it at Don's house.) The museum which was designed by the artist who died in 1989 and is also buried there has an amazing collection of

sculpture, holograms, paintings, optical illusions, jewelry etc. We tried the old game of mentioning to a bored looking guard that we were novices when it came to knowing about the artist and 20 minutes later we were richer in our appreciation of Dali's life and work.



A beautiful woman, or Abraham Lincoln?

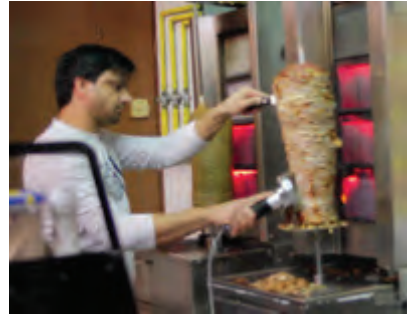




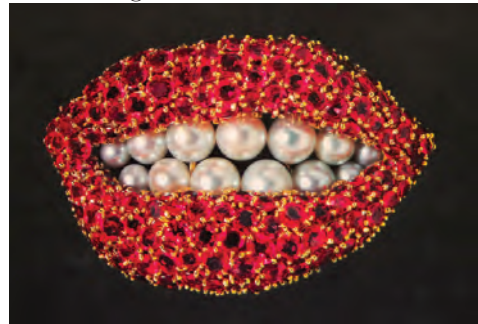
A
tapestry version of "The Persistence of Mem-
ory"



Mae West never looked so life-like We exited
just as the museum closed and headed back
to our van which by the way was running
smoothly.



We stopped for kabobs and drinks made by a
young man from Pakistan who even threw in
extra sauce for our dinner on the road. They
were delicious and got us halfway to Andorra.
We pulled in at a train station in the town of
Rippoli and after using the station facilities
and then buying a few groceries we bedded
down to the periodic rumble of trains arriving
and leaving.



DAY 154 (2011-12-14 19:15)



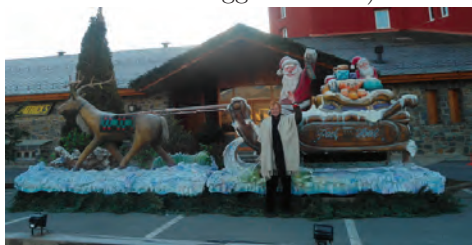
Monday 12 December 2011



We took pictures with the Santa in the Andorran mall. It was a long haul to get to our 23rd country, Andorra, and then back to Valencia by early evening. We woke early and pulled out of Ripoll by 7:30 AM, still dark. Nicole crashed in the back while Dian and Charles enjoyed the breaking dawn. We were taking a risk that the detour to Andorra wouldn't be just to add another notch to our Countries Visited belt, but also a chance to see some worthwhile Spanish countryside we would otherwise miss.

Charles chose, last minute, a southern route, paralleling the Andorran border with Spain (France is on the north). The "normal" route would take you up through a piece of France then through what looked like, on the map, two very long tunnels. To him that translated to maybe a stiff toll to go through or the option to go the old way through incredibly twisting mountain roads then all the way through the middle of the small country and out the west side. Who needed that? No one

said Andorra is beautiful, and it was mostly known for massive malls with duty-free cheap prices. Yes, a shopping destination. In the old days it was significant, and in fact Spanish music people used to go there to get discs they couldn't find under the Franco regime (and would have to smuggle them in).



We will now take the opportunity to show you all the Dian-Santa pictures we took during this holiday season. Our gamble paid off with some gorgeous scenery. We started climbing higher and higher and got into ski resort country, beautiful but a little scary driving with those white-capped mountains looming ahead. There was a brief stretch of road we took very slowly, with many caution signs about icy roads ("black ice," Nicole warned, "you can't see it on asphalt"), but that was a short stretch and we started descending but not before coming across an unusual sight: snow-making towers, a dozen or more right by the road, then all the way up the ski path to the mountain top. In the Pyrenees, in December, and they're having to manufacture the snow slopes. For shame. (But we were happy we didn't have to drive through the real thing.)



When we reached the Andorran border we were tempted to go in and u-turn back (the car ahead of us did that) but decided to go to the first village – Sant Julia de Loria seemingly

quaintly-named, but it was just an excuse for a large shopping mall. We pulled in and got a few supplies (should've stocked up, prices were so cheap) and gas/diesel at 1.14 Euro/liter, the lowest we'd seen by far – translated to \$1.75/gallon *less* than the most expensive fuel we'd had to buy (probably Switzerland).



We dashed across the busy highway for photo ops by the Andorra sign, then took off for good ol' Spain again. Had to stop at the border – rare, and they inspected everyone's trunk – that never happened before. Leftover from Franco days? Or keeping people from bring vanloads of cheap scotch back for resale – more likely.



The drive south was pretty in parts but not overall the best we'd seen. Arriving finally after 11 hours of driving, we were so glad to meet Don and unload our stuff into his place, where he'd generously invited us to stay from 15-30 December when he'd be back the States. We had dinner of his veggies and our couscous, satisfying and healthy-tasting. The ladies were asleep by 11, but Charles was almost as nocturnal as Don and so they had to chat a bit into the early hours.



DAY 155 (2011-12-14 19:16)

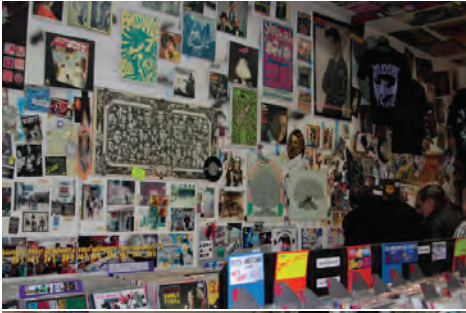
Tuesday 13 December 2011

Charles and Dian awoke at 10 AM to find a parking spot close to Don's, and they were successful! Something of a miracle in Valencia. Nicole and Dian went to the Chinese Bazaar next door and bought organizers for Nicole's clothes in the van. They walked to the van and for the next two and a half hours organized like mad women!

Later in the evening Don took us to his friend's record store in the first shopping mall of Valencia. Nicole was admittedly a little skeptical of its location, besides, aren't cool record shops supposed to be down windy side streets right next to a vintage bookstore and a java joint? But her faith was restored when she stepped inside, for it had all the ambiance of a neat old music store with its wall to wall posters and miscellaneous music items. As it turns out the owner, Juan, has had Amsterdam Discos for coming up on 29 years! Don wanted us to meet him and his 18-year-old daughter Arizona, especially for Nicole's sake, but she wasn't there.



A great thing happened at Amsterdam Discos: Nicole had been carrying around a sticker from the band TV On The Radio, hoping to put it somewhere special in Europe and spread the word a bit more. We believe it found a perfect home in the store, and Juan and Miguel, the other employee present at the time, seemed very excited to have the sticker, and Juan put it up on the wall instantly. Mission accomplished!



It was almost time for the show to start at a nearby jazz club, so Charles and Don went to that while Nicole and Dian opted to stay home and try to call Dian's parents and her sister Monica. They waited until midnight to call, thinking maybe the other two would get back from the club, and filled the time by watching the Coen Brothers film "Hudsucker Proxy."



It's a good thing they didn't wait for too long because Don and Charles didn't get home till around 3 AM. Dian and Nicole successfully reached the family back home, and it was good to hear everyone's voice.



A great international nativity scene collection was on display at the mall



Including a scene from New Mexico!



DAY 156 (2011-12-14 19:17)

Wednesday 14 December 2011



Since Don and Charles talked until five in the morning and Nicole also called it a night in the morning, Dian wrote some postcards and prepared a package for the post office while everyone else snoozed. At noon the Happy Trails (NOT Travails) Gang shambled to the old city center. We were not quite oriented as our digs had changed to Don's place in the El Carmen district. After many wrong turns but some surprisingly wonderful street art that Nicole captured with her camera, we found the "correo"- post office - an impressive yellow building with a soaring cupola in the middle decorated in Spanish tiles. We pushed the button and took a number only to get up to the window ten minutes later and learn we'd selected the "pick up packages" ticket. 25 minutes after that our new number was called and we sent a package (shhh - don't tell Dian's dad she did a portrait of him) and some other gifts and postcards.



Leaving the bustling, Christmas clad downtown we wended our way back to El Carmen with the knowledge that ALL Starbucks have a free sample policy. We determined to test our neighborhood store and wow! It was not only true but we had the good fortune to meet

English-speaking-Valencian-born Sento who generously poured about 10 coffee samples each topped with whipped cream and drizzled with chocolate. We enjoyed the drinks and his tips on where to go and what to do while staying in his hometown. We told him all our friends and blog followers would be sent to Sento.



Dian had seen a cool antique store down an

alley but with all the awnings drawn for siesta we couldn't find it. We stopped for groceries and went home.



Don was up and getting ready for his two week visit to his sister in the states. We had lunch and it was then that Nicole realized her favorite cashmere sweater from Grandmother was missing. She and Dian thought it might have been left at the grocery store but on the way out of Don's vestibule there it was hanging on the rail - put there by some good Samaritan - (not sure that would happen in L.A.)





viewing pictures at Don's house

Re-

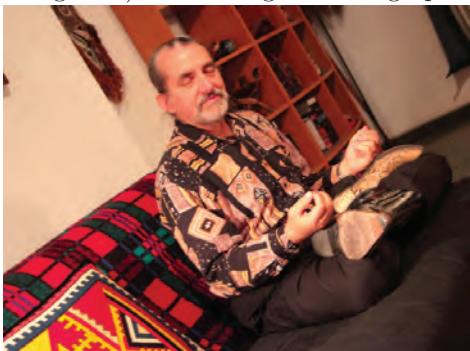


We had a quick look at the view from Don's roof at sunset. There were lots of churches and even a glimpse of the shot pocked entry gate towers. Charles went out with Don to see where recycling should go and then Dian made her own version of tapas for dinner - garlic, olive oil, ham, cheese, pepperoni and cayenne pepper on toasted bread. After dinner Nicole cut Dian's hair and with no previous experience did a fine job on Dian's fine hair.

DAY 157 (2011-12-16 08:24)

Thursday 15 December 2011

Don thoughtfully exited for his plane to Boston quietly at 7:30 AM, but we had said goodbyes the night before. We knew we'd miss him and were so grateful for his generosity to let us stay in his place while he was gone. We would see him for a couple days after he got back on the 30th. New Year's Eve is no big deal in Spain, spent quietly with family, so we thought we might join him in the traditional midnight eating of grapes.... (be still, my beating heart). That's OK; though Nicole would miss her long-standing NYE with her cousin Lizzie, Dian and Charles weren't interested in going wild, (usually Dian had a gig on that best-paid of nights, many times in Palm Springs, so we often didn't even spend it together). We were good with grapes.



Getting into the zone, the 2012 zoneIt seemed odd to not have Don there, but how wonderful it was to have his roomy home, stacked neatly with the most amazing selection of books and music, which he made available to us. Dian dove into a book on Dali right away, and Charles started auditioning tempting unheard sounds and copying known gems into the laptop (with a good half a terabyte memory left, he started with the Coltrane complete Atlantic recordings, seven discs worth). Paradise on the Spanish coast, Andrews-style. (That wasn't inappropriate: Don had tons of great dub, reggae and ska.)

It turned into a lazy day – no, wait, what was that Italian expression? – just what we all wanted. You can't chase experiences non-stop without a recharge. G'night.

DAY 158 (2011-12-16 08:28)

Friday 16 December 2011

While Charles worked on his blog days and full computer usage rights, Dian and Nicole walked around the city with a few goals in mind.

One was to find Sento, the generous and friendly worker we'd met at Starbucks, and get the address for his workplace specifically so we could send people there. The other was to find the elusive antique shop Dian had been pining for for so long.



More street artNicole and Dian knew the area in which the store had first been spotted, but to find the shop itself would be a little more difficult, as there were multiple antique stores in the immediate area. They asked in several places, even in an English bookstore where the Scottish store owner explained the crime-scene-like-outlined-body on the floor was from an ex-girlfriend, and though he didn't know where the store was he could tell us lots about the Reyes Magos event that would take place on the 5th of January. Still, the pair would not be deterred from their search.

They even got Dian's money belt a new grommet and then, just around the corner, there it was:



Stacked from floor to ceiling with odds and ends from days gone by the store was great to look around, though Nicole felt a bit like a bull in a china shop with her big jacket and camera in tow. Amongst a basket of old dolls, Dian spotted one from Andorra! Since we had no tangible souvenirs from the country (though we had lunched there), she bought the doll.

After finding Sento and getting a cup of what we had sampled the last time we were there, he pointed out an electronics store where the two could get a connector to go from our car radio to our CD player and iPod. They found the store easily, thanks to his clear instructions, and after purchasing the needed cord, they walked home, with a quick detour by way of Dia, lots of street art, and a quick stop by Sonia's store.



Dinner was a delicious pasta, salmon and broccoli mix, and with a little talk and winding down, we went to bed.

DAY 159 (2011-12-18 04:10)

Saturday 17 December 2011

We were noticing that going to bed late – 6 AM for Charles who stayed till the DJ set was over then walked home and 3 AM for Dian and Nicole who took a taxi from Club Sala Matisse where the show by Arizona Dylan and her dad, Juan took place – and getting up late, were becoming the norm.

Dian wanted to hit the grand central market before it closed at 1 PM so she went there alone and had some indelible memories burned into her brain. One was of a rally of picketers for better healthcare in the same church plaza as a ring of kids playing a duck duck goose game while two Lucille Ball-colored elderly redheads strolled by. There was a guitar playing girl scout leader (or some kind of group selling poinsettias to raise money for their group), and a man with a white dog who did tricks on its hind legs while a woman played a lively synthesizer to the scowls of local merchants. Another group had a yard sale/baked goods sale for their society and Dian found a really great Daisy Duck item for a euro. She walked out to where the van was parked and started it but unfortunately the electronic connector she and Nicole had bought didn't work with their CD player and the radio.



Graffiti Close-up Finally, the grand market was reached and the produce procured for Claire and Bill's "sandwich party." Since it was to be a contest with various categories the competitor in Dian was let loose as she searched for the perfect ingredients.

Meanwhile, Charles had had a croissant and *cortado* (coffee with steamed milk), outside at a cafe near our flat while Nicole sorted photos in her room. The wind had died down and

there was an air of Christmas festiveness all over the city. We even opened another of the edible gifts Monica had sent from "the heart of Texas." Yum!



At 5:45 we began our walk over to the Ruzafa district to meet Bill and Claire for a movie. By now, we'd all gotten a pretty good lay of the land but that didn't stop us from getting frustrated with one another for wrong turns and three block detours. (As the saying goes we've been hanging around with each other so long we're speaking again!) The movie we selected was "The Artist" and after a bus ride and some quick hellos to friends of Claire and Bill's, we settled into our seats to watch a movie without dubbing or subtitles. Everyone enjoyed this French film and afterwards the ten of us walked (did we mention walking is a favorite pastime in Valencia?) to a little restaurant where we had tapas, stuffed mushrooms with goat cheese, chicken/walnut salad, pate, blood sausages, ham, cheese, and tuna jerky with wine for our after-cinema meal. While chatting with Bill we learned that when he had long hair and a bushy beard his motto was "let your freak flag fly free" which we found hilariously funny coming from the good ol' Texas boy.



With the chill night air spurring us homeward, we bade adios to our friends and went to bed at the reasonable hour of two.

DAY 160 (2011-12-18 09:12)

Sunday 18 December 2011

Another late night meant another late rise. Around 11:30 PM Charles heard singing and lots of voices, nearby – church? a football game (singing team songs)? He decided to walk outside and investigate and, not hearing any more, decided to keep walking and learn the neighborhood a little more, even though he was in his cowboy boots not his walking boots. (For walks less than an hour or so, they worked, and he'd been missing his boots-never wears shoes at home but Euro city terrain was usually not suited to cowboy boots). He picked up some tomatoes and tangerines.

We had an omelette for late breakfast then finally got ourselves out of the apartment around 1:45 for our planned trip to the Valencia modern art museum, just a five-minute walk away. It was good; Charles said he liked about 15 % of it, Dian about 75 %, Nicole somewhere in between. Jose Manuel Ciria we liked, and one whole room titled Surrealism had some good things, but on the heels of our Gaudi/Dali pilgrimages it was hard for anything else to be very impressive. We browsed in a great book store with lots of Taschen art books. We walked back by way of our precious parking space to visit our van and pick up a few things. Charles decided to make a thorough search throughout the nooks and crannies and Nicole and Dian took off for home, detoured by street art along the way.



Safe and warm again, out of the wind, the trio settled into blog writing, painting, email catching-up, reading, guitar playing, snack-

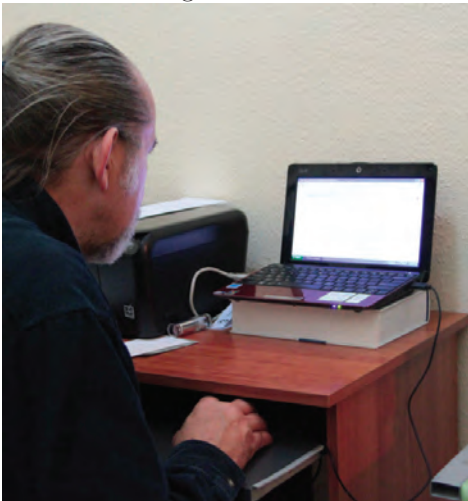
ing, listening to a great blues collection box set of Don's, and brewing up some great applesauce with raisins and honey. We called our friend "Uncle" Enrique to invite him and his sister Pilar, whose home we first stayed in upon arriving in Valencia, to the winter solstice sandwich party our friends Claire and Bill (our next home after Pilar's) planned for the following Thursday. We weren't sure how the up-in-years pair might react; Claire said Spaniards don't quite understand the idea of a party, especially a theme party, the way Americans do. But Enrique got it and was quite enthusiastic about the silly idea, and said they would both be there with their sandwich creations. Claire told us on the phone later that Enrique and Nicole would judge the sandwiches for prizes, as the youngest and oldest in attendance.

We had veggies and couscous for dinner and Dian started work on a modern art painting, but first we watched our first movie together from Don's vast and excellent collection, and made a wise choice: "Theremin", the stranger than fiction story of the man who invented that electronic musical instrument (and color TV! and more) in the '30s then disappeared for 50 years before turning up in Russia. Don said it was one of his faves too. Highly recommended.

DAY 161 (2011-12-21 04:06)

Monday 19 December 2011

The cleaning lady above our flat was going at it and so by 10 we were at it too, with attitude. Let's just say the walls were thin in all the Valencian apartments we'd stayed at and Don's was no exception. We caught up on emails, bought a few things from the Chinese Bazar below, painted some Christmas cards, then had a lunch of Pakistani spinach over vermicelli with garbanzo beans.



Later we called Dian's parents who reported they were "fair to middlin'," and after a light supper of mushroom soup and salad with yoghurt dressing, followed by some walnut cracking (don't ask), we retired.

DAY 162 (2011-12-21 04:06)

Tuesday 20 December 2011

A few observations, as our friend Mary would say, of the minutia only an extended stay in one place can offer:

There are no bugs in Spain. Yes, we did hear ONE FLY a couple days ago but there are no ants, cockroaches, spiders – the usual insects. Maybe they don't mix with city life but we didn't even see them when we stayed overnight at our friend Ajfan's cabin way out in the country.

The quietest hour in Valencia is from 6 to 7 AM. No kidding. The last of the revelers are walking home (loudly) on the street below around 5:30 and then...silence.



The church bells don't chime through the night, only during waking hours (what are those again?). And speaking of waking and sleeping, we still hadn't gotten the exact hours of siesta. Some shops and restaurants are closed from 1 till 4 PM while others seem to close from 2 till 5 PM. One thing's for sure, on Domingo (Sunday), almost everything is closed. It's a family day which you can tell by all the good smells wafting from the apartments.

They don't sell salad dressings in the variety we're used to, olive oil and vinegar are standard but unless you go to Corte Ingles you won't find Paul Newman brands. Ditto for really hot salsa. We were surprised that the Spanish people as a whole don't like their food really spicy. Thank goodness Don's kitchen was well stocked with cayenne and crushed chili peppers.



After being awakened by either a new dentist in the building or someone using an electric saw, we got up and Charles and Dian did some grocery shopping. Dian wanted to paint in the church courtyard at the end of the street so she took six Christmas cards and her water color set and wrapped in a pancho and scarf, finished them. It was so nice to work with the splashing fountain and thoughts of Dali and other great artists floating in her head – no, the Christmas cards wouldn't have melting clocks.



Praying on behalf of our lottery ticket Charles went out to buy bus passes and Nicole and Dian walked to the post office to mail some cards. Dian was pleased that the clerk showed

her artwork to his co-worker and even found some cool stamps instead of printed labels for them. The duo walked past a modeling casting call at the department store Corte Ingles which extended down the street. We always seem to find cool street art down the tiniest alleys and this day was no exception. In fact, one of the best finds was near an old church (Santa Lucia) where Dian impulsively bought a lottery ticket for five euros. The pot was up to 80 million! We laughed about how we wouldn't tell anyone we won so we could continue our travels albeit with a few more perks. When we arrived back home Charles had a roast pork and potatoes meal with salad and brie cheese waiting. We watched the Coen brothers movie "Blood Simple" then konked out.

DAY 163 (2011-12-21 18:25)

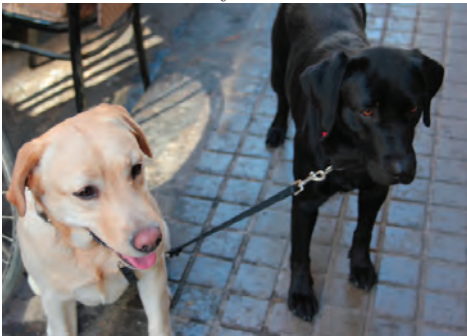
Wednesday 21 December 2011



No one left the apartment all day except Charles who went to the van to snag a few more items.



Dian painted. Nicole contacted friends. We all watched a doc on Werner Herzog's disastrous filming of "Fitzcarraldo" called "Burden of Dreams." Later, Charles had a long video chat with his good friend Joel. That's it. Some days were like that.



DAY 164 (2011-12-23 13:03)

Thursday 22 December 2011

This was the much anticipated Solstice Sandwich Party day!!! We did some blogging, laundry, emailed Nicole's friend Myles' parents about flight schedules to Spain, and made guacamole.

Charles walked over to Claire and Bill's and had a coffee with Bill then bought some exotic *cervezas* (pronounced ther-vay-thas in Castilian) and a secret Christmas gift or two. Upon his arrival back at Don's he helped Nicole and Dian make Christmas tree bacon and guacamole open-faced sandwiches with tomato ornaments and anchovies as garlands as their entry for the "most original sandwich." While they were aware that Nicole was to be one of the judges, they decided to throw caution to the wind and let her build one of her own.



Charles hightailed it over to Juan Vitorio's Discos Amsterdam record store (yes, they have and love vinyl, even 45s) knowing it was their 29th anniversary, for which he had bought a 2 and a 9 candle and stuck them in a cupcake. Juan and long time assistant Miguel seemed genuinely pleased, and once he got back they had only a

few minutes to dress up for the party.



Dian put on make up. She wore a belt over a close fitting black top with a velvet knee length skirt (from Sonia's store) and Don's cowboy boots, which fit perfectly. The jewelry selection (though limited) was just the right touch – the Piegara glass pendant and matching earrings. Charles and Nicole “cleaned up well” and the threesome walked across town carrying their precious entry (and the cowboy boots because NO WAY was Dian going to try those out on a cross town walk.)



Be-

ing the first to arrive, we helped set out the wine and even gave Claire a hand with her spaghetti sandwiches (surprisingly delicious and quite original). Pilar (whose flat was our first place to stay in Valencia) and her brother Enrique were next to arrive and it was a great pleasure to meet up with them again and see what a festive spirit they brought.



As

the sandwich entries mounted up Nicole and her fellow judge Enrique (the youngest and oldest) were SUPPOSED to start sampling in the private chambers but Uncle Enrique begged off saying he was not an apt choice since he was on a diet. The replacement was Frances McLure, a 30 year-plus resident of Valencia and Scottish mermaid who, as Nicole

put it, “didn’t like any of them.” Finally the moment arrived for the announcements and since judge Nicole had liked everything it was a hard decision, but Emparo won for best homemade sandwich, someone else (we forget!) for best meatless sandwich, and the Andrews family won for MOST CREATIVE!!! With Nicole conducting the “drum rolls” the various winners got their prizes from Claire. Dian accepted the colored pencils with a tearful speech and after lots more conversation the party wound down.



Before catching a ride home with Frances, the Andrews family got to tour the next door neighbor’s flat that had gorgeous Moorish floor tile designs and the gypsy musician who stayed there told us some fascinating stories. We played guitar and Frances sang a beautiful Scottish ballad, then we bade our hosts goodnight.



DAY 165 (2011-12-23 13:04)

Friday 23 December 2011

We yawned and started the day at 12:45PM sleeping in after the Great Sandwich Party the night before. Thankfully we hadn't had to walk home across town as our new buddy, Frances offered us a ride. It was fun singing Scottish songs with her and despite her saying she didn't have a voice, she did ("Mum always said God loves a trier.")



Us singing from the night before Charles made a bacon omelette then we walked to the van to start it and did a bit more Christmas shopping. We had a lovely salad, left-over sandwiches from Bill and Claire's with Russian beer at dinnertime and opened a gift, which was a book about Gaudi.

We could hear choir songs from down below and it was beginning to feel a lot like Christmas.

DAY 166 (2011-12-27 10:38)

Saturday 24 December 2011

It would be a bit of a drive to Toledo so we arose at 6:15 and took off less than an hour later. We knew the way there was no scenic wonder, Toledo and its neighbor Madrid being perched on a high plain known mostly for its chill in winter. But we were also advancing through Don Quixote country, and since we'd been reading the book aloud for a while it was interesting to see windmills and the rolling flat stretches that we could just picture the loony old dude riding across and spotting something in the distance that looked like wrongdoing needing redress.



We arrived at the Hilton Buenavista Toledo just before noon and the accommodating staff let us into the room in advance of the 2:00 PM check-in time. They also let us park the van in the corner of the front drive for the duration, with no charge. They were extremely cordial and helpful all around, with Theresa at the front desk using her good command of Ingles to throw all sorts of advice our way, about a hiking path, a bus that circled the outside of the city walls



Charles went for a hike towards town. He didn't say so but his mission, like a hunter head-of-household of old, was to find food for the family; we hadn't brought more than on-the-road supplies, and we sure didn't want to raid the room fridge or go for exorbitant room service or restaurant prices. As Charles walked and walked and kept walking he got very discouraged – it was now approaching 4 on Christmas Eve, a day when it seemed everyone was closing at noon for siesta with no intention of opening up again until the 26th. After cutting through residential areas and the downtown shopping district and finding *nada*, he got all the way up to the old walled town and thought, if there's nothing open back there, there sure aren't going to be markets in the old area. But lo and behold, a Christmas miracle: he found not one but three places open within the first two blocks and stocked up on good cheese and meat and wine and even brought home half the kebob sandwich he had to buy for sustenance after that draining search. The family would not starve!



Back at the Hilton, Nicole and Dian were refreshed from showers and naps and had prepared tea and yoghurt-covered rice cakes. We then really made the room look like Christmas by mounting the pine boughs Claire and Bill so thoughtfully gave us (our tree) and decorating it with the very small ornaments we had fashioned from small pine corns we gathered and painted in Piegaro, Italy. We had a surprising quantity of wrapped gifts to spread around.

Dian's parents had sent a fantastic box of gifts that were thoughtful and useful, including a lot of yummy Trader Joe's items, like the Thai soup cup that became part of our exotic Christmas dinner in the room, added to the cheese, bread and meat slices Charles got in the old town, some great Czech beers brought from Valencia and various treats for dessert (dark chocolate, yay!). We got dressed and got on the computer to call Grandmother and Grandad, and were also able to speak to brother Tim and his wife Marta who were visiting San Pedro from their home in Memphis. We almost got to connect with Texas too as niece Amelia rang us up, but we had to text her holiday wishes because we had to finish up the call and catch our shuttle to town at 9:45 for midnight mass.



Marzipan and



Marzipan

and



Marzipan



Charles and QuixoteWe had fun exploring, wandering into a hotel lobby to be invited to look downstairs, where we found a medieval setup with long tables and high narrow chairs and several authentic suits of armor standing around. Good photo ops. Then into a shop or two and lots of window shopping, taking in huge displays and creations of marzipan (a Toledo specialty) – like swords, lots of eels (??), shields, and a 4' x 6' castle – and also nativity scenes (they have competitions there for the best ones), and lots of real swords and knives (also a Toledo thing). We went by the cathedral and couldn't find a way in, then two men standing nearby said it probably wouldn't open up until after 11:30 PM, So we wandered some more, to the nearby square where they had a large ice skating rink set up inside a clear tent, and finally up the hill a bit to find a tea shop open.



Dian, Sancho Panza, and Nicole



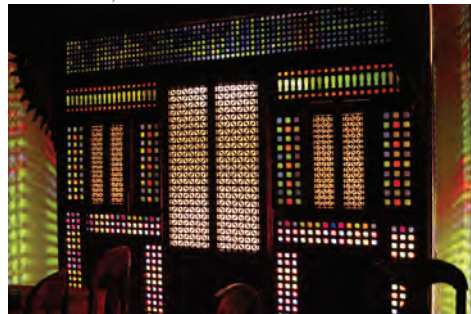


Nicole and Quixote



The name was "Alqahira", and it was a find - a Christmas present from Arabia. When we

stepped in it was like a passage into another land. There was wonderful Middle Eastern music playing softly, fabulous inlaid furniture, hookahs, and holding the magic together was Fahti, the gracious proprietor who treated us like visiting royalty. Charles is strictly a coffee guy but Fahti convinced all of us to pull up a chair and have a fine tea, which he served with a flourish on a silver tray, and gifted us with sesame-covered cookies to accompany it. We chatted with him about his hometown Cairo, and the time passed quickly until we needed to get on to the cathedral for mass. At first we didn't realize "Alqahira" was also a restaurant with a limited but tempting menu, but when we did we quickly decided that was where we wanted to have our Christmas dinner, courtesy of a gift card we had just opened from family friend, Irene Thermos, back in San Pedro.





Toledo's main streets were a wonderland of lights



DAY 167 (2011-12-27 10:39)

Sunday 25 December 2011

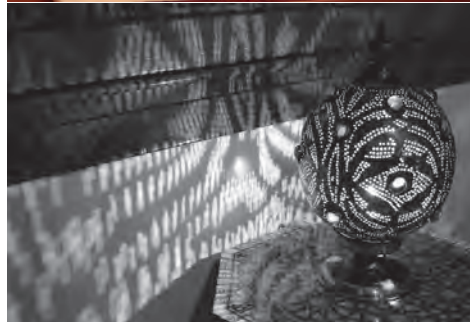


"Merry Christmas!" we chorused as we snuggled in deeper to our Hilton beds in Toledo. But reason overcame the comfort and joy of the moment when we saw that the breakfast buffet would be ending soon. So much to eat (included in the room price) so little time! With a truly impressive array of local delicacies as well as good old American standards like scrambled eggs and crisp bacon (impossible to find in lands where an espresso and a croissant is a standard breakfast), we had our fill and even managed (with staff permission and encouragement) to take a few treats back to our room for later. God knows we're NOT going to raid the ultra-pricey room mini-bar.





We opened the rest of our gifts and had the leisure of laying in bed and reading new books or eating yummy treats sent from sister Monica and brother-in-law Rick in Texas and Dian's parents in California. A brief foray downstairs to use the lobby wi-fi was followed by a nap. At 7 PM our shuttle into town awaited, but just before leaving we were able to phone Dian's parents and her brother Tim and wife Marta who were visiting them from Memphis. It was good to touch base with family and specifically to thank Tim for setting up our luxurious accommodations through his status as a Hilton corporation high mucky-muck.



In Toledo the joint was jumping, a contrast to the quiet, almost deserted night before, and we wound our way down curving streets, past the big cathedral, to "Alqahira" tea house/restaurant, through a festive atmosphere which included a life-sized Don Quixote and Sancho Panza on someone's balcony. When we arrived at the restaurant,

proprietor Fathi was just wiping his brow from the huge lunch party that had just left. We were seated by ourselves (it was early, of course, for a Spanish supper) in front of the large gorgeous colored glass and carved wood balcony piece he installed, and with his help ordered a variety of dishes from the menu. The food was delicious and we gave him a Three Kings Day present, his first that year, he said, and he seemed touched.

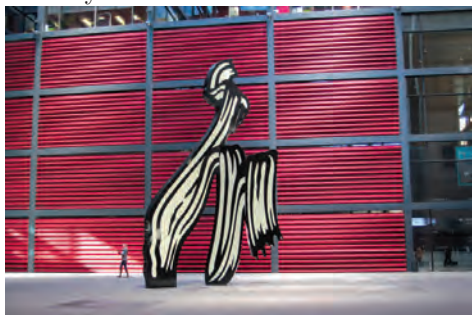


Exiting we took some more photos of the town in its Christmas attire, then meandered back to the Hilton through the crisp night air, but not before purchasing a box of the marzipan cookies that Toledo is famous for.

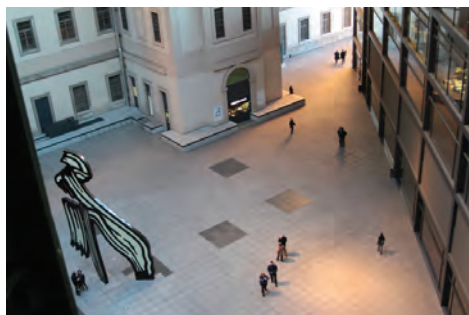


DAY 168 (2011-12-27 10:39)

Monday 26 December 2011



There was nothing lacking at the Hilton breakfast buffet and when an employee came to ask if we had enjoyed our stay we unanimously said, YES! (Well, Dian yanked his chain a little complaining of the loud fire crackers and people carousing but then quickly amended the comment to say she thought he had been asking about the town of Toledo. He seemed relieved when she used the word "tranquilo" to describe the Hilton.) The waiter was smiling when Dian let him know she needed more coffee since she'd put salt in the first one by mistake. Yes, with little croissant sandwiches tucked into our jacket pockets, we were set for the snack we would need later in Madrid.



Charles had done the checking out the night before so all we had to do was dispose of our Christmas tree, (thanks Bill and Claire) and all the glitter decorations we had made in Piegaro. We made doubly sure NO GLITTER fell on the carpet (right mom!?) and did an idiot check before shutting the door to room 139. Our bags were a bit fuller with all the wonderful gifts that had arrived from Dian's mom and dad and were waiting for the Happy Trails Gang plus all the good junk we gave each other and Uncle Pat and Aunt Felicia's gifts, Mark Twain's "The Innocents Abroad" and an Amazon gift card.





It only took an hour to get to the Reina Sofia Museum in the heart of Madrid and we were lucky to find a paid parking space on the street right across from it. At the ticket window Charles pulled out his trusty press pass, Nicole produced her student ID card and Dian dug into the recesses of her money belt for the NOT ONCE ACCEPTED teacher card. All three were accepted and we entered one of the most fantastic museums in Spain for free!



A book Nicole read in her Existentialism class Let's put it this way. Dian has always loved Picasso since her college art professor chose one of his paintings for her to meticulously copy. Other students had Manet or Degas but the teacher matched Dian with Pablo and her appreciation of his genius and seeming childlike quality knew no bounds. Imagine then how she felt standing in front of his masterpiece *Guernica*. The mural was commissioned by the anti - Franco forces and was based on a bombing attack on a little Spanish town with only civilians living there. When Picasso painted it, in black and white, it caused such a stir that it was used to moved people to see the horrors of war and it went on tour. It was eleven by twenty five

feet. But until Franco left and a democracy was set in place Picasso exiled the piece to the New York Modern Art Museum only allowing its return 40 years later. Supposedly when Nazis approached him and said, "Are you the one responsible for this (*Guernica*)?" "No" said Picasso, "you are."



"A Trip To The Moon" by Georges Melies, one of the first "magicians" of cinema



There were so many great pieces by the Surrealists and of course being in the middle of a book about Salvador Dali, Dian was in hog heaven. We went up to the 4th floor for a view of Madrid at dusk then stopped for a quick coffee at the museum cafe. Nicole put money in the parking meter and we huddled in our van to have our snack. Yes, it was getting chilly as we walked to the Prado where we'd been told a temporary exhibit was open to the public. Unfortunately as Nicole quipped, "El Prado es cerrado, no

entrado!" Oh well, we walked around it and up the steps to a church where a christening was taking place.



Since it was already 7 PM we decided to drive back to Valencia on the most direct route and lo and behold there were no tolls! We arrived at midnight and parked in front of Don's place deciding we'd look for a more permanent parking space the next morning.



DAY 169 (2011-12-29 11:29)

Tuesday 27 December 2011



Pictures around Valencia Charles arose at 8:30 to move the car by 9 from in front of Don's to some secure and free parking space not horribly far from his place – a tall order in Valencia, especially near the old city where we were.



After a fruitless and frustrating hour and a half Charles headed back to the apartment to pay

for a space for an hour, take a breather, and pick up his good luck charm, Dian. It was sooo much easier to have two sets of eyes looking for possibilities and reading signs and maps and judging traffic, and if/when a space was spotted chances were good it was previously occupied by a tiny European car and you'd need someone standing outside waving their arms and yelling "one more inch!" in order to fit a big VW van in.



It worked.... but it took another hour and a half and about eight cruises through the tiny street off the main drag where we scored a perfect spot before, then finally scored again. Good for almost another week. We celebrated the successful conclusion of our three-hour trial by popping into a small deli on the way back, with three kinds of paella simmering in their huge frying pans, and taking one home.



Ate, napped, emailed. Late dinner but good, tuna steaks from the nearby market, great mashed potatoes with cream and olive oil by Nicole, and a big healthy salad.

DAY 170 (2011-12-29 11:30)

Wednesday 28 December 2011



Claire and Nicole This was to be a Spring cleaning day, and so it was. With scrubbing brushes, cleanser from Albania and some home-grown elbow grease, we made Don's pad sparkle! Ingredients for the *tapas* party that night, with our Austin-Valencia friends Bill and Claire, were prepared in advance and included: sliced prok, cream cheese, pesto, mushrooms, grilled eggplant, tuna, chickpeas and stuffed olives. We toasted and cut some sourdough bread, then waited for the doorbell to ring.



Nicole putting together the Fantasy Van They were right on time and we opened a bottle of red wine and began tasting the *tapas*. The dining room and its nicely-set table were neglected in favor of the comfort of the living room area with couch, so Dian traveled from kitchen to living room with about 10 different

creations. Meanwhile, Nicole put together the "fantasy van" model she and Dian had bought for Charles in Piegaro, Italy.



Dian's song "Neptune's Tavern" was performed so our guests would know from whence came the book of the same name (Dian's words with her illustrations) that we had given them. With wine flowing freely it was nice to have Nicole clean up the kitchen and also nice that we didn't have far to walk (down the hall) to fall into bed. Bill and Claire said they didn't mind the walk home (about 20 minutes) because the night air was pleasant.

DAY 171 (2011-12-29 11:31)

Thursday 29 December 2011

Is it okay to say we hate writing these blogs... every day or so? This confession is made in all candidness because deep down we know how much we'll treasure this daily synopsis of our trip but it's a MUST and we wanted a MUST FREE sabbatical. There. It's been said. All together now, Poooooooo family. Now on to the juicy details of our amazing adventure.



With Pilar and Enrique expecting us for lunch at 2:30 we wrote a few postcards, Nicole helped wash up after the tapas party and we finally scooted out the door to walk to our old neighborhood. We arrived bearing a box of marzipan cookies from Toledo. Holy guacamole! The house was completely decked out in Christmas decorations including a big tree and gorgeous nativity scene. Then the feast began. Pilar had made her own holy guacamole served on pork rinds with a drizzle of mole. We had a yummy fried noodle dish, *fideo seco*, re-fried black beans with Mexican cheese sprinkled on top and finally (after we were all groaning about eating too much) the main dish, *chilaquiles*, a casserole made with tortilla, chicken, peppers and cheese. All of this was washed down with either cervesa, tequila or pineapple juice. After spending their youth in Mexico the brother and sister had been in Valencia for the past 33 years and loved it.



It's wonderful how new friends can feel like old friends so quickly. The language barrier was nominal and when Nicole and Dian played some Spanish songs on the guitar Uncle Enrique even commented on their perfect pronunciation. We had cheese atop a square of guava and coffee plus all the choices of Christmas sweets you could imagine. We left exchanging verses of "Feliz Navidad" as we rode down the elevator to the sunny street below.

Yes, we were in an unusually long period of good weather according to our friends and we were soaking it up like cats on a windowsill. We stopped at the Dia supermarket for more pesto and pasta (staples for the camping ahead) and Dian turned her glasses in to an optica shop where the proprietor, Jaime said he'd try to solder the broken frame but... "no se puede" which we recognized as the opposite of Barack Obama's campaign slogan (borrowed from Caesar Chavez) - "Yes, We Can." We took his card and agreed to call the next day to see if the miracle had been wrought.



Back at home we had a light dinner and each of us buried ourselves in the books we'd chosen from Don's vast library, trying to finish them before leaving on the first of January. When one thinks of the effort that goes into a good book it does seem silly to complain about a measly daily diary, doesn't it?



DAY 172 (2011-12-30 20:33)

Friday 30 December 2011

Don returned from his half a month back in the States with family for the holidays, during which time he generously let us stay in his roomy apartment in the El Carmen district in the old part of Valencia. He walked through the door almost exactly at 10:30 AM as he had predicted; Charles was the only one awake at the time – hey, we were in Valencia, where a 4 AM bedtime was more the norm than the exception, especially if you were under 30, but that was Charles' usual lifestyle back home too. Dian and Nicole eventually greeted Don, and we all tried to stay out of his way as he unpacked his new music/movies haul and dealt with jet lag and getting back on schedule.



Charles and Dian headed over to the optica shop where the owner had fixed Dian's broken glasses! They stopped for a *cortado* and pastry served by a Sandra Bullock look-alike then went back to our old favorite bakery, Horno Goya. Allysa was there and piled on the paella then gave us a New Years lemon muffin on the house. We walked over to Bill and Claire's and had tea and hot lemonade while deciding what to take to the BBQ the following Sunday. Leaving them at about 3 PM we walked to the post office to mail some items and check on the disappearance of a large box sent to the States over a month before. Hmmm.



Later we took naps while Don went out to do some shopping, and make a reservation for us at 9 at one of his favorite restaurants, Bodeguilla del Gato, just a five-minute stroll from his place. At 9 we were early diners, but by the time we left at around 10:30 the place was full, with more people coming in. What a find. Great atmosphere, music, staff, and the food was superb and the prices low. The bill for four people for salad + 4 different tapas (calamari, blood sausage, pimiento de padron, mussels, + 3 beers + 1 coke + 2 really incredible desserts (toasted camembert covered with boysenberry sauce and a sumptuous slice of chocolate cake) + 4 grappas came to \$62. And that's why people move to Valencia, or happen upon it and stay forever.



Chapter 2

2012

2.1 January

DAY 173 (2012-01-07 14:29)

Saturday 31 December 2011

The last day of the year was not particularly eventful, but was endearing. We tooled around doing various chores such as buying mosquito netting and walking to the modern art museum to buy some Picasso diaries and Dali books.



Don's kitchen



Near the museum Charles went to the van then with Don over to the Gran Mercat to find some nice tuna steaks for our farewell dinner with him. Nicole made delicious mashed potatoes and Charles added a salad. We thanked

Don for his friendship and his incredible hospitality, then acted like lame couch potatoes awaiting the 12 bells of New Years, where we were prepared for the traditional Spanish "celebration" (whoo hooo!!) of eating one grape for each peal of the bells. Nicole and Dian "cheated" (Charles said, but Valencians disagreed) by taking the seeds out in advance, but Charles opted to eat all 12 in a row while spitting the seeds out like a Bugs Bunny machine gun. Needless to say, he finished far behind the ladies.

Soon after the new year began Dian finished the (760 page) book on Dali, but one mustn't write more for it is the next person's blog day, and we do have rules. Like bowling, there are rules!



Did we mention there are oranges in Valencia?

DAY 174 (2012-01-07 14:30)

Happy NewYear! Sunday 1 January 2012

Up at 9:15, we drove to Claire and Bill's to follow behind their friends Miguel and Pilar's car to for the hour plus drive up to Ajfan's barbecue in the country, northwest of Valencia. Lucky us to be included in another get together!



We shared our *chorizos* (sausages) and a pasta dish, and of course sampled everyone else's yummy contributions. Dian's favorite was Puerto Rican Aleida's yucca dish. Bill, Charles and Dian went with Gary to see his nearby property, a long slice with a great view and lots of potential, and returned about an hour later after hiking nearly to the next town.



When the sun went down we sang some songs, Dian on guitar and vocal leads and Nicole adding lovely harmony. Dian even had the group imitating bagpipes (Frances' Scottish influence – don't call her, or any Scotsman, Scotch: that's a drink... that the Scots cherish – got that?) by using their fingers on their noses and mouths, then Frances got everyone in a circle to kick up their heels to "Auld Lang Syne." When the cleanup was finished we followed Ajfan to her beach house in Poble de Farnals, north of Valencia.



Rallying the troops to participate in imitating bagpipes with their fingers ON their noses



It worked. With hasty instructions on the locked carport, washing machine and heaters, our kind benefactress left us since her daughter was moving some things into their new home. It had been a long day and we fell into beds with heavy eyelids but light hearts, thinking about how great 2011 had been and how wonderful 2012 was already proving its young self to be.



DAY 175 (2012-01-07 14:31)

Monday 2 January 2012

Windy weather greeted us at our condo by the sea. Dian took a walk and saw lots of wind surfers. She folded her hands behind her back and bent slightly forward in a manner not unlike Sherlock Holmes, trying to solve a case. This posture, she recognized, was her normal stance for beach combing, and came as naturally as the white-crested waves to the shore (been reading Robert Burns).



View from Frances' place

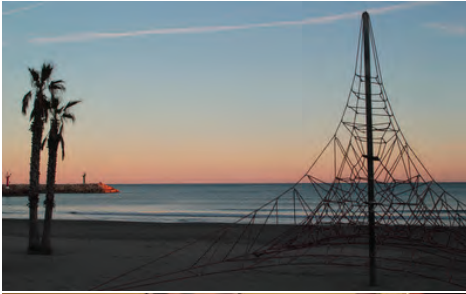


Charles, Frances and Nicole walking around Frances' place. Although Frances' place was only 10 minutes up the road from Ajfan's condo, we managed to get lost but finally appeared at her door around 3PM. She gave us a tour of her neighborhood canals and the marina before walking us over to the giant Costco-like Alcampo to return a piece of electronics, where we ended up buying a cell phone to replace the one we had lost (or had pick pocketed) on the ferry from Greece to Italy a couple of months earlier.



We'd been looking to do this for all that time but were stymied by rules that made it impossible to add minutes onto a prepaid phone without being a resident of that country. This was our opportunity: Scottish Frances was a 30-year resident of Valencia and a *profesora de Espanol*, and if she couldn't get across the concept that we needed to be able to add money/minutes onto the phone by credit card, online, anywhere, no one could. The *hombre* at the Vodafone booth absolutely assured us that could be done, signed us up with the cheapest phone (19 Euros/25 bucks) plus 5 Euros of airtime, and we left, all smiles except for a little doubt of yeah, we've heard that before.





Just a fraction of the bounty of dark chocolate in Frances' collection



Back at the beach condo, Frances fixed us a lovely salad with cheese and meat augmented by some bread we had bought, which we ate right after Charles put her new lamp together, mostly correctly. We watched some of Michael Palin's travelog of Valencia on the net, then drove home.

DAY 176 (2012-01-07 14:31)

Tuesday 3 January 2012

Dian became a blonde, again. After a rather late rising, the family got going with a trip to the local Consum grocery store (subtle eh?), then Dian did the dirty deed while Charles shot hoops and Nicole worked on her "caption art" and let her eye have some rest (allergies?)



Dian made a hummus by squishing each chick-pea between her fingers then adding oil, salt and a little milk. Nicole casually mentioned she had a craving for a Twinkie and lo and behold, Charles found one at a local Mercado – with granulated sugar on top. Shudder. We had sausage, couscous and salad for dinner then a halfhearted game of Scrabble. Nicole ate her Twinkie and Charles went to the Internet ice cream parlor/sports bar to catch up on emails. CAN YOU GUESS what this image is? Write your answer in a comment!



DAY 177 (2012-01-07 14:32)

Wednesday 4 January 2012

Ha ha, an easy day to write about! We arose at 10:15 and after coffee, Charles made fried eggs and bacon (this particular kind was MUY salty). We went for a walk along the beach and back through Ajfan's neighborhood which was pretty quiet, being more of a summer getaway. There were a few cool tile mosaics along the sides of buildings and when we returned we had a nice big salad with fresh bread, homemade hummus and really good Parmesan style cheese.



Look out
Joel and Jeff, the Dude still has his moves



Rocks found beach combing With an art project underway in two rooms and music playing from the iPod, we had a relaxing day. Dian painted the portable toilet box so it wouldn't be so obvious when used as a chair (not the toilet, the BOX), and Nicole did "caption art" on some old WW II photos from an Italian book found in Lugano, Switzerland. Charles continued reading the John Fante novel he had borrowed from Don.



At supper-time we had Nicole's delicious Indian curry over couscous (thanks to Grandmother and Grandad's care package at Christmas). She even added a creative touch by frying a ripe banana in a bit of sugar and oil.



Sometime after retiring for the night, Dian got bit by a mosquito and after killing six in her room felt she'd gotten revenge for the swelling eyelid that kept growing (and itching) through the rest of the night.



DAY 178 (2012-01-07 14:32)

Thursday 5 January 2012



We drove down to Frances' to have a great view of the local Three Kings arrival by boat. Unfortunately, the Kings disembarked while Dian was parking the car but at least from Frances' balcony we could see the kids line up and all the costumed attendants standing behind their monarchs, all dressed in elegant brocaded robes. Later we went downstairs to get a closeup of the scene and Dian got to shake each king's gloved hand. With a white Rolls Royce convertible waiting to whisk the royals away, Nicole quipped that they were probably itching to tear off their wigs and beards as soon as they hit the highway. (Remember these were all volunteers and it was a warm day).





The two mermaids embark Dian drove Frances to pick up her car at the mechanic's. Later we savored her really delicious apple tarts fresh out of the oven, with tea of course, and we lounged around using her computer to contact loved ones via email. Around 1 she and Dian (with Nicole as our very own Arbus), plunged into the 63 degree Mediterranean sea – FRICK! Frances does water aerobics all year round and stays in for about 20 minutes everyday; in comparison, Dian was a lightweight ... BUT AT LEAST SHE DID IT! We took hot showers (the best part, Frances says), finally hung up the glitter greeting sign on her balcony that read "Bienvenidos 3 Reyes," then sat down to a mouth-watering dinner on the balcony of steak pie, mashed potatoes, veggies and salad. After supper Frances handed a beautiful bag to Nicole which contained the keys to her house. "Look what the Three Kings left!" she said. To which we said a silent hallelujah.



The 3 Kings land, by



sea The Kings' ride



Kids mob kings (Santa Claus x 3) Since she had a party to go to (with friends who have been meeting every Friday for 30 years), we drove her to the metro station then headed home to Ajfan's place where if you can believe it we had a little pasta before bed.





Frances' balcony is second to the left

DAY 179 (2012-01-07 14:33)

Friday 6 January 2012

Three Kings Day was anticlimactic for us but nevertheless we enjoyed hearing the children in the neighborhood shrieking delightedly with each gift they opened. It was blustery outside but we still hung our laundry out and prayed it wouldn't fly away. We took the opportunity to shoot some hoops that morning, Nicole adding a little flare to her practice. Behold, this marvelous sequence:



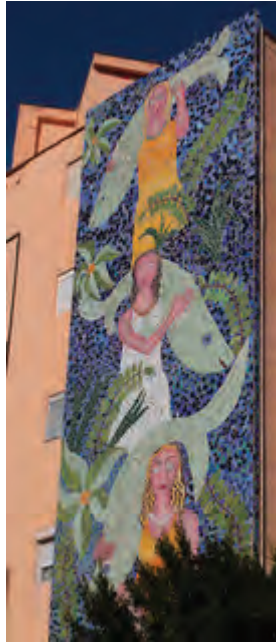




Charles

read aloud from *Don Quixote* (page 77 out of 1026 but hey, who's counting), and Nicole and Dian did art projects. We had chili con queso with sausage and tomatoes for lunch and then called Frances to confirm our hike departure time the next day. As our readers already know, we'd been asked to "look after the house" while Frances was away for a few days and this she announced by gift wrapping her house keys and saying, "Look what the Three Kings left!" God bless our





big hearted friends.



Greg Ack 4. Bristle - gypsy-punk/ska from Brussels, Belgium, with sister and brother leaders Dulci and Rick 5. Mea Culpa (My Fault) - heathen cha cha from Cuba, with Loli ChiChi (transvestite) and the Band 6. Grey Horde - alternative rock from Scotland, with frontman Michael Cap (their biggest gig to date at Fjord Theater, sponsored by Ford) 7. Loch Me Out - punk/riot grrrl from Scotland, with Ginji Studebaker, Lana Mann, Mikki Armenia, Monique the Freak, and Jean BuBuPa 8. Flannel Formica - folk blues/rock from Jamaica, with Jah Booty on lead guitar 9. Birds Fly Overhead - pop rock/B-52's-esque from Fresno, California, with John Owens on synths and drums 10. Tiller - Fishbone-esque experimental rock from Norway, with Jan Jan on lead vocals 11. LowGo - Devo-esque electronic pop from Florida, with frontman Marty Berg 12. Eyelash Out - all electric/mauri/Loudon Wainwright III cover band from Spain, with Miguel Montoya on accordion Charles shot MORE hoops and proved he hadn't lost his touch. Dinner was left over pasta with fresh bread and cheese.



Nicole and Dian laughed their butts off creating band names, origins, styles of music and participants names: 1. Thistle Man - traditional English-folk from England, with frontman Baggity Bibbins 2. Whether Vein - alternative/hard rock from USA, with Kim Black on lead vocals and guitar 3. Mattress - garage band/some covers from Tempe, Arizona, with frontmen Dean Michael and

Saturday 7 January 2012

The hiking day with Frances and her family had arrived and we were up for our first real trek in the mountains with an experienced guide. After getting up at 9 AM we met Frances, her son Scott, his wife Carmen and their nine-year-old son Alan at the gas station near the highway. We had an hour and a half drive to Montanejos following them in our van and arriving around noon at our hike entry point. We had a quick *cortado* at the local bar then began our ascent of the steep gorge. The sheer cliffs are famous worldwide for excellent rock climbing (Top 10) but we didn't see anyone rappelling down the sides. The pace was set by Alan and we all kept up pretty well although on the descent Frances enlisted Nicole and Alan to go at a quicker pace ("break-neck speed," as Nicole put it) so the three of them could fetch food from the car so the others would not have to walk so far after working up a big appetite.



Left to right: Nicole, Frances, Alan, Charles, Carmen, Scott The three and a half hour hike was fulfilling and we opted to have our picnic rather than get in the thermal springs which were, by 4 in the afternoon, too cold in the shade.



The food we shared tasted OH SO DELICIOUS and Scott treated us to a beer to go along with Frances' *ensalada*. We had gourmet potato chips, hard boiled eggs, pepperoni and cheese sandwiches, tomatoes and chocolate. We caught the last rays of the sun and even though Carmen and Alan spoke very little English, we all communicated easily.

Some of Dian's Simpsons memorabilia was offered to Alan and he proudly wore a "cast pass" around his neck for the rest of the day, as well as treasuring a "how to draw Bart" sheet. Frances received a hand-painted mermaid and merman purse courtesy of Dian, which she seemed to like.



Having been invited to Marta's country home for tea, we drove the 20 minutes to her cool "Gaudi-style" home where she was working on mirror tiles for her living room wall. With a fire in the wood burning stove and a "brau brit moonlit nich tonich" outside, we cozily drank our tea and told stories of anarchy and aliens. Ajfan arrive from her place down the lane (her country home, not to be confused with the beach house we were staying at), and after she contributed some chocolate chip cookies and relaxed with a cup of tea, we gave her the original canvas painting Dian had done of her, Emparo and Claire. She seemed pleased.



Moldy sign-in book Upon our return, Charles generously gave Dian and Nicole foot and body massages to soothe their aching bodies.

DAY 181 (2012-01-09 11:38)

Sunday 8 January 2012

We spent the day at Ajfan's catching up on blogs. Dian did TEN! We loaded our van in anticipation of our next stay at Frances' home. Charles read Don Quixote aloud, and we had couscous, soup, and vegetables for dinner.



DAY 182 (2012-01-10 03:23)

Monday 9 January 2012

Rising at 6:45, we wanted to be sure we would get to Frances' in good time to take her to the airport. In the time between then, we loaded the van, tidied up the place, and left by 8:30, arriving with no problems 15 minutes later.



Gathering up the last few things for her trip to the Canary Islands, Frances began to show us where things were in her place. Questions were withheld until the end of the "class" because otherwise she would lose her train of thought and surely skip over something she meant to say later.

Charles took her to airport in her car while Nicole and Dian settled into the place. How beautiful it was! The water from the canals sparkled right outside her balcony and the sun shone its warm rays onto the house.

Upon Charles' return, he and Dian went to the big Target-like megastore store Alcampo to get a few necessities and even a little horchada, a local milky drink made from "tiger nuts."

Nicole made grilled cheese sandwiches for the group (something she'd been craving the past few days) and a little curry mayo, pepperoni, bread and oil, olives and beer to boot!



Catching up with some bills and e-mails, we called the day to an end after a phone chat with Dian's parents Marie and Joe.



Naps are a beautiful thing



Tuesday 10 January 2012

The day bode well for adventures abroad and minutia at home. Dian's definition of the word minutia represents getting into the everyday flow of a community as opposed to passing through. (Some would say, why use a big word when a diminutive one would do but...) Anyway, we made hummus with a "wand" instead of our bare hands (strangling chick peas can be therapeutic though), and had delicious, tuna, egg and hummus sandwiches for lunch. Nicole and Dian shopped at the nearby, Al Campo supermarket and returned with provisions.



An impulse buy at Al Campo



By 6:45 PM we were headed into downtown Valencia where Charles dropped Nicole and Dian so they could use the main post office to mail letters and a package. We all met in front of Bill and Claire's place to walk to Ubicks but they were too crowded so we went across the street and had a funny Italian waiter who pretended to abscond with Nicole's camera when we asked him to take a group shot. Marta, Emparo, Don, Claire, Bill, Charles, Nicole and Dian enjoyed tapas and either wine, water or coke then part of the group left and the rest walked back to Bill and Claire's.



We've been told and also noticed that the Spanish people generally don't hold gatherings at their homes. no one knows why. Bill and Claire plus Marta and Mike and Ajfan were the predominant go-to houses for get togethers and we were lucky enough to get invited to all of them!



Dian and Marta After saying farewell to Claire and Bill and dropping Don at the entrance to El Carmen, we drove home with the aid of James Bond our GPS. At 1:30 AM we were glad to find a parking spot after circling the area three times.

DAY 184 (2012-01-12 06:37)

Wednesday 11 January 2012



We've been perfecting living the good life. From the sun drenched balcony overlooking the plaza and canals below Frances' apartment we had time to play guitar, write e-mails, read and chill. Dian made artichokes with a curry mayo dipping sauce plus stuffed bell peppers with garlic mashed potatoes for



lunch.

Charles turned an ordinary Al Campo Supermarket frozen pizza into a delectable masterpiece and we went to bed fat and sassy.

DAY 185 (2012-01-12 06:38)



Thursday 12 January 2012



While Dian read Washington Irving's short stories on the Alhambra, Charles got ready to go off on his "boys' day out" with Bill. Dian and Nicole worked on putting pictures on older days of the blog, and Dian eventually slipped off to buy CANNED PARTRIDGE at Alcampo.

The boys' "day out" turned out to be more of a "day in" because Charles and Bill ended up just talking at Bill and Claire's place while Bill fixed salmon and eventually pizza.





After it got dark the two received a phone call from Charles saying he would be staying at Bill and Claire's that night (Claire called it a "slumber party" for the two guys), and they didn't hesitate to have a great evening with just the two of them. Nicole made a delicious salad and Dian whipped up some fabulous pork chops, mashed taters and corn!

DAY 186 (2012-01-21 09:38)

Friday 13 January 2012

Up at 5:30 AM Dian finished the book *Heart Of Darkness* in the heart of the Valencian darkness. After going back to sleep she heard Charles come in at 10:45 AM from his "sleep - over" at Bill and Claire's. Dian took a walk on the beach and Nicole sorted photos for the blog. Great news! Dian's mom received the box of presents!!! Everything was intact . Oh happy day!!! We had the left over pork chops and veggies (including pate and artichoke hearts.) then went to bed by 8:30 for Dian and who knows when for Charles and Nicole.



DAY 187 (2012-01-21 09:39)

Saturday 14 January 2012

It's hard to believe we got ourselves up and out the door by 5 AM but we did. We headed to Granada and our rendezvous with Myles, Nicole's friend who was flying from LA to spend a week with us. Outside of Murcia we bought gas and by noon we were checking into Camping Maria Eugenia. The camp was on the outskirts of Granada near a village called Bobadilla and all around us were fields with the beautiful snow-capped Sierra Nevadas towering above. At 4:30 PM we piled into the van to drive the 20 minutes to the Granada airport to pick up Myles. We were full of anticipation. His flight was an hour late so we were bursting at the seams to see him and when he appeared we all hugged each other like long lost friends. It's to his credit that for the next week Myles fit right in and gave Nicole and all of us a whole lot of fun memories.



We had tried for a larger bungalow apartment but they were all taken that first night so we stayed in the van and arranged a private apartment for him and since it was warmer than our van, we had our first dinner together in his bedroom while the portable heaters blazed away.

DAY 188 (2012-01-21 09:40)

Sunday 15 January 2012





Waking up to a cold and rainy day, we warmed our bellies with hot cereal and coffee while we waited for Myles to come down to the van from his room. Sadly, when he did arrive, he was not wearing his husky-dog slippers, but we understood, knowing he would not want to get them wet in such weather conditions. Looking at the time, and once again at the less than inviting sky, we agreed to go into town anyway. So, walking the ten or so minutes to the bus stop we boarded the number 4 to Granada! Our bus dropped us right in front of the cathedral, but with few hours of daylight left we chose to circle its exterior and the surrounding streets rather than go in. Granada was different than any other city we had yet visited greatly due to its obvious Moorish influences. Dian bought some old postcards while Myles eyed a Middle Eastern door decoration, possibly perfect for his dorm.



Snaking our way uphill past tea shops, bazaars

and intimate little hookah bars/restaurants, we arrived at a beautiful vista point overlooking the entire city. After a few group shots (taken by a woman who nearly broke her neck trying to step onto a wet pole in stilettos in order to get a better shot), we walked back down to the cathedral bus stop and went back to our warm bungalow.



With four beds and a kitchen, we ended up spending all our meals and nights, (well, Charles gallantly slept in the van), in the bungalow. It was during dinner that Dian revealed that while walking around that day she'd found €45 on the ground!!!

DAY 189 (2012-01-21 10:47)

Monday 16 January 2012



We called Dian's parents, then called it a day.





We were up at 9:30 AM thanks to Charles setting his alarm and knocking on the door. He slept in the van while Myles had a master bedroom, Nicole slept in the “dining room”, and Dian was in the “foyer”. Improvising accommodations was challenging but a good skill to cultivate. By 1 PM we had caught the bus to Nueva Fuente (New Fountain) University. We walked a good distance from there to catch a mini bus to the Alhambra. Instead of buying tickets for the Alhambra tour however, we only found out some information regarding timed entries etc. and decided to dedicate a whole day to the tour of the Alhambra and Generalife (Gardens) two days later.



“Will you take a picture” is sometimes interpreted as “Will you be in a picture.” We had two exhibitions to see for free, the Escher and Owen Jones shows being held in the Charles the 5th Palace. We thoroughly enjoyed the M.C. Escher exhibit which beautifully captured the geometric symmetry of the Islamic tile and wood carving motifs. He came from Holland and was greatly influenced by the Islamic style. The other exhibit was good but the chance to see a real wood worker in action was the best! His shop was filled with lacquered wood table tops and boxes (one of which we bought) and as we observed his precision with the chisel and glue we were mightily impressed.



Since the weather was not only chilly but lightly raining we took cover at the Paradores Hotel restaurant and had either coffee, hot chocolate or water in the ultra modern

monastery-turned-hotel. Upon our perusal of the photos adorning the wall, we saw that Michelle Obama had dined there and our waitress was standing right next to her!! When we brought this to her attention she immediately beamed with pride and acknowledged that it was a privilege for



her.



Charles the Fifth!



Tired.





We came home on the bus, had sandwiches and pasta then curled up in various heaps while Charles read aloud from Don Quixote.



The Alham-

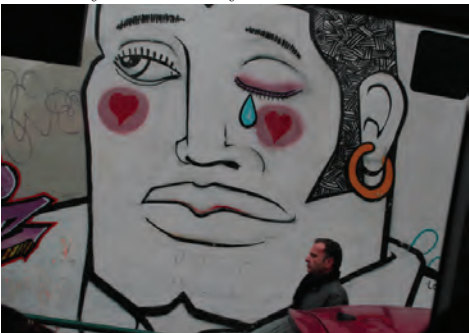


bra



"Canon Fodder" (mudder not pictured)

Tuesday 17 January 2012



Charles knocked on our bungalow at 10:30 AM after spending the night in the van with the heater going full blast. Fortunately the weather was getting warmer. Unfortunately we had a plumbing problem but Maria Trinidad, the landlady, had a workman over within the hour.



Charles and Dian bought a few groceries and upon their return all four hopped on a bus to Granada to have a glass of early evening tea in one of the Arabic style teahouses. On the way we met a man who made repairs on church statues. He had a shop full of customers and it was fascinating to see his workmanship and the clothes he had made by hand. We also had a chance to see a lot of the town by walking around discovering street art and lo and behold, A THRIFT STORE! (No purchases).





By 7:30 we were back in our cozy but rather dank bungalow where we had a light dinner then off to bed.

DAY 191 (2012-01-22 13:27)

Wednesday 18 January 2012



Note: Some of the pictures correspond to each other, like these two (above, below). See if you can spot them all



We rose early so as to get the most out of our day at the Alhambra. The air was crisp but clear from the rain the night previous, and with jackets and gloves we marched from campsite to bus stop to Alhambra! A friendly employee gave us a map of the grounds and a little explanation of some of the highlights and with audio-guided tours in hand (courtesy of Dian's parents), we began our tour. (Oh, and Charles got in gratis!)



To our surprise and delight, our audio-tour was narrated by Washington Irving (well, someone voicing him)! Although Nicole and Myles found it delightfully cheesy at times, it was really quite enjoyable in comparison to other sometimes dry narrators. Dian agreed it brought a lot of life and romance to the already fantastic yet serene buildings. We spent much of the day strolling around and it was nice to have the luxury to go at our own pace and gaze upon all the "juicy pommygranates" (as Irving put it).



Although our tickets were a combined entrance to the Alhambra and the Generalife, we still only had a certain amount of time for both of them because people are allowed but a few hours in the actual buildings (to cut down on crowding) and the Generalife closes earlier than the rest of the grounds. So, tearing ourselves away we hightailed it to the gardens to make the most of our last hours there. From the gardens we climbed atop a tower for a breathtaking view of all of

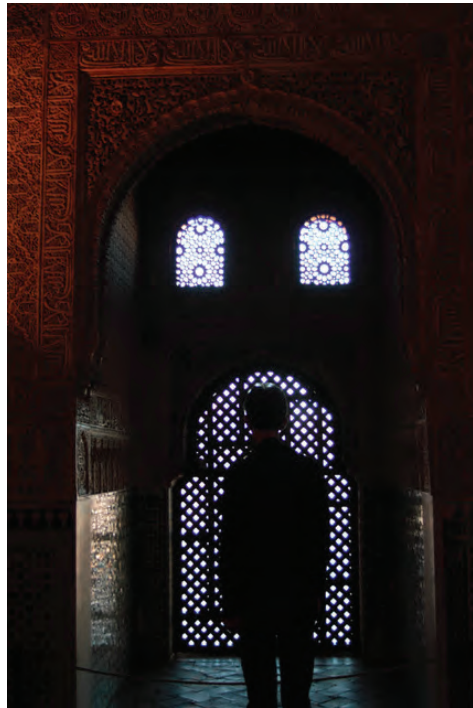
Granada. The sun was in a glorious position for pictures.



With this we said goodbye to Mr. Irving and the beautiful place he had led us through, and went home. Nicole and Myles started playing the "i" game (a game where one person tries to stump the other by ending their sentence with a word rhyming with "i") to pass the time. This game still has not ended.

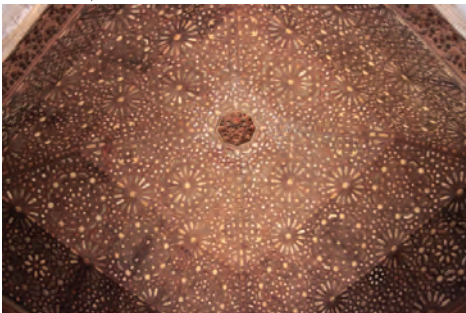


Back at the bungalow Myles played his first game of Boggle with us. Poor thing didn't know what he was getting himself into. Nicole *killed* everyone with her score so that even veteran players Charles and Dian were humbled.





We called Dian's folks, though Marie wasn't there, and we all thought of Marie's mother Martha, who would have been 121 that day.



DAY 192 (2012-01-22 13:27)

Thursday 19 January 2012

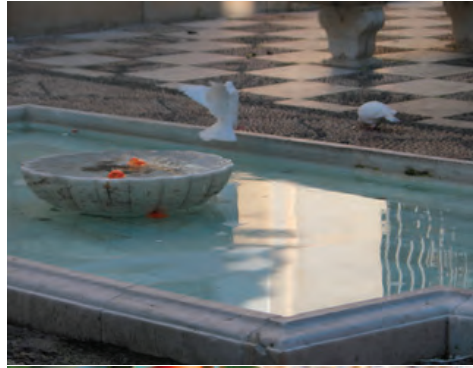


Charles' phone alarm awakened us at 9AM and his delicious omelet helped the 4 of us get on the road to Cordoba from by 10:30. We drove with beautiful countryside to look at. Even though "James" sent us on a farmer's back road to see famous ruins as old as the Alhambra, it was a wild goose chase and we never saw them.



Arriving in Cordoba was a bit of a parking nightmare and we were happy to sit on the bridge and eat our picnic lunch after an hour of driving in circles. It's hard to keep a happy disposition when you're hungry. The musicians sweetened our mood with an accordionist playing standards like the Ramones would (speed-wise) and further down an Eddie Vedder style singer/guitarist who played the same song for about 15 minutes.





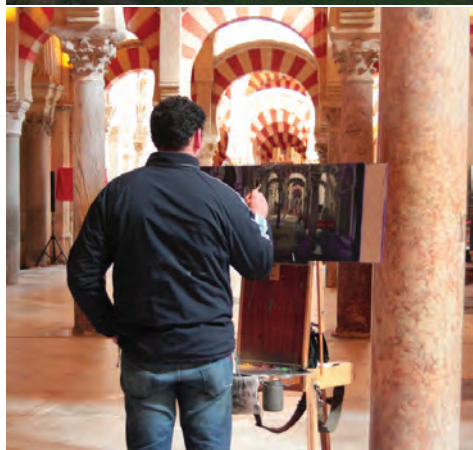
Inside the old town we were greeted by a pleasant maze of alleys and narrow streets that took us to the famed Mosque/Cathedral. This particular combination spoke to the tolerance (or lack of) between the Muslim and Christian religions. The rust colored striped columns and intricate inlay mosaic work was preserved along side the beautiful statues and saint iconography. Outside we toured the Jewish quarter and walked briskly by the building which housed the Spanish Inquisition leaders.



Myles and

Nicole talked a lot in the back seat while we headed home at dusk when all of a sudden the water gauge broke and we were stuck on another farmer's road calling Sebastian for help. With Charles' diagnosis of the problem and Dian's jerry rigging of a wire cap for the broken water sensor, we hobbled home only

having to pull over twice more to let the car cool down and add water. While the three of us had gotten used to such disasters as being part of life on the road, we were impressed and pleased we didn't have to worry about Myles' reaction, who took it all in stride. We even had cortados and bocadillas at the gas station just outside Granada. We called Dian's mom and dad and related the day's news along with a rousing versions of "Camptown Races" and "Clementine."



DAY 193 (2012-01-22 13:27)

Friday 20 January 2012



We slept in until 1 PM! Dian made lentil soup while Myles and Nicole slept even later. After a LOT of time on the question of where to take our van for service, Charles drove in to spend hours just trying to determine anything at two VW dealerships, one gigantic where you needed an appointment to even have it looked at (and wearing a suit might've helped) and another large but not gigantic one where a mechanic took mercy and time and set the whole thing up for the following Monday. Whew. Duty done, mission almost accomplished, Charles then bought a few groceries. Back at base, he checked ferry prices to Morocco and attended to some other business online.





Around 4 Nicole and Myles took a bus into Granada to buy a souvenir Myles had seen on our first day. It was a beautiful blue cloth doorway tapestry, a great memory of Arabic Granada, suitable for dorm rooms. When they returned we decided to splurge on our camp restaurant's paella made by chef Jose, brought back to our room, and that turned out to be a great choice. In a tribute to his delicious meal (the paella came with chicken and seafood and there were little *kebes* – empanadas with olives -that he sent over to our room) we marched over to his restaurant and sang a Spanish song after which he smiled broadly and thanked us.



That evening Myles packed his bags for home and before he zipped up his duffel he was just able to stuff in the dog slippers Nicole had given him.

DAY 194 (2012-01-22 13:27)

Saturday 21 January 2012

We awoke with squinted eyes at the sound of our 5AM alarm set to get Myles to the Granada airport. Nicole helped him squeeze the GIANT dog slippers into his small carry-on backpack, along with his newly bought door covering. Thank goodness he's a light packer!



By

5:30 we were ready to leave, but Myles surprised us with a gift of rose tea from Harrods! Dian then presented him with the piece of Alhambran tile she'd discovered after the rains, and he was very grateful.



We

arrived at the airport in a timely manner, and groggily waited in line with Myles. We spied a group of nuns and a man ahead of us, carrying just one bag- an accordion labeled "Mission for Paraguay." Turns out it was just the man leaving, but we assume they were all apart of the 5'-or-less order since not one of them came up to our shoulders.

About half an hour later passengers were called to board, and with hugs and kisses we send Myles off, bound for New York (where he's attending school). Nicole put her arms around Charles and Dian and sleepily said, "That's my boyfriend!"

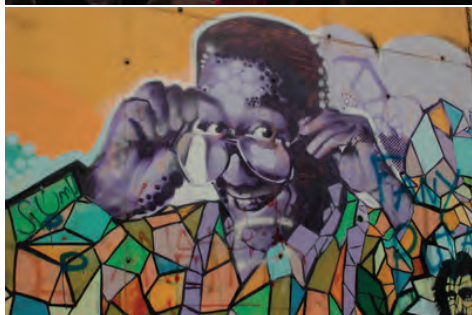
Back at the homestead we zonked out until 12:15 PM. Having a light lunch of chicken and egg salad, we all started packing in preparation for leaving in a couple days, and Dian finished all **31** postcards she had set out to write!

Charles made fried pasta and soup for dinner, but Nicole opted to sleep more while he and Dian ate. We all agreed Myles' visit was a good one, and we were all (Nicole especially) glad he came.

Sunday 22 January 2012



So, you like ham? The day was full of unexpected “emotional currents” to quote Dian’s sister, Monica. While we don’t have a real desire to print all of that for everyone’s consumption, we do want to be true to ourselves and report not only the good stuff. Dian woke everyone up by farting. Not really. No, really, she did. Okay now Dian has told you her worst secret. We’ll see who else in the Happy Trails Gang will share THEIR worst secrets and you can bet they have a few.



More street art, this time featuring Urkel



Bird, Juan, Dian, Charles We didn’t start as early as we had hoped in order to see a free children’s Mozart concert at the Manuel de Falla Auditorium partly because a mean bus driver sped up to leave us in his dust. Okay, we weren’t quite at the bus stop but hey...



One of Nicole’s favorite pieces of street art to date Upon arrival in downtown Granada we started seeing band members in their marching band uniforms. Many were warming up but Nicole and Dian agreed that they were already HOT (see photo for verification). We hurried along to where Charles had found our site on the map and GPS but it was not there but was finally got pointed out to us on a hill about a 20 minute walk away (according to a concierge.) We visited the beautiful church and courtyard of San Matias and after a prayer for guidance, Juan from Chile showed up. Scoff if you will but we considered him, a fellow traveler to be a godsend since he was not only friendly but willing to help us get to our destination using the GPS on his phone. We eventually got to the auditorium just after the show ended. Walking inside we saw how beautiful the place was and only cried a little.



Marching band members Juan's philosophy is to get lost on purpose and we adopted his idea with a vengeance. (The only part we needed to eliminate were the frustrated glares and insinuating comments). We ended up having a quarter of a kilo baklava treat that was devoured while listening to a FANTASTIC band with a charismatic leader who really had the gift of music (as they all did.)



The snowy Sierra Nevadas were in the background as we listened to a flamenco band and other street musicians near Saint Nicolas Church. Then we walked to the Flamenco headquarters in the caves of the Sacramento district which ran above the river Darro just below the Alhambra.



The flamenco group Finally we headed to our bus stop and were home for soup and showers by 6 PM.



DAY 196 (2012-01-26 08:06)

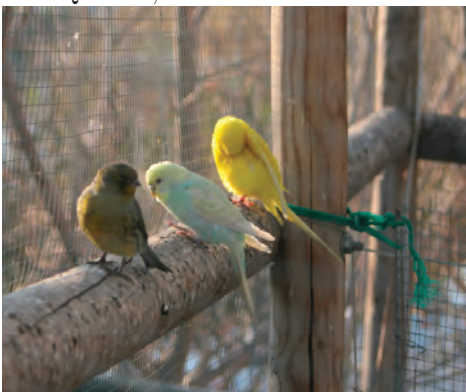


Monday 23 January 2012

By 10 AM we had left Granada for Malaga. We found Camping El Pino, a pretty little camp within a walk of the Mediterranean. The store was filled with delicacies that British folks seem to love, so we deduced who the greater clientele was. We jumped at the opportunity to stay a week upon hearing the price of seven nights at 14.40 Euros per night, with the last two being free.



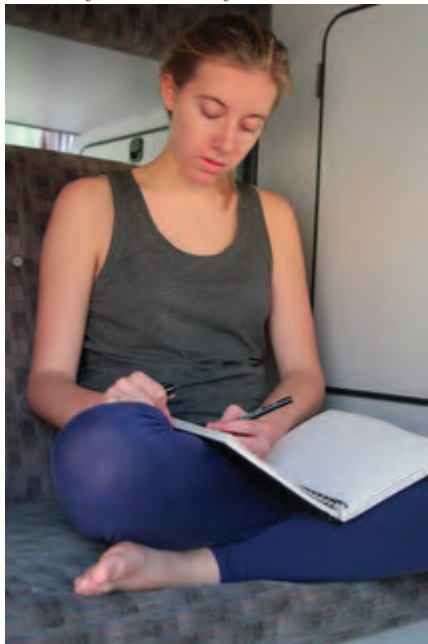
We put down stakes, had a light dinner, read some Don Quixote, and went to bed.



Lots of birds at the camp

DAY 197 (2012-01-26 08:06)

Tuesday 24 January 2012



Up at 9:30, Nicole seized the opportunity of another warm sunny day to write a letter to her dear friend Ariana. Dian took a quick walk around the camp, then decided to take a shower... without anything with her (no towel, shampoo, soap, nada), just to see if she could. And she did! Pouring a bunch of the camp's soap on her hair (shampoo + body wash!) and using one of her fast-drying outer-layer shirts as a towel, she was squeaky clean and on her way in no time!



Following her ears, Dian met a couple from Amsterdam who were playing on their new guitar bought in Malaga. She chatted with them a bit, then came back to the van so we could all take part in washing it (a much

needed thing). Using water, vinegar, and cleanser as an abrasive, our van was sparkling once we were through.



Later on we treated ourselves to some "gourmet" potato chips, and chocolate milk made from some of the "sipping chocolate" powder Marie and Joe had sent in a care package to Toledo. Ah, the simple pleasures.

DAY 198 (2012-01-26 09:08)

Wednesday 25 January 2012



Remember him from The Ed Sullivan Show?



PCH, or Costa Del Sol?? The aroma of the warm cereal bread came wafting in the van from Charles' early morning visit to the camp market. Although most the camp appeared to get up after 10, we were fed and ready to explore Malaga by 11. When we arrived in the town center parking was abominable and we circled the area for an hour. Not fun. We must remember that these old sections weren't engineered (if goats running on a trail is engineering) for so many vehicles and even the river where we parked was bone dry with only a few joggers and free parking making it a draw. The Picasso museum WAS a draw (no pun intended) and for the second time (gracias, Espana!) our respective passes (journalist, teacher, student) got us all in gratis. What bliss for Dian who, in art class at UCSB got paired up with Picasso to copy his work as faithfully as she could.



One of the famous bull billboards in Spain



Dandelion-like fountain



Pretty old train station



Etched window art



Nicole in front of and around the cathedral:



Pedro De Mena, sculptor



Taking down Christmas lights

We left after two hours of musing and close inspection of the master and an adjacent exhibit by renowned sculptor Alberto Giacometti. We perused the cathedral exterior and peeked in ditto for the castle but didn't go in. Inside a bookstore we bought a map of Morocco. Now we were

committed. After a few tangerines and chips we were escorted by a kind gentleman who took us on a twisting convoluted maze of narrow streets and finally to the river, so we could find our way back to the van.



Entrance to Picasso museum



Street musician singing "Ave Maria" Inside we had couscous with curry sauce and then left for the Facebook friend Ana's jazz jam in a town 30 minutes from Malaga. Unfortunately we didn't have a phone number for her and when we stopped at a cool Indian restaurant (Raju's Indian City) to order take out and use the Internet to see if she had written back, she hadn't. Alas, we had only chicken tikka and aloo gobi to console us but we enjoyed meeting the outgoing owner, Raju, who moved to Spain 15 years ago and said to quote him on his choice: "East or West, Malaga is the best!" We loved walking

into an Indian restaurant in Spain and hearing Johnny Cash and Waylon Jennings coming from his programmed music mix, also LA icons Warren Zevon and the Eagles (or did he surreptitiously call up "Hotel California" just for us?) – it's a music/culture blast that's hard to describe unless you're there. Turbaned Raj was also playing a computer chess match nearly the whole time he was chatted animatedly with us.



Our guiding angel Back at home we went to the restaurant near our camp to catch the end of the big soccer match, have a beer and call Dian's mom and dad. Charles eventually did reach them and learned that Grandmother had received the castanets Nicole bought her!!! It had been 75 years since she learned to use them and perform Spanish dances but she was glad to try and work up the routine again, or so she said.



Raju and Charles

DAY 199 (2012-01-27 07:14)

Thursday 26 January 2012 The day began early for Charles, who tossed and turned all night on "the worm." Even after six months, the sleeping rotation was still not a thing of grace. Something we usually said to each other first thing in the morning was "Did you sleep well?" Interesting how different the priorities of travel could be from the priorities of home life.



Pam and Dian. Photo by Charles So up at 9, he headed for the camp market to grab the coveted cereal breads (last two). We wondered: do others notice that there's new guns in town who scarf the best breads early, not leaving any for others? Early worm, too bad. The cereal bread was equal to anything La Brea Bakery puts out, but costed less than \$1.70. Yes, we loved Spain. We found out you could "reserve" the bread, so we did, for our last three days. Nibbling at warm bread sufficed for breakfast, and much of the rest of the low-key day was spent in the adjacent restaurant (with wi-fi) posting blogs and downloading photos by Nicole, with Dian filling in the downtime with original art for postcards to be sent. Charles did some van rearranging and joined the ladies for the El Pino restaurant's dinner special, 2-for-1, for 6.95 Euros. We decided to go for two 2-for-1s and save the leftover meal so we got one one scampi, one pork chop, one chicken tikka and one fried fish. All very good, but the one we skipped, the quarter chicken (which we

saw on someone else's table), looked the best.



At some point Dian made a remark to the couple who sat down at the next table, and.... whoosh, we were off! Pam and Harry were Scots, in their 70s, who lived in Spain and were as lively a pair as you'd want to meet. Nicole and Charles tried valiantly to continue working on the computer and hand-writing a blog, but it was useless. They had too many stories, we had too many jokes and riddles, Harry gave a Robert Burns recitation (he knew the entire "Tam O'Shanter" by heart but didn't recite the whole thing) and he also had a marvelous voice and a packet of Scottish songs. We hoped we would run into them again.



Nicole and Harry Dian and Nicole retired to the van with NightHawk Charles left to squeeze out more Internet time, and again it was hard. A ladies group soon trooped in and took over the pool table and, possibly

aided by the lubrication of liquor, proceeded to have a fine, long time at a volume level achieved only by the Who in their heyday. A little distracting but heartwarming, to see half a dozen mature birds out on the town, as it were, having a rowdy time with no inhibitions, rather than sitting at home and sighing, wishing, hoping, watching the telly. God bless 'em. Despite Charles probable hearing loss.

DAY 200 !! (2012-01-27 07:15)

Friday 27 January 2012

Not a fun day. Shortly after Charles returned to the van after midnight (charging the computer in the restaurant and using their secure Internet connection), Nicole started with a difficult series of dry heaves that drained her completely and kept us all up most of the night. Food poisoning? – we all ate the same things. Stomach virus? – maybe.

Poor thing. Tough for her, and for her concerned parents who couldn't do much more than try to make it easier for her and comfort her. Toward dawn she finally fell asleep and rested and slept most of the day, with only one recurrence. We gave her a little water, very small amounts of bread, eventually a little juice and plain watercracker. Charles got a little sleep early in the morning, Dian a little after that and we all survived, thankful we'd had no serious health issues on this trip.



Late that evening Charles returned to the restaurant to find the Friday night karaoke singalong in full swing. A singalong because few grabbed the mike but nearly all raised their voices, mostly for old, really old British songs and ones popular during both world wars. He walked in on "Daisy, Daisy" (which we like because of Dian's Daisy Duck connection) but there were quite a few Charles had never heard because of growing up on the "wrong" side of the pond – "I'm a Londoner," "Down at the Old Bull and Bush." You get the picture. He enjoyed the spectacle (and also the idea of being, at 64, maybe the youngest guy in the joint) and when checking on his Skype software saw that his Long Beach buddy Kevin Poore was on line so rang him up for a treat,

turning the computer screen around for a bit so he could see for himself. Kevin was the perfect guy to "get it" and enjoy it.

2.2 February

DAY 201 (2012-02-01 08:55)

Saturday 28 January 2012



Buying bread from the camp staff. Photo by Charles. We awoke to no more rain and lots of birds chirping from the nearby aviary. Nicole's recovery from the stomach flu was in full swing and we had the luxury of resting with all the fellow travelers (mostly Brits) at either the restaurant or at our site. A German couple who were passing by our van stopped to say they had had a similar van and we took the opportunity to ask them a couple of questions regarding the propane and heater. They were very helpful but declined our offer of a bag of dried fruit.



Charles and Dian had Irish sausage and couscous for lunch but Nicole wisely preferred to stick to simple food. After lunch Dian walked down through the avocado orchards that reminded her of friend Mary's orchards in Ojai. At the Mediterranean, she explored an old torre (tower) and put some pretty tiles she had found near a roadside shrine. On the walk home she found a ripe avocado on the ground and it was added to the dinner after which we all slept soundly.

DAY 202 (2012-02-01 08:55)

Sunday 29 January 2012

Food poisoning? "We're finally sick of each other," quipped Nicole. It seemed we had all caught some kind of bug. Looking back, Dian said the only good thing about that day was it was an easy one to blog about. We were achy, sleepy, and ate nothing but Carr's water biscuits, but in the end it all came out okay.



Laying low

DAY 203 (2012-02-01 08:56)

Monday 30 January 2012

Feeling better, we got up at 10, had eggs, bought groceries (including a surprise treat of Nicole's UK favorite Walker's Salt & Vinegar 'crisps') and were out the door from Camping El Pino barely by checkout time.



Camp supply refill Yes, we parked outside the gates because of checkout time and remained an additional TWO HOURS searching for our phone and both our phones' chargers. We ultimately abandoned the search and drove on. It's amazing how with such limited movement and such a small living space, things could disappear. After a ways of driving, now late in the afternoon, ol' Excalibur-White Rabbit (our van) started making noises. It became too big to ignore so we pulled into Marbella Automechanica which, with tons of cars parked out front and in the garage, seemed like a good bet. As always happens when taking a car to a mechanic, it stopped making the noise as soon as the workers were listening. At last it started "clunking" again, and they set to diagnosing the problem. Meanwhile in the office, two men argued with the owner, complaining about a price that was exorbitantly higher than what they'd initially agreed on. It made us a little nervous about the integrity of the business, but we talked to the two men and they kindly said just to "Make absolutely sure what the price is beforehand, or at least don't let them do anything without your authorization." We took this advice to heart and watched them work on our car like hawks. Nicole and Dian watched them work for a while but upon feeling slightly awkward they began to walk away, though they

were happily beckoned back by a mechanic who said it was fine to watch. It was then that the two witnessed him crack our hubcap!



G'bye, camp Perhaps it was because he felt bad about the hubcap, but just as he was finishing up our car he motioned us over, holding an additional battery, and still gave us our old battery, whispering "*irapido! irapido!* (quickly! quickly!)" so as not to be discovered by his boss. Along with this lagnappe and a fair price, they said we could stay the night in their lot, it being 7 by now and dark. We drove in search of a place to get some grub (Nicole muttered something about a desire for lentil soup), and randomly picked a place that, wonder of wonders, served lentil soup with chorizo! The young man (and the only one on duty in the place) was kind enough to take Charles and Nicole to the kitchen to show them the soup. Nicole waited for it to be warmed while Charles went next door to buy a gyro (too robust for Nicole's stomach at the time). As the young man handed Nicole the bowls of soup he added an array of cookies, smiling shyly and saying, "*gratis*" (free). Back at Marbella Automechanica we were just about to turn in when we heard a ruckus at the 24 hour gas station next door. Some crazy woman was clearly upset by something and was so vocal about it that the gas station workers had locked the doors and called the cops. She eventually left, though, and we slept peacefully.

Tuesday 31 January 2012

The last day of January found us rising early from our cozy mechanic shop parking lot (where the evening before they had given us permission to stay). Even though the ranting man/woman (we couldn't tell) was admonished by the police the night before, we had fallen asleep easily and were well rested the next morning.



Don Quixote-themed tiles

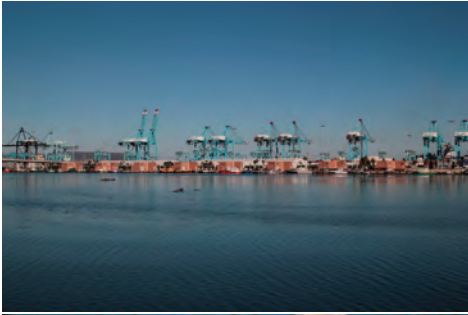


By 6:60 AM Charles and Dian were navigating the hour drive to Algeciras while Nicole snoozed till we arrived. The port was just awakening and we found a hospitable Marriott with nearby street parking. Charles went in to use the "weefee" (as the Spanish pronounce it) and Dian and Nicole stowed stuff. After grabbing a croissant and coffee (for which we were later banned from using the "guests only lounge"), Charles and Dian walked to Corte Ingles the huge "everything" department store in search of a new phone and charger to replace the ones we lost. Lord love a duck, if it wasn't one thing it was another. The deal we got was good since the charger would work with our old Dutch phone and came WITH

the new one. We put 20 euro on the Sim card and the lovely senorita helped us register everything from the store computer - in Spanish!!! We also found a nifty gift for Grandad's 87th birthday and were able to mail it in the basement post office. (The sales woman was impressed when Dian pointed out the Daisy Duck wrapping paper and her voice history with the character.)



We gave away the painted box to the community center nearby where we were parked. Groceries were bought and insurance was checked into for driving in Morocco ALL at Corte Ingles. Unfortunately the insurance woman couldn't help with our situation but drew a wonderful map of two other places to try. Nicole and Charles tried the other places after lunch but no dice (dicey neighborhood though.) We concluded our day in Algeciras with the long put off "toot"orial on our porta-potty. This provided some good laughs and the knowledge that if and when we were in an emergency situation with no bathrooms available we could use our own.



DAY 205 (2012-02-01 09:02)

Wednesday 1 February 2012

....February!! (In 2nd Grade, the only word little Charles – future Spelling Bee Champ – missed on his weekly spelling test all year was "February" – he knew how to spell it, he just got his "b" backwards!

.... but that's got nothing to do with the blog, does it?



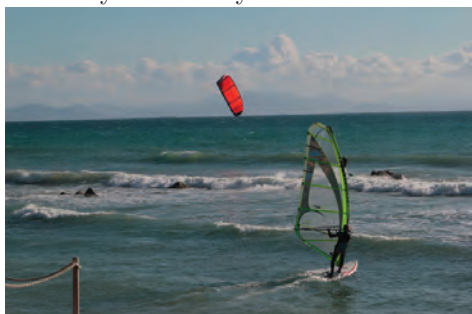
The family decided to hit the road for Tarifa, only seven miles away on the coast, where Aziz (our Rick Steve's connection) had recommended campsites. We soon learned why. As

soon as we got out of Algeciras the countryside got very green, and the spectacular presence of Gibraltar gave way to the thrilling sight of the coastline of north Africa looming across the sparkling water, not very far south. We stopped in one camp and found it too chi-chi (but Charles knew from research they were all pricey in that area), so we went on down the road a bit and found just what we wanted: Camp Torre de la Pena, a haven for wind- and kite-surfers and Germans in particular, a 40-year-old camp right on the water that was paradise to our SoCal eyes. We quickly picked a site with a view, threw blankets and pillows outside, and enjoyed the view and the sun. The sun shone, the waves lapped gently on the shore, and we immediately dug it-balm for our beach-starved souls. Nicole and Dian wasted no time exiting the van and staking out spots on the sunny side, while Charles took care of business, and eventually landed in the light. Dinner then a quiet retiring. Life was good!



DAY 206 (2012-02-11 01:12)

Thursday 2 February 2012



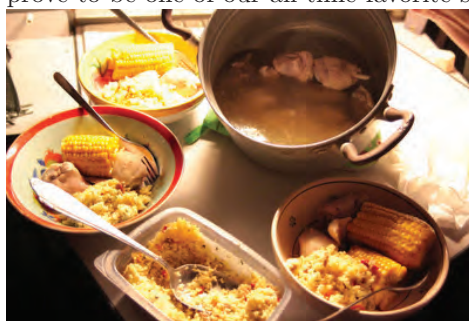
Africa in the distance After the distant Tangier night lights faded with the morning light, a clear sea sparkled right in front of our camper. We decided to stay another day at Camp Torre de la Pena (even though it was €22 per day). It really was a gorgeous camp, and the windsurfers gave even more life to the white-capped waters.



It was a quiet day of organizing the car's bench seat to fit our extra battery, Charles working very hard on finding a place to get propane and settling insurance with Sebastian for Morocco. Nicole soaked up the camp restaurant's ocean side view while Charles and Dian drove out to **FINALLY GET PROPANE!!!** It was a miracle that the propane station was not far away (and it was thanks to camp owner Ana for helping us locate it). Charles even did a little dance as the tank was being filled. A *great* point of concern had been lifted from our shoulders, for propane was what was needed to power our stove, fridge and heater! After this was all said and done they drove around Tarifa, which Dian likened to New Zealand's Cape Reinga. They saw two TexMex restaurants, but unfortunately they were closed.



Annie, Clive, Charles and Dian Meanwhile, Nicole had befriended a British couple, Clive and Annie, after she helped them figure out some computer problems they were having. Once Dian and Charles came back we all talked and exchanged stories and travel tips. They informed us of a free-camping place that would prove to be one of our all-time favorite spots.



Eatin' good on the road! Later on, Nicole chatted with two German windsurfers, Matias and Rolf, who it turns out had both been to Santa Monica! Walking back from the restaurant, a German man pointed to Charles' snake skin boots and said, "Snake!" Then pointed to his own Crocs and said, "Croc!" It made us chuckle.

Knock* *knock* *knock* Who could *that* be at our door? It was Annie, asking if she could borrow a bottle opener. Of course we obliged, and upon returning it we exchanged info, thinking we might not see them for a while.

DAY 207 (2012-02-11 01:18)

Friday 3 February 2012



As we got ready to leave beautiful Torre De La Peña we joked about the mostly German people who returned to that fantastic wind surfing spot every year. Of course we had to do our best German accent which had one man asking, “Ver do you go?” To which the other replies, “Verever da *vind* takes me. I’m a *vind* zurfer, ha ha.” All right you had to be there. We said goodbye to Ana who showed a photo of her whole family and camp staff 40 years before. They were coming up on their 50th anniversary the following year. We congratulated her then paid for our two nights and gave her an inscribed Dali book we had bought at the Modern Art Museum in Valencia.



Heading up the coast towards Cadiz we turned off where our English friends had told us to and found a gorgeous beach with a handful of campers parked in a lot near the water. We asked the first person we came to if it was okay to pull in and he joked it would cost us five euros to be paid directly to him. Since this was a free camp we felt lucky to have gotten a front row seat with nothing between us and the surf. We had soup with thick German bread which was sold at the previous camp store.





Nicole took off photographing the right side of the beach and Dian beach combed the left. Charles went up on a sand dune overlooking the water and basked in the sun for an hour. No one for as far as the eye could see. Dian brought back some “art” objects and Nicole some great photos. There were some natural springs to which many people trekked and filled water bottles. We vowed to do the same the next day.

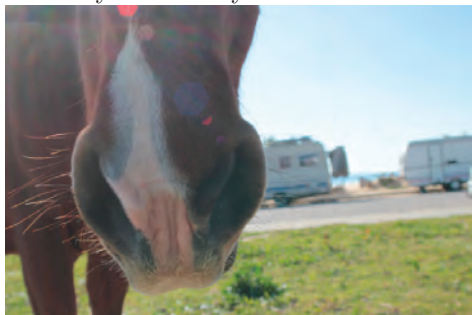


Charles was e-mailing Morocco contacts and taking care of bill paying while dinner was prepared. In the dark van, Dian and Nicole sipped wine and stared out at the twinkling lights of North Africa. After a chicken dinner we called Dian’s parents at the nearby café and told them how glorious the place was. We were shocked to hear Charles’ name called out from a camper. It was Clive and Annie our

English friends who had decided to come back to the free camp. We thanked them for tipping us as to the whereabouts of the paradise we were in and went to bed.



Saturday 4 February 2012



FREE UNPAVED PARADISE. By 9 AM Dian was taking a walk along the beautiful stretch of beach near the van with her thermos of coffee. She spied a beached dolphin and took one of its teeth. When she returned, four horses had come right near the parked van and were munching grass, seemingly unperturbed by all the humans.



We took our chairs over to Clive and Annie's and Annie fixed her legendary Cuba Libres. Soon the delicious aroma of Clive's fritata was wafting out of their camper. After lunch and good conversation, Dian painted a sign on a large board that read, "Por Favor, Please, Bitte, NO LITTER" with a Mother Nature figure standing guard. Dian, Nicole, Annie and Clive marched it over to the natural spring and put it up (it had been filled with trash before Dian cleaned it out). Later that evening we looked out our front row view at Africa across the straits of Gibraltar and had lox with pasta for dinner. Afterwards Charles went back to the camp café to work on the computer until they closed.

DAY 209 (2012-02-11 01:26)

Sunday 5 February 2012



We had a light breck'n, but that was fine because we would be having an exquisite lunch a la the ever generous Clive and Annie: chili over rice topped with plain yoghurt, prepared by Clive, and crepes with a still hot fruit syrup drizzled on top- all we could say was, WOW! Nicole later commented that they were the best crepes she'd ever had. Annie had gotten Clive cooking lessons, and it sure showed.





As an honorary New Mexican (because of her cast-iron stomach), Dian put piri piri (a super hot sauce from Portugal) on her food. Nicole had some too, but then discreetly excused herself to go back to our van, fumbling frantically with the keys and muttering under her breath as tears formed in her eyes. Finally she got her hands on the cold milk and gulped gratefully. We all swapped travel stories. Annie showed Nicole some pictures from their travels, and it turned out they had also been to Cesky Krumlov in the Czech Republic! And loved it! Realizing they got along so well with music, Charles brought over our hard drive full of it for Clive to sift through. He and

Annie were like kids at a candy store, and in return they burned us a copy of Hugh Laurie's new CD which we'd listened to during lunch and very much enjoyed! It was at the Wi-Fi restaurant that Charles read the e-mail giving us the 'OK' for Morocco! We ordered a round of drinks for and Annie and Clive who were also at the restaurant checking mail.



That night the couple came over for a few rounds of Boggle, which they had never played before. We added a few British words to our vernacular such as 'rill' (like a hill) and others. Nicole spared no mercy for the newbies, but after a few warm-up rounds Clive and Annie held their own.

Dian served "digestives" (graham cracker-like cookies), a common British snack, as a treat, which we all munched on.

DAY 210 (2012-02-11 01:28)

Monday 6 February 2012
We got up and bade farewell to Clive and Annie at about 9:30 with the hope of connecting with them in Brittany where they have a home. The new neighbors were a German couple named Heinz and Luzie who were bird watchers. Soon after meeting us they said we were rare birds (or was that odd birds?) It was discovered that Luzie teaches children music as does Dian and they exchanged some songs and CDs for their “kinder” classes.



couple

we met who had just come back from fish-



ing



We decided to drive into Algeciras for a test run. Our ferry departure wasn't set in stone but with the help of a Rick Steves (tour guru) contact named Aziz Begdouri, we had a lead on an inexpensive one. We stopped off at Torre De La Pena and Ana printed out Charles' and Sebastian's auto information for insur-

A
guys

ance purposes for us. We then headed into the port, a 20 minute drive through hilly pastureland with towering windmills at the crest of each one. The port was full of barriers and lanes that we followed until we got to the main ferry building. Unfortunately the price for a round trip ticket for three with the van kept going up from the price we had been told about. Aziz came through with another company and a BETTER PRICE! We would leave from Algeciras but land in Spain on the continent of Africa where Spain still retained a plain - (we couldn't resist.)



We headed back to Tarifa (the closest town to our free camp) for some groceries and dinner at a restaurant called Coyote – not exactly the Tex-Mex Charles was hankering for but close enough. Our Italian waiter/cook, Max made us feel right at home with the Route 66/Surfer décor and we had burritos, chili and lasagna. Delicious! Dian did a sketch of his grandmother making the family recipe for lasagna in Bologna as she imagined the scene. He displayed it in his front window stuck to the fridge then gave us a pirate decal which reminded the Happy Trails Gang of San Pedro's own Pirates (except these crossbones were surf boards.)



Drawing by Dian for Max

DAY 211 (2012-02-11 01:29)

Tuesday 7 February 2012



Glad to be back at our free camp in Tarifa, Charles was up at 10:15 and in the other camp restaurant's Wi-Fi zone, eager to hear from his contacts in Morocco, and specifically Jajouka (home of the ancient Master Musicians of Jajouka, a possibly 4,000 year old tradition that was brought to the Western world's attention by former Rolling Stones member Brian Jones). Success, he did! And they were more than welcoming to all of us, especially since we had never even met each other, and only were in contact through mutual friends. Dian and Nicole cleaned the van's interior, then Dian made delicious HAMBURGERS for lunch! Topped with a little mayo curry, lettuce and tomatoes, it was a perfect lunch which we ate happily on our beachside "porch."





While Charles checked the car's oil and put in some anti-freeze, Dian and Nicole went to get water at the natural spring, with Bear. Bear was a dog that had been hanging around us all day, and was so big we named him accordingly. He was an extremely well behaved dog and even as we ate our hamburgers he sat patiently a few feet away.



On the way to the spring we noticed a young man sitting up high on a dune with his guitar. We waved hello but kept going. At the spring, we were saddened to see Dian's "No Littering" sign had been tampered with. But did you think that would stop us? No! We just put the sign right back where it had been, filled up our water bottles, and headed back. Dian took lots of pictures of Nicole and Bear, the ocean and the dunes.



The man with his guitar was still sitting on the dune so we asked if we could hear him play. He said, "Sure" rather sheepishly but very sweetly, so Dian, Nicole and Bear climbed up to sit by him. His playing was very free and melodic, and we chatted for a while in between songs. Nicole and Dian sang a couple of their own (including The Doors' "People Are Strange," which he said was one of his favorites). He introduced himself as Marcus, and he said he thought it was beautiful-our family's relationship and what we were doing. He invited all three of us to come later that evening for music and wine or tea at the free camping site just a few paces away from where our site was.



Bear dutifully followed us back (though we began to wonder where his owners were, or if he even had any, though his brushed coat

and clean collar indicated he indeed had a home). Charles had been talking with Luzie and Heinz, who were going to check into the nearby campsite that night in preparation for their son who was coming to visit them with his girlfriend. They asked if we would want to come over that night for drinks (and a shower! because we would be their guests at the camp) and we readily accepted.



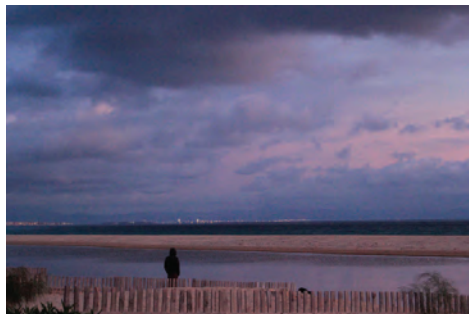
We had a veggie-stuffed omelet, then killed time by using Internet (Charles), taking a shower (Nicole) and just relaxing in the van (Dian). We met Luzie, Heinz and their dog Don at around 7, and they brought out a lovely array of fresh Spanish desserts and Portuguese port. They showed us pictures of their beautiful home on the border of Denmark and Germany, and we chatted. At some point during the get together Dian left to take a shower with Luzie and Nicole guiding her there. It was getting late, but we still wanted to meet Marcus at his campfire, so Lucy and Don joined us. There he was like sitting at the UN: amongst individuals from Switzerland, Germany, Italy, Spain, and upon our arrival, America, all gathered around the fire on couches and other random furniture, gazing at the stars. Marcus greeted us happily, and while with Danielle from Germany Nicole learned that he had been so excited to meet Dian and Nicole, a mother and daughter traveling with each other and Charles...and they sang, too! Marcus played his guitar while Kris, also German like Marcus, stoked the fire.



Kris



Photo by CharlesAt one point Dian and Nicole started singing while Dian played guitar, and even the taciturn Italian man was moved to bring out his harmonica. A Spanish woman camping in the area looked at the moon and stars while listening to the two and, possibly encouraged by the “fumes” she was inhaling, sounded a bit like a howling dog when she exclaimed, “Wowowowowow!” Nicole later realized she was parked two campers down from us at our camp area and though she looked to be not more than 30, had two daughters of 21 and 23! Nicole gave her her e-mail address for her and for Marcus if she saw him again.



It was getting late and we wanted to be up early the next day, so we bade farewell to the mellow yet welcoming bunch and walked back

along the beach where no flashlight was necessary because of the bright, full moon. Bear had met us at the campfire, but didn't follow us home, though later on when we were just going to sleep he trotted over to our van and sat outside of it, quietly guarding.



Wow

DAY 212 (2012-02-11 01:31)

Wednesday 8 February 2012

We were up at 6 AM to catch our ferry to Tangier! Unfortunately in the dark as we were leaving we made a u-turn off the pavement into SAND, DEEP SAND, NOTHIN' BUT SAND. We pushed, the workmen from camp came over and helped, then gave up and handed Charles a shovel. We used our hands and any board nearby to scrape away the sand from under the van. We knocked on our new friends Heinz and Luzie's camper at the early hour of 8:15 and they came over to help without hesitation. Finally after an hour and a half of digging we were able to push the van onto solid ground. Looking back at the foot and a half deep holes our back tires had left we shouted, "Hallelujah!"



The camp receptionist printed out our boarding tickets, and Luzie bought us all a *corrado*. What a way to start our trip to Africa, (we'd visited Kenya on a previous trip so this was our second time to the continent).



The dry run we'd made into Algeiras the day before helped us find our company Acciona's departure port. Charles popped into a tobacco shop to put money on our phone, then we got in line. With Dian at the wheel,

Charles couldn't help but be envious that this ferry allowed cars to drive on instead of backing on as he had had to do in Greece and Italy. On board the clean and hand-somely furnished ferry, we could see the Rock of Gibraltar close up (but not close enough to see the infamous monkeys). 55 minutes later after a smooth crossing we landed on a sliver of Spain, called Ceuta, in North Africa.



Driving into TangierThe paperwork for the car and the passports was done at the Moroccan border. The first impression wasn't exactly the best, what with their office window broken out and covered with cardboard. A man made eye contact with Nicole while he tried to open up our back trunk. When he realized it was locked he just smiled. Another man who had an "official" nametag (but still wanted a tip: "The government doesn't pay me!") helped us get the proper forms to fill out, then directed us up the hill towards Tangier. We weren't in Kansas anymore.

We took a wrong and ended up driving the longer inland route into the city. This wouldn't have been a big deal, but Bachir Attar was waiting for us at the apartment of Paul Bowles, where we were to stay, and needed to leave by 2 PM. On top of that the needle was in the red for diesel, plus we had let Rick Steves' recommended tour guide Aziz Begdouri know that we were coming, and he was waiting for us in the city center.



Aziz From the road we called Bachir who said not to worry, he would be there, and when we called Aziz he said the same. Finally we found the huge mosque that Aziz told us he would be waiting by, and from across the giant traffic circle we heard, "Charles! Charles!" Music to our ears. When we pulled over we embraced like long lost relatives. He led us to Paul Bowles' apartment where a plaque in the entry hall read:

Paul Bowles

American writer and composer

Lived here from 1960/1999



We were honored to stay in Cherie Nutting and Bachir Attar's friend's (now deceased) home which still had photos of the many famous personages who had visited that very apartment. Mustapha Attar, Bachir's younger brother, welcomed us with tea. We offered them tangerines and Bachir ate one, regaling us with stories of his US music tour around the time of 9/11 when he talked down the FBI. Another story was about being 5 years old and watching Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones dance by the fire to his dad's music in Jajouka "like in a dream."



Charles, Bachir, Aziz, Mustapha and Dian. After a quick tour and transfer of keys, Bachir and Mustapha left. Nicole, Charles and Aziz went in Aziz's car to buy insurance for our van (a necessary formality, but not much good in case of a real accident). Charles got the Moroccan currency of dirhams at an ATM and paid the travel agency for the ferry tickets, but Aziz wouldn't take a penny. Meanwhile Dian rested and made pasta for dinner.



The totally legitimate insurance building. When Aziz left with the invitation to call if we needed anything, we started bringing up clothing and linens from our van to our flat on the fourth floor, climbing 115 steps each time.



Freezing in the apartment

During dinner a neighbor in the apartment complex knocked on our door with a distraught German who had seen our van with its German plates and thought that WE were Germans who could help him. After politely but firmly telling him no, Charles rejoined Nicole and Dian. Later, Charles went downstairs to pay the night guard to watch our van (this is how it works in Morocco, and the neighborhood night guard is even recognized by the local police). We finally fell asleep in the chilly apartment with the call to prayer echoing off the walls of the city below.

DAY 213 (2012-02-11 01:31)

Thursday 9 February 2012



With a good night's sleep, no gurgling tummies, sore bodies rested from digging the van out of the sand and a comfortable (if not a bit chilly) apartment to wake up to, we counted our blessings and got ready to explore Tangiers. Knock, knock, "Who's there?" It was Aziz who came by to tell us about a special farmers market that happened only twice a week to which the Berber women came down from the Rif mountains to sell their produce. He offered to take us in his car. The man was becoming our guiding light and trusted friend in what otherwise might have been a difficult city to navigate. (By the way we opted not to pay a hundred bucks to have "James" our GPS outfitted with Moroccan maps.)





We arrived in the market place and Aziz expertly drove between the stalls to park and show us the lay of the land. We joked that with people having to duck in to the stalls to let the cars pass they may have been in cahoots with the store owner. "Oh look dear, these are lovely, I might not have noticed them." But truly there were no shortages of cool things to look and and buy. We said goodbye to Aziz then went to the Berber women's vegetable displays since by then it was noon and we didn't want them to pack up without getting to peruse their wares and take some photos. Charles bought some fingerling potatoes and peppers which he made into a really good dinner later on.





We went to the tobacco shop to buy stamps for a letter and ten postcards. We were astounded at the high price but it was a small price to pay for the smiles they would bring to family and friends. The fellow who helped to make sure we were getting the right amount of stamps said we could affix them at his restaurant, the Mamounia Palace. It was beautiful inside with tiles and Arabic carved wood. The musicians were tuning up and we opted to order just one price fix meal and share it. After an initial raised eyebrow, the waiter warmed to us and even gave us a heftier portion of couscous. We posed with the musicians and paid the bill thanking the fellow who had brought us to “his” restaurant. We walked through the fish market and meat stalls. Spices were piled high and if we hadn’t spent some amazing hours at the Grand Mercat in Valencia we might have been more overwhelmed.



Photo by Charles

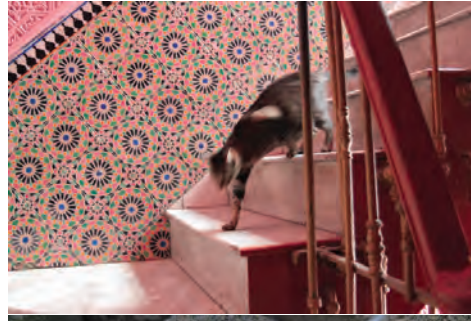


Our ever so accommodating maitre d



Electronic matters needed attending to so we followed Aziz' lead and went to Tokyo Electronics the local fix everything electronics store. They were closed so we strolled around and saw some fantastic antiques at a store near the overlook to the harbor. With the king present for a Renault/Nissan factory dedication, the police and military were on every corner.





We finally got to settle a couple of tech questions at Tokyo Electronics and Nicole took some cool shots of their gray parrot. Heading up the hill toward our apartment (well, Paul Bowles' old apartment), we stopped at the American Church and cemetery called Saint Andrew's. Many of the headstones said "A friend to the Moors" and almost all the names were English (even one for a certain George Bush). When the "plit plot" of raindrops began we hailed a taxi and were home in 10 minutes. During the ride back Nicole exclaimed, "There's Aziz!" and sure enough he was standing in front of his kid's school waiting to pick them up. Later he stopped by to check on us and recommend the American Legation and a bookstore for Paul Bowles' music and writing. We had dinner, read some of Cherie Nutting's book called "Yesterday's Perfume" and went to bed tired but satisfied with our first real day of sightseeing in Morocco.





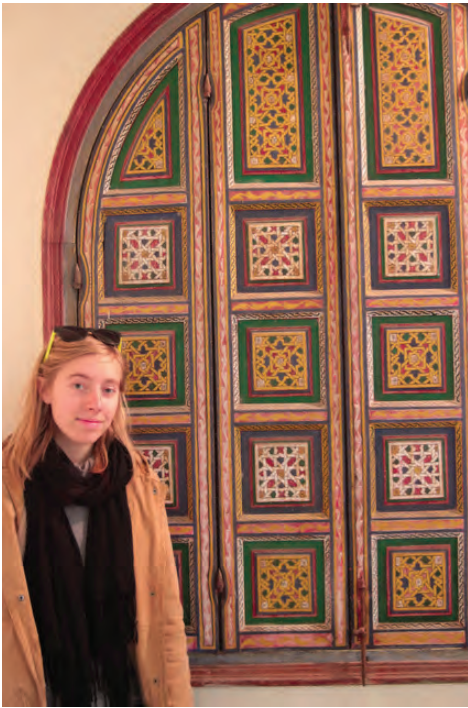
DAY 214 (2012-02-11 01:32)

Friday 10 February 2012



Dian got up early to write and have yoghurt (was it the call to prayer that brought her out of sleep?) On Aziz's recommendation we took a taxi (they were very cheap) to the American Legation. It was a little hard to find, and by the time we got there it was only open for one more hour. We enjoyed seeing a hand-written note from President George Washington to the Moroccan king thanking him for being the first to recognize America as a new country.





Each room of the beautifully preserved building had furniture, lamps and paintings from the early 1800s, but what most interested us was the wing dedicated solely to Paul Bowles. Many of the photos on display were also in our apartment and it was interesting to see him as a young man in his beloved adopted city.



We headed over to a bookstore owned by Yves Saint-Laurent and his partner. We bought a book of stories and art by Mohamed Mrabet (Paul Bowles' former friend and helper), and another book called "Beats On Bowles."





A foot holder for shining shoes



At the post office we bought postage stamps and got through the long wait by looking at the impressive array of photos depicting Tangier. We ate our picnic lunch on a terrace overlooking the sea, then hailed a taxi for home. At 4:30 PM Aziz arrived to take us to our meeting with Mohamed Mrabet at his home. This gem of Tangier seemed more subdued than what we had come to expect based on what was written about him, but we learned that he had sustained a major illness and was finally doing better. He showed us his original guashe on paper and canvas while his daughter served us tea and pastries. He told us some stories of his time with Paul Bowles and Tennessee Williams and seemed to enjoy the chocolate bar and VaVa LaVoom CD we gave him. After about an hour and a half we all got in Aziz's car and dropped Mrabet at an appointment with a gallery owner. The streets were packed with locals and we thought it would be fun to treat Aziz to dinner, but alas, he declined because he needed to visit his mom.



Upon dropping us back at our apartment we had a light supper then fell asleep, dreaming of “Sir Captian the Cat,” “Lala Cola,” “The Mask” and other stories from Mrabet’s book.



Mrabet’s

inks

Saturday 11 February 2012



Before leaving for Jajouka, Aziz swung by one last time to take us to a certain Cafe Hafa (a favorite spot of Paul Bowles' when he lived in Tangier), and it was breathtaking. They served mint tea and...mint tea. You could also buy hot peanuts from a man walking around, which we did, and they were a delicious accompaniment to the tea and spectacular seaside view.



The holders workers carry the teas



in
Mint tea and hot peanuts



After getting to know a sister and brother who were clients of Aziz, we finished our tea and headed back to the apartment where we saw Mustafa waiting in his jeep to take us the three hours drive from Paul Bowles' apartment to Jajouka. Dian rode in the jeep with Mustafa while Charles and Nicole followed behind. We arrived after dark and picked up Abdullah in the little town called Ksar El Kiber (the last one before the dirt road turn off with no sign at all for Jajouka). Nicole and Charles joked that Mustafa resembled a Marx Brother with the way he not once, not twice, but three times stopped his car in town and scuttled around the back, smiling and waving at them, as he ran into a shop to get provisions. The stone walled compound was opened by Mustafa and we drove through to a large grassy area that enclosed a house and "lodge" for the musicians. The other musician, Mohamed, greeted us and then we saw our friend, Bachir. After having tea and homemade lemon cake we went inside the music room with pillows and low couches along the walls. Bachir's wife Fatima sent over a feast of two vegetable-stuffed chickens with lemon cooked to perfection with olives and potatoes. There was a bell pepper mixture (special for guests), spinach with beans and

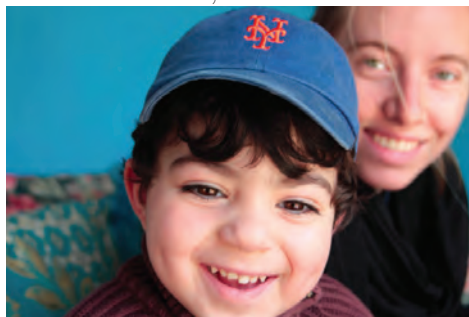
fresh bread. The musicians ate the traditional way with bread soaking up the food, which Nicole tried to emulate, but Charles and Dian used utensils. Afterwards we had lira (flute) music (with circular breathing), accompanied by two drums. Then, we heard Bachir play the gimbri (guitar like instrument) while the others either sang or drummed to a tune about “I’m lovesick but you’re my medicine”. The repetitive tones and pulsating rhythms were intoxicating. Dian wasn’t so hot on all the cigarette smoke, though. We heard GREAT stories by Bachir, not only a master musician who’s played with The Rolling Stones, Debbie Harry, Ornette Coleman, Peter Gabriel, Steve Lacy, Paul Bowles, Steven Tyler, Randy Westin, The Red Hot Chili Peppers, Patti Smith and Robert Palmer but also is a master storyteller with a ready laugh. Charles stayed to talk more with the musicians and hear music while Dian and Nicole retired to the beautiful room reserved for us, but upon hearing more music faintly through the wall, Nicole ran back to hear more, not wanting to miss anything.

DAY 216 (2012-02-11 01:34)

Sunday 12 February 2012



We had a FEAST that morning (after the musicians played till three or four). We got to meet Fatima, Bachir’s wife and his adorable three-year-old son, Salah-Din. We had our breakfast of croissants, yoghurt, jam, goat cheese, fresh homemade bread, olives and of course, tea.



We

We

spent the morning doing various things including washing Dian's poncho, painting a portrait of Salah-Din, and taking a walk with Mustafa to the famous tomb of Saint Sidi Ahmed Shik, where healing at the fig tree has taken place for almost 1,000 years. The belief is that when someone is mentally ill he/she is chained to the tree and watched by their family, then after a couple of days they are cured - (this can take up to a week and is often accompanied by the Jajouka musicians on Fridays). We actually saw a family who had traveled there for the cure, pack up and go after their son was better.



The Tree and the Chain:





Dian's portrait of Salah-Din



Bachir reading Neptune's TavernWe had lunch of tortilla (frittata) and steamed eggplant with olive oil. The other two musicians left with olive oil from Jajouka and we went to the music/memorabilia room where we listened to music recordings and signed the guest book (an honor). Bachir presented Charles with a CD of the Master Musicians of Jajouka, featuring Bachir Attar, and even

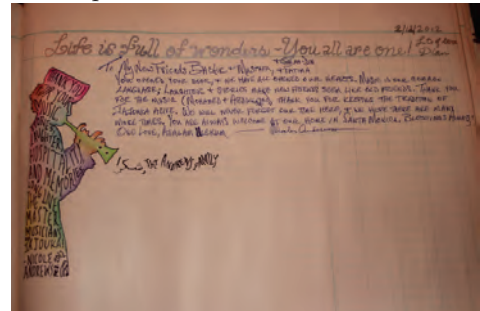
inscribed it. Dian gave a Daisy Duck Pez Dispenser to Salah-Din and a Neptune's Tavern (her original book) to Bachir. She cried with joy silently as he read it aloud.



Feeling the *barracka* (divine energy) watch over us and laughing so hard our stomachs hurt, we were thankful when the feast of couscous and goat arrived. Nicole had to gather her jaw from the floor as the giant dish was brought in. Accompanied by carrots, cabbage, calabasas, turnips, but no bread (bread is never served with couscous), we ate till we were positively rotund.



tad better than usual. Mustafa, Bachir, Dian and Nicole stopped playing at about 2:30 AM and with great contentment we all fell into our respective beds.



We signed the guest book of Jajouka (quite an honor) (Nicole's artwork)

After dinner we brought out our guitar, and playing original songs, Dian and Nicole jammed with the master musicians. What a thrill! Bachir commented that Dian looked like the sister of Neil Young while singing and said we should record an album on their label. With the Rif Mountains in close proximity Dian wondered if her own riffs were just a

DAY 217 (2012-02-11 01:35)

Monday 13 February 2012

We awoke again, after another late-night (nearly 3 AM) talk-laugh-music session with the Attar brothers, to find another bountiful breakfast arriving at the outdoor table minutes after our bedroom door opened. How did Fatima do it? How did Mustafa wake early enough to orchestrate it while simultaneously keeping the 3-yr-old dimpled dynamo Salah-Din from self-destructing from his limitless energy and curiosity? And all for people who were strangers only 40 hours earlier? These folks were remarkable examples of Moroccan hospitality, and we were the blessed beneficiaries.



It took a while longer for Bachir to drag himself out of bed – actually, Mustafa dragged him, when he found out we were planning to take off soon. We tried unsuccessfully to offer some donation for the food we ate and probably 20 gallons of sweet mint tea we drank but Bachir made it clear we were welcome any time, to stay for as long as we wanted, an offer we all hoped we could make good on some day.

Parting was such sweet sorrow but we had much more of that great country to see, and so we followed Mustafa into the next big town where he picked up some supplies and we continued down the road, but not before we wisely took his suggestion to grab a trio of “ham-boor-goors” for the road from a local stand. They were huge (nearly twice the size of a big American burger), all savory meat in pieces not patties, that cost a mere \$2.70. A few miles down the road, unable to wait any longer, we found out how delicious they were,

wrapped in a thin, light but chewy bread that beat any bun we’d ever had.

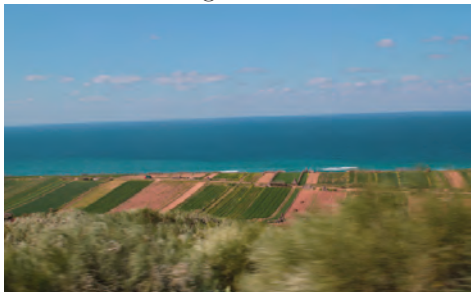


It was a long day’s drive, rolling through some beautiful farming countryside but a lot of it was not so remarkable. What WAS remarkable was seeing men plowing fields walking behind a pair of donkeys, women riding on top of mountains of leafy greens piled high on their asses (sorry, too much Sancho Panza). More so: a man gathering stray wood to load on his horse, right next to three lanes of rush-hour traffic in the thick of Casablanca; men herding their cows and goats in the median between freeway lanes; and the one that made us laugh, a complex of modern design buildings with a big sign dubbing the campus “Technopolis” – and a huge herd of sheep strolling in front.



We continued towards El-Jadida and the coastal road to our goal of southern warmth and endless beach at El Ouatia, and after emerging from the grip of Casablanca traffic looked for and found a “repose” stop, meaning a 24-hour restaurant with restrooms and a safe place for the night. To make sure, we inquired inside if it was 24-hour and also safe and allowed,

and the manager behind the counter motioned to an employee who spoke English and he assured us we could "dream easily" because there was a security guard patrolling the premises, and that we were welcome. We were just floating on hospitality, and constantly mused about what the American version of many of our situations might be.



We gave a call to Dian's folks through the computer from the van because we could get Internet there, through our handy dandy Maroc Telecom USB stick, one month of Internet almost everywhere in the country (on top of a sand dune? we think so) for 24 bucks. Wish we could get that in SoCal. Dian and Nicole then hit the hay while Charles went inside to catch up on many important communications, and milked his cappuccino while getting free electricity till the wee hours.

DAY 218 (2012-02-16 09:01)

Tuesday 14 February 2012

It was a strange thing to be taken out of sleep by the wailings of the call to prayer, then to drift back into dreamland. This would happen to us many times during our stay in Morocco. It took us out of whatever we were doing when the call started, and even for a non-Muslim, reminded us of where and who we were, and the ideologies and devotion tied to religion. It was also mysterious, at times even eerie, because it was unintelligible, being in another language, and because of its tuneless, wailing nature. It reminded us that we were in another world, rich with culture we were unaccustomed to. This was our morning alarm after a "peaceful, dream-filled" night, and after chatting with one of the friendly gas station employees (he even looked up his Facebook page for us), Charles bought a package of dirt-cheap cookies made fresh by a baker which we enjoyed on the road.



After a while of driving Nicole spied something along the road that couldn't possibly be a donkey, and definitely wasn't a cow- cow's don't have humps- our first camel! It would be one of many, but it was still exciting to see our first.



Looking for clues for the Valentine's day treasure hunt

We stopped in Essouira, a place famed for its traditional gnawa music, but upon asking around we ascertained that there wasn't much of a scene except in the summertime. Charles still wanted to explore the old town, and while doing so he bought a musician's CD (even getting it for less than half what was originally offered!).



A

Valentine's Day treasure hunt

It was getting late, so we pulled into the closest campsite not far from town, which was 70dm (about \$8.00) a night. Dian and Nicole led Charles on a campervan-confined treasure hunt leading to a package of chocolate-coffee cookies, in honor of Valentine's Day. Nicole had drawn a picture for Myles which she sent by e-mail.



DAY 219 (2012-02-16 09:46)

Wednesday 15 February 2012



We

were up by 10 for coffee delivered to our van by Lachen (no roller skates but hey, delivery to our door - what service!). We ate fresh bread from the camp Sidi Magador store in Essaouri and Lachen came back with a pair of pointed- toe Arabic slippers for Dian. They fit beautifully (especially because one was size 44 and the other size 43 - the same as Dian's feet!) Driving along what we thought was going to be mostly the coast road we ended up seeing a lot of pasture and inland scenery. Each small village had donkeys, children who waved at us and many small vendor's shops. As in Kenya (where we went on a safari three years earlier) there were many destitute-looking people but not too many who begged at our door or became disrespectful. We saw many French camper vans and the surfing crowd in small towns on our way to El Ouatia.



DAY 220 (2012-02-21 19:38)

Thursday 16 February 2012



Be-
cause we needed to handle an Internet call to Dian's medical insurance people, we pulled over just outside of Agadir to use Google Voice. We also bought groceries there and soon the sun set. Where to camp? With no camping guides for Morocco, we trusted a sign for Camping International Sidi Wassay. The road from the highway was 15 kilometers and there weren't a lot of buildings or people on the way.

It was by then a common occurrence that just when we thought we were going to be the only tourists at a deserted outpost, we would enter the gates and the joint would be jumpin'! We found out that our ocean view site came with electricity and cost the equivalent of eight dollars a night. We had the chicken and petite peas we'd purchased from the massive super-market Marjane earlier and slept peacefully.



To
us, a beautiful beach. To others, a windsurfing mecca

Charles and Dian were up at 8:30 AM and took a walk up Wassay beach. "Mohamed" (a respectful name for any man if you don't know his actual name) was in every doorway, lurking behind every tree. Not in a menacing way just...there. With a tip from our new German friend, Sabine that the *amlou* in the camp store was "brilliant" and much cheaper than you could find in any other place, we bought two tubs of the sweet argane oil and peanut/almond/honey mixture to spread on crackers or bread (two fingers anyone?). At 50 dirham each (1 dirham = 12 American cents) it wasn't cheap, but boy, was it good!



We
spent the day catching up on the blog. Dian wrote out the lyrics to her original songs so Nicole could learn them and add harmonies, and we all enjoyed looking out at the gorgeous ocean view. By 8 PM we were ready for dinner, but it turned out our little camp restaurant only prepared food that had been ordered earlier in the day. We ended up with three cheese omelets, with the cheese sitting in a cube on top of the eggs.



Not quite the "omelette du fromage" we had hoped for We had been invited to a campfire near Sabine and Jocham's Mercedes ambulance (their mode of transportation), and found it easily because of the beautiful candles she had burning brightly out front. They started a fire using dry palm fronds, and soon we were joined by a French couple, Patrique and Corinne, followed by an Irish couple, Jerry and Fennula.



Fennula, Jerry, Sabine, Patrique and Corinne



Jocham and Charles



We started with delicious hot tea and “sweeties” then progressed to wine and whiskey (Nicole abstained that time). Dian and Nicole’s guitar playing and their singing as well as Corinne’s was appreciated by all, and Corinne’s voice was like a cross between Odetta and Edith Piaf - beautiful. Our international group broke up around 1:30 AM and we walked up the stairs under the stars to our van.



DAY 221 (2012-02-21 19:40)

Friday 17 February 2012



To-day would be the day we finally reached our southernmost destination: El Ouatia (chosen because of its natural beauty and its temperate weather). We said goodbye to Sabine and Jocham, hoping we would see them again in Sabine’s town, Jimena de la Frontera, Spain.



We stopped in Tiznit for a lunch of deviled eggs Nicole made in the van. Bachir called while we were stopped, just wanting to say hello and check up on how we were doing. We missed the opportunity, after telling him what we were eating, to razz him about the egg-riddle he still had not solved, but it was just nice to hear his voice and know we had friends watching out for us. Far outside of Tiznit we had to stop the car on the side of the highway to take in the site before us: camels. Over

60 of them! All striding single file across the desert (with a lone herdsman at the rear). We knew we would not get to the Sahara desert on this trip so we really drank in the scene.



At around 6 PM we arrived in El Ouatia, but skipped going into town to search for a free-camping spot, which we found way off the side of the highway where about 14 other French campers were staked. There were sweet wild dogs roaming the area, three natural springs that trickled into the ocean, and a spot for our van so close to the water you could hear waves crashing. With no bathrooms for miles, however, Nicole was quite anxious to christen the porta potty. It worked great and we were glad to have it. That evening Nicole made a couscous dinner, then we went to bed.

DAY 222 (2012-02-21 19:41)

Saturday 18 February 2012



We heard sea waves crashing through the night and the yips of the wild dogs that lived in the area but slept well. With Amlou (argone oil and nuts) and bread for breakfast we decided to celebrate Grandad's 87th birthday in our own way... by having a "whale" of a time. This we accomplished by walking down the beach and finding a gigantic whale skeleton (or what was left of it) and taking pictures in front of its five foot tall pelvis and ten foot long ribs all bleached to pure white. Charles had discovered the bones the day before but Dian found a three foot long piece hoping to fit it in the van. (No luck). We also followed the wanderings of a chameleon who made its home near the gushing springs of warm water.



Taken by Charles



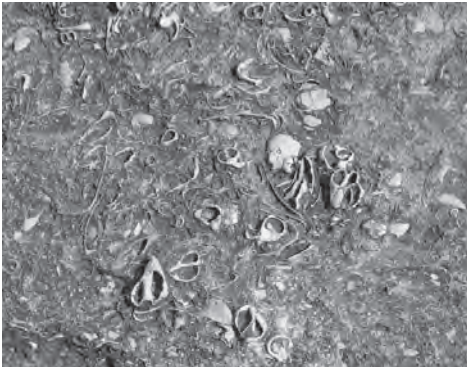
Taken by Dian



The natural (thermal) spring leading into the oceanDian made some hummus and painted some cards. Nicole sang the jingle we made up about Carr's Biscuits. Then we all had delicious Spaghetti Bolognese made with garlic, onion and bell pepper by Nicole.



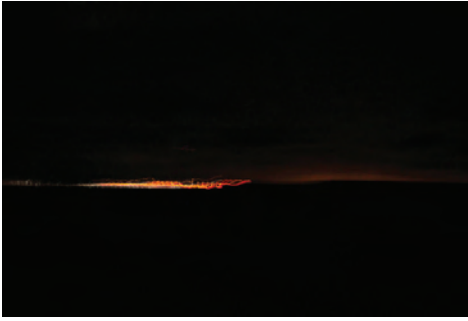
Nicole's dinner! Taken by Charles



Shells embedded in the rock



Puppies! Taken by CharlesWith a wonderfully clear connection via Google Voice to Dian's parents to sing Happy Birthday to her dad, we retired at about 8:30 PM to the howling of the puppies nearby.



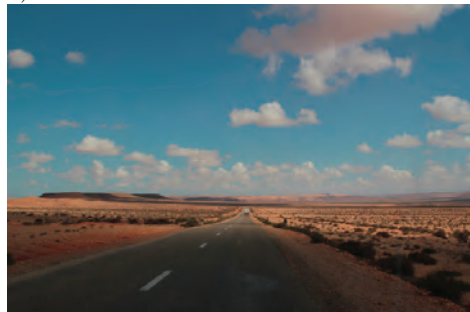
Night sky and a truck's lights on the highway.

DAY 223 (2012-02-21 19:42)

Sunday 19 February 2012

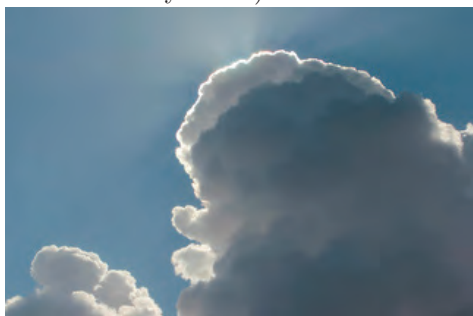


We left the beach, stopped in nearby El Ouatia for bread and water (Moroccan water is fine and safe to drink for Moroccans but sometimes not for foreign systems), then moved on to closeby Tan-Tan for fuel (diesel, not gasoline, best communicated in Arabic by saying something close to "D-S-L") – that had big clean station, attendants in snappy uniforms, but didn't take credit cards and Dian reported the toilet was a hole-in-the-ground squatter with a woman attendant who wanted money (for...?).





Then we started the long drive back up the road that got us that far south. The landscape again reminded us of the New Mexico desert: brown, dusty, dirt forever, distant mountains, low-growing scrub vegetation. But no camels in NM! We were excited to spot maybe the same herd as before because there looked to be about 50-60 but this time off a ways and in a bunch. (Nicole got the group photo, Charles quipped, to go with her previous conga line highway crossing. She also snapped the "camel crossing" highway sign – you don't see those everywhere.)



As usual we were waved through the frequent police stops while they checked some Moroccan car (profiling or just being nice to the tourist money?) and one tall good-looking cop (they almost all were) even gave a big smile while he saluted us. Sure is a different feeling than we have when we see cops at home. Listening to Bachir Attar, Loudon Wainwright and the CD from the Gnawa guy's band we enjoyed all of it.

Stopped at Guelmim for ATM cash (all 200s, a \$24-bill, sometimes hard to use) then north to Sidi Ifni back on the coast, looking for a good spot to stop. SI had two camps within 50 yards of each other at the end of the road, both

packed – not our cup o' sweet mint tea so we kept heading north along the Atlantic. Past the last town, gorgeous coast drive but still no camps, then finally, yes! And so cheap: 30 dirhams about \$3.60. Here's why: very small, no Wi-Fi, no electricity, no shower, little in the store and nothing in the cafe but tea, one WC stall hole-in-the-ground style, and chickens, roosters and cats gathered around the front door of the van. But when we drove to the end and parked, there was a familiar face: the German guy, Frank and his family (wife Katrine, very very blonde kids Josephine and Titus), whom we had talked to when we pulled into the free camping spot on the beach in Tarifa, Spain. Small world, this.



And we were only a short walk to a spectacular beach so that made up for a lot. Dian and Charles took a stroll while Nicole caught up on missed sleep, and it was filled with locals, several fishermen, two women gathering mussels off the rocks, kids playing football and jumping in the water and tide pools (fully clothed), at least three couples hidden in the large rock formations extending to the water's edge (making out?), and two devout guys taking a prayer break right there on the sand. Back to camp they went up for a tea and

fetches Nicole to join them. Mint tea has always been her favorite so Morocco's been heaven for her taste buds, but this time it wasn't mint. Dian tasted it and asked the waiter, "Mint? Not mint tea?" and he looked at her quizzically (some language barrier) and replied "Tea... it's tea!"



We bought eggs and cheese and had a delicious omelette by Dian, read a chapter from Don Quixote, stayed up to Skype Dian's family for a report on the big birthday (87!) ice cream social celebration for Grandad and gave them a computer screen tour of our great little home on wheels (that didn't take long). Finally we put our weary heads down for some deserved rest. A great day, we all agreed.



DAY 224 (2012-02-21 19:43)

Monday 20 February 2012



Nicole came back from an early morning walk along the beach to find her parents chatting with Frank and Katrin, the couple we'd met in Tarifa. Their kids Josephine and Titus busied themselves with sword fighting, playing with the chickens and sporadically climbing onto their parents. As it turned out Katrin and Frank had visited the states several times and even stayed once at the KOREAN BELL the very spot where Charles and Dian were married!



We all exchanged stories and travel tips over breakfast, and they told us of a beautiful drive through "Paradise Valley" that was not to be missed. Dian, thinking they might be yearning for some good, hearty, German bread offered it to them, but could not see from her angle that there was mold on the other side! Frank said they had not had that kind of uber healthy bread since they left home, and he did not say this wistfully. Noticing an interestingly shaped stick on the ground, Dian (ever

the beach comber) bent down to pick it up, but was halted by Katrin whispering, “Do not touch that, it is Frank’s. It’s *art!*” She grinned and we were reminded that before in Tarifa when Dian came back with buckets of beach treasures, Frank had teased that she was so kind to pick up the rubbish, to which she retorted, “This isn’t rubbish, it’s *art!*”



Back on the road, we were waved aside by a cop on a motorcycle, just the thing we *didn’t* want to see, knowing our Moroccan insurance was not going to be very helpful if we got into a scrape. No matter, though! He was just at the beginning of a long line of government cars being escorted through the windy back country. One could barely make out the fezzes, djellabas and suits through the tinted back windows.



BEFORE looking for a camp. To make a long story longer, we had trouble finding camping (even free camping) in Agadir. After at least two hours of driving around, asking around, and blank stares abounding, we finally pulled in to the one and only camp in Agadir...which was full and about to close. To give a vibe of the camp, their brochure was heavily advertised by the 23 hour casino down the road. The man at reception, perhaps thinking he could get some good casino PR through a young person like Nicole, squeezed us into a spot between two other jumbo-campers (again, we were grateful to have such a small vehicle). To put it lightly, the camp was terrible: unfriendly gatekeeper, no place to plug in to electricity, though we were paying for it, disgusting bathrooms (smelly, dirty, no soap, no TP, no *lights* in the women’s side), you get the picture. The only good thing about the place was a friendly French couple, Christian and Nicole, who offered to let us use their electricity if we moved closer to their plot. We chatted a bit, and when we mentioned Paradise Valley Christian smiled and said, “Ah, ‘heepies.’” We were terribly exhausted, so pretty much instantly after saying goodnight to them we zonked out.



At last we’d made it to Agadir, where we made the unwise choice of buying some provisions

DAY 225 (2012-02-21 19:44)

Tuesday 21 February 2012

We were up at 8 AM and ready to leave the Agadir Camp where the kindness of Christian and his wife Nicole had allowed us to have electricity and charge up all our gadgets. We gave them a book- on - CD about France as a thank you gift and headed out the gate with nary a backwards glance at the self -important gate keeper in the oversized doorman's uniform.



At "Speedy" we got an oil change and the manager fixed the loose wires so our back up light worked..all for about eight dollars. Dian painted two buoys with cartoon faces as a gift and he presented us with a car duster. We also left the dead battery with him.

At the nearby Marjane supermarket Dian held up a package of ground beef and a postcard of a camel to the butcher who looked befuddled then grinned, "No." Dian's unexpected commercial re-use fee arranged by her agent Vinnie Biunno allowed the Happy Trails Gang to treat themselves to an array of baklava style pastries and Dian and Nicole had a gelato in honor of Grandad's 87TH birthday Ice Cream Social. With sugar coursing through our veins, we headed up the coast a while then inland toward Marrakech.



Marjane

cookies



We stopped at the camp the German family had recommended, but decided not to stay, even though Nicole looked longingly at the brand new showers. The receptionist, however, was kind enough to give us a demonstration of how the Argane nut is crushed and made into oil (he did this after searching for a nut outside, bringing it in with a rock, and smashing it carefully on his brand new granite countertop). We bought a half liter of the special oil that had a slightly nutty taste.



The

Argane

tree



A

roadside

shop



We headed up through Paradise Valley and stopped in Aulouzze, a Berber village, where we bought an alabaster mask for Chris. Another recommendation by the German family that turned out to be wonderful for us was a restaurant called Al Bassatine, where we had mint tea on the terrace under the Atlas mountains with donkeys braying and children playing below. We finally had to move inside when a bee, attracted to our honey comb treat, made us too uncomfortable. Thankfully the downstairs interior was straight out of the Arabian Nights, and with a fire going we had chicken brochettes with Argane oil salad, olives and bread. This was all thanks to Grandmother and Grandad's Valentine's Day treat!



Paradise Valley Before leaving we drew a cartoon for his guest book and took some pictures, then headed up the windy road where we saw cascading waterfalls, beautiful rock formations, and lots of beehive boxes. Boys with slingshots on the side of the road made us a little nervous at times, but were never in any real danger. At one point we asked a man how far it was to Marrakech, and he was either heading in that direction or was trying to keep an eye on us at a respectful distance. Dian looked back at one point and said the respectful distance was so respectful that we couldn't see him anymore! By nightfall we stopped to fill up with the very inexpensive diesel and spend the night at the repose/aire. Charles drank 6 teas and coffees and stayed up till 6 AM working on the computer in the all night cafe.



Goodbye Agadir, hello Marrakech!

DAY 226 (2012-02-21 19:44)

Wednesday 22 February 2012

"Don't You Know We're Ridin' . . ."

Having retired to the 24-hour rest stop cafe the previous night at 8 to do work at the computer, Charles still found himself, two coffees and two teas (three cups each pot) later still there at 6AM. A few problems had come up. We had the date wrong, by four days, of the final day of carnivale in Cadiz, Spain, which we wanted to make. So everything had to be adjusted, new research done and e-mails sent.



Jardin

Ma-



jorelle

But by 6 AM he was so exhausted he got little fitful sleep by the time the family arose at 8:30. He sent them inside to blog and add photos and caught a couple more hours, but

by the time we had deviled eggs by Nicole and got everything ready to roll, it was 1:30, and by the time we finally made it into Marrakech and survived the mad traffic (driving in Morocco was a different experience than in Europe!) and found a good parking place for the night, it was 4:30 PM. Our disappointment at a late arrival was soothed by Hadin, the smiling parking lot attendant, who offered us, from his little guard shack, glasses of hot tea all around, no charge.

Knowing the massive central square, the Jamaa el Fna, flipped over around 7 PM to a nighttime mode of huge food tents and music and crowds till dawn, we decided to walk to the famous Jardin Majorelle, a 90-year-old garden restored by designer Yves Saint Laurent and his partner Pierre Berge, who lived for many years on the estate adjacent to it. They also established the Islamic Art Museum of Marrakech there, a gorgeous building from the outside but we didn't pay the extra amount to go in. It was \$6 each just to get into the garden, with only an hour till closing, and we all agreed that it was beautiful and tranquil but less than overwhelming, less than we expected from the crown prince of fashion.





Two women's hands with henna tattoos in
Jardin Majorelle



Marrakech by day We hiked back to our van for a pick-me-up bowl of vegetable soup, and though we were all pretty tired, as darkness fell we marched off to take on the reputedly wild Jamaa el Fna. THAT met our expectations. Not exactly like a scene from *Satyricon*, but close. Or maybe the Star Wars bar. After wending our way down a narrow street crammed with small shops selling... everything, we turned a corner and there it was, a huge dark open square with tent canopies off to one side and the rest dotted with crowds of people gathered around a performer or... something of interest.



As obviously not Moroccans we drew the attention of hustlers and beggars, sometimes poking or even grabbing at our sleeves, but fortunately no thieves – we’d learned well where to keep our valuables, and had had no problems on the trip with that headache. We’d also learned the best way to be left alone; a smiling but firm, “No thanks!” then no more contact, look the other way, every additional glance was renewed hope. There and a little later in the *souks* Charles was hailed as “Ali Baba!” and “moustache!” (odd, for a bearded guy) and forgot to find out later whether that was standard, an insult, inside joke or what. Most of the music gatherings had a lot of drums banging away and many others had a lead banjo, a little surprising.



After hitting most of the crowds to looky-loo we headed for the *souks* for some serious shopping. Nicole knew exactly what kind of bag she wanted, Charles was looking for exactly the right kind of scarf (not found, at any reasonable price, but he did snag a snappy, much-needed “camel leather” belt for about 8 bucks.. Both of the belts he brought with him, originally in the last holes, were now out of holes! And Dian... Dian was in a meditative mood, searching for the shopkeeper who was not begging us to come in, but still managed to function as The Enforcer, helping us stick to our best bargaining mode and not weakening. That resulted in her snagging a great un-

expected piece, a star-shaped goatskin lamp. The bargaining process took forever, many walk-aways and call-backs, but finally we paid not a dirham more than our bottom line (\$8.50), and were delighted. Handmade, authentic, beautiful. The seller was also a good sport about it, with smiles all around. Charles complimented him on spending his down time watching educational shows on TV, instead of just veging, and that brought a smile too.



A man sitting outside the shop, upon Dian’s request to take a picture of the two, stole a kiss from Nicole! We can assure you it was without consent. Nicole’s drama for her bag also dragged on forever, and she exhibited truly remarkable bargaining skills, many return visits, but the guy was unmovable and she ended just a shade above the price she wanted to pay (still, nearly half the original asking price), but the bag she got was unlike any at all the many other shops that sold them, with leather and bright yellow handwoven carpet material, and she wisely left with her heart’s desire instead an extra dollar or two in her pocket. The bag was a treasure, and the place and method of purchase something she’d always remember.



Nicole and her bag the next dayThe *souks*

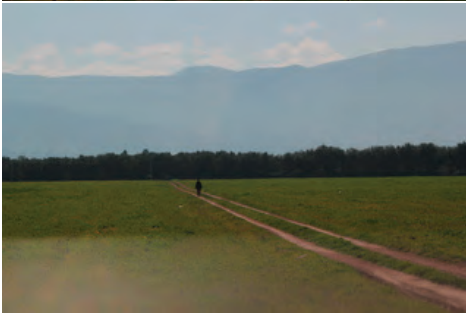
stretched out forever north of the square, a maze, a labyrinth, all with (it seemed) pretty much the same things, so we just stuck to one area, barely scratched in but still there were four levels and hundreds of tiny shops and we only poked around a few, phew!



We were going to sit down to a nice dinner in the square but were so tired of the assault of the hustlers that we settled for two bags of fries to go – REALLY great, crispy fries with a dash of sea salt thrown in at the last moment, and flavored with a taste of something else, maybe cumin. Back to the van really tired but delighted with our purchases, z - z - z - z.

Thursday 23 February 2012

Eleven hours of driving. That is what we did. On the downside, one can get a little claustrophobic with so much car travel. On the upside, one appreciates the smaller things seen on the drive, such as the town we passed through, Beni Mallal, which we likened to an old Vaudeville star (“Beni Mallal, ladies an’ gentlemen!”). We saw lots of beautiful country, especially since we were taking the scenic route, and we even saw our first glimpse of snow on the Atlas mountains! We had since noticed a pattern in many of the small towns we passed: a nice (though often unpaved) main drag, with electronic stores, markets, etc., but just a block off the main street were dusty dirt roads, empty, overgrown lots, and sometimes just vast, untouched fields. It was like a western town movie set with facades of buildings but really nothing behind them. It was outside one of these small towns that we spotted our first REAL LIVE CAGANER (if you don’t know what a caganer is, please refer to DAY 152)! We had hoped to find a campsite in Meknes, but after a couple tense hours of driving and finding only one camp (that was closed) we called it quits on Meknes and took the super highway to Fez, assuming we would stop for the night at an *aire repose*. This stretch of highway just happened to be the only one we had encountered so far that had *zero* rest stops, so we ended up driving all the way to Fez, then landing in a 24 hour gas station. We bought a bag of chips as a consolation prize for all the driving and searching we had done. Charles called his old friend Roger Steffens, who told us he had actually lived in Marrakech for a year, and got “goose pimples” when Charles described to him our visit to Jajouka.

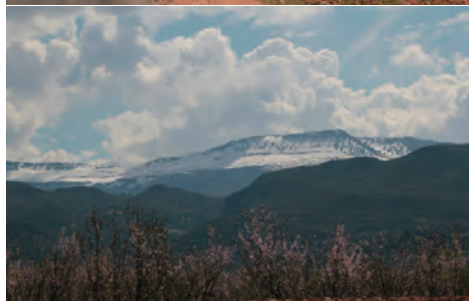
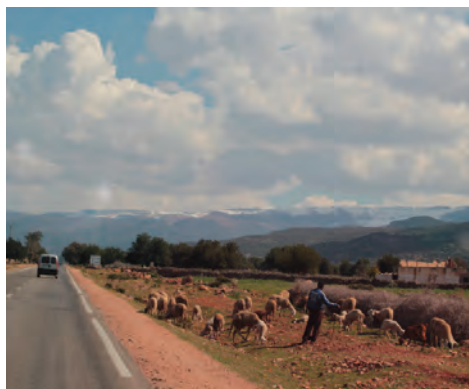


DAY 228 (2012-02-27 11:31)

Friday 24 February 2012



After a good night's sleep at the rest stop, we were up at 9 AM with a full tank of diesel heading from Fez through the backside of the "kif", we mean Rif mountains. The 11 hour drive the day before had taken its toll, but we had a 9 hour driving day ahead of us, so with bright eyes and bushy tails we started up the winding switchbacks into the breathtakingly beautiful mountains. When a car going the opposite way frantically waved for us to stop, Dian, at the wheel at the time, steadily drove to the nearest village. She and Charles checked to see if anything was on fire, but when a man asked Charles if he'd like some hashish, we realized that was the only thing that might catch on fire.

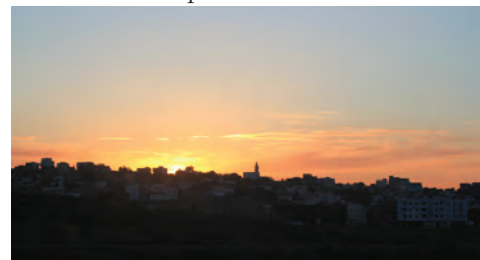


Soon we saw many people, all men, gesturing with two fingers like they were holding a cigarette. We learned later that the area around Ketama is a legal pot growing area (the only one in Morocco), but the selling of it is not legal, nor is it taxed. Our friend Aziz later said he had told us of this, but Charles claimed "selective memory."



We got up to the snow line, and Charles made a snowball, and was wolfing down his lunch in order to avoid being solicited, when three men came out of nowhere to offer us kif! There were huge sacks of fertilizer stacked up near the sides of the road, and Dian spotted a hidden "hot house" where we assumed the marijuana was grown. According to Aziz, the drug lords can make a lot of money, and their mansions next to traditional Berber houses were a testament to that.

Dian wished that instead of speed bumps and barrier gates, the drug lords would put money into filling the pot holes, but the place is famous for its pot. We emerged from the mountains in the town of Tetouan and were in Tangiers by 6:30 PM. A quick phone call to Aziz provided us with guidance back to Paul Bowles' apartment, where we parked in our old spot. We had pizza for dinner, and after Charles paid the neighborhood watch guard we went to sleep in our van.



DAY 229 (2012-02-27 11:31)

Saturday 25 February 2012 Sweet Home, Tangier . . . We arose from our secured parking spot in front of the apartment building of American writer Paul Bowles' former longtime residence (where we got to stay on our first trip through, courtesy of Cherie Nutting and Bachir Attar, good friends of his), to await our friend and white knight Aziz Begdouri, who offered to pick us up and take us to Cafe Hafa for one last visit to that hallowed literary hangout (Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Ginsberg et al), even though it was Saturday and a busy work day for Morocco's leading tour guide. When we say our car and parking spot were secured, we're referencing the odd system they have of designating one person, usually an older man, to watch over the cars parked on his block. If you're going to be there a few hours you hand him a few dirhams, overnight 10 (\$1.20/euros .90). He'll sometimes appear as soon as you park or sometimes you won't see him for hours or even days. Several times previously we had to leave the money with a nearby shopkeeper, who gets it to him. We guess. But everyone there swears the system works and if there is any problem reported to the police the first person they go after is the watchman, demanding answers. Good old Morocco - it works, after its own fashion.



Ismael, Currito, Aziz and Charles. Aziz showed up smiling hugely as usual, with a surprise: his two sons in tow, Ismael and Currito, on their way to English lessons at the American

language school. Aziz' wife is Spanish and they speak her language, his and English at home; he turned uncharacteristically sober for a moment when Charles asked him about the English lessons - "Of course, you must have a good command of English to succeed today, no question, yes, no question." A father obviously dedicated to providing the best opportunities for his sons, we knew from other conversations how much he valued family. If he treated his customers like gold, he treated family like precious jewels. And we still marveled at how much time and attention he gave us while juggling the rest of his busy tour business.

On the way to the school we found out that Currito (7) had been playing and replaying the CD Dian gave Aziz of her "Modern Music from Outer Space" as sung by her VaVa LaVoom persona, or more accurately, one song, "Casey Casey Casey." So Dian sang it in person, with Nicole harmonizing, for him in the car, and we think he enjoyed it but in shyness he turned his head to the side window and didn't show his face once. Very sweet.



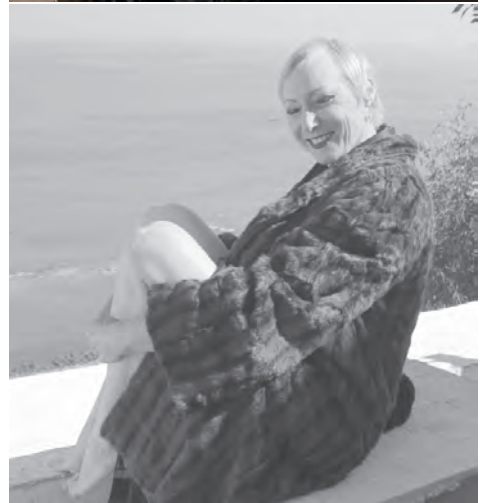
After dropping the boys at school we proceeded toward the cafe but Aziz made another stop, dashing into a doorway to come back with bags, "a traditional Moroccan breakfast," he proudly announced, really good Moroccan bread sort of split into sandwiches, some with goat cheese and some with our favorite, Am-lou.



Charles had expressed a desire to go early to the cafe, to get some writing done at the same place that inspired so many great writers, and asked Aziz for directions to walk or catch a cab, but instead he offered to take Charles early then come back for Dian and Nicole later. Not wanting to put him to that much trouble, we decided longer time at Cafe Hafa was something we'd all like and Dian hatched a plan to occupy Nicole and herself. She brought some clothing items, like the mink coat her mom had mailed for warmth, a caftan, old-school Ray Bans, a black fur hat and her makeup bag, and recreated the '40s-'50s look that reigned in Tangier's literary heyday at a photo shoot by Nicole. Charles moved off by himself and did manage to write a column for the Santa Monica Daily Press that he felt good about, and read it to all when Aziz joined us again.



Amlou and cheese with bread





Charles moved a couple of times as the place started to fill up, then gave up and settled in, musing how packed it must be in summer. But locals loved the place too and new arrivals seemed to be Moroccans of all age groups, including the young men at the top tier who were smoking a hookah (Middle Eastern-style water pipe, large, with hose). Dian noticed them too and despite some misgivings, decided this was an opportunity not to be missed, so she and Nicole approached them to see if what they were smoking.... really was. Yes. It was. And they didn't mind demonstrating how it worked for the curious visitors.



Aziz later explained that while *kif*, the marijuana variety grown in Morocco, and the hash that is made from it, are officially illegal, the government has reached an accommodation (that the neighboring European nations don't appreciate much) with "the industry" to limit growth and production to one certain area (the one in the Rif Mountains that we drove through the day before, that ordinary tourists never drive through unless they are looking for the goods, which of course explained the enthusiastic welcome our van's foreign plates got us) and sort of look the other way. But he also explained that we were perfectly safe there, that because of the government blessing and control the criminal element had mostly been eliminated. Gosh, Charles said, that's exactly what I've been saying for years is wrong with the US' "war on drugs" that results in prisons overflowing with minor violators and now a neighboring nation nearly out of control with drug violence. But the government of Morocco doesn't tax it, and that could be a source of more control and moving some of the vast mountains of money away from drug warlords and into government coffers. But that's just one non-smoker's opinion...



Before we entered Cafe Hafa that morning Aziz beckoned us in the other direction, a few steps away onto a large rock area overlooking the Straits of Gibraltar. He pointed down to the depressions all over the surface and told us, "These are the ancient Phoenician tombs. Long before the English, French, Spanish and Portuguese, the Arabs, the Byzantines, the Vandals, Romans and Carthaginians, the Phoenicians conquered the Berbers of Tanjah and ended their westward march here, believing the ocean beyond to be so vast that it must be the end of the world." "Otherwise," Charles quipped, "we Yanks might be speaking to you now in Phoenician."



Finally it was time to hit the road to make our ferry in Ceuta, where we had landed 17

days and a lifetime's adventures before. Aziz drove ahead of us to the edge of town to make sure we didn't get lost, and we stopped and bade him a warm but reluctant goodbye. The drive back was by the coast and beautiful, but not as striking as our arrival introduction to Morocco and North Africa. That memory, of heading up the mountain into unknown territory and culture and being thrilled by the beauty of the mountains and sea, was an indelible one.



The breeze of getting through return customs that Aziz predicted didn't happen. It was much easier, but the lines were long because of the important Spanish holiday many Ceutans were returning home for. We were cutting it close to make the early afternoon ferry and missed by an hour but easily made the 5 o'clock crossing. We zipped out of Algeciras port to our beloved propane refill station, then back out the familiar road to Tarifa, only this time instead of free camping we went for the campground right next to it, for hot showers and easy Wi-Fi before our departure for carnival in Cadiz. Our Moroccan adventure, we all agreed, was a definite highlight of our year-long trip.



DAY 230 (2012-02-27 11:31)

Sunday 26 February 2012



Church

we grabbed a couple scrumptious ham, cheese and date pastries, then we walked into the center of the old town. It's safe to say we were not expecting so much music, which was a very pleasant surprise! Tons and tons of singing groups (some a capella, some backed by instruments) seemed to appear out of nowhere, and all were in costume, whether they were homemade or store bought. Being in choir for four years, Nicole especially appreciated how tight ALL the groups were with their harmonies, and their facial expressions were more than enough to let you know what the song was about (though we probably missed a few bawdy punch lines because of the language barrier). Even though the groups on floats in the parade often had a more polished look, there was no difference in talent to the "parade" groups and the "street" groups. There was so much life all around, especially with costumed kids darting through the crowds, running free for the day. We three sat in a plaza for a while sipping beers and Fantas, taking in the sights and sounds.

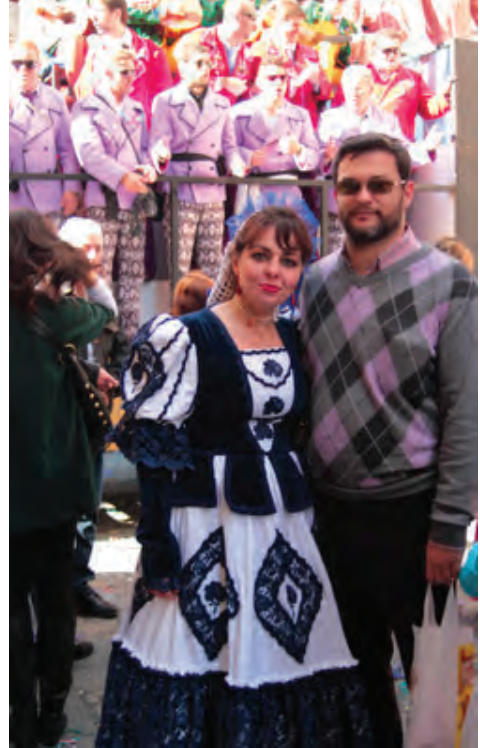
in



Cadiz

We left Tarifa in anticipation of the Carnaval in Cadiz, and it did not disappoint. Driving closer and closer to the center of all the happenings we began seeing children and adults alike in costumes of all sorts. After parking









¡Sangre!

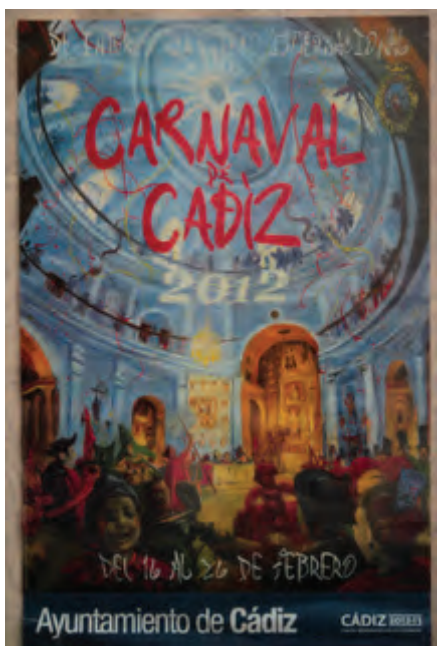


Though our minds were buzzing with excitement, our feet were honestly quite weary,

and with the festivities ending at 6 anyway we decided to call it a day, though not before Dian purchased a Spanish hat to blend in with the others. Charles and Nicole shook their heads, wondering where the heck they were going to *put* the dang thing.



Seeing a poster for the carnival in a restaurant, we asked the waiter if we could have it. He said it was fine, on the condition that we take a picture of ourselves with it once we were back in LA.



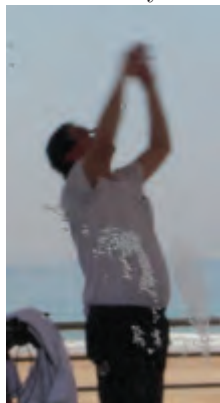
Deal!

We were able to find the same free camping spot we'd caught a glimpse of on our way in, and after Dian "unknowingly" intruded upon a young surfer putting on his pants near his car to ask if it was okay to stay there (which he confirmed) we had dinner and dozed off with the singers' dulcet tones still ringing in our ears.

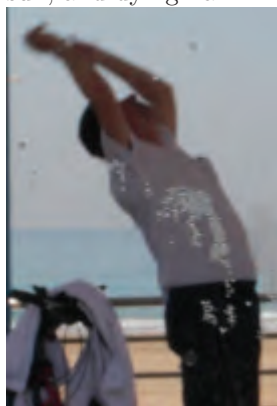
DAY 231 (2012-02-27 11:32)

Monday 27 February 2012

We were up at 10 AM at our free parking place with 15 other campers overlooking the Atlantic ocean on the outskirts of Cadiz. Nicole's "infomercial" on face washing was funny, but her musical accompaniment of the Nutcracker's Suite to a man exercising on the beach was hysterical (she taped it).



After paying a pretty big toll we opted to program our GPS for no toll roads, and promptly found ourselves on a farmer's gravel road. 50 minutes later, just outside of Sevilla, we pulled into Camping Villsom which, though pricey, seemed like the respite we needed for catching up on the blogs, e-mails, paying bills, drying clothes in the hot sun, and dying hair.



While doing laundry in the giant Maytag machine, we met Suffolk folk Diane and Ian who gave us some wonderful camping tips for Portugal. They had had a van like ours, which drew them to our plot in the first place.

2.3 March



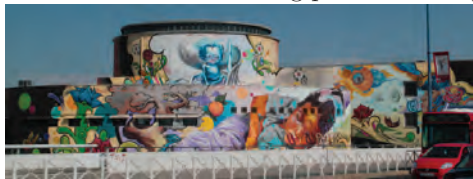
Charles made a delicious pasta dinner and we all had hot showers before bed!



DAY 232 (2012-03-03 02:57)

Tuesday 28 February 2012

We were up at 10 and by 1 were on our way from Camp Villsom to the much anticipated city of Sevilla. Since it was a holiday celebrating Andalucia (the province's autonomy) we thought we would find more festivities. Unfortunately there weren't any to speak of, but we saw lots of families having picnics in the park.



On the way in Nicole happened to see a bulldozer collapsing the floor of an old army training building and was astounded to see the dust the falling debris caused. We pulled over to watch but nothing of such magnitude transpired again.



The building to be demolished



After driving around and admiring the architecture we finally parked near a beautiful old schooner in a church parking lot. Nicole opted to stay in the van and play guitar while Charles and Dian walked through the park to

Isabela Catolica (the government building covered in tile which used to house the headquarters of agriculture, aviation, military, etc.). Charles made salami, cheese and lettuce sandwiches which we ate in the church parking lot. Fortified, we moved on to country #25! By 5 PM we were in Portugal. There was no border, just a bridge. It was too bad we didn't buy gas in Spain because in Portugal it was 15 cents more per liter. We bought groceries at a big supermarket, including our first Port (which is actually made in northern Portugal). Following tips from our friends Annie and Clive we drove to the town of Fuseta where we checked in to a camp and got free electricity (shh, don't tell it was a freebie).



After a dinner of fresh broccoli (long time no see, or taste) and pasta, Dian was backing the van closer to the electricity box when she inadvertently forgot to put on the emergency break. Charles leaped in and stopped the van from colliding with the camper behind us! We made two attempts to talk to Dian's parents but the first two times we spoke to her dad only. Finally at midnight (Portuguese time) we reached both her parents, and gave them the skinny on all that had been happening. Charles stayed on the computer till the café closed (free camping might have been an option but since it was our first night in Portugal Dian urged us to stay inside the camp gates and not on the street until we got to know the southern coast of Portugal better).



DAY 233 (2012-03-03 03:02)

Wednesday 29 February 2012



Apart from the beach combing, the walk through town Dian and Nicole took, the post-cards they sent off, the call to Capitol One made by Charles to sort out (once again) our card that had been wrongfully frozen, apart from that, it was to be a day of scouting out camps. Just before leaving Olhao we were informed by Pam the painter (her easel was set up in a quiet corner of the boardwalk) that we weren't in Olhao at all, but just outside it in the small town of Fuseta. Though she was from England she had visited many times because the setting was just so lovely and the people so kind. Nicole and Dian found this to be true when walking through town, for even the smallest smile or attempt to say *ola* (hello) or *obrigado* (thank you) would crack their sea-weathered faces. The men seemed joyful in their fishing tasks, and we saw many working on their old boats, still doing it the old-fashioned way.





The following is a brief description of the camps we visited:



> PRICE(Y) WATER TOWER So named because of the much needed Internet connection that was supposedly best near the water tower...but with no spaces nearby. It was altogether clean, huge, filled with happy, sun-kissed ex-pats, and quite expensive. We chose to move on (but not before making our lunch in their parking lot). > NAMETAGS Fit with water park, tennis court, three bars, restaurant, bathrooms galore and more, camp "nametags" did NOT have the funky, old vibe we were going for. They even made us wear nametags around our necks to walk around the camp. Thanks, but no thanks. > 3 POOLS

AND A TURNSTILE Again, HUGE camp, three pools, large restaurant on a hill, and a pass needed at all times to get through the turnstile (with a bouncer-like guard to boot). It looked to be a tad older, and it was very clean, but it was also quite expensive and we still had a lot of day left to explore! Because we were taking our time, we made pleasant detours through small seaside towns, our favorite being Faro with cool street art, a good old fisherman vibe, pleasant cafes, and a plethora of pretty, old buildings in between the stages of decay and restoration.



After making an accidental 20-minute detour we came to: > CAMPING ARMACAO DE PERA Not antiseptic (but still clean), not

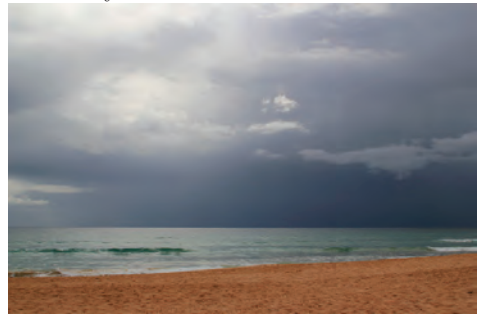
cloistered, free Wi-Fi in the bar, cheap, and 10 minutes from the beach! And that is where we stayed.

DAY 234 (2012-03-03 10:00)



A chain in Portugal!

Thursday 1 March 2012



Waking up to polka music from a nearby trailer and a light rain had us wondering what country we were in. Camp Armacao de Pera was full of returning folks from Britain, Netherlands, France and Germany, “Hardly ever Americans!” the receptionist remarked.



Dian and Nicole were helped by an English couple Dave and Ann with the best directions to the beach. There they found fishing boats, rock caves, and closed hotels. In town they stopped at the post office to buy postcard stamps. Later with dog poo on her shoe, Dian stayed outside while Nicole found an empty box to send our goat lamp from Marrakech home to Nicole’s grandparents.



Yum?Back at the camp Charles was writing a column and another article about the trip, and was gratified to see a screen capture of his photo in the Santa Monica Daily Press sent by our friend Mimi. In the afternoon our tranquility and Charles' Internet connection were disturbed by the rehearsal for the yearly talent show. Lip-syncing was the order of the day for almost every act, and back in the van, only a glass of Port could lift the cloud from over our heads.



We put in our order for the dinner and entertainment to be held in the camp restaurant that night and looked forward to a scrumptious seafood dinner. Around 7 Charles texted Dian and Nicole to come up and join him in the dining room. We saw Ann and Dave at a table by themselves and asked if we could join them.



them some of her photos. The soup and salad came, but not until TWO HOURS LATER did our main course arrive—This after they ran out of chicken piri piri. The very thin, dried out salmon and swordfish came with apologetic looks from our waitress Nidia (whose birthday it was). The headliner, an

accordionist/singer prompted Dian and a few others to form a conga line which incidentally passed through the kitchen. There she witnessed a chef sweating bullets while five waiters tapped their fingers. As Charles put it, the best part about that night was getting to know Ann and Dave, and where else would we have gotten to see slightly drunk elderly Dutch dancing like ice skaters and singing loudly. It was a slice (“A very thin slice.” - Nicole).



Not a very convincing smile. (Note the camp manager rushing around in the background.)



Dave and Ann



DAY 235 (2012-03-03 10:01)

Friday 2 March 2012

Up at 8:30 Charles was already writing his article in the camp restaurant. Dian and Nicole went into town to send the box with the lamp and were amazed to find it cost about \$70. Good thing we bargained so hard in Marrakech.



Back at home they did some laundry, made beans with onions and cheese, and added *piri piri*, a local hot sauce. Nicole and Dian worked on blogs, and Charles wrote, wrote, wrote, researched, researched, researched, and e-mailed, e-mailed, e-mailed. Later we had couscous with pesto, and tuna sandwiches. Charles started reading aloud "The Innocents Abroad". Speaking of Mark Twain, Nicole, while calling some friends from home, found that her boyfriend Myles had made an acquaintance at NYU who was also a relation to the author! To the strains of "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean" and "Que Sera Sera" sung by a contingency of fellow campers in the restaurant above, we tried to sleep.

DAY 236 (2012-03-03 10:02)

Saturday 3 March 2012

The day went much the same way as the previous one. Charles worked on finding contacts who might help publish his article, Dian wrote out lyrics to her songs and sewed a little, and Nicole wrote postcards to friends and played guitar.



town



Late in the afternoon, after a pesto, pasta, peas and pepperoni lunch, Charles ventured into town to explore and buy a few groceries. Nicole and Dian continued to work tirelessly on the blogs, finally at the stage of typing what had been written in long hand. Charles came back with the usual necessities plus lots of fruit and a bag of chips as a treat! We resumed our aforementioned activities until late evening when the singing at the camp talent show brought us back to our van for dinner, which consisted of soup, and a baked sweet potato pastry traditional to the area which Charles had bought on his outing.

DAY 237 (2012-03-06 04:42)

Sunday 4 March 2012



In

Dian and Charles played hide and seek behind the palm trees at our camp. We stowed our sleeping bags and comforters and closed the slats that supported the bed above. It's funny how the chance to NOT have to do that chore for 4 nights had become so welcome. It was the same with washing every dish and utensil and putting it in the backpack each time we ate. We're not complaining mind you. With assurances to Augusta the camp landlady that we had enjoyed our stay we checked out and headed inland to Silves.



Church

in

Silves



The tallest cactus we'd ever seen!



The small town that still had it's 11th century castle and turrets intact was beautiful to see. The town had an upscale vibe to it and we stayed for a couple of songs by a trio at a nice restaurant but moved on without eating there.





The old and the new



A

project done by students to raise environmental awareness.

These kinds of paintings were all over trash bins around where we parked. We checked out a camp that was listed in our Camping International book but felt it was a little too pricey and Nicole declared she was ready for some free camping. With Charles' suggestion to head toward the ocean we found ourselves in the little town of Luz. At the very end of town we saw "our kind". The group of five campers were perched right above the cliffs with the water crashing below. We introduced ourselves to the Dutch foursome enjoying the afternoon sun and a few beers and they said we were certainly welcome and it was a safe place to park. Later, Corinne gave us a book to look through that had campsites all up and down the coast of Portugal (which we took notes from and returned later that evening). After a scrumptious dinner of omelet and guacamole Charles went into town to find Internet and Nicole and Dian crashed. Just before they did Nicole said, "Look where we are – it's like a moving desktop screen saver."



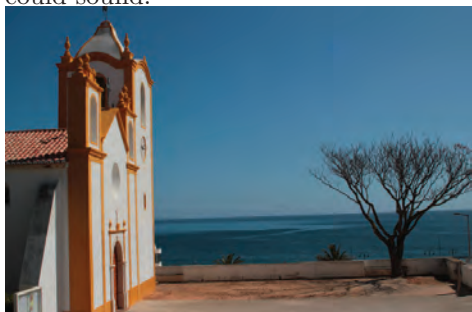
Does it get any better?

DAY 238 (2012-03-06 04:43)

Monday 5 March 2012

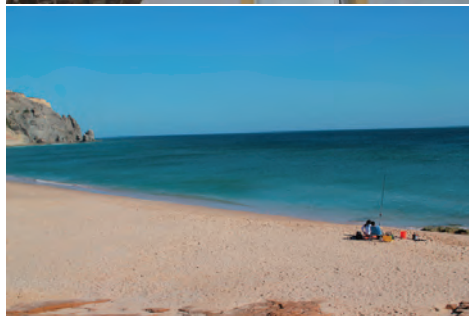


Another shitty day in paradise, we used to joke in Santa Monica, and that applied to the Algarve region on the south coast of Portugal as well. A bit ironic that we'd been seeking out the sun and warmth we enjoy nearly year round back home, surrounded by Brits, Dutch and Germans escaping to Algarve from their frigid homelands. Okay we liked to brag but even WE were astonished at how arrogant we could sound.



Charles and Dian both took separate morning hikes, Charles loved rock formations jutting out into the ocean that gave him the vantage point to take in the crashing waves and ebbing

tides. Dian being a true beachcomber didn't find much sandy beach for combing. Nicole rested her irritated eyes most of the day in the van but managed to crank out quite a few postcards for friends. We hope they are appreciated (Dian sent out a ton too) because they were dang expensive to mail everywhere in Europe, almost two bucks each for postage and a card.



The local Irish pubs in Luz opened at 11AM – why is that mentioned? Because they were the best source for Wi-Fi and electric plug-in. Charles put in a couple hours then marched up the street to do some grocery shopping and as he came down the street who should he see but a familiar face, there in Luz, Portugal – Dian!! They walked back to the van together, and after she and Nicole trekked

off to the thrift shop they found he had fired up the stove and put together a dinner of bratwurst and seasoned new potatoes, a feast that proved too irresistible and became a late lunch instead.

Among the booty procured at the charity shop were two blouses for Nicole, a dress for Dian and a couple of gifts for her mom's birthday which of course we can't reveal here.

After nightfall she and Charles hiked back to the outdoor area of The Bull to call her folks on Google Voice where the Wi-Fi was good and it was not as noisy as inside.

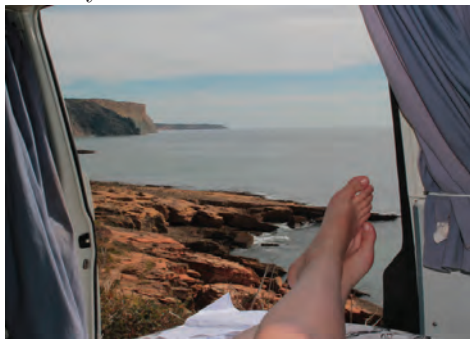


The vote was for an early turn-in, around 9, about five hours earlier than Charles was accustomed to, so he took a flashlight to bed and his copy of Don Snowden's "Make the Music Go Bang!" a chronicle of the LA punk/new wave/underground scene of the late-'70s early-'80s. He loved Don's style on the intro chapter, then reveled in the first guest chapter by Phast Phreddie, reliving those days and finding out a lot about what he missed before he got there, as Phreddie ran down a list of important sites. Sweet mosh pit dreams.



DAY 239 (2012-03-08 03:55)

Tuesday 6 March 2012



Van with a view



Dian's rooster rendition We woke up at 8 in the morning and saw once again the beautiful waters of Luz. Dian left early for a walk to the next town, Burgau, where she met a friendly couple from Austria, Wolfgang and Andrea (and their dog Eoc), whom she chatted with and exchanged travel stories. The couple treated her to a coffee. It would be three more hours before Dian would finish her "tour." She bought some freshly made biscottis off a local baker and skipped the hour-long wait she would have had to endure if she took the bus, preferring to walk back to the van instead.



Can you spot our van and Dian?



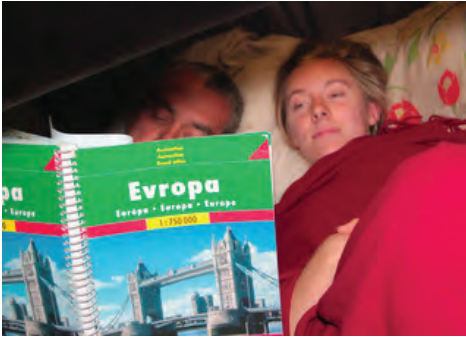
Trip photographer



Mr.

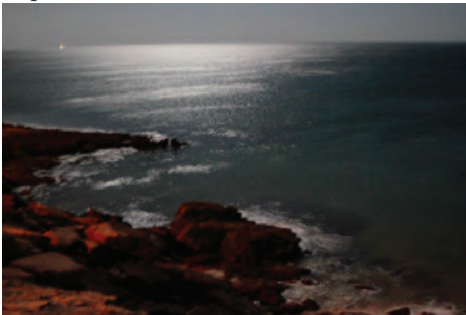
Concave Nicole finally finished writing out 18 POSTCARDS for her close friends. She figured she had not written too many of them in a while via snail mail, so it seemed like a good time to send something to ALL of them. Charles used the Wi-Fi at The Bull restaurant and bar, and regaled bartender Carly with all our stories.

Back at the homestead, Dian drew her own rendition of the rooster of Portugal for her mom's upcoming 83rd birthday. Nicole sorted her wintertime and summertime clothes and decided to donate a few items to the charity shop in town. We took the car in to do this, and while Dian turned in the clothes and Nicole walked to the post office to mail her postcards and buy more stamps, Charles found a pair of jeans to finally fit him, only these were six belt notches smaller than his others!



92

days left! We stopped at a rather upscale market, Baptista, to get some provisions, and on the way back to our little spot Nicole hopped out of the van with the computer to take advantage of the Wi-Fi at The Bull. She spoke with Carly some and sorted some pictures. We played Boggle that night (must we tell you who won?) and had a dinner of broccoli and sandwiches. Then we looked over the map-book and sketched out the remainder of our trip.



DAY 240 (2012-03-08 03:56)

Wednesday 7 March 2012



Let's start from the back and work toward the front. The back was a superb seafood dinner we treated ourselves to (47 euros) that will always have as a great memory of Portugal. We arrived at Marisqueira O Pardal at about 8 PM after getting lost. A local woman had recommended this restaurant and the fact that it was hard to find made us anticipate it all the more. When we walked through the door Carlos, the owner, greeted us. His wife cooks and they prepare the recipes from generations of family members' secrets. We ordered the seafood with rice and after a starter of olives, a basket of bread, a bowl of garlic carrots and another of octopus salad, we were sure we'd gotten lucky and found a winner. The huge kettle of lobster, mussels, scampi, and crab in the hot broth was intoxicating. The radio blared blues and Carlos' son revved his toy truck on the floor near our table. We were the only non-locals all evening. Finally after not a morsel of crab (which we cracked with

dental like instruments) or lobster could be stuffed into our stomachs, we took the left overs back to our free camp. Before we left, Carlos showed us the old ceramic pots covered in barnacles that were used to trap the octopus and he turned on the lights so we could see the crabs in the aquarium for the next guest's dinner.



No, this is not a shot from a dentist's office



fice



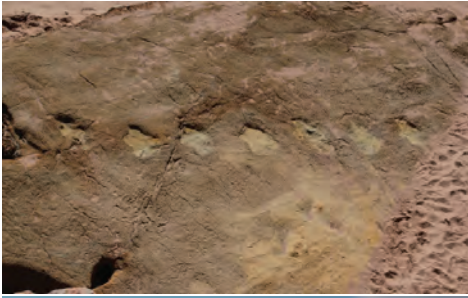
The wreckage



Our free-camping spot from the day beforeAt the start of our day we decided to leave our breathtakingly beautiful site and move on to Sagres - the very tip of Portugal. Driving out of Luz (pronounced Loosh, gotta love that sexy 'sh' the Portuguese have), we stopped in Salema. This used to be a thriving fishing village and was recommended by Rick Steves for its dinosaur footprints. When Dian said that Rick Steves wouldn't print it if they weren't authenticated, Charles ribbed her with, "Oh sure. Anything Pope Rick says is gospel." The town's camp area was a "naturist" (nudist camp) but we decided the cost would have made us lose our shirts so we moved on.



Salema



Dusting sand off the prints About 30 minutes later we were in Sagres and checking out another camp. No good. We drove into the little town on the cliffs with a lighthouse and fort and fell in love. Right next to the Atlantic were about 15 campers and being small we fit right in between Denmark and Finland. (In fact, we had taken the back spot but folks there encouraged us to move on up to the site with the better view.) This free camping area was quite international as opposed to other places we'd stayed at and everyone was running around in bathing suits or at least shorts and tank tops. The town had a huge surfing crowd and as we walked around we found a pleasant mixture of old and new shops.



The marina of Sagres





Charles stayed at the internet bar while Dian gave Nicole a mock job interview (for a position as a dog poop picker upper - no pay.) They went for a walk around town then chatted with our new neighbors who kindly showed us maps and places we might like to visit. With stomachs rumbling, Dian and Nicole drove over to pick Charles up for the odyssey of finding Pardal.



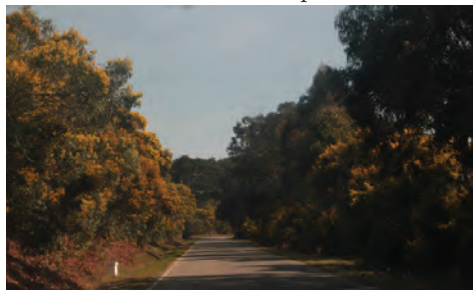
Thursday 8 March 2012



While Nicole and Charles slept in Dian took a walk around the charming Sagres. She found a woman whose husband had taken an incredible photo of a storm in the 1970s that Dian had chosen as a postcard. Up the road she found a hand painted blue-on-white Portuguese plate in a little grocery store.



We bade goodbye to the free camp under the bocci balls and headed north. By 5 PM we had arrived at Camping Milfontes where we opted to pay for electricity so we could use the Internet in our van. Charles walked around the town and brought back some groceries since there wasn't a store in the camp.



We had leftovers from our seafood dinner the night before, augmented with couscous. Nicole worked on her Hosteling International application, we each enjoyed hot showers, and

DAY 242 (2012-03-15 05:05)

Friday 9 March 2012



Dian painted postcards Another of Charles' articles was published in the Santa Monica Daily Press! Yay! Pine trees at Camping Milfontes mingled with the smell of the sea. The camp, established in 1977, had a good, funky vibe and it was a good place to be able to use the Internet and electricity in the comfort of our van. This allowed Nicole to write her application and accompanying essay for a Hosteling International grant for young travelers.



Lunch Dian walked into town, bought what she thought was sausage (turned out it was mixed with grains and oats which was quite delicious), tomatoes, and strawberries from a very determined farming woman, though nothing would ever compare to the pushy vendors in Morocco (Marrakech specifically). Upon giving her a free strawberry, the woman exclaimed, "Opa!" Walking out to nearby dunes, Dian saw an old fortress peppered with red Icelandic poppies.

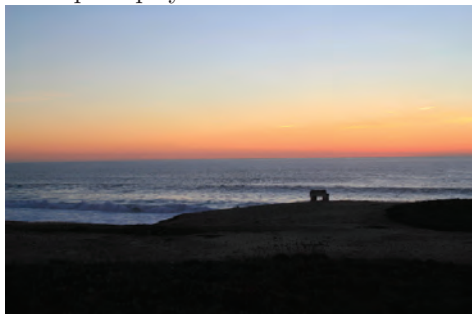
We had lunch outside by the closed camp restaurant, and although we invited the woman at reception to join us, for she was sitting nearby, she declined (but that

was before she saw what we were having). Dian cut her knuckles on the crust of the bread- now THAT'S crusty.

DAY 243 (2012-03-15 05:05)



Nicole finished her Hosteling International application and sent it off at 6 o'clock, then promptly thereafter we checked out.

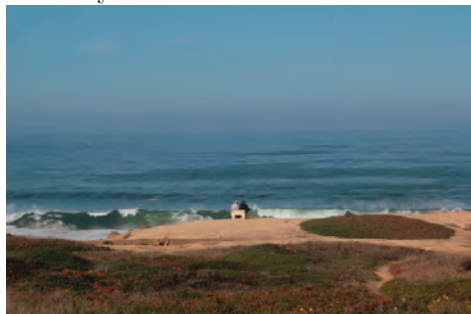


A short distance up the coast, we found a stunning free-camping at Porto Covo and found a spot just in time to see the sunset. Nicole made pesto pasta and Charles read "The Innocents Abroad" which had a very applicable and relatable chapter about keeping a travel journal that made us laugh.



Haze and reflection of a street lamp by a camper (or Close Encounters!)

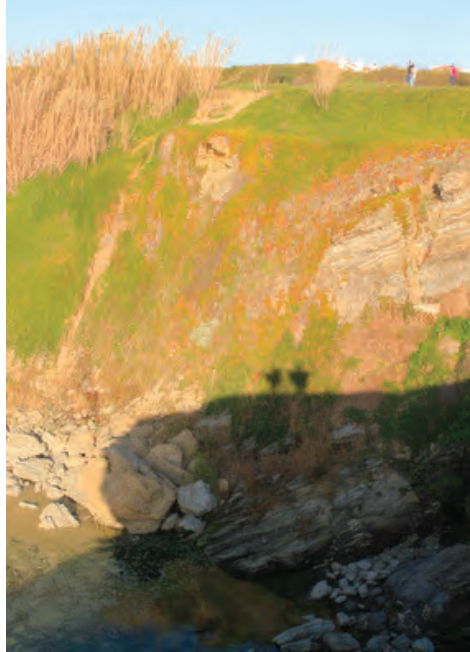
Saturday 10 March 2012



Up at 8 o'clock- what a view! Porto Covo, with its pristine coves had won our hearts. We spent the day painting, playing guitar, and watching men with wallpaper remover tools rush down at low tide to pry mussels off the rocks (legal?). Charles bought groceries and we played Scrabble in the afternoon.



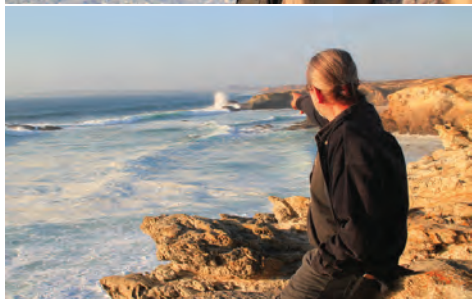
Run!



Our little van



Charles took Dian and Nicole to his favorite spot on the beach



Later, Nicole and Dian walked into town and had a coffee and coffee-cake on Vasco de Gama Boulevard. It would seem that Saturday was the day for families to promenade down the boulevard, and Nicole joked that after they reached the bottom of the hill there was a tram that took them back to the top.



Dian took some of the leftover pasta to eat on the bench by the million dollar view, but when she left the open container for but a moment a flock of seagulls nearly attacked her (shades of "The Birds"). Charles stayed back at the van after buying groceries in town, and made his favorite Greek salad for dinner. He then read aloud Mark Twain into the night.



DAY 244 (2012-03-15 05:05)

Sunday 11 March 2012 Beauty, and the Beast – Charles took advantage of another night of fitful sleep to steal out under the near-full moon and go down by the cliff edge (safely, carefully) to watch the waves crash and spray against the rocks below. Hard to get enough of this kind of nature’s power and beauty, and we were due to move on from Porto Covo the next morning. Come 8 AM he went down again for one last look in the daylight. Dian and Nicole got up soon after so we could get an early start to Lisbon.



On the scenic drive there, an ominous sign: our GPS was signaling it was low on power. That confirmed our fear that both cigarette lighter-type plugs on the front dashboard drew not from the car’s main battery but from the secondary battery which had been getting progressively weaker and not recharging from driving as it should, but then we hadn’t been driving much, just hanging out on various Portuguese beaches. But what kind of setup was that? No tap into the main battery? We thought we were screwed. The worst thing to lose, especially when driving into a big city, was the GPS. Cross country, maps will do, but European cities required GPS, one steel-nerved driver and two all-seeing, quick-witted navigators.



James GPS Bond got us to the first camp listed in Lisbon, but it didn't look good. Big fancy-tacky entrance with fountains and R-rated statue, uniformed guard, turnstiles to walk through to even check out the place. Hoity toity meant expensive which it was-35 bucks/28.50 euros. No way.



So on to the second/last camp in Lisbon. James just got us there before expiring but we were crestfallen to see it was not a camp but a closed office of a camp association. So we grabbed a good parking spot to think things out, across from a police station and a Lidl grocery store, and set out on our uppermost goal, a Wi-Fi place where Nicole could receive an important call/interview about Camp Kesem. We found one a few blocks away and she was able to get the call – later, because no one remembered the daylight savings time in CA that clicked in early that morning.



We had a few hours of daylight so we decided to splurge on a cab ride to a Rick Steves-recommended part of town, the Belem district, and that was a good decision. We packed it in: first to the imposing monastery of San Jeronimo, then across the street past the huge fountain to the Monument to the Discoveries, a towering white wedge with larger-than-life statues of Portugal's most famous explorers on either side (led of course by Vasco de Gama), and on our way to the famed old Belem Tower (the last thing departing sailor's could see of Portugal and the first thing that signaled they were home). We heard music from the park

and stopped for an unexpected treat, a band called Katharsis. We heard only two and a half songs but they impressed us with their skankin' mixed-up sound and mixed instrumentation which included trombones (as a lead instrument), accordion, flute, mucho varied percussion, sax, a turntable DJ, and yes a tuba! Of course they had a bass and guitar and a chick singer (that's not sexist but a shout-out to an LA musician friend of ours by that name) and best of all an electric didgeridoo. Seems each musician played at least three instruments as they switched around on each song. The main guy up front had a ponytail halfway down his back but the rest of his hair was an inch short – that's dedication to a style. We had to leave the area without sampling the famous pastry (200-year-old secret recipe) at Pasteis de Belem – the line was huge.



Monument to the Discover-



ies





A return cab ride got us back in time for Nicole's call, which seemed to go well. Her folks were proud of how calm, self-assured and downright charming she could be in pressure situations. Sebastian, our genius German mechanic, called us to consult on the battery situation. It was so nice to know we always had that lifeline. Having all overcome a lot of hurdles in the first half of the day, we were satisfied we packed so much into the last half, and retreated back to the van for sandwiches and an early bedtime.



DAY 245 (2012-03-15 05:06)

Monday 12 March 2012



We got up early at 7:30 to take full advantage of our second and last day in Lisbon. We had no idea the city was so hilly, and we figured the locals all must have buns of steel from walking them all the time.

We found free parking right near the water, and closer to most of the city's attractions. At a nearby cafe Charles and Dian had coffees and all three of us had the region's famous pastry, *pastel de Belem*. Although it came with a shaker of cinnamon, Dian asked to have them warmed up and with a shaker of powdered sugar, as per Rick Steves' recommendation. WOW.



A passage from Rick Steves' guidebook



We happened upon a famous shop that sold nothing but canned seafood products in cool old tins. We got some as souvenirs and gifts for friends. From there we wound our way up the hills in search of the castle of St. George. It was so great to see local women hanging up their laundry right next to touristy shops, and it gave a good vibe of the city and its attitude. The people we encountered were a good mixture of the old and the new.



Although we did not enter the castle grounds we treated ourselves to a taste of a famous drink in Lisbon, a cherry liqueur they call *ginginha* served in a chocolate cup. WOW, said Charles.





Photo by Dian





A woman doing her laundry right near the castle walls, who smiled for the camera



Nicole under a grey cloud of scouring pads



A traditional urinal?





On the way down the hill we stopped in a port shop and had a tasting with a very detailed explanation of the history and aspects of port by expert, Luis. We all learned a heck of a lot, including the fact that port matures excellently after being bottled, and for most varieties the longer you keep it, the better it will taste.



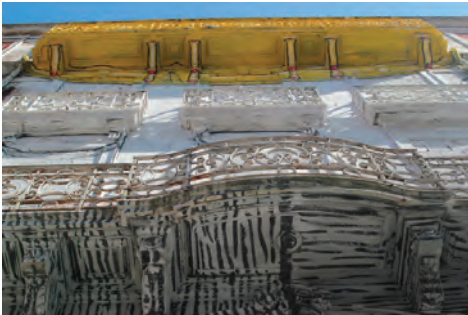
Nicole had to locate the large street art project she had glimpsed, which she recognized involved one of her favorite street artists, Blu (in collaboration with another artist, Os Gemeos). We found it again with her homing pigeon instinct, and she shot it at all angles while Charles searched in vain for a money exchange place to get rid of our Moroccan dirhams.

Dian took a walk around the art-laden building facades, and took a piece of cobblestone that had paint splatter on it from Blu. She gave it to Nicole as a memento, which Nicole loved.

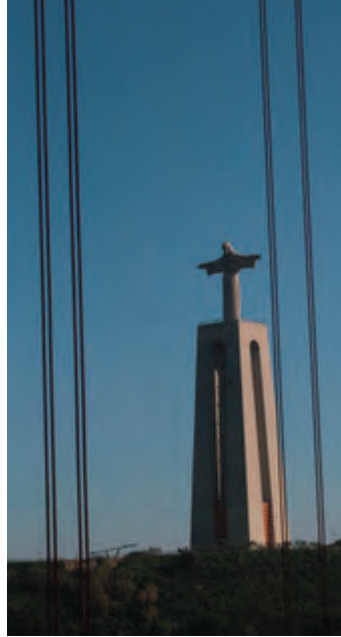
We left Lisbon and navigated through towns like Elvas and, upon Grandmother's recommendation, Evora, a pretty little city with ancient aqueducts and castle walls around unexpected corners. All three of us made shadow puppets on the passing road due to the odd angle of the sun.



Blu



Above where Dian took the rock



Entering the outskirts of Badajoz we pulled into a rather seedy looking gas station to see where we could stay, and parked under an awning. Nicole asked quietly, "Can we fit under this?" None of us had thought about the height of our car and the low awning until after we were almost through pulling in. Getting out, we saw we had but 2 INCHES to spare from hitting a metal pole. Yikes! We took this as an omen to leave, and finally decided upon a train station that had nice bathrooms and a cafe nearby. Not wanting to call attention to ourselves, we pulled all the shades and made beans and eggs, which Nicole had been craving intensely. She dutifully mashed all the black beans into a smooth consistency. Charles walked around the town's main street, got some more credit on our Spanish phone, but reported that there was a strange,

very long street with families about but really nothing open, not the kind of lively night life we'd gotten used to in Spain.



DAY 246 (2012-03-15 05:06)

Tuesday 13 March 2012



We were up at 8 after a good night's sleep in the Badajos train station parking lot. With a restroom available and a restaurant serving good coffee first thing in the morning we were set.



The Jara flower



Sheep and a shoe-heap. You could hear their bells tinkle in the stillness of the countryside. Heading to the town where Charles grew up, no wait a minute, that's Albuquerque with one "r" not Alburquerque, Spain, we drove through rolling fields dotted with wild flowers and from time to time a big grove of eucalyptus. We pulled into the sister city to New Mexico's about a quarter to 10 and went directly to the tourism office below the main square. There we introduced ourselves to Francisco who seemed pleased that we had made the journey and immediately presented us with a beautiful poster of the castle that towered over Alburquerque. With the information that it would be impossible to interview the mayor since he had just embarked on a WALK TO MADRID protesting some local environmental issues, Charles interviewed Francisco instead for a magazine piece. He turned out to be a wealth of information about the town's history, and after an hour we thanked him and left to explore.



Traffic jam?? In a city of just under 7000???



We finally put the Amoeba sticker on - Peace Through Music



Downtown Albuquerque



Francisco and us (note the mug from the NM city)



Inside the tourism office



Enjoying our local pastries in the town squareThe *castillo* had a view of the plains below that stretched for many miles and it was easy to see why it was a strategic stronghold for the Muslims, Jews and Christians over the centuries. We were told that the part where the gigantic cranes were working adjacent to the castle on a new hotel would be off limits but we were more than satisfied with the castle towers and ramparts we had all to ourselves.



Climbing the castle wall



Prince

Charles



The potted geraniums reminded us of Uncle Tim. When we wound down through the old part of town we asked where a good restaurant was to have lunch. A wizened old woman said emphatically, "El Castillo!" so that is where we ate. Earlier we'd sampled some local pastries and doughnuts, but getting down to business was not hard with such a delicious menu hand written in Spanish. The restaurant owner, Raphael, said we could have our choice of two courses on the menu plus a drink and dessert for nine euros. We ate till we were stuffed and took the rest back to the van. While we were at the restaurant we charged up our computer and checked e-mails.



The mayor, Angel, on local television! Finally we said goodbye to Albuquerque, filled up with diesel (it was much cheaper in Spain) and headed back to Portugal (again, no border stations). With the autostrada tolls adding up we were glad to see the sign for Fatima around 6 PM and pulled off to find free parking. A nun gave us the go ahead to park in front of the mall where her religious articles shop was - would she lie? Charles made friends with Tony who owned the Internet cafe while Dian made dinner by headlamp and Nicole made us laugh.



Pork and cabbage stew



Cream of squash soup



String beans, eggs and shrimp



Potatoes and garlic fish



Pork chops, potatoes and salad



Fried chicken (very lemony!), potatoes and salad
 All that plus dessert!



Guess where this view is from? A gas station!



We thought of Aunt Monica when we came upon these blue bonnets

DAY 247 (2012-03-15 05:06)

Wednesday 14 March 2012



Even though Portuguese Tony of Jersey stayed open till nearly 1 AM, Charles was up at 7 to get us all to the first mass in the basilica at Fatima. It was a small gathering we thought, even for off season. Just for a lark, Charles made sure he wore his Rolling Stones tongue t-shirt (Sympathy for the Devil), under his outside shirt of course.

The approach was impressive, with the towering white basilica built in the '30s at the far end of a huge square with a tall pedestal and gold statue of Christ (surrounded by shrubbery with four fountains dispensing holy water) near the front and a chapel off to the left, where the three children reportedly saw the apparition of Mary. The story goes that they saw her first on the spot where the basilica is, where they would ordinarily pray the rosary while tending their sheep, but the light was so bright they ran away, thinking it was lightning, the vision appeared in front of them and lit up the area again, and this time they stopped and listened. We think we've got that right... And the rest is history.

Off by the outdoor chapel was a large curved area where people could light candles

(Charles lit one for his mom, who sometimes went to Our Lady of Fatima Church in Albuquerque when not at Our Lady of the Assumption, and for his pop, who was always faithful about getting his family to mass, on time, every Sunday, even though he never got to go to the Baptist church he was brought up in because they said any man who worked in the liquor business was not worthy, hmpff, you know what we think about that!). There were big candles and all bent over and melted together, quite a sight.

Inside the basilica we noticed that all the stained glass windows were of Mary, till you got to the last two with the holy family on one side and Mary and an adult Jesus on the other. The backdrop art behind the altar was also interesting, sort of a black and white rendering of the apparition with an angel and the three children praying to Mary but also a bishop off to the side. Huh? No politics there, nope.



Photo by Charles On the way back to the car Dian had the idea of buying one of the small plastic cups with a hole in the bottom for a candle and using it to carry some holy water back to the van, by wrapping plastic around her finger and jamming it in the hole but it all leaked out before she got back to the van. Charles' meaty finger, however, was a perfect fit and even though it was turning various shades of purple he got the whole cupful of water back intact. A miracle.



Photo by Charles



Photo by Charles

So then we'd seen Fatima and attended mass and lit candles and carried holy water and headed off for a shrine to a different kind of ecstasy, Port. Back at the van, Charles ran off and came back with hot coffees and warm croissants on a tray from the nearby cafe. When they don't have take-away cups they always insist you take their good china without a thought that's the last they might ever see of it. It just didn't work that way. Thank God.



Without our (t)rusty GPS we did quite well mapping it (Charles had always loved maps), we took a small construction detour in a small town, Batalha, and went around the corner and Bam! There stood one of the biggest, most impressive cathedrals we'd ever seen, wedged between a very modest plaza, a pretty but very small tower sculpture in a park, and a freeway. Who knew? We always savored lucky accidents because we knew we'd be driving past so much since it was impossible to research every possible route we could take and what was worth seeing. We thought we could, but the reality was otherwise. If you know you're going to Madrid and Rome next month, you can know almost everything. If it's

Europe and north Africa, itinerary unknown, there's only so much you can do. We'll let the photos speak more eloquently for the cathedral, the monastery of Maria de Vitorio. Huge, ornate, gorgeous, buttresses flying everywhere, blackened and yellowed with time (from 1386), best gargoyles we'd seen yet, an unforgettable unfinished chapel which Nicole discovered through an inconspicuous side door where we lingered a long time. It seemed every country in Europe was littered with cathedrals, castles, ruins and stunning modern architecture one would never suspect in such little towns.



Photo by Charles

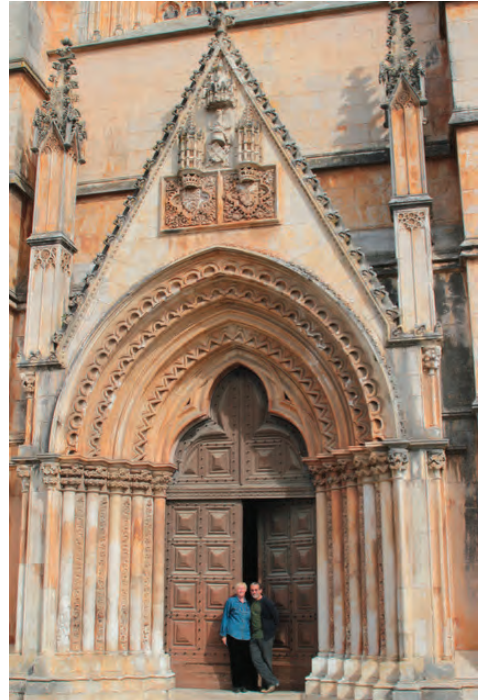


Photo by Charles



Old stone blocks with symbols on them identified influential families who had donated to the church.

Photo by Charles





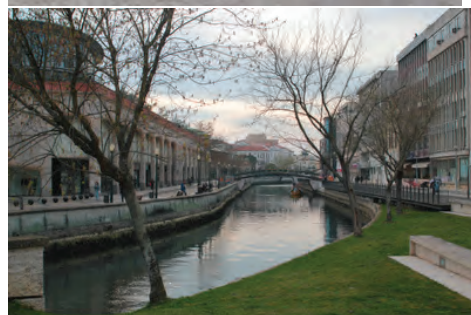
We popped into a couple of the tourist shops nearby and one was very interesting, filled with authentic local handmade crafts at good prices that we had to resist. A smiling woman there demonstrated her knotting method on a shawl in progress, but when a tour bus unloaded in front of her shop, boom! all business, later gator.

Photo by Dian



One more intentional detour, to the coastal town of Nazare, where we'd been told some of the women still wore the traditional seven layers of skirts, from the days when it signaled they were waiting for their sailor boys to return. We found a couple, older women, one Nicole snapped from behind and the other, when asked, smilingly posed for a photo. Ham sandwiches by Dian for the road for lunch, so full and falling apart that Nicole kept hers together with a rubber band!





Another slight "wrong" turn exposed another fantastic castle, as well-preserved, it seemed, as the one in Alburquerque (but that one was still our favorite). We drove through Coimbra, the town of the famous, historically important Henry the Navigator (actually, he did more enabling than navigating) where we saw a pretty river and nice architecture,

then on to Aveiro, where we stopped briefly but loved it! Art everywhere, whimsical sculptures even on traffic islands, colorful boats, and canals! We thought we were back in Venice (IT or CA). By the time we got near Porto James GPS Bond was slightly revived, enough to show us where a camp was, and Nicole wisely snapped a shot of his directions on her camera. Camp Madelena was a little pricey for having showers very dicey (we preferred adjustable handles for the hot water instead of having to hit a button every 15 secs – were we asking too much? yes, sometimes, like at Camp Madelena) and their Wi-Fi was only available in one cold, empty building, but there were few camps in that part of Portugal so we jumped on it. Inside reception, Luis was a delightful young man full of smiles and great advice on Porto and the best free tourist map for a city we'd seen yet. (Interesting, the skills we'd acquired...)

DAY 248 (2012-03-15 05:07)

Thursday 15 March 2012



What a sight for sore eyes! It had been below 8 forever. Charles took the car in to a mechanic, sans GPS, to try and get the battery either charged or replaced, we weren't sure what the problem really was. He called Sebastian for a little advice, and he diagnosed the problem as being in the relay, which fortunately, the mechanics agreed with. Charles was offered free coffee from the garage's machine by a friendly worker, and he sipped gratefully (truly the way to her parents' hearts, Nicole believed).



Near this intersection there was a swan sitting in the middle of the road. We drove slowly past it, and saw another person stop to carry it out of harm's way.



The music build-



ing



Back at Camping Madalena Nicole and Dian worked tirelessly on catching the blog up with words and pictures. They took showers, which were mediocre at best, but at least it did the trick. We also discovered some mosquito bites (that time already??), but hey, we were camping.

Charles came back, and we had ham and cheese sandwiches before our venture into Port. Driving through that city, our happy sightseeing was cut short by the new sounds the car was making. We tried our best to enjoy the great architecture of the old fort, the new music building and more, but we had to cut our excursion short to get back the the mechanics before they closed.

We got there just in time, but not in enough time to fix the car. They said to come back at 9 the next morning. Great, so now where would we sleep? We drove back to our Madalena camp and explained our situation to Luis, who agreed to let us stay in the parking lot and use the Wi-Fi and restrooms, free of charge (but this was to be our secret).



fire somewhere caused a vibrant sunset.

DAY 249 (2012-03-15 05:07)

Friday 16 March 2012



Street art on the way to the mechanic



We were so lucky to have the protection of our good old Camp Madelena without having to pay to get in. The security guard watched over us (apparently) in the parking lot. We left at 9 AM and after getting a bit lost we went back to Auto Mechanica Madalena where we had our van's thumping and rattling noises assessed. While we waited Dian painted a "thanks for the service" sign which included the company's logo. When we presented it to the owner he seemed pleased. After tightening the clutch and the brackets

on our muffler, putting in two new fan belts and connecting the wires for our back up light, we paid the bill and left for our last visit to Porto.

It was so much fun to visit the caves in Gaia where the port wine houses age that good stuff. We hiked around the river area and climbed up to the top level of one of four bridges connecting the two cities, where we had a fantastic view of all of Port and Gaia, including the monastery and its ancient walls.



Krohn Port House In and around Gaia:





The ladder (we assumed) workers took to climb to the underbelly of the bridge. While Dian opted to cross on the bottom walkway of the bridge, Charles and Nicole preferred to take the high road and cross on top. After a long hike straight uphill, and the promise of much more windy trekking, they went back down and crossed the same way Dian had. She was surprised to see them so soon but they thought they had made the right choice. Port side:





One of the "tourism police" stationed around the city of Port



Dian beckoning Charles and Nicole into the antique shop

When we climbed down the steep hills to the main street after a couple of wine tastings we were feeling no pain! An antique store sold Charles some cool old coins and an old 45 of John Entwistle. While we were there he gave us the last of his bottle of 1965 port, a rare treat none of us would forget.

The best part of the day though was when we walked into Sonia's Port House. We were on a quest for a 1952 bottle of port for Dian's brother Pat's 60th but everyone said it was a bad year (except for your birth, Pat.) We decided to buy a selection of ports and Sonia

let us taste the truffles made of chocolate and port. The deal was sealed. We had to buy a box and promise her and her daughter Erica we would be sure to keep them cool and only have one while sipping our tawny and ruby ports.

When we got back to the beach we weren't able to see ANY other campers so we pulled up next to a campground and Luis, the camp representative said we could sleep on the adjacent street while his security guard kept an eye on our van. So we started and ended the day the same way.



Sandeman

Mr.

DAY 250 (2012-03-15 05:07)

Saturday 17 March 2012

We all slept well and awoke well, no bruises from pinches, because we all slept in something green. Some of us were disappointed at being denied our yearly St. Paddy's skin tweak.



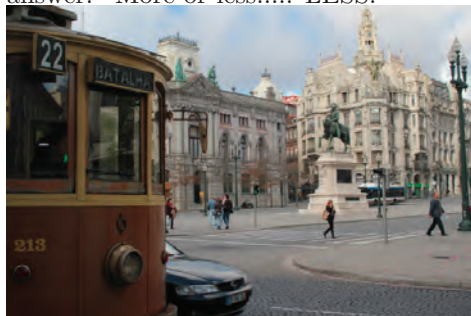
Then as we were packing up we discovered our precious tins of tuna, mackerel and sardines with the too-cool retro packaging were soaked in oil – one had sprung a leak. Sadness, and a big mess to clean up. But eventually we were ready to leave the Port area and travel north to the Spanish border and the legendary Santiago de Compostela.

The route lay through the middle of Porto, and Charles programmed a stop at the train station, a sight recommended by several. It was worth it. The former convent had been decorated floor to high ceiling with huge tile (typically blue) with scenes of the history of Portugal. Bonus: Charles noticed an exchange office in the corner, and they did something dozens of large and small banks and other financial institutions wouldn't do: exchanged our leftover Moroccan dirhams, for euros, and at a good rate.



Having secured a good parking spot in the middle of the city we decided to venture up

the street, find a bakery and see what we could see. We soon saw the tallest tower of Port, a landmark, and the church attached. Plus, a great bakery where we paused to eat at a table in the window with our coffees, pizza slices and ham and cheese pastry thingies. On first entering Dian asked the woman behind the counter if she spoke English. We loved her answer: "More or less..... LESS!"



We knew we were saying goodbye to the Portugal we loved as we drove north through forests, low mountains and vary scattered rural houses in very small towns. Across the border we lost an hour (Portugal's in its own time zone) and pulled into Santiago de Compostela around 6 PM. We passed a sign for a campsite but it was way overpriced (\$35/28 Euros) – is that any way to treat pilgrims? So despite encroaching darkness we headed straight for the center of town.



A paperboy and a journal-



ist

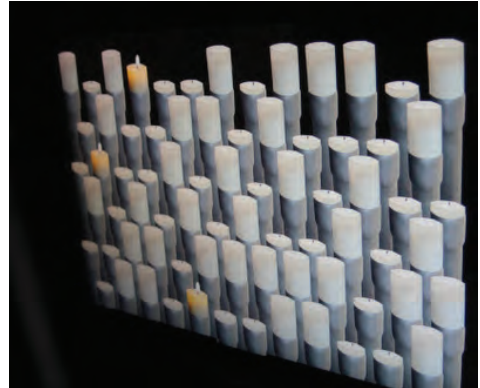


The wind sock shows how strong the gusts were, particularly difficult with our tall van.





Pilgrims laying down after reaching their final destination Our initial impression of this famed cathedral couldn't have been more favorable: as we walked toward it Nicole said, "I think I hear bagpipes," and she wasn't losing it, she was almost right, as we turned a corner and were floored by the looming facade of the cathedral we all heard the music and went closer, to an underpass to the left, to see a young man playing the Ullean pipes, the sound echoing and floating over the vast square. Don't forget, it was St. Patrick's Day. Was that guy there every day or just once a year?

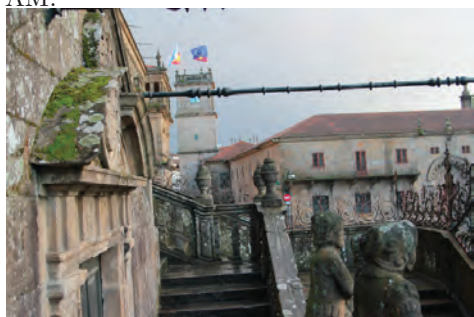


Really? Not even electronic candles, but digital ones? Our friend Don in Valencia, on recommending we stop there, said "I'm not real mystical/mythical but I actually got the feeling a couple times that if/when Atlantis was discov-

ered, it would sort of look like the Cathedral.” We all agreed there was something different about the place and took our time exploring inside and out.

Christians come here via a month-long walking trail across Spain. It’s considered by many the most important Christian pilgrimage site after Jerusalem and Rome. The Apostle James was entombed there (add St. Peter in the Vatican and we only had 10 more Apostles to find!) We were able to go down to the tomb under the altar while mass was being said, also to climb stairs above to hug the back of a large gilt backpiece of the altar – very unusual for that to be allowed during mass we thought. We didn’t really get to see the rest of the town, but the university there is 500 years old and also dominates the city life. It was also the furthest Iberian outpost of the Roman empire; the road ended there.

When we finally got our fill and lots of photos we emerged into the dark – we hated to not be settled into our place for the night by dark. Wandering into the high-end hotel nearby, Dian asked the concierge if he could recommend a place for us to park, and amazingly he was the right guy to ask as he directed us to a large open lot where bus drivers parked for the night. Well-lit, in the open and secure with cameras, it cost only three euros for overnight parking as long as we vacated by 8 AM.



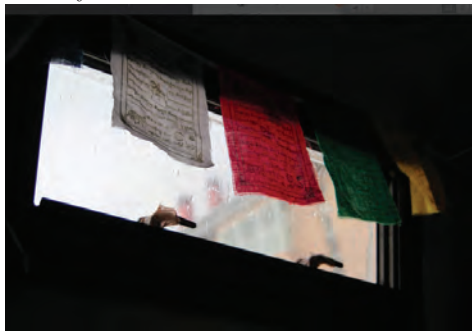
Nearby was almost nothing, only two bar-restaurants open, one packed and noisy but the other a perfect Wi-Fi hangout for the night, open till 2. Charles took advantage and celebrated St. Patrick’s Day in Galicia province, one of the Seven Celtic Nations, with a shot of Jameson’s. The topper was a Facebook communication from a Galician ex-pat in DC who hipped him to the trailer of the Emilio Estevez-Martin Sheen movie “The Way,” coming 13 May, all about Santiago de Compostela. We would definitely look forward to seeing it.



An
improvised rain shield to get from the bar to
the van

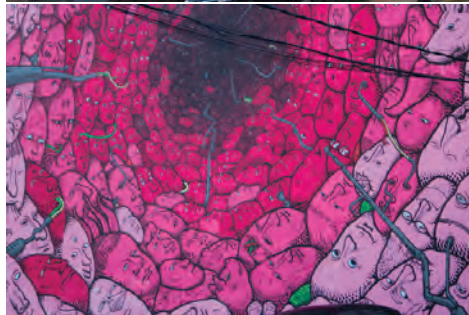
DAY 251 (2012-03-21 03:30)

Sunday 18 March 2012



We were up before 8 to exit our parking area so we wouldn't have to pay for an additional day. It rained and even hailed as we drove through the pilgrimage-route towns.

We found some good street art (always a bonus) and were driving through the Galicia region when we stopped to eat at a secluded beach near the town of Espasante. The setting was gorgeous, though there was still a nip in the air, with camelia bushes in full bloom and even a few cork trees. Charles brought coffee to the car in the restaurant's cups and saucers, and Dian made a scrumptious lunch of garlic and onion fried potatoes with a little touch of mayo, and mackerel.



After lunch we walked down to the beach where Nicole found clay seeping out of the ground. She collected some with the thought of sculpting it later. Dian found slate,

driftwood, cork, and shark egg sacks.



Shark egg on a slab of slate



Nicole's

clay



Dian's finds Driving toward Viveiro, we started hearing a weird sound coming from the back of the van. Not again! We called our guru Sebastian and he recommended driving the van up on a curb and tightening screws on the muffler, which Charles did. Meanwhile Dian walked into town and bought a ham and cheese pastry for dinner and a little Daisy Duck candle. We had port wine and listened to The Innocents Abroad as we fell

asleep next to the river and the flow of traffic. **DAY 252 (2012-03-21 03:31)**



Monday 19 March 2012

After getting up and buying groceries we were told by a clerk that the best mechanic in Viveiro was the Ford garage not 500 meters away. We took the car up the hill to the garage and after waiting about 25 minutes we were seen by the boss. We joked that for every inch our car went up on the hydraulic lift we would be charged accordingly.

We thought the rattle from when we shifted came from the muffler bracket being incorrectly mounted, but instead they found the muffler pipe had become complete detached from the underside of the car. It was interesting to see the underbelly of our van, and after his coworker finished welding, he took it for a test drive with us. During the test drive we heard that same sound coming from the right rear tire.

Back at the garage he took the wheel off and tightened it, and lo and behold, the sound was gone. All this for 24 Euros. Dian and Nicole sang "Las Mananitas" for the woman in the office who very much appreciated it.





ing lot of the restaurant/hotel.

Sun-

shine broke through the grey clouds and feeling buoyed up by the inexpensive fix, we stopped at an antique store and enjoyed perusing the unusual artifacts of the area.

Following a sign to a camp we went down to what Charles dubbed the "rocky-sucky" beach because of the "really loud sound" the rocks made as they were pulled back down into the surf. When we left we asked a man where the camp was, and as he watched us take the wrong turn we saw him jump into his own car to shepherd us to the campsite. In the rain. There was no one there, however, and a sign said "make yourself at home, we'll take your information later." But instead of waiting around we crossed the street to see if the restaurant there had Internet. It did, so we checked our e-mail and ordered a couple of coffees. When Dian pointed to the baby bottle full of warm milk that the bartender had sitting on the bar for her little girl (Diana), she indicated she wanted one for *her* little daughter. She did not expect to actually get this, but Nicole proudly enjoyed it just the same.

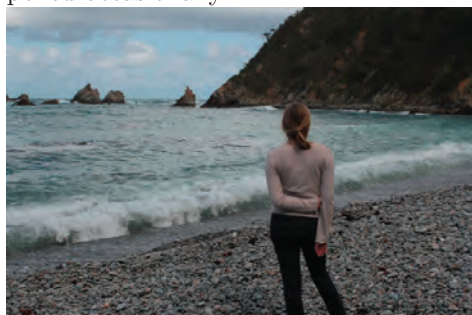
We had brussel sprouts, soup and sandwiches, plus a surprise desert of homemade bread pudding and ice cream Dian had prepared. With their blessing, we spent the night in the park-

DAY 253 (2012-03-21 03:31)

Tuesday 20 March 2012



We got up at 8:30 for the restaurant opening and for Wi-Fi and cafe con leche. No good email news, pshaw. Bright sunny morning, rain over? Dian gave presents to the owners, a 20th Century Fox pin to mama Monica and a Hollywood pin to her mama Ana, who both promptly and proudly put them on. We waved goodbye and started up the road. Whoa! Where was Dian's red book? It had so much info from our whole trip it had become a vital document so we swung around and headed back, but Charles soon found it stashed in an unlikely crevice in the van. How we could ever misplace something in that small space was a mystery, but it happened occasionally.





Stopped at a beach

We programmed our GPS for the only camp we could locate in the area, only 23 km away, but after 15 we saw a sign for another camp so we decided to check it out. The road it pointed down took us to the very small fishing town of Vega. You'd never know it was there from the main road just up the hill. We drove right by the very small camp which gave us a chance to drive all the way down to the port and see what the place was like, and winding our way back through narrow streets, we found the camp. Tiny, funky-nice, but with Wi-Fi in the bar till late hours, hot showers, washing machine (– usually it was 3-7 euros/\$4-10, for one mini-load, we did two and took advantage of the warm sun for drying), and only 13 euros a night – we were in! It didn't take long for the ladies to take advantage of those showers, Charles took his a little later. The proprietor saw we were parked at a bit of a slope and brought out a balancing wedge and some boards for the other tire and viola! We were level. Very kind gesture.



We decided to go looking for some seafood in the fishin' town, didn't succeed, but again stumbled onto a find. The one restaurant everyone recommended didn't open for dinner till 9 and it was only 7:30 plus they were higher priced than we wanted, and the other place had no seafood, just pizza and *hambourgesas*, not what we wanted. But on the way back we saw an open door to a very interesting-looking little building labeled Casino Teatro. Dian, as usual, urged the more hesitant Charles and Nicole to check it out, so we went up a couple flights of dark wooden stairs till reaching a door where we could hear voices, knocked three times until someone answered and let us in.



side of casino



In-



SculptingWe were surprised to see a handful of people in a cozy little bar on the third floor, and after a few curious stares they welcomed us. We explained in our best Español that we were visiting for the first time from Estados Unidos and they started turning on lights for us and the gentleman who opened the door, Jorge Luis (we *think*, after asking twice – sorry dude, your accent was thick), gave us a complete tour of this art deco-ish community center/theater built in 1931 by a famous architect, with funds from town citizens forced to emigrate for work who sent back money to keep culture alive at home.



He took us backstage and under the stage and up to the balconies and into the green rooms and onto the raked stage with the trap door in front for a prompter. The seats were deep crimson velvet, and all could be stashed below the stage to open it up for dancing, which our guide was always willing to accent with one hand to his stomach, the other held high and a few steps added for emphasis. We also met the president of the theatrical society, who offered warm smiles and handshakes. All in all a very professional setup you'd never expect to find in such a small community. Not a museum-quality art deco find, but as we first entered Dian said, "I don't expect it to be the KiMo" – referencing the stunning Native American-style art deco theater in downtown Albuquerque (the NM one).



Life in a small spaceWe were delighted with our discovery and the warm hospitality, charmed by the townspeople's justifiable pride and wished we could see a production there. Every Easter they've had a noteworthy model ship exhibition, but we would just miss it. We headed back into the now-cold night and back up the hill to our cozy little camper-van home where Dian whipped up a warming dinner of noodles and soup. Life was good.

DAY 254 (2012-03-29 09:05)

Wednesday 21 March 2012



Charles asked if the camp staff had any fresh bread for sale, as some have, but this was not the case. We were happily surprised then when camp owner Begoña hand delivered us bread from somewhere in town! We decided we would stay another night to catch up on blogs, use the good hot showers, Wi-Fi and toilet paper! (Shocked as you might be, we really came to appreciate bathrooms with simple amenities like paper towels, soap and yes, TP).



Puerto del Vega

Eggs were cooking while Dian gave Nicole a "cockney cooking class," wherein she asked Nicole what two things could make anyone like any dish, to which she replied, "sugar an' onions!"



Octopi Dian and Nicole walked into town, bought strawberries, and explored tiny residential streets. They visited the fish market (already closed, save for a few men still weighing fish and LIVE octopi that Nicole and Dian feared were in danger of sliding out of their boxes). They went through the pretty manicured park to the *maravilloso* museum of Puerto del Vega. They were quite impressed with the state of the art exhibits on display, showing old relics from the area and telling all about the town's history. They were greeted by the same man who had shown them the Casino the night before, and he explained that although many people had left the town for the big city, they were still loyal to their home and put a lot of money into the museum.





Where was the last small town museum you visited that had video and HOLOGRAM accompaniment?



We were reminded of the historic Muller House, where Dian's mom volunteers in San Pedro.



Madreña-shoes in various stages



Look familiar?



Back at Camp Ancla we had a meat and cheese platter from the restaurant bar, and Jose, the other camp owner, demonstrated the tradition of pouring a regional alcoholic apple drink high above the glass to make it bubble. Dian brought in the guitar and made a little music with Jose and Begoña. We talked to Grandmother and Grandad afterwards and Nicole and Dian did a few

paintings, and Nicole sculpted a rabbit from the clay she had found on a beach.



The pinball wizard



It has been brought to our attention by some blog followers that we post too many food photos. Tough.

Thursday 22 March 2012

We had some of the oatmeal cousin Roos had sent along. Nicole chased Dian around the trailers yelling "YOU" in an accusatory tone because Dian had remarked that Nicole didn't even know how to make oatmeal. Nicole defended herself by reminding Dian she had to pour the boiling water into the packets - "We didn't even have BOWLS when I went to camp!"



Thinking of Jim. Then the sad news. Charles learned of his younger cousin Jim's passing. We were all in shock and then deep sadness. A wonderful father and grandfather, Jim was taken quickly from an apparent heart attack. We knew we couldn't be with the family at his funeral but Charles wrote a moving piece about his and Jim's childhood together which the family asked to read at the service. The outcome of a black time is the light in which everything seems bathed thereafter. For the rest of the day we cherished each other and our journey with Jim never far from our thoughts. Charles and Dian went into the next town for the weekly farmers market where Dian was told a man still made and sold *madrenas* - the wooden shoes she and Nicole had seen in the museum and on the feet of camp owner, Jose while he watered. Sure enough the stall was found and with the helpful advice of passersby, Dian got a pair extra large so she could keep a soft pair of sock/slippers on as well. The market offered everything in the way of fruits and vegetables and they bought some apples, bananas, bell peppers and bread. As they were leaving they bought on impulse a small begonia plant for camp owner, Begoña.



Jose, Dian, Charles, Nicole and Begoña



After presenting her with the gift we settled up our bill and started down the driveway. Just as we approached the gate, she ran towards us with Dian's red poncho which had been left on a chair in the dining hall. As we continued along the Spanish coast (where we kept seeing signs for the pilgrim path to the cathedral in Santiago), we kept an eye out for a place to get Internet and sleep. Around dusk we pulled into an area with lots of trucks and buses and it was there that we had Charles' stuffed chiles. YUM! Unfortunately a group of people chose our van to stand in front of after we had made up our beds so we had to wait till they left before we could get to sleep. While peeking at them through the curtain Dian and Nicole couldn't stop laughing that the couple posing for a photo right in front would zoom in on the shot

later and see our eyes gleaming behind them. **DAY 256** (2012-03-29 09:06)



Friday 23 March 2012



Once a seminary, now a university. At one point all the big government officials of Spain convened there and for that day it was "the center of Spain."



The Marquesa's houseWe woke up and found the parking lot nearly empty, but soon two busloads of high school students drove in. Charles was in the restaurant already reading a beautiful response by Zack Andrews regarding his dad's passing. We were all moved.



Gaudi house



We drove to the fantastic town of Comilla that we discovered by accident. Having decided to check our map we pulled over (for the umpteenth time) and saw perched on a hill the university/seminary. That was enough to intrigue us but we were floored when we saw the Marquesa's house and her buddy Antonio Gaudi's place next door. We could see by the many tourists that this was a destination worth spending some time at. Happily, we were allowed in to the Marquesa's house even though the visiting hours were in a half hour. The interior was beautifully kept up. We exited and walked down the lane to the sunflower ceramic clad Gaudi residence (it was never established whether he visited it but he DEFINITELY designed it).



Finally we went to the farmers market and bought a stinky, moldy cheese. The long sought after scarf was also procured for Charles and when we got to the visitors office Natalia was quite helpful and showed us the university/seminary in photos but we decided not to walk through it. Dian picked up a free novel at the library and Charles bought a bookmark. Comilla was an amazing find and we thanked our lucky stars for the liesure we had to explore unexpected goldmines. After a picnic in Ubiarco overlooking a hermits chapel built into a cave, we passed a cemetery in Boo. Not that scary. The large city of Santander was passed through quickly but we gazed back at it across the bay from Tranquilo Beach. The Bailey's style liqueur we sampled in a little shop in Loredo whet our appetite for the MEXICAN FEAST Nicole made later when we finally settled into a cul de sac overlooking the sea near Langre.



Made us think of our friend Ellyn Maybe Since the only other van in the area was a VW, we went over to say hello and ask if the place was safe. The first words out of Roman and Eva's mouths were, "We're Austrian. Do you speak English?" (Their van had Espana plates). We said, "We're Americans. Our van is from Germany, not us." After that they told us they had slept there peacefully the past two nights and we should feel safe. So we did.





Lunch spot!



Hermit's chapel



Photo by Charles



Photo by Charles



Photo by Dian

DAY 257 (2012-03-29 09:06)

Saturday 24 March 2012



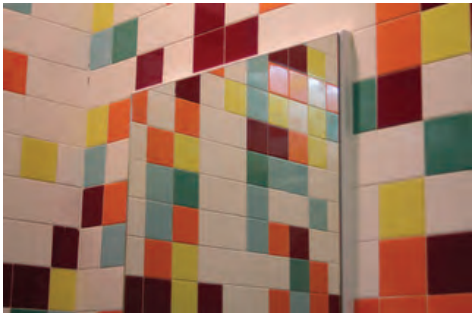
Nicole, Eva, Roman, Charles and Dian



Eva and Roman joined us for coffee in the morning, and after we bade them farewell they coasted down the hill, (the only way they thought the van would start). Shortly afterwards we met a woman from Basque country who gave us a few tips on the area and was very helpful. We did a bit of beach combing, art and walking around before leaving.

A lunch in the little town of Langre was just the pit stop we needed before going into Bilbao. The town had churches that must have been the inspiration for many of the early missions in California. We saw eagles flying and more pilgrims with shells on their

packs as we drove. We took a toll road in order to save some time, but couldn't understand why our GPS was going haywire until the worker at the tollbooth explained that it was a brand new road and that no GPS had it in their systems yet. We trembled slightly as he calculated what our fee was, then laughed when we saw it was only €55 cents!

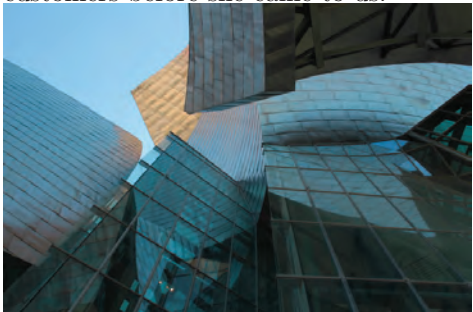


Even the bathroom tiles make a statement. After touring the museum for a few hours we felt sufficiently stuffed with culture, but our stomachs were another matter. We went into a Subway/Ben and Jerry's to get sandwiches, and Nicole gave in and bought a banana split. We all really had to hound the lady on duty because she kept making "mistakes" on our price, and favored all other customers before she came to us.



couple

We found a great parking spot only available to non-Guggenheim employees on Saturdays and walked into the museum. Charles got in for free with his press pass, and Nicole and Dian got discounts and free audio tours with their student and teacher cards respectively. The woman at the front desk was pleased to hear we lived near some of Frank Gehry's most famous buildings, in California.





Jeff Koons' "Flowers"



Jeff Koons' "Puppy"





The view coming into the Guggenheim area



Finishing our sandwiches we ran to the Belles Artes museum which had been recommended to us by a few people as the not-so-flashy museum of Bilbao, but one with a lot of great pieces of art. They were right, although by the time we walked there (only a five minute walk) they were 25 minutes from closing, and as the ladies at the front desk said shrugging their shoulders in an unconfident way, "You'll have to run if you want to see it all." Challenge accepted. Charles got in for free again, and so did Dian, and Nicole got a discount, so we decided to go for it. We saw THE WHOLE THING and Nicole even had

time to write down some artists and pieces to look up later.

As if that wasn't enough we RAN back for the fire artpiece exhibited every night in the water surrounding the Guggenheim. It went on every five minutes from 8:00 to 8:30, and we nearly jumped out of our skin every time it started up because it was so loud. We were shooting some photos when we heard a voice say, "You can't make a photo here!" It was Roman! He and Eva were meeting a friend there, and we had a chance to say goodbye to them again and wish them a good ride back to Austria, and they wished us a good rest of our trip.

We spent the night in the same parking spot, and Charles went to a nearby Internet cafe and worked a while longer.



Outside

Belles

Artes



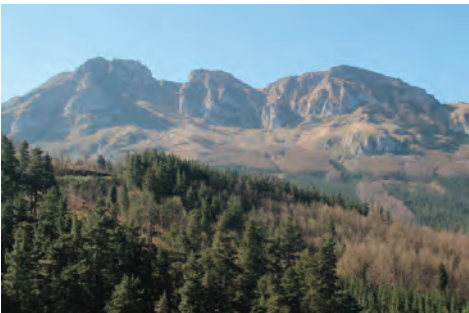
Sunday 25 March 2012



What can you do about loud revelers through the night when you're parked in a public place? Nothing. The youths who were partying right outside our van didn't seem threatening just LOUD! We looked out at the beautiful fountain of a female holding a lyre not 500 meters from the mightily impressive Frank Geary Guggenheim Museum. All was quiet in the morning except for the splashing of the fountain water as we stowed and began our QUEST FOR YLIZALITURRI. This was the family name of Dian's sister in law and we were hoping to see the town her mother's basque family hailed from.



Lunch spot



We drove inland bidding a fond farewell to

Bilbao. The mountainous region we drove through was a perfect place to pull over and have the egg salad sandwiches we'd prepared and breathe in the crisp air. Many bike riders passed our van on the way up the steep mountain and we waved to them hoping that when one or another of them chose to wave back he wouldn't lose his balance and go crashing down the hill.

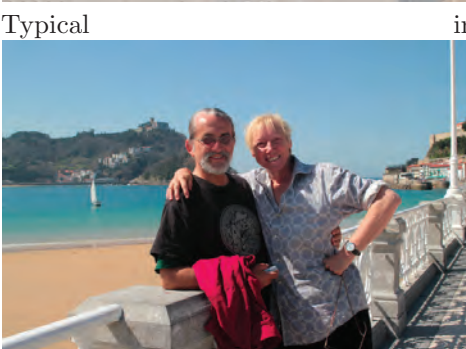


Photo taken by Dian



San Sebastian





Typical image



We went into San Sebastian and immediately met a couple who showed us the best way to get into the old town. There we saw the Christ statue called Sagrado Corazon which loomed over the bay and the church which Dian's brother Tim's wife's family helped to build a few centuries ago. We think. Walking around the town we saw how the better half lived and still do on the north coast of Spain. But we were on a mission so we left after a short visit and headed on to Lizarra. (Though we were tempted to stay and check out the cement museum - where we thought the family name might appear. However Nicole said she couldn't think of anything more boring than a cement museum so we passed). As we closed in on the switch backs leading to "Lizarra" the town we had on an

e-mail from Marta’s sister, we started to have forebodings. Didn’t they say it wasn’t too far from San Sebastian and Hondarribia? As the miles and hours went by and snow was on the sides of the road we started to wonder. Finally we reached the town and the ten people in the service station/cafe said that they didn’t know of any name that started with “y” only something like LIZALITURRI but even that wasn’t a name they knew. Dang it. The closest highway that would take us back up to the San Sebastian area was out of Pamplona another 45 minutes away. (No, the bulls weren’t running). While driving towards another possible town called Lizartza enroute to San Sebastian we happened upon a fantastically decorated house on the side of the road. Across the road were two beautiful shetland type ponies. We pulled over and called out to the man who had been seen fleetingly. Undaunted by his non response we entered the yard and soon Juan Guritti, the sculptor/painter/musician greeted us. What followed is a story that Nicole’s photos can most eloquently describe. Suffice it to say he was the genuine ARTicle and we were privileged to spend an hour and a half viewing his studio and workroom. We just want you to know we were there:





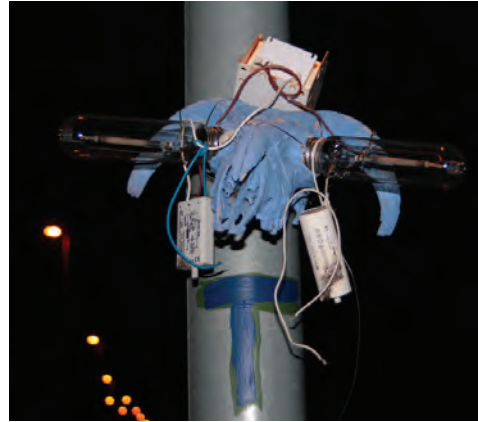


Can you tell what the blue
art piece is made from?



Find the chicken





Back on the trail of Marta's family, only ten minutes up the road we found ourselves in Lizartza. Since it was dinnertime we parked in the church square then asked at the first tavern (well, there were only two) if anyone had heard of a family in the cement business long ago and whose female relative was the mayor of Lizzara or Lizartza recently. Nada. The group having drinks were trying to be helpful but once again the names in that Spanish Basque part of the region all started with many different letters but never a "y". "Why?" We were stumped. To lessen the disappointment and have the only authentic basque meal we were likely to have, we walked down to the "other" tavern and ordered the fish. Three courses of fish were served starting with a delicious soup, followed by fish complete with it's gelatinous eye and finally a yummy fish in lemon garlic sauce. When our waitress queried if we'd like dessert we said, no we were stuffed. Too bad they still smoke in those places. As we went to bed we all stunk like ashtrays.

DAY 259 (2012-03-29 09:09)



Monday 26 March 2012



Another lead we followed for the family name. The search for Marta's family in Basque country (Spain) continued with renewed vigor. Charles and Dian got up at eight in order to catch "Ana" in her office. The oddest feeling came over them as they RECOGNIZED Ana from the night before. Her name had been given to them by the waitress as the woman who might be able to help from town hall but Dian and Charles had already talked to her in the group at the first tavern. Wierd. She invited them to look over her shoulder as she Googled all the versions of Ylizariturri she could think of but no dice. Finally she made a connection as to the meaning of the name at least. Lizar is a type of tree - the Fresno. Turri is a waterfall.

Nicole came in and Ana opened the upstairs library allowing us to do some research of our own and check e-mails. We said good bye and a hearty thank you.

The dream of the whole town running to us with open arms went up in smoke but we felt good about exhausting all possibilities based on the limited evidence we had been given. Besides, without the quest we would never

have had all the unexpected adventures we did. We headed for Biarritz. After nearly three months in and out (mostly in), we said adios to Spain. The hoity toity town of Biarritz was just as we imagined it. Lunching above the port we looked out over the harbor and down the coast at all the old hotels in all their faded glory.



Basque

coun-



try
A meat truck outside a Dia



Ev-

everything was in bloomWe dove alongside the Pyrenees covered in snow and the fields below covered in green grass that reminded us of our visit to the emerald isle. Unfortunately the idyllic mood was shattered by the rattling of (what we learned later) was our exhaust pipe. We decided to pull into a camp outside of Lourdes and after two false attempts we found a winner.



It

was 7:30 when we pulled into Alex's camp - Leprat Dou Rey and were greeted by his huge dog, Babou. The corkscrew resting on the reception counter told us we were in France

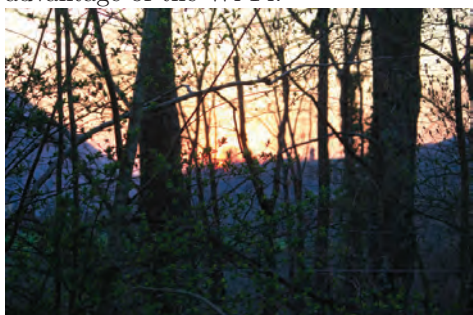
and after checking in we called Sebastian our ace mechanic to see what he thought of our "rattle."



While Charles dealt with that and hooked up on the Internet Dian made pasta which was served on the large table and chairs Alex had kindly brought down for us from the bungalow nearby.



Photo by DianAfter dinner we all trooped over to the reception area where we left a message for Dian's mom and dad. Being that reception was closed, Charles had to stay IN THE COLD (and nearly caught one) to take advantage of the Wi-Fi.



DAY 260 (2012-03-29 09:10)

Tuesday 27 March 2012



The camp owner's massive dog Charles called a local mechanic with camp owner Andy's help to try and fix our squawking car wheels, but the tiny garage was booked solid, so after a quick, reassuring call from Sebastian we checked out of the camp at 1 PM and drove to Lourdes, praying for an automobile-miracle.



Charles and camp owner AlexWe hate to compare to another sacred site, but it was our family's consensus that Lourdes was more peaceful and purer than Fatima. True,

we were visiting in the off season, but we were in the off season for Fatima, too, and the vibe was different. There were a lot more accommodations for the blind, the handicapped, and other disabled people, and pictures of painted tiles with the "Our Father" in 62 different languages.



We brought bottles and filled them with holy water from the spring in the grotto where Bernadette once stood. Dian was reminded of the book "Red Shoes For Nancy" that her grandmother (Gammy) let her read. It was a true story about the faith of a catholic mother and her physically challenged daughter and their journey to Lourdes.



Pilgrims who bring a cross with them on their journey may place the cross in this section. We were happy to see there was one from the homeland!



Braille and raised representations of art pieces were below every station.



This is what the raised square represents



Note the nun at the bottom carrying a cross



One of many "Our Fathers" in different languages



The grotto

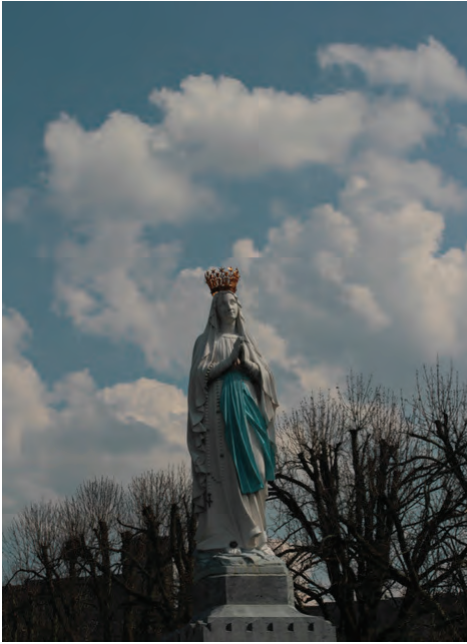


Departing from Lourdes, we drove by *d'Bastard* hotel by way of Condom. We drove until evening and stopped finally, as per Dian's desire to sleep near the river in Bergerac, gazing right at the Dordogne river. Charles befriended a Frenchman who had totally

designed the inside of his campervan to be run off of solar energy. We chatted with a few other free-campers from Belgium then had risotto and broccoli for dinner.



Our sleeping spot. Not a bad place for free!

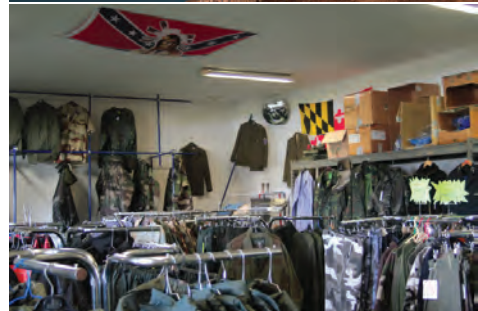


DAY 261 (2012-03-29 09:10)

Wednesday 28 March 2012



Even though through the night two times some jerks were DRUMMING (rather well), we slept passably near the Dordogne River. Charles was out and about early and brought back croissants (chocolate and plain) plus baguettes from the local baker in Bergerac. We listened to the church bells while sitting on a park bench and watched a boat repairer working on his little sailboat sitting on the grass.





American army surplus store? Right, that's why the flag is incorrect.



The first stop we made was at a store called "Cyrano and Roxanne" where we had a taste of six wines with the informative and charming Emile and ended up buying a bottle of sweet wine from the Bergerac region and a tin of duck foie gras. Dian spotted some discounted ceramics and everyone voted to get them though where we'd put them we couldn't say. As we were leaving, the good English speaking Emile came out to say good bye and gave us a very special gift. Dian ran back in with a CD of her music as a reciprocal gift and we were on our merry way.

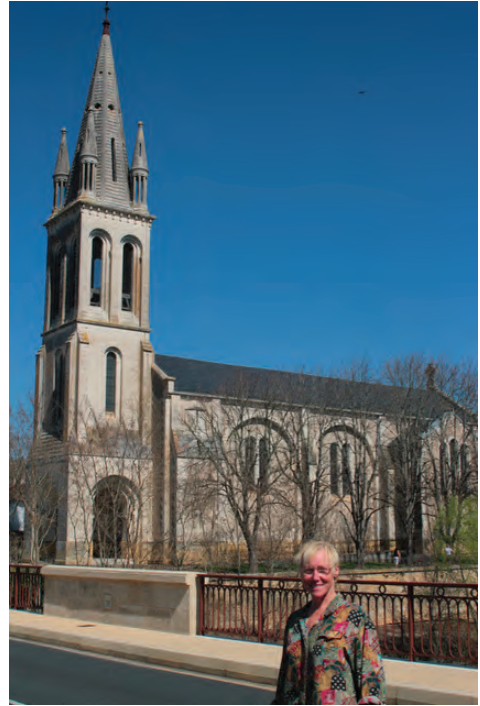
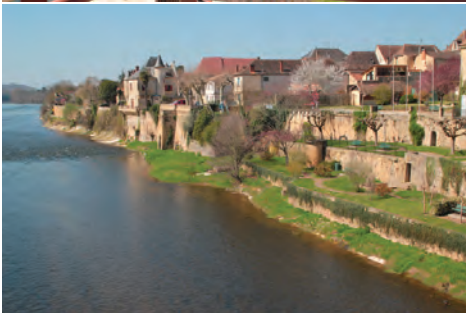


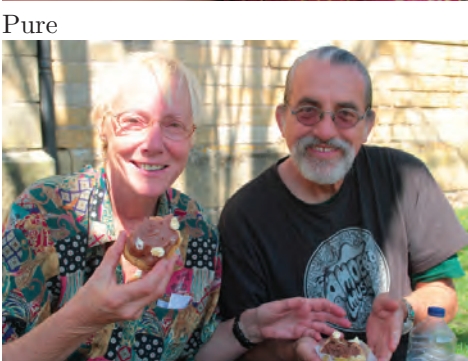
Trying to explain where the best fat comes from





The next stop was a picnic in the little town of Lalinde. There seated on a bench on the grass near the church overlooking the Dordogne, we had sandwiches and finished with our first chocolate éclair bought at the local patisserie. Wow, they really packed the filling and we thoroughly enjoyed the indulgence. (Charles by the way has lost about 25 pounds!)





Nicole said her parents could finish the eclair since she had had her fill. There was not even a half a

second pause before the two simultaneously ate their last pieces.



A girl sketching



Following Rick Steves' advice to get lost and meet the locals (especially in the Dordogne region - one of his recommendations) we

asked where the ducks and geese were fed for the foie gras. One lead led us to a farm but the man only had tins and jars of the stuff so he sent us to the town of Saint Alvere where the tourism office gave us a flyer for an english speaking farmer we could visit. We found Patrick and Maggie's farm and were greeted by their daughter, Amy. Patrick (from Ireland) had been at that location for 18 years and enjoyed the south of France but admitted the foie gras process was very hard. Since the feedings had already happened and we were told they never let outsiders watch we were disappointed but he was great and shared his stories about raising lambs (Dian took two shakes of a lamb's tail but didn't keep it even though Patrick offered to find her another somewhere in the sheep's yard.) Nicole couldn't get over him apologizing for how messy the farm was - which it wasn't - and none of us could remember ever hearing that come from a farmer's mouth. We bought some goose foie gras (NEVER call it pate said Emile).



Explaining the ducks' portion of food



Farmer

Patrick



Les

canards

We'd live in the beautiful Dordogne region in two shakes of a lamb's tail. Literally!



With the recommendation of Patrick to see where the confluence of the Dordogne and Limeuil Rivers came together, we drove to the picturesque site and found free camping right on the riverside. We brought out the guitar and Charles pumped up his basketball to shoot a few hoops nearby. After Nicole made chicken soup and we taste tested the two foie gras we went to sleep listening to distant celtic flute music emanating from somewhere.



Life is good.

DAY 262 (2012-03-29 09:10)

Thursday 29 March 2012



Dian's artThe Blanco River in Texas where the family of Dian's sister lives had a similar aspect to the River Vezere where we awoke. The quietness was added to by the chirping birds and while Charles went to shoot hoops on the court nearby, Dian and Nicole played guitar and painted. We had fried eggs ala Nicole and after stowing got on the road again.

Our first stop was the nearby 12TH century chapel adjacent to the small cemetery that Richard the Lion Hearted had built in recompense for his murdering Thomas Becket (remember Peter O'Toole and Richard Burton's version in the film "Becket"?). After that we tooled around the towns of note such as Cadouin with it's abbey and La Roque Gageac - a town built into a mountain near the river. Tulips were blooming everywhere

and they accented the butter yellow houses with the soft turquoise shutters. Ah France.



Chapelle Saint Martin



Because the church was closed, Nicole put her camera up to a chink in the door to get this shot.



Ceramic flowers were a com-

mon site on the graves



The best find was Josephine Baker's old estate also known as Chateau Des Milandes. We were there two days before the official opening of the tourist season so we could only look from the outside but it was on those beautiful grounds that she raised her family of adopted children from all races and escaped the spotlight of Paris.





We stopped at a free campsite that had roosters, chickens and toilets but it looked like some of the campers were LIVING there so we moved on.



Chateau des Milandes from afar

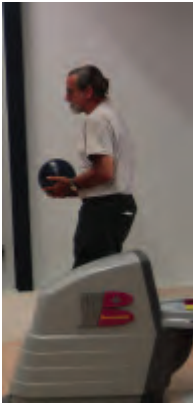


Josephine and Dian



The tiny town of La Roque Gageac, built into the side of the rock. Around 5:30 PM we saw (angelic chorus) a bowling alley!!! We stopped in to play a game and use the Wi-Fi. Nicole trounced Charles but Dian was the real coward (she didn't even try to bowl). When the joint started jumping with poker players, bowlers, patrons in the restaurant and at pool tables, Dian and Nicole went out to the parking lot to make up the beds. We snacked on left overs and when the place closed, Charles came to bed too.



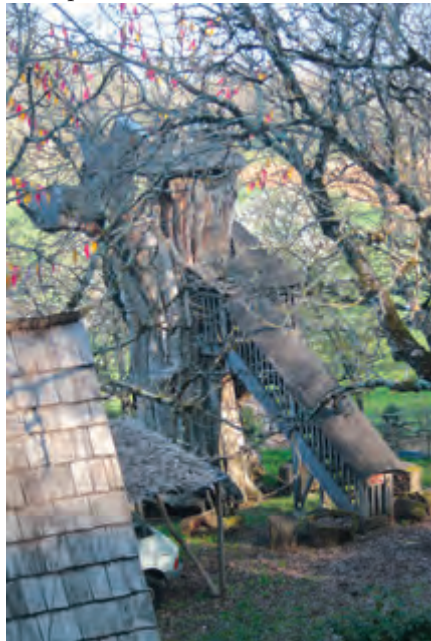


DAY 263 (2012-03-29 09:10)

Friday 30 March 2012



Nearby the bowling alley We woke up in the parking lot of the bowling alley and successfully got Wi-Fi outside the closed building. This allowed Nicole to check some e-mails, and find out that she had been accepted into Camp Kesem! Since she was too old to be a CIT (Counselor In Training) the UCLA staff had worked with the National Camp Kesem board to create a position for her as camp photographer and blogger. Nicole was as jubilant as Dian and Charles were proud.



A recreation of an old village. A little hard to tell, but this was a treehouse



Foie gras ducks



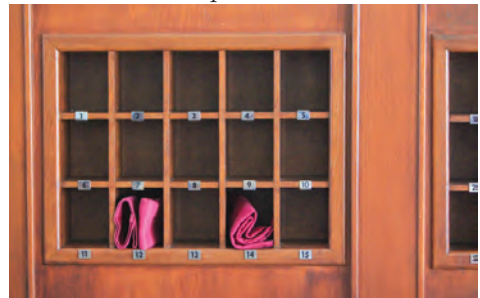
Driving the five hours to Clermont Ferrand where the Trappist monastery was located, we got a bit lost and asked a woman for directions. It turned out she spoke perfect English (her husband was English) and she was able to give us good directions because she bought products from the monks all the time, including their famous cheese. She was a little surprised to hear we were staying there, because not many people do, and she wished us a good visit.

A natural stream curved near the monastery which complemented the simple yet tranquil landscaping and architecture of the inner walls. The buildings themselves were rebuilt in the 1800s in a colonial style, but were on foundations from the 12th Century. We

were greeted by Father Basil who, being from America, spoke perfect English and was able to show us the layout. He asked if we had had lunch and we wisely admitted we hadn't. He checked with the kitchen staff, who then brought out a "modest repast" of fish, pasta, apples, coleslaw with tomatoes, Bordeaux wine, bread, apple juice, 3 of the monks' self-produced cheeses and a French specialty *fromage blanc* (rather like plain yogurt or sour cream, but very rich and creamy). Let it be said: the French know how to do it, even the monks with their humble lifestyle.



Father Basil pointed to our rooms



Guests are asked to fold their napkins back into the slot corresponding to their room



"Hey, if one of the nuns did it during dinner, why can't I?"



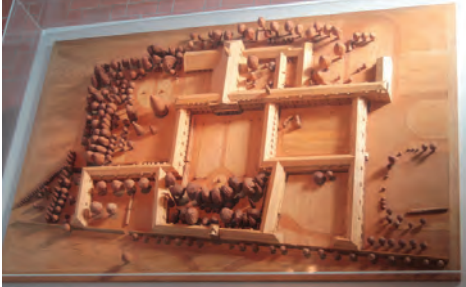
We parked our van in the inner walls next to two blooming cherry trees, and took the opportunity to look through the picture gallery of photos from the monastery. They even had a room showing a 45-minute video on the monks' lives, inside the cloister and the chapel. Charles could walk around these places if he wished, but women were not allowed anywhere near the cloister or where the monks did work (in the fields or barn).



Brothers working. The monks' age ranged from early 20s-80s, with many young men.



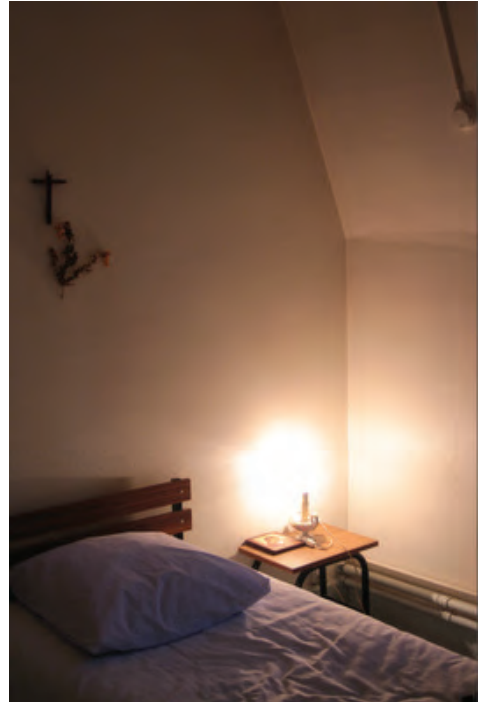
From the video



Model of the monastery



Dian and Nicole rested in two wonderful rooms that had been prepared by the monastery housekeeper, fit with sinks in every room, a comfortable bed (pleasant surprise there), and lovely, hot showers. Charles went to vespers.



Dinner was eaten in silence with two other guests (nuns?). Classical music played softly while we feasted on sweating blue cheese, swiss and brie, quiche, soup, *fromage blanc*, fresh bread, the monastery's own wheat germ (and wheat germ with chocolate), and of course, Bordeaux wine.

We took a walk (although we could have rolled just as easily) along the river and saw what we think were several otters at different times, which Nicole tried to capture on film (successfully...barely).





Reflection of the trees

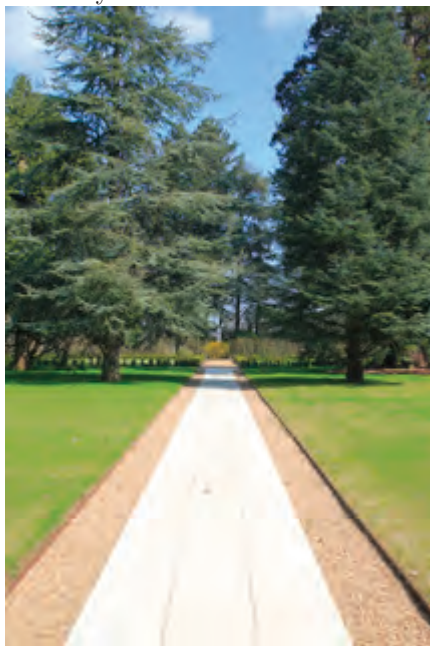


Got



We
went to bed early for the next day's 6:45 AM
service.
it!

Saturday 31 March 2012



Two great sequoias donated to the monastery
EXTRA! EXTRA! TRIP TO PARIS POST-
PONED! Yes, the best laid plans of mice
and men... When we awoke at the crack
of dawn for the 6:45 mass which was sung
in Latin and French by the monks we felt
like we had all our blessings. After mass
we had another silent meal with the two sis-
ters. We tried not to gulp down the fromage
blanc which Father Basil concurred was made
even tastier with a sprinkling or so of sugar.
The instant coffee was a let down though.
Oh how we missed the italian cappuccinos.



A photo from the monastery



gallery

We packed up and changed the linen on
our beds. The service preceding lunch was
brief but again synchronized in perfect har-
mony. After a delicious silent lunch of breaded
chicken, scalloped potatoes, mango and lemon
jam plus WINE, we gave a donation to the
monastery and bought some of their cheese
and black raspberry jam. We gave a hearty
thank you to Dian's dad's brother, also a Trap-
pist monk for giving us the lead on the Abbey.
As we were pulling out we decided to buy more
brake fluid for the squishy brakes. When we
put it in it didn't help so we called and left
a message for Sebastian. While we waited
for his reply we bought groceries and contem-
plated taking the van in to a local mechanic.
Soon Sebastian was on the line telling us that

the brakes were good and the sound we heard plus the squishiness was not a big deal..."not dangerous" As we drove along later we joked that those would be the last words we heard echoing as we flew over the cliff. The decision to drive the 9 hours to Frankfurt/Cologne area where Sebastian worked was unanimously agreed upon and we covered 5 of the 9 hours that afternoon. We pulled into an Auto Grill where campers and trucks were already parked for the night.

2.4 April

DAY 265 (2012-04-01 13:19)

Sunday 1 April 2012 Dear blog reader, we're sorry to inform you, but due to the fact that we're sick of each other, we're calling it quits...April Fool's!



Mustard fields through the Dijon region



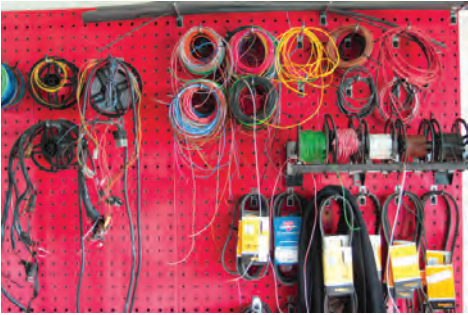
Photo by DianWe woke up in front of the Auto Grill and left by 9AM. We saw our first deer in a field (that makes the ratio about 1 to every 5,000 "Deer Caution" signs we'd seen around Europe). We paid the \$40 toll just before entering our 26th country, Luxembourg! Forty minutes later we were in Germany, so three countries in one day wasn't bad. Our GPS led us directly to St. Sebastian at his boss Frank's garage. Within one minute of listening to our car he had diagnosed the problem.

For the next eight and a half hours he worked ceaselessly on getting Excalibur/White Rabbit in tip top shape. Charles made two trips to the local Subway sandwich shop and bought provisions.



#26! Photo by Dian





Quite organized.



Ah, Clifford...we meet again.



The fleet.



Coming back from Subway



Sebastian! Photo by Dian
We called cousin Roos and Henri to tell them we would be able to spend Easter with them and they invited us to come as early as we would like.

St.



Celebratory beer!

We spent the night in the parking lot of the garage with much lighter hearts. Our April Fool's jokes: - Dian told Charles and Nicole there was a man selling stolen hubcaps at the Auto Grill - Charles exclaimed there was something crawling at the bottom of his coffee cup - Nicole gave Charles about 10 more gray hairs when she told him the screen to the laptop had come off (it had been having some trouble) - Dian told her stepson Chris on the phone that Nicole had married a Croatian man, then - Nicole told her grandparents she was marrying a Frenchman. All of these pranks were met with dismay, then laughter, and a little bit of sheepishness on the part of the prankster.



DAY 266 (2012-04-04 03:11)

Monday 2 April 2012



Oh horror, egg McMuffins for breakfast on the road! Shhhh, don't tell. It was what fit best for our 9 AM departure to Holland. Arriving on Henri and Roos' doorstep an hour later, we were greeted by Mabel, Roos and Roos' colleague Ingrid (Henri was at work).

We brought our gear in to their guest house. Roos laid out a sandwich buffet along with some delicious grilled veggies and we shared a few stories. Afterwards while Ingrid and Roos worked we spread out a years' accumulation of souvenirs on a table to admire. We have had quite some adventures.

So many people laud Jack Kerouac's "On The Road," but no one gives enough credit for "Off The Road." This being said, we reveled in hot showers, warm beds that didn't have to be stowed right away, and room to walk around. Ingrid said, "See you later," for we planned to go into Eindhoven the next day, where Roos would be doing more work with her at her

place while we took care of some errands in a larger town. Henri came home (no crutches this time as he was using when we saw him at the beginning of the trip!) and we all ate curried chicken, cashews, avocado, peaches, crispy onions and coconut with peanuts. It was good to be back home.



We joined Henri and Mabel in walking to the tennis courts to watch Roos play with a few buddies. Afterwards we shared a few beers in the tennis club house, and Charles chatted at length with one of the players who also had a love for music.



Henri filled in for a moment



Roos



We
walked home and fell into our beds. Our beds
in different ROOMS!

DAY 267 (2012-04-04 03:12)

Tuesday 3 April 2012

The comfortable guest house of Roos and Henri was hard to leave at 8 AM but like a well - oiled machine we were up and out the door 15 minutes from the time Charles' alarm went off. (It's so unusual to turn over in the bed or move in any way and not feel the whole van shake slightly either when you are moving or the other two are.) We were rested and ready to visit Eindhoven where both Roos and Henri work. Nicole packed sandwiches and we jumped in Roos' car to drive the 35 minutes to her partner Ingrid's house.



On the way we stopped at her old high school to see the flock of kids arriving on hordes of bicycles – many already parked in the yard. The kids ride like they were born doing it and many don't even hold the handlebars. (We saw Ingrid's niece checking her phone or iPod while riding on the back and gracefully moving with the drivers bumps and curves.) The daffodils in yellow and white were coming into full bloom along the streets and we pulled into Ingrid's house (designed by her architect boyfriend Paul) at about 10AM.



Schoolboys parking their bikes



The words posted designate the levels of schoolchildren; advanced, regular, etc. The house was marvelous. Using natural materials accented by large windows and decorated with muted paintings and some of Ingrid's sculpture, we were blown away on the tour she gave of the three stories. Every wall could be opened and moved to make another space or to uncover another room. The indoor/outdoor motif was beautifully carried out with balconies and terraces overlooking the courtyard (that Paul also designed) and the two steeples of the tall church nearby. As we were getting ready to take Roos' car on the errand of fixing our computer, we were asked to come back inside where Paul presented us with a book about his architecture. We were delighted and asked if he would inscribe it to Dian's dad – “a colleague architect”.



Paul, Roos and Ingrid



Bouyed by the generosity of virtual strangers we drove through downtown Eindhoven with it's many modern and humorous architectural sculptures and buildings – it was bombed heavily in World War II. We drove to the little Apple repair shop Charles had researched and with Dian carrying our laptop on a blanket like a sick animal going to the vet, we greeted Ancella and her partner, Rolf who both let out a low whistle. This meant we had a screen that was barely hanging on due to hinges bent during a fall and they could see it was going to be difficult. To make this long story longer, we had our precious laptop in our hands 30 minutes later with a very creative "fix" and a promise to give them tips on what to see in L.A. the next time they were visiting the states. We were grateful that they had tried to find a solution that fit us and didn't include buying a whole new screen (600 Euros+).

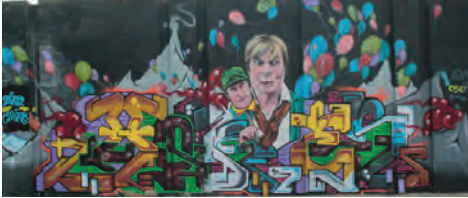


Fun architecture abounds!





Charles, Rolf and Ancella After filling up Roos' car with diesel we headed to the graffiti area in Eindhoven where the bicycles go under the highway in a four leaf clover pattern. All the walls were covered with art and we spent an hour looking. Nicole caught some of it with her camera and we left feeling like we'd seen one of the top ten street art spots in Europe.





Nicole embraces every travel experience. After getting a new battery charger for our camera, we headed back to Ingrid's house where we saw Roos walking Mabel. We stayed for a minute then walked to a couple of shops - one of which was a Peace library and the other a 34 year old comic book store where Dian found two antique Daisy Duck bowls (known as Katrina).



We had a chance to congratulate Paul's son who had just gotten picked to be the goalie for the national field hockey team (at 16!) - he showed us his brand new gear then we left for Neerkant.



Rolf and his gear



While

Dian and Charles were getting lost Nicole stayed back and took Mabel for a walk While Charles and Dian went out to buy a few groceries for the dinner they would make the next night, Roos whipped up a feast of "spicy chicken" over rice with delicious side condiments and wine. (Unfortunately the 30 minute round trip had taken Charles and

Dian 2 hours since they took a wrong turn. Roos exclaimed, "How could you drive all over Morocco and not get lost and then get lost here...?"

We went to sleep soon after hearing about Henri's police raid on a gypsy family that Nicole and Roos had watched on the national news.

DAY 268 (2012-04-04 03:12)

Wednesday 4 April 2012

We got up when we wanted. Roos and Henri both went to work. We lit a fire in the dining room fireplace while Dian started making chili for dinner, but she made it too hot for Roos and Henri's taste we thought, so Charles drove to the grocery store to buy a fresh set of ingredients. Dian learned the valuable lesson that you can always add more heat, but you can't take it back.



We served the different chilis. Roos and Henri tried both the "hot" and the mild and declared they liked the mild version but thought the "hot" wasn't too "hot". Lesson learned: you can't please everyone, so you've got to please yourself. Taking his cue from Nicole, Henri even brought out his camera to take pictures of the meal.



At 10:30 PM as Nicole Skyped her friend Ariana for the first time in a loooong time, Henri came down the stairs and said, "Sorry, I have to go." "Why??" Nicole asked, it being so late. "A man just dropped dead off his bicycle." That's not something you hear everyday, and it reminded us of the real dedication and sense of duty one has to have for a job like that.



And dessert! Vanilla and strawberry ice cream with fresh strawberries and a chocolate and coconut cookie

DAY 269 (2012-04-04 03:12)

Thursday 5 April 2012



The happy response from Ingrid for the ceramic shallots bowl was just the reaction we'd hoped for and we knew we'd made the right decision in giving it to her. She had searched for one and couldn't find it. The interviews she and Roos conducted over the phone went well. They had the left over chili for lunch (which Roos said was even better the next day) then Dian took Mabel for a walk to the post box to deliver postcards. It was COLD outside.



After lunch we went to a local asparagus farm and Roos bought the fresh, tender white ones for our dinner. Dian purchased a couple gifts for her brother Tim's birthday and we parted with Ingrid - giving the traditional three kisses on the cheeks and a bear hug for good measure to which Roos exclaimed, "Get a room."



It's the most wonderful time of the year (for Holland)



Free apples at the supermarket! We know most of you have had the pleasure of eating a vegetable straight out of the ground so you'll

know what ecstasy we were in when Roos presented the platters of steamed white asparagus, ham, boiled eggs and mashed potatoes with butter for supper. The Dutch know how to do it right.

Ater dinner we watched "cinnamon challenges" on the internet and then Henri and Roos went to their 9 PM tennis lesson. We were in bed by the time they returned.



These white asparagus can only be harvested a few weeks out of the year



A machine shaves the aspara-



A thematic napkin for Dian's brother Tim's birthday



Too bad we can't upload smells here!



The final product.

Friday 6 April 2012

Nicole thought it would be interesting to listen to an actual job interview being conducted by Roos in her house (she and longtime friend have an IT headhunting company) so she and Dian went over early and eavesdropped (with Roos' permission). Afterwards Roos gave Nicole some tips on job interviewing which may turn out to be very valuable.



Lunch! By Henri



Free photo shoot at the supermarketThe cinnamon rolls for breakfast were really good, especially the frosting, and reminded us of Pat and Kay in Arizona. We were treated to Henri's wurst and grilled onions on buns for lunch, then headed off to mail some postcards. We sent something to Dian's brother Tim for his birthday, then did a little grocery shopping. When we returned we watched some of "The March of the Penguins", narrated in Dutch. Dian colored in an Easter card for Roos to put on the refrigerator.



The preparation for Nicole's Mexican feast took about an hour, with Henri and Dian chopping and stirring as Nicole made salsa, burritos, guacamole and rice with toasted pine nuts. We had Cointreau and cranberry cocktails.



After the dishes were done we called Dian's mom and dad and then played Big Boggle. Henri got the longest word, REALIST, but guess who won?



It was a good Friday.



We finished up with rice pudding and a game of Boggle

DAY 271 (2012-04-09 12:06)

Saturday 7 April 2012



It was raining when we got up but Dian admitted that not once since the trip began had she awakened to want to crawl back into bed and stay there all day. Too much to see and do! And so, we all went our separate ways that day. Henri went to visit his mother, Roos and Charles went to five different stores for party provisions (the fish store was remarkable, and they also went to a small place, more like a farm store, that specialized in big white asparagus, available for only a few weeks, with unique and memorable, melt-in-mouth taste), and later Roos took Nicole out to her riding stable for a lesson on her gentle horse Koletta. After the lesson they went to visit the other horses, some of whom we had seen as brand new colts nine months earlier.

We gussied up a little then drove to de Tafelaer restaurant for a fantastic dinner out, French, a treat from Henri and Roos, *dank je wel!* The meal included many wonderful dishes but one in particular was striking and also a local fave: mustard soup. Yes, it was delicious and Roos promised we could make it easily with a jar of mustard, some bullion, cream and bacon.





Mustard soup! Henri drove us there by a scenic route and even though Neerkant is small it sure was pretty with all the daffodils in bloom.

Bring on the food pictures!





DAY 272 (2012-04-09 12:07)

Sunday 8 April 2012



Friends, the day of Dian's birthday had arrived. It was made doubly pleasurable by being on the same day as Easter Sunday. We started the day with **STOLLEN GOODS**. Actually, a stollen is a cake filled with almond paste and it used to be baked to as much as one meter in length for women who had just given birth, for her family. The one we had was filled with raisins and had a really thick paste inside. We also had hard boiled eggs, sausage rolls and ham. Roos had already been up making Dian's carrot cake and when she left to ride her horse we were entrusted to take it out when it was fully baked. We may have erred on the early side but it was still delicious.



The first guests, Harrie and Ietje, nearby

Neerkant neighbors, arrived bearing a basket of locally-made honey and Dian's new favorite, Old Amsterdam cheese. Later our friends the Smalhouts from Amsterdam drove down. We gave everyone a peek at all the souvenirs we had acquired thus far. There was great food, music (Nicole and Dian on guitar and everyone singing along) and later, after Roos' brother and his wife arrived, we sat down to a nine course (!) Japanese meal.



Dian and Benji



Roos, Dian and Herman



Deborah and Dian



Henri, Dian and Harry



Ietje, Nicole and Dian



Dian, Paolo and Deborah



A tour of the van...lasts about one minute. The intensity of cousin Roos was something to behold as she started with sashimi, then woked the salmon, seaweed, rice, shrimp, beef, mushrooms, each separately and served with chop sticks on rectangular china plates. Dang!



Sashimi (tuna, salmon and scallops with ginger, wasabi and soy sauce)



We had fun earlier catching Herman, Deborah, Benji and Paulo up on what we'd been doing since we pulled into their driveway in Amsterdam ("looking like the Beverly Hillbillies," to quote Deborah) nine months earlier. They thoughtfully brought an array of gifts typical of Holland including a Crabtree and Evelyn room freshener spray that Deborah (again) cracked we might use after cooking chili beans in the van. They drove back to Amsterdam after a warm afternoon get-together and reminded us we were welcome to visit again. The day was lovely and Dian couldn't have asked for a more perfect way to celebrate the beginning of her 56th year.



Seaweed



Charles, Harry, Ietje, Inge and Roos



Roos and her sister-in-law, Inge



Fried rice and vegetables with "local" seaweed

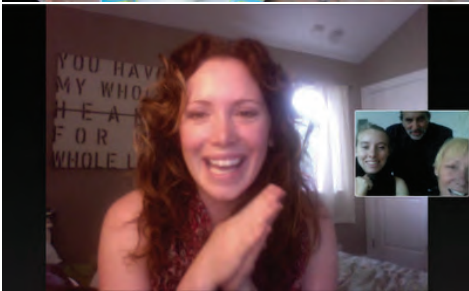


Roos' brother Gert, Nicole and Dian

DAY 273 (2012-04-09 12:09)

Monday 9 April 2012

No, say it wasn't so! We had to pack up for an early departure the following morning. We had been spoiled (again) by Roos and Henri. Dian, Charles and Nicole put souvenirs in boxes to leave in the guest house and take back to Santa Monica at the end of the trip, when they would again swing by good old Neerkant NL, thereby freeing up some valuable space in the van. The morning had begun with Charles making Dian breakfast in bed (the birthday gala continued!) and we all had cappuccinos made by Henri on their new foam machine, with chocolate dust sprinkled over a template of a happy face, a heart or stars.



Skype session with AmeliaIn the afternoon we skyped with niece/cousin Amelia in Texas who held up a fuzzy B & W photo and asked us what we thought it was... an ultrasound!

YES!!! There will be a new addition to the Byars/Penoli/Michell clan in October 2012!!! We were so happy for her and husband Jason. We couldn't believe Monica (Dian's sister) and Grandmother (her mom) had kept the secret so well. It turns out Dian had bought a little yellow hand knit jacket and cap from a camp store in Spain, saying at the time, This is for.... whoever's next with a baby. Yes, we were psychically on to it before they were. We of course had to call the proud grandmother-to-be, then the proud great grandmother and great granddad-to-bes. Everyone was overjoyed.



Photo by Dian



We went over to the neighbors house and brought some bread to feed their tame deer. Harrie and Ietje were very kind to invite us in and allowed us to take lots of photos of the

deer and the striking plump black and white-feathered chickens in their yard.



When we came back to the house, Roos and Henri were serving up mashed potatoes and beef stew, just the thing for a drizzly grey Monday (and a national holiday). We finished the dinner with fruit dipped in yogurt that had been drained over a cheese cloth and seasoned with ginger and lime.



After watching "Benjamin Button" with Roos and Henri and catching up on the blog we went to bed knowing there was a seven hour drive to Paris ahead of us the next day.



DAY 274 (2012-04-16 02:29)

Tuesday 10 April 2012



It was raining when we got up at 6:30 to give Henri a hug goodbye before he went off to work. Roos left a while later, and we gave her a hug and a hand painted thank you card with a portrait of the two of them. Roos gave us the rest of the stollen, and we left the house keys with their houseworker.

As we left Neerkant (reluctantly) we saw people playing tennis outside in the rain!

Passing through Belgium we waved hello to

Dian's father's cousin, Jerry, but couldn't stop because of our strong desire to get to Paris quickly. In the evening we entered France and pulled into a 24 hour gas station and restaurant just outside of Paris, and taking advantage of the famous French highway rest stops, made leftover chili for dinner and spent the night. Charles read Mark Twain aloud.



Roos was still with us in France

DAY 275 (2012-04-16 02:30)

Wednesday 11 April 2012





We entered Paris, heading for the only campsite within city limits - Camping de Paris Pois de Boulogne. We were slightly nervous for the

price and staff attitude, which hadn't gotten very good reviews when we looked at their website, but were pleasantly surprised when the staff was nice and helpful.



We took the camp shuttle bus at 1PM into the "City of Light." We walked up the Champs Elysees and ended at the Arc de Triomphe. We took pictures by the Eiffel Tower, and when Nicole was filming her parents yell "Amelia and Jason are gonna' have a baby!" in honor of their niece and nephew-in-law's great news, Dian threw her hat up in excitement, and over a fenced off area on the grass. She had to climb under quickly while Charles held up the fence to retrieve the hat. With that excitement out of the way, we racked up another typical Parisian pastime: eating crepes. We each ordered one in the park (Dian and Nicole got one with Nutella, and Charles got one with *gran marnier*) and watched a man craft them with love and care.



Typically Parisian?



Scotland's later, not now!



Retrieving the hat



Later on we crossed the Seine river, toured the inner courtyard of the Invalides building, dominated by the statue of Napoleon Bonaparte (where he is buried), and much more. At the Grand Palais we decided to view the Helmut Newton exhibit, the first ever retrospective of his work. Not being so familiar with his work beforehand, it was a great opportunity for Nicole to take inspiration from such an iconic photographer. Unfortunately, the fact that Dian had once been photographed by one of Newton's proteges did not help us get a discount. Staring at naked bodies made us hungry, so we began keeping an eye out for a good place to get dinner.



Because the weather was so fickle and it vacillated between sunshine and a light rain so often, the streets weren't very crowded, which made for a pleasant stroll through the

Jardin des Tuileries and finally the Louvre. It was all spectacular to see, and Nicole was very pleased so far with her first day in Paris. Our tummies were grumbling and our spirits were waning, so we agreed to meet up with our friends Hourik and her granddaughter (Nicole's old pen pal), Astrid after we had something to eat. This is a secret, but we finally settled on a quiet, pleasantly decorated (and reasonably priced) Chinese restaurant which we were fine with after a long day of walking and sightseeing.



What do you call a French kitchen exploding? A linoleum blown-apart.



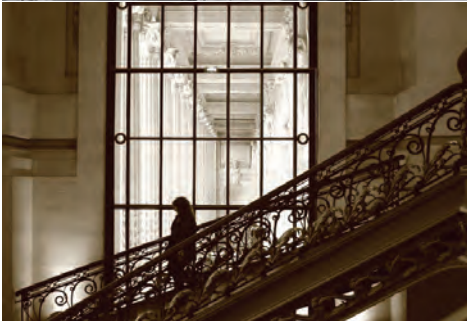
Invalides building



Invalides building



You see lots of interesting things along the Seine



Jardin des Tuileries



Rodin



Jardin des Tuileries





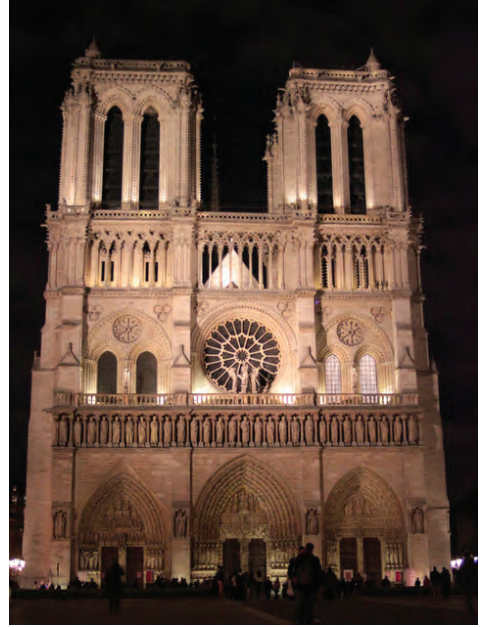
And even more photo shoots...



We found Waldo! Finally we dashed over to Notre Dame before stopping by Hourik and Astrid's, which was in a great location just next to the fountain of Saint Michel. Unfortunately we dawdled a bit too long catching up with the two, and paired with a little bit of misdirection on the Metro, we didn't make the last camp shuttle bus, which ran even later than the public buses, so we reluctantly took a cab back to camp.



Seine at night



Notre Dame



Nicole fell absolutely in love with this venerable bookstore (once frequented by Gertrude Stein, 'nuff said). If you see Nicole please remind her she has to go back to this place.

DAY 276 (2012-04-16 02:31)

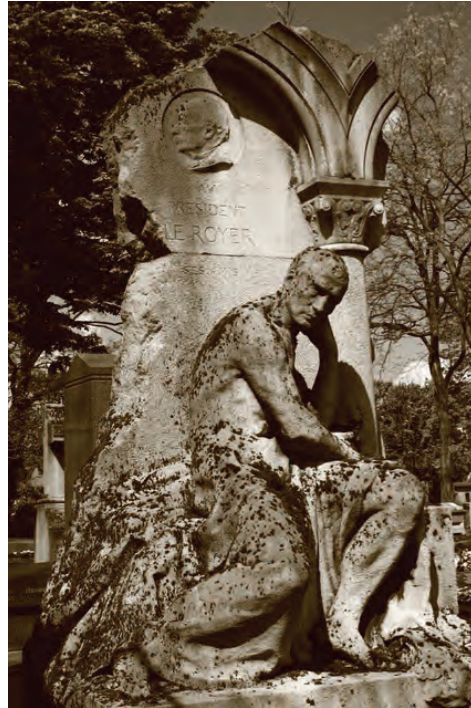
Thursday 12 April 2012



Fountain of Saint Michel at night



Walking to Hourik's



April in Paris! Dian and Charles' second time. The tulips were just beginning to bloom as the daffodils were fading. The famed, huge cemetery Pere Lachaise was our first destination and after catching the camp shuttle bus to the metro station we rode all the way out to the 16th *arrondissement*. Before finding the four block square graveyard, we stopped at a charming gift shop and the owner gave us a map book – usually a four euro price. *Merci!* We bought a card for Grandmother's birthday then trekked to the sites of some beloved personalities.





Oscar Wilde's grave Nicole was saddened that Oscar Wilde's tomb, which had formerly been covered in lipstick kisses, had been refurbished in 2010 and had a plexiglass barrier, which she nonetheless kissed (gingerly), and we remembered Aunt Monica's performance in "The Importance of Being Ernest" and how she rocked the role. Next we walked to Edith Piaf's grave. A young English boy was wondering aloud to his family how she died, and since there was a crucifix on her tomb he declared that "it must be really ANNOYING to be hung from a cross." After these moments of gallows humor, we walked to Jim Morrison's grave, which of course was crowded (but not like in summer when you have to wait in line just to pass by). The unspectacular grave marker had us musing about celebrity and why we remember some people more than others. He was a man who touched many lives and was a true poet. Edith was a devil with an angelic voice and Oscar Wilde was, to quote an inscription scrawled on the tomb, "My favorite dandy."



Edith Piaf's grave



Gum-infested of Jim tree in Morrison's front grave:



Jim Morrison's grave



After lunch (Charles insisted on having his sandwich in the cemetery, to honor the Lizard King.... somehow) and a coffee at a nearby café we headed to La Cinematheque Francaise museum (designed by Santa Monica's own Frank Gehry) for which we had free entrance coupons. As we stood in line in the drizzle, Charles went to the front of the line and discovered that a Tim Burton exhibit was taking place in a separate part of the museum. With his press pass he got in free and Nicole got a student discount, so we jumped out of the long line and straight into the Burton show. Some of you may know about him and his early career as a resident and budding artist in good ol' Burbank CA (there was a typical-Burton-style official city anti-littering poster on display), and a four year employee at Walt Disney Studios, but his long and varied list of movie credits was a revelation to Dian. His macabre style didn't quite mesh with Disney and so with the friends he'd made at Cal Arts he started doing his own thing. What an amazing collection of art – from sketches on napkins to gigantic models. We took the last 45 minutes to peruse the French cinema memorabilia in the museum and it

was equally fascinating, with really early ("magic lantern") film cameras, the model of the robot woman from "Metropolis" with that landmark film projected onto the floor.



It was really special for Nicole, seeing memorabilia from films by George Melies and the Lumiere brothers



Nicole saw this when she was "too young," says she, so this was a rather momentous occasion for the two. It was a great day for Metro-musicians:



You haven't lived until you've heard "Proud Mary" done in a French accent...and well!





The fountain by daylight. Finally, we called Hourik, whom we had met some years ago while she was visiting our friends and neighbors Mark and Mary in Santa Monica, and whom Dian and her sister and mother visited in Paris three years before. Nicole and her granddaughter Astrid became penpals (yes, real letters, snail mail, or would that be escargot mail?) but had never met. After a reunion/meeting at their apartment we walked to Leon de Bruxelles (famous in Belgium for their chocolates) for their also famous mussels and fries. Charles and Dian left in time to catch the metro and bus back to camp while Nicole stayed at the apartment and shared Astrid's bedroom.



Street



art



Astrid and Nicole



Dian and Hourik



DAY 277 (2012-04-16 02:31)

Friday 13 April 2012



Nicole's Day: I left with Astrid for school, arising at 8 AM and leaving by 9. We boarded a two-level train that went straight to her building, and although I peeked into her classroom I left Astrid before it started. She gave me directions for the best way to get to Le Marais, a district that I had heard good things about, but I ended up scrapping it after I figured out a route with fewer line switches on the metro (even if it was a longer trip, I appreciated the simplicity).



She didn't get to look around Belleville (from "The Triplets of Belleville"), but she did see the metro stop! I arrived in Le Marais right near a great museum featuring Matisse and walked around some. I wasn't sure whether or not I would be

meeting up with my parents soon, so I killed time while I waited to hear from them. I got a text saying they probably wouldn't come to Sacre Coeur because they wanted to rest their feet some more and were enjoying talking to some people they'd met in the campsite, so I decided to go there myself, not knowing when I'd get back!



There weren't as many artists as I had heard there would be at the top of Sacre Coeur, but the weather was gorgeous and I seized the opportunity to get a banana and Nutella crepe and eat it on the hillside.



Really the only artists Nicole saw, just comparing their art pads.



Back on the metro I traveled to the opera house, made a stop at Gallerie Lafayette

(not knowing what I was stepping into, but being very pleasantly surprised), then strolled down the street towards the Louvre with the Palais Garnier in the background. With a quick stop in an American bookstore and a sandwich shop for lunch I ate in the gardens surrounding the Louvre and waited until my parents came. It was a different pace being on my own, but a pleasurable one. Dian and Charles' Day (and then Nicole): It was hard to remember how many kisses we were up (or down) to but we were pretty sure we were down to two from the three we had been receiving and giving in Holland. These things were only minor blips on the radar of our adventure but we wanted to be correct and not have too many bumped noses. It was strange not having Nicole in the van but Dian and Charles left on the bus (with a borrowed walking stick for Dian from the nearby Dutch couple John and Marion) and they took the metro from the bus stop to the Opera House. The Gallery Lafayette was where Dian and Charles had a coffee and wrote a couple of post cards on the top floor with the magnificent view. (It was also where Dian, her sister and mother had eaten a few years before). They also met a woman named Kristine and her two daughters Parker and Perry and enjoyed chatting with them.





Galerie

Lafayette

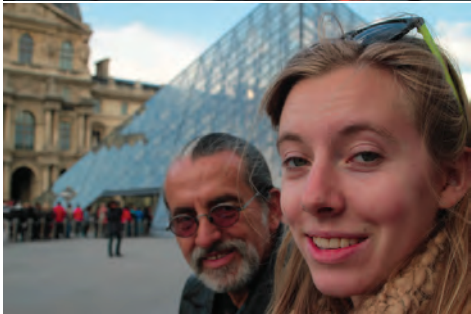


In front of the Louvre the family reunited and Charles and Nicole went in after 6PM for a free entry. Dian, who was nursing sore knees and ankles opted to stroll leisurely along the Seine where she bought a vintage Daisy Duck comic book and some old postcards from a vendor. She went to a bizarre comic book store near Hourik's house then heard, "Dian? Is that you?" It was Hourik who was just returning from work. She opened the door to her apartment and gave Dian a wonderful treat...40 minutes in the Jacuzzi!!! While that was happening Hourik was getting a new refrigerator brought up four flights to her kitchen. Yikes! It nearly fit. Charles and Nicole came to the apartment and with Astrid we all went out for Indian food at Bollywood in the Latin Quarter. It was sensational!



Charles and Dian left Nicole with Astrid and Hourik and took the metro back to the bus stop. On the way back Dian, desperate not to miss the camp shuttle again threw her walking stick in the metro door when she and Charles were about to get stuck inside. It worked and three men pried the inner and outer doors open so Charles and Dian could RUN for the bus. They almost missed it as they

had exited on the wrong side of the street but finally the driver had to stop...a block down the road! Charles returned the walking stick to John and Marion who commented after hearing how their stick had been used, “ Of course, that’s what it’s made for.”

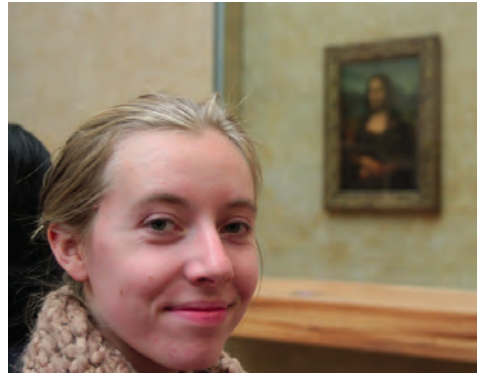


The Louvre!





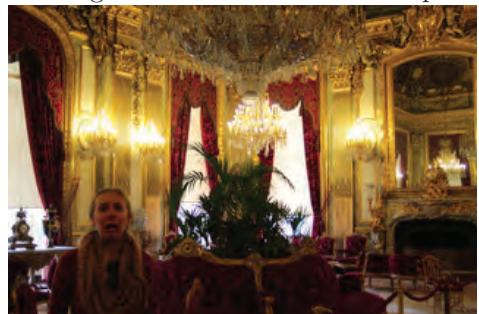
Signs outside the galleries in the Louvre

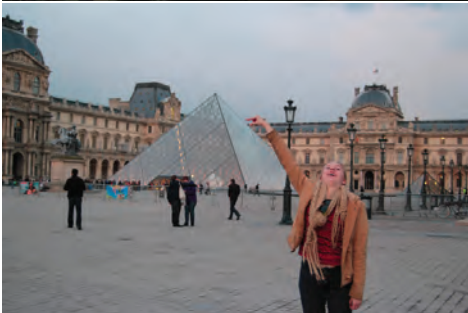
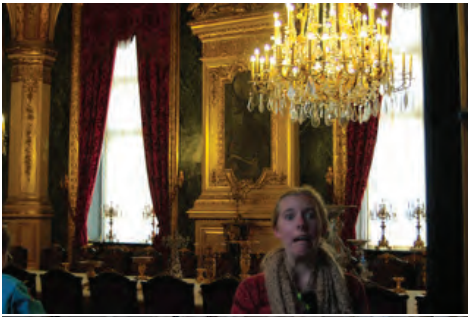


Thar she blows!



Bowling ball in the painting?





Most people pretend they're "holding" the tip of the pyramid, so Nicole decided to parody



it.



Dadaism?



Bridge of "love locks"





Bollywood Restaurant:



Nicole, Dian, Astrid, Charles, Hourik

Saturday 14 April 2012



Flying over the white cliffs of Dover



Nicole got up at 7AM with Astrid, she to take the metro to her parents, and Astrid to go to school. With a few breakfast items crammed into her mouth and pockets, Nicole said goodbye (she had finished chewing by then) to Hourik and Astrid, and hoped to see them again. She texted at 7:30AM on the cell, "I'm on the metro." Charles and Dian picked her up at the bus stop after checking out of the camp. With fresh croissants and hot coffee aboard we headed for the ferry in Calais. When we found out the price was better in Dunkerque we drove there then waited a couple of hours for our crossing on the DFDS Line. The hour crossing was uneventful but we got a little bit of excitement when the border/customs official began interrogating Charles. It became clear that our best tack would be tact since this official obviously believed in the letter of the law – meaning why were we traveling into her country and how were we paying for it – did we intend to STAY there?



Anyway, Charles got some good material for his next column and we entered England unscathed. Driving on the left side of the road took a little getting used to but Charles did very well and we were at Nigel and Mary's house in Surrey by 7PM (note the hour time change).



What's wrong with this picture? We're on the wrong side of the road! It was great to see our old friends plus their dogs Poppy and Sandy and we caught up over a delicious fish and chips meal brought in by Mary from their award winning take out place. Once again we were ensconced in the bedrooms on the second floor with the view we remembered from a few years back of pastureland with grazing cows. Ah the joys of farm livin'.





And treacle tart to top it off!

DAY 279 (2012-04-27 05:48)

Sunday 15 April 2012

What else should one do when visiting in the countryside of merry olde England than have afternoon pork or beef roast with yorkshire pudding? The Mulberry was a perfect choice by Nigel and Mary for our Sunday lunch and we drove there on side roads since there had been an accident and power outage earlier. (In fact, Mary had been pressed into service while walking the dogs with Dian and Nicole as many drivers stopped to ask her how to get around the road block.)





Mary giving directions We enjoyed the atmosphere of the Chiddingfold restaurant owned by famous radio DJ Chris Evans, and after a Guinness or two and a round of arm wrestling, we left for a little tour through Godalming, (in the news that very week as the home of Jack Phillips, a hero of the Titanic disaster who was the young telegraph operator who stayed at his post until the last minute, and perished while trying to send a message for help.) The cricket players in their white sweaters and pants barely looked up on the green near the famous Charterhouse School, one of the original nine founding British "public" (private) schools, built 1611 and still operating with about 750 students (yearly tuition: \$40,000/25,000 pounds/30,000 euros). The band Genesis formed there, and we thought the classic '60s counterculture film "If " (introducing Malcolm McDowell) was shot there but it wasn't. S'posed to be, till the headmaster discovered the controversial content of the movie.





Mary and Nigel



Yes, fig and goat cheese is nice, but...



...bring on the meat!

Photo by

Dian Elderberry



sorbet



What, you don't fight over the bill like this?



This arm wrestle was purely for fun...well, maybe fun for Nigel, Dian's arm hurt a lot after!



Cricket at Charterhouse



Charterhouse school After a nice cup of tea back at Tigbourne Farm, we watched the Sarah Palin biop, "Game Change" then played a game of trivia (with Nigel contesting nearly every answer in the book). We ended the

night by calling Grandmother and Granddad in Rancho Palos Verdes, then had eggs on toast and asparagus whipped up by Mary, yum.



Sandy and Poppy, none the worse for ware!



Like a good English dog, Sandy is quite proper and formal.

DAY 280 (2012-04-27 09:07)

Monday 16 April 2012



My goodness, what gorgeous weather! Are we sure this is England?



That's better.



A sign Dian painted for the family, identifying the

Tigbourne Cottage estate. Surrey was ablaze with wild flowers and the kind of green grass that only grows when it's saturated with rain. We puttered around Nigel and Mary's house returning e-mails and writing blog pages while Nigel was at his office in London and Mary was with clients. (Nigel is a film producer and Mary is a Pilates instructor). Dian asked if they would like a sign for Tigbourne Cottage and set about painting one for the front gate, on a long wood post she found, with a rusty nail jutting out the back. After lunch Dian and Mary drove into nearby Godalming for a quick perusal of the charity shops. There were quite a few but luckily neither Mary nor Dian bought much. At Fleetcroft Guitars, Ben put a new screw in the tuning peg of Dian and Nicole's guitar ...for free! The small town generosity was appreciated and probably wouldn't happen in Los Angeles. After a quick stop to mail Grandmother a birthday card Dian and Mary sped down the country lane in her convertible Audi.



If any of our blog readers have a chance to dig in nettles – don't! Dian sustained many prickly nettle burns when she tried to bury the post she'd painted in the ground. The antidote leaf was unfortunately NOT in the area.



Nicole inherited an ultra comfy onesie from Topshop! Mary treated the Andrews to a delicious Indian dinner in town and we really feasted. Besides it being one of Nicole's favorite types of food, it was too spicy for Nigel and since he was still at work we ordered dishes with lots of heat. Back at home he tried to tell us that a treacle was a small animal – though we knew from previous experience it was a sweet dessert . He complimented Nicole on her follow through after watching the prom queen bid and thank you videos she made the year before on Facebook.



With an in-depth map consultation between Nigel and Charles that lasted into the night, we were set for our upcoming Wales and Scotland leg of the journey.



DAY 281 (2012-05-04 08:40)

Tuesday 17 April 2012



We said goodbye to Mary, Nigel and the pets.

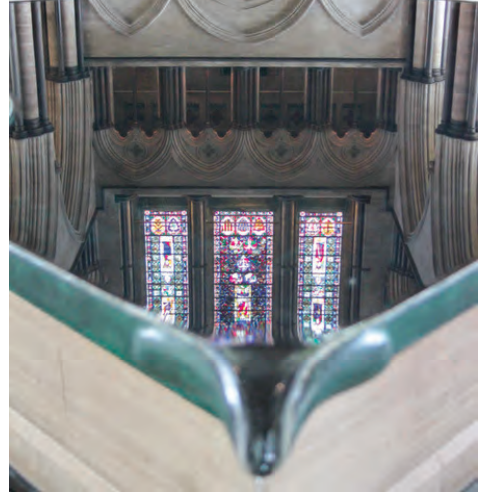


Salisbury Cathedral



The day that would have been Uncle Tim's

birthday started with the Happy Trails Gang getting up early to say goodbye to Nigel before he left for work. It was a blustery, rainy day but the sun kept making valiant efforts to shine through. We said goodbye to Mary at about 12:30 and headed for Salisbury Cathedral where Nicole's choir had performed the year before. (A quick homage to the saltiness of perfectly proper Mary was the story she told of the unruly star Nigel's film company had to bend over backwards for on a recent shoot. When the line producer, who was standing next to the star asked Mary, "Have you met our star yet?" Mary sweetly said "No." and kept walking.



Salisbury Cathedral was gorgeous and when we mentioned Nicole's performance there the docent said to have a look around (without paying for tickets). We saw the Magna Carta – one of four in existence. Just after seeing a rainbow we arrived at

Ina and Ravi's house in Glastonbury. A wonderful gathering of Ina's sons Richard and Chris plus Ina, Ravi, Nicole, Charles and Dian enjoyed Ravi's mushroom pasta and home brewed Irish stout. We had a song fest until 10PM then crashed in "Avalon."



Coming into Glastonbury



Ina and Dian playing songs



Ravi and his homemade brew



Charles enjoying the brew!

Wednesday 18 April 2012



Up at 10 in Glastonbury at the homes (note the plural) of Ravi and Ina, we had coffee and breakfast by the wood burning stove then Ina went in to work (she's training to be an audiologist). She had decided to miss the morning meeting in favor of spending time with us.



High Street

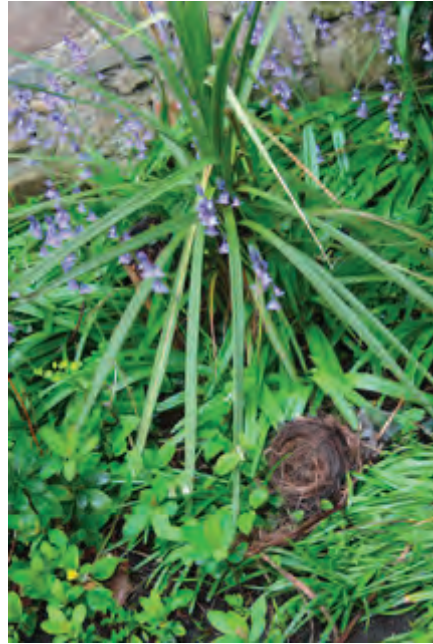


Glastonbury locals



drove us into town to buy some groceries then he and Charles returned to the flat after dropping Dian and Nicole at the THRIFT STORES!!! Oh happy day, Glastonbury had five cool charity shops and one really reasonably priced vintage store where Nicole bought a cute knit top that looked like it had never been worn. She also found a Sergeant Pepper military-style 1960s jacket that was

in near-mint condition. Dian found some Picasso cards, and a corkscrew for Ina.



She and Nicole enjoyed tooling around the hip Tor Record store with its modest but well-chosen stock. The dragon/crystal stores were a bit much, they decided, but it demonstrated that the King Arthur legend was alive and well in Glastonbury – otherwise known by some as “Avalon.” Walking the short distance back on High Street, they got caught in a little rain but the intermittent showers followed by hot sun weren’t unusual.



We finally broke out the monastery cheese we had bought in France at the Abbey (from “holy cows,” quipped Ravi). The cheese looked intimidating with its musky, dusty outer layer, but we knew it would be special and wanted a special occasion to share it. Served with two kinds of crackers before

dinner, it was surprisingly mild, exceptionally flavorful and a hit. We kept slicing until we had polished off most of the small wheel. Then we made a turkey/veggie stir fry with brown rice for dinner, and with Ravi's Guinnesslicious homemade Irish stout, we were full and content. The after-dinner music was a selection of about 20 of Dian's originals that Ina's son Richard proclaimed "brilliant." Beds were hit by 11.



Les fromage



Ravi enjoying cheese with his home-brewed beer



Charles, Ina and Richard following suit!



Kindred spirits? We think so.



DAY 283 (2012-05-16 11:01)



Thursday 19 April 2012

*Happy Birthday Irene! (Charles' mom,
Nicole's grandma she never got to meet)*

... So throughout the day we kept her in our thoughts, especially in the garden of the Glastonbury Abbey. We all got up early and after porridge (ah, England) decided to take advantage of Ina's morning off and Richard's position at the Abbey entrance gate. Walking from the house took only 10 minutes and we were knocked out by the beautiful condition of the grounds and museum. The legends abound there and with Richard guiding us we walked to the chapel where Saint Patrick stayed (and Ina's choir had performed a number of times), the grave of King Arthur and Lady Guinevere (some question this, but Charles overheard an older couple in the museum section and the gentlemen told his lady, "You know, some say Arthur didn't even exist..... that's ridiculous!") and the site of Jesus' visit with his great uncle Joseph of Arimathea, a metal merchant who travelled to Glastonbury when it was still accessible by waterway and was a huge trading center.



Tryouts for Fiddler on the



Roof



We love the street titles such as these in England.



And these.



And these. The herb garden was especially wonderful with the healing and culinary properties of each plant described on a card in front of each specimen. Since Irene had been an avid gardener we all smiled to think how much she would have enjoyed it. The duck pond, badger hills and Abbot's kitchen were highlights as well. The museum contained lots of kid-friendly interactive exhibits with a sense of humor we don't always see in the States. We continued on to the gift store where we bought an Andrews family crest magnet and some cards.



Glastonbury Abbey



Richard, Dian, Charles
and Nicole at the Abbey



Finally. FINALLY, restroom facilities with TWO ladies' rooms so as to avoid a huge line from the ladies'.



Charles, Ina and Dian



The Happy Trails Gang wanted to find a CD of Guy Clark to replace the worn cassette Ravi loved so they went back to Tor Records. Alas Lesley, the manager, tried hard to find one but was unsuccessful. She was an animated conversationalist and also very knowledgeable about music so we ended up chatting for a while. When she heard we were traveling for nearly a year she spouted, "I'm green with envy!" Which was very honest of her and probably a sentiment many of our friends and blog readers share. (Anyway, thanks for doing your best to hide your baser instincts

from us friends and family. We KNOW we have much to be thankful for!) We bought a very good country music compilation CD for 2.99 (pounds) and bade Lesley farewell.

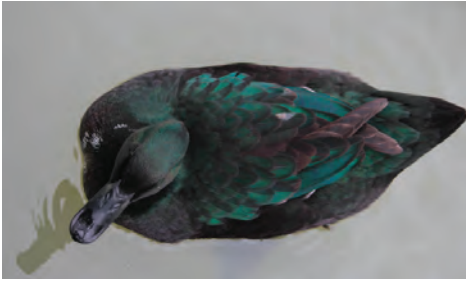


Richard told us that *apparently*, King Arthur's actual resting place is about ten feet from where it's marked for the tourists.



Where he is actually buried.







Vintage store, DollyBirds



Ina gave us permission to put these up.

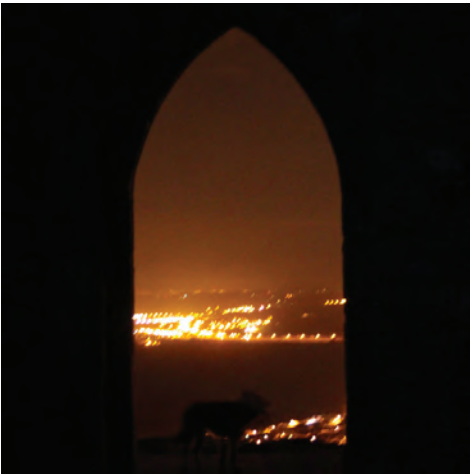


Tor Records Charles found a fantastic black western shirt with red roses and snap buttons at a thrift shop and then they all stopped back at DollyBirds – The Vintage Hideaway where Nicole had found her “cricket shirt” and

said hello to Esther. She was very sweet and confirmed that Nicole’s military style jacket was indeed from the ‘60s. A doll that had caught Dian’s eye was passed on again but she kept thinking about it. Finally the trio headed home after a quick visit to St. John’s Chapel on High Street.

In the kitchen Ravi was busy making his famous kidney, mushroom and onion dish with a tomato and green onion salad on the side and hot rolls. With a bit of wine from the Andrews larder we were feeling good enough to dance on the table top (well, some of us) and decided to hike to the Tor, around 10 PM. (It’s a strikingly sharp hill with an ancient tower on top which we saw on the way in, but didn’t know about its

long history and mystical connections and influence. Even area young folk will go there frequently, day or night. Of course, it's a good getaway/drinking spot as well, but then that's always been the case). The moon must have been new because Ravi, Ina, Richard, Katy the dog, Charles, Dian and Nicole had to climb up the hill by starlight and occasional torch (flashlight). It was exhilarating as well as a good way to work off a few calories and we lucked out with no rain. At the top, inside the Tor, Dian and Ina cackled like witches and played guitar (which Richard had gallantly carried). The songs we sang were from the olde English or Irish songbooks. Closing with an American folk standard, "Clementine", we left the summit and in a half hour were back by the cozy fire in Ravi's house.



The Tor by nightlight



Photo by Charles



Photo by Charles

DAY 284 (2012-05-03 08:04)

Friday 20 April 2012



By 10 we were up having coffee, yoghurt and rolls in front of Ravi's cheery wood burning stove. Even though the rain looked threatening we decided to climb to the Tor of Glastonbury again and appreciate the views by daylight. Although we took the same path as the night previous, this time we passed other hikers whereas before we had been alone. The "dragon" on the hills below could be discerned and a newly mowed "heart" was staring at us from across the valley. It was cold though so we didn't linger. Back at the house Charles completed his Santa Monica Daily Press article while Dian, Nicole, Chris, Richard and Ina drove to the local grocery store for ingredients for a MEXICAN FEAST.







Mean-while, back at the ranch...Chris in his cowboy hat. Yummy bean, rice and guacamole burritos were made by Nicole, Dian and Richard with Nicole deserving full credit for orchestrating the meal. We had a song fest that lasted till the last strains of Mary Poppins songs were concluded somewhere past midnight.



Ina totally blissed out from a neck and shoulder massage given by Nicole.

Saturday 21 April 2012



With a big hug and Ina's Polish chocolate horseshoes for good luck, we left the Glastonbury family and headed for nearby Wells. As quick as you could say "Jack Robinson" the weather changed from sunny to rainy. We had encountered the market at the base of Wells Cathedral and were enjoying the antics of the town crier – Len Sweales. He explained that his verse was written that morning highlighting all that the merchants were selling and that being a town crier was a position appointed by the Queen. There was a terrific juggler/magician as well as musicians and all kinds of stalls with everything imaginable. We particularly liked the booth selling "old body parts" (for the dog). We picked up some postcard stamps and then ventured onto the grounds of the Wells Cathedral. When the rain came down in earnest we decided to move on to Cheddar Gorge.





Creative titles for doggy treat bones



The narrow walls of the gorge were not covered in cheddar cheese for the taking as Dian had fantasized but was wonderful in its sheer cliffs and steep slopes where only a sturdy sheep could graze. In the town of Cheddar we bought ... you guessed it! Charles returned to the van laden with a nice assortment of local cheddar cheeses. He had met the butcher who had been drafted from a rugby team to go to the States to learn to play football. "It didn't work out though" said he but he had a nice chat with Charles about the U.S.



We drove to Bath on the back roads and soon we were asking Nicole if it looked familiar (her choir had performed at the Abbey the year before). We saw where the Santa

Monica Choir led by Mr. Hulls had stayed and where they stopped for buns at Sally Lunn's. We peeked in at the Roman Baths for which the town is famous and actually found a small vintage store Nicole had discovered but had not had time to peruse the year before. With a short set of organ music at the free concert in the Abbey to feed our musical side and a street musician outside playing the Hang – a steel drum like instrument - we headed out of town for Wales.



Skirting Bristol we took the Wye Valley and entered Wales at about 7PM. The owner, Mrs. Mary Murray showed us where we could camp very near the Monnow Bridge leading into old town Monmouth in her clean campsite. As the rain gently fell, Charles read Mark Twain aloud after a curry and couscous dinner in our cozy van.

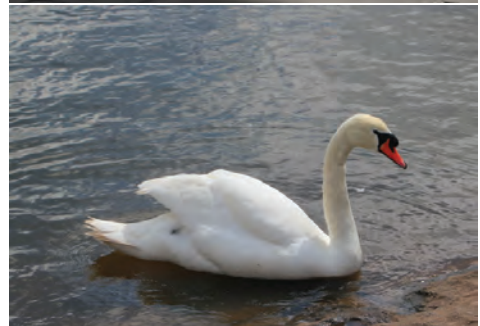


Bath





Sally Lunn's famous bun and tea shop that Nicole visited with her school.



DAY 286 (2012-05-03 08:30)

Sunday 22 April 2012



We got up at about 11 and Dian and Charles made a quick trip over the Monnow Bridge into Monmouth where we found a cool pair of jeans for Nicole. The carrot cake Charles had bought at the Wells market the day before made a delicious breakfast with coffee from our thermos. Our route took us along the edge of the Black Forest National park and it was lovely.



Across from a preserve for swans and other birds we spied an honest box with cookies for sale. The owners, Hazel and Richard and their daughter, Megan came out to explain that these cookies were made from a hundred year old recipe and were made on the top of the griddle sort of like a flat scone. They were delicious and we munched on them as we drove by rapeseed fields vibrant yel-

low in the sun. Dian found a Mother's day gift for Charles and Nicole to give her at an antique store and would have happily spent another two hours perusing the shop.



When we nixed a rather expensive camp the clerk pointed us in the direction of the Fox and Hound which had a Camping and caravan park behind the pub. As we entered the warm little room with a blazing fire in the hearth and saw the twinkle in owner Helen's eyes we knew we wanted to stay there. It turned out to be trivia night so after moving the van to the back and getting a little stuck in the mud (Helen drove our van while we pushed), we went back into the pub and met some amazing Welsh folks. They included us in their weekly trivia game and when our team lost they gave us the prize – a bottle of wine AND the prize from the week before that they had left, saying, "Enjoy your travels." After most of the patrons had left, Helen gave us each a beer on the house and we had some good chats with the locals.



We had hot showers and egg with rice burritos then fell asleep in our soggy camp where we were the only ones.



DAY 287 (2012-05-03 08:31)

Monday 23 April 2012



Welsh countryside





HAPPY BIRTHDAY GRANDMOTHER!
We thought of you all day.

Our hostess with the mostess, Helen, stopped by at 10AM to make sure we had slept well through the night. Charles was the only one up but he assured her we were fine and bade her farewell. We decided to retrace some of the road we'd already been on to take advantage of John's recommendation from the

night before to go through northwest Wales including the charming town of Llangollen. (John by the way was the man Charles had chatted with in the pub who came up with an answer to Dian's query of when would be the best time to hear some male Welsh choirs..."When they're drunk" said John). Outside Llangollen where we had stopped to buy black thread, we saw many people setting up tripods and deduced that the little steam engine train traveling along the picturesque countryside was what all the fuss was about.



The region was famous for its purple colored



slate

Typical Welsh town name Impressions of that day's drive included sheep, sheep and more sheep, little waterfalls near the road and a bit of snow, signs with a plethora of double D's and F's but nary a J,K,Q or Z. In certain parts there was shale on sheer

cliffs that looked like California's Devil's Post Pile, in other parts it was like a scene out of the movie "How Green Was My Valley." We continued on towards Liverpool and by 2:15 PM had our first sighting of the ocean.



After going through the tunnel to enter the port area we set our GPS (SAT NAV as the Brits call it) for the information center which happened to be where Beatles Tours



Liverpool were available. While Charles and Nicole waited in the van in the limited time parking spot, Dian got the lowdown on what tours were available. We decided to take (courtesy of Aunt Monica and Uncle Rick) the three hour taxi tour and in 25 minutes we were on our way. (Well, we did have to come up with 12 pounds in coins for the recommended parking near the stadium where the Back Street Boys were to perform that evening. Coming up with that much change wasn't easy and instead of being able to pay the full amount we could only pay till five the next morning. Oh well).



Classic

cab



The cab called Eleanor Rigby was waiting for us as was our guide Phil who turned out to be a wealth of information and very personable. It was fun to go from late afternoon 5:30 to 8:30 and watch Liverpool transform into night. Besides the Beatles birthplaces we were treated to local history and especially the magnificent cathedral. Whenever we wanted to stop or ask questions we were welcomed and Phil even gave us a nifty CD and photo packet as a souvenir.



Location of John's first marriage



John's birthplace



School (in the background) Paul and others attended We were dropped in front of the Cavern Club and after taking some photos there and at the Hard Day's Night Hotel we walked back to our van noticing barely any cars in the lot and had a late supper then fell to sleep.



George's home! An old woman was living there when we went.



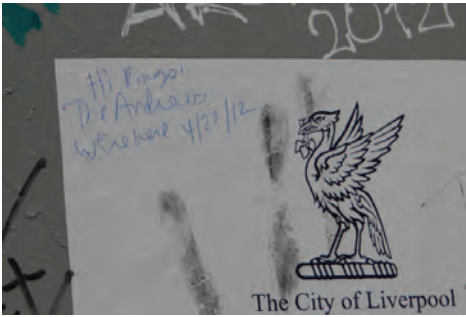
Inspiration for Ringo's first solo album cover



Can you see the hidden message?



Left, Ringo's home. Right, Ringo's birthplace



Ringo's birthplace, which was, when we went, in danger of being torn down along with the rest of the neighborhood homes.



Ringo's home!



Penny Lane's barbershop (the one that inspired the lyric)



Impression of Paul's "wink"





The place Paul and John first met.



John's home!



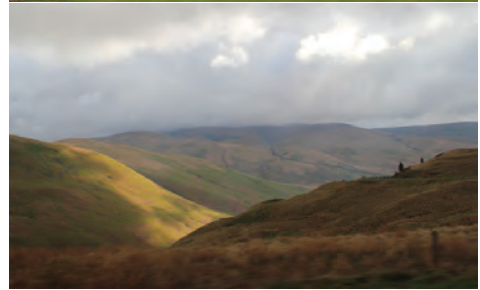
Eleanor Rigby's grave





DAY 288 (2012-05-03 08:32)

Tuesda y 24 April 2012



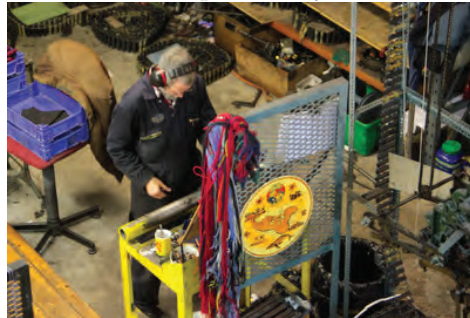
Okay getting up at 5AM from the Liverpool port wasn't fun but at least we had our guide Phil's CD of "When John Met Paul" to listen to as we drove north to Edinburgh. We passed Lockerbie, famous for its jet crash and ensuing terrorist law suit. When Dian used the roadside to "water some flowers" she inadvertently stepped in a green gelatinous mass that made a squishing sound. What it was she'll never know but it and the two dead rabbits and crow hanging from the fence were creepy enough to have her running back to the van. Nicole saw a reindeer sign

that had big antlers (unlike the more docile looking deer signs we'd seen) and someone had painted a red nose on it.

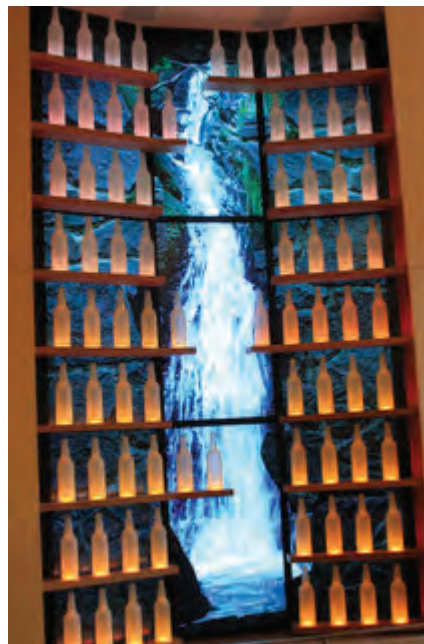


We entered the “Athens of Scotland” after a quick lunch of tuna and hard-boiled egg sandwiches plus hot chocolate. (It was great having the stove – especially in cold weather). The wee (little) parking problem got sorted (cleared up) and we managed to find street parking

right below the Edinburgh Castle. This incredible site was once a volcano and so the rocky pedestal upon which the castle sat had a medieval menace about it. Charles took care of the menacing feeling by taking the whiskey “Experience Tour”- free as a journalist. The cars each person sat in had a hologram/animation that told about the distillery process and at the end was a nice taste and complimentary souvenir glass.



Wool



worker Scotch Whiskey Experience While he was enjoying that, Dian and Nicole hiked up to the castle grounds then down to the tartan wool factory where the workers were seen at looms turning out beautiful clan tartans. We read that the Andrews name fell under the Ross clan. The Camera Obscura shop was cool and Nicole couldn't resist a flip

book animation. Reuniting at the Edinburgh Festival Headquarters Hall we were able to shake out our umbrellas and get warmed up a bit. We heard on the radio it was the wettest drought they'd ever had and a month's worth of rain was expected to fall or had already fallen in April. We couldn't talk to anyone about the weather without them either apologizing or saying, "Too bad you weren't here in March."



Before leaving the grand city we went to the Writers Museum. The three honored authors were Robert Louis Stevenson, Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott. Let's put it this way, Scottish people LOVE their native sons. Robbie Burns who wrote "Auld Lang Syne" among hundreds of other poems was a ploughman nearly up to his early demise at age 37. Robert Louis Stevenson who wrote "Treasure Island" and "Doctor Jeckle and Mr. Hyde" based the latter story on a real deacon who was hanged for immoral behaviour even though he was a pious church leader by day in Edinburgh. We saw the actual printing press that Sir Walter Scott used and couldn't help but be amused by the mannequins with voice overs explaining how the press was used.





Driving out of town we passed Saint Nigel's Cathedral among other landmarks and soon we were back "on the road again" heading towards northern Scotland. (We made it a practice to sing the opening strains of Willie Nelson's "On The Road Again" everytime we started a new day of driving albeit in a minor key sometimes). We stopped after passing by the Glen Eagle PGA Golf Course and said a silent prayer that Donald Trump would keep his greedy hands off of Scotland's property. (Many people we met complained that he had already bought up media arteries and wanted to make Scotland like America. NO THANKS!)



In the Writers' Museum We finally landed at a little gas station with a 24 hour truck stop into which we squeezed, had pasta with peas and fell asleep to the coming and going of four

wheelers. Charles, God bless him, went into the cafe part of the gas station and sorted photos till the battery on the computer got low.



Highland

Cattle



Wednesday 25 April 2012



Typical. The truck stop outside of Perth was serviceable and as always we were glad to have a restroom nearby first thing in the morning. We bought coffee and Charles fixed the glove box then off we went to the Tay Forest where a famous battle had taken place and a soldier leaped across a gorge at Killcrankie. With intermittent showers and sun we headed towards the Dalwhinnie Distillery where we became members of Friends of the Classic Malts Club. This meant that after tasting three whiskeys (Nicole and Dian were not very enamored but Charles liked them), we were given “passports” listing about 10 other distilleries in Scotland – mostly in the north – where we could go for FREE tours and tastings. We also got a nifty pin and certificate.



Some enjoyed the tasting more than others.



We stopped at the information center just outside of Inverness and met John, a very helpful and knowledgeable attendant. He gave us an idea of what the weather up north would be like as well as calling the camp we wanted to stay at to make sure they had Internet. Nicole commented, “You know what? I like the weather.” And it was a good thing since the storm had left Inverness drenched. The campsite we pulled into was under water and Darryl at the gate said there were only a couple of places that were safe to pull into. (He was from San Francisco!!!) So we parked on a scruffy patch of gravel and hunkered down for the afternoon. After awhile the desire to catch up with family by Google Voice prompted us to walk a quarter of a mile to the Beefeater Restaurant where we used their free WiFi to call home. We caught up with Grandmother and Grandad then Charles worked with the credit card company on a false alarm while Dian and Nicole went back to shower and fix dinner.



As usual Mr. Andrews was eager to EXPLORE the town so he and Mrs. Andrews bundled

up for a foray into the "Capitol of the Highlands." Leaving Nicole to have some time alone was a good idea and Charles and Dian hit the jackpot with their musical search.



With umbrellas of no use in the gale Charles and Dian noticed almost all the locals were hatless, umbrellaless and even jacketless. Meanwhile the six layers they had on presented a problem after entering the Hootenany Pub since they had to stand in the warm room with no place to set all the layers. They shared a beer with a nice gal named Rose who told them about another pub with music and since the trio of two fiddles and an accordion were slightly underwhelming they headed to The Sellions for good traditional Scottish music.

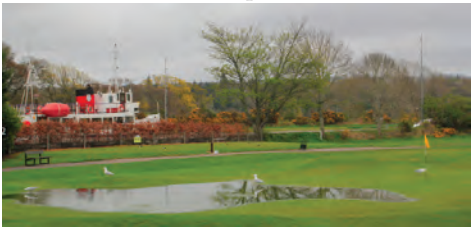


Inverness With a voice like a booming angel Charles and Dian had the pleasure of listening to Kenny Jameson play his guitar with his backing band of accordion, drums and bagpipes. The pub was packed and a nattily dressed octogenarian sat in the front row playing along on the boudhran (drum). After being whisked onto the dance floor a couple of times for some promenading and do-si-doeing, Dian was asked to sing. She pulled out an old girl scout favorite called "Wah Saw The 42ND" and lo and behold Kenny knew it! Suffice it to say the response was good and even the older gal patted Dian approvingly. Staying till last call they had a nice

chat with the drummer before heading out into the cold to catch a taxi back to camp.



We've spotted 'er!



DAY 290 (2012-05-03 08:36)

Thursday 26 April 2012



He's got the keys



Again. Typical. Charles and Dian returned from their Inverness evening out by cab at 1AM. It was funny when the driver asked what kind of music they'd heard and after they replied, "Traditional Scottish military songs" he said, "I'll take Neil Young." We arose the next morning to a little bit of sunshine and were pleasantly surprised when the owner of the camp, Mr. MacDonald said, "No charge." This was because Bught Caravan Park had basically been underwater and our pitch was just a scruffy bit of gravel high enough not to be affected by

the storm. Nicole gave “old MacDonald” a bag of some candy we had and he gave her three leather bound calendar holders with cool flat ballpoint pens. He also said how it was a while since he’d seen such a pretty blonde American – but in a nonoffensive way.



Photo by Dian We pulled out at 12:30 PM and headed for the grocery store to buy provisions for the trek up north – ALL the way north to John O’Groates. On the way we stopped at a thrift store and found a wonderful wool blanket. We also stopped near a gas station to observe a man named Mr. MacArthur (yes a relative of General MacArthur) working with his 106 varieties of daffodils. He also flirted with Nicole. Dunrobin Castle was just closing but the kilted man let us in to see the fantastic gardens full of mazes and interesting shrubs right near the ocean.





A new purchase from a charity shop (along with a much needed woolen blanket) Clynesh distillery was on our “passport “so we decided to stop there. Unfortunately the tours were over but we were able to have a taste of three whiskeys. The east coast of Scotland was full of Broom also known as Gorse, farm houses, sheep, sheep and more sheep. We also saw a real Carnegie library (one of the few still in existence in the U.S. is right at the bottom of our hill in Ocean Park).



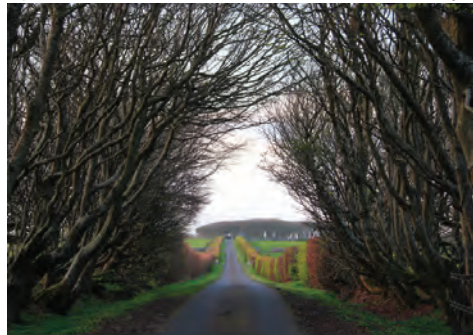
At 7:45 we arrived at John O’Groates, the northern most town in Scotland where we could see Norway from the beach! The Orkney Islands were right in front of us. We arrived at a campground near the town of Thurso just after the gates were closed so we slept in the adjacent parking lot.



Just about as far on the big island as you can get.

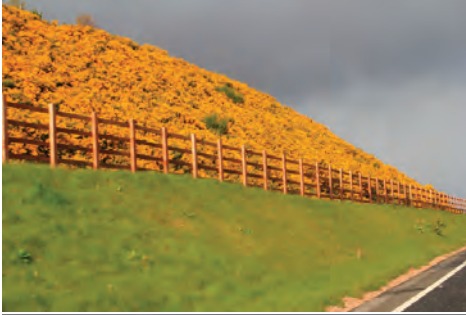


We drove by the Castle of Mey, where the Queen Mother used to take her holiday.



Castle of Mey And now some nondescript, generally beautiful shots of Scotland landscape:







Thurso

DAY 291 (2012-05-03 08:36)

Friday 27 April 2012



With your permission this blog will be a Kerouac style stream of consciousness entry. Slept warm under orange, wool, English made, Alzheimer charity shop blanket. Passed the nuclear reactor being dismantled near the Vulcan Ministry of Defense sign and new wind turbines nearby. Eggs and two pounds in the honest box but a dead fox hanging from a fence like a beacon to other predators not to harm the sheep. Rain brought us to a B & B/café/gift shop. Bought musical apron for whiskey bottle then leek and potato soup – homemade by Jon. He and his wife Anna came into the café while we were eating carrot cake and invited us to stay and use the Internet. Nicole played “It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels” by Kitty Wells on her iPod. Snow flurries started

and ended and despite the warning of snow we packed up at five to continue around the north west coast corner of Scotland.



Hold your tongue!



Dian, Jon, Anna and Charles



Before we left we gave the generous couple a painting Dian had done and they treated us to beverages. We gave them the .5 euro thirty second tour of our van and off we went to downtown Tongue. We some how got tied up in outer Tongue so never really held or bit our Tongue. (Try saying that five times in a row for a real...oh you get the idea.)



As we drove through the pristine wilderness STUNNING views of snow clad mountains

and blue ocean met our eyes. Nicole said, "If you haven't been to the northwest coast you haven't seen Scotland." Ian, the fisherman who checked us in to the camp in Scourie agreed with her. He was heading off on a six day fishing trip with his crew even further north where they would find monk fish and prawns. We had chicken dinner with potatoes and corn on the cob overlooking the Atlantic.



The worst it ever got in
Scotland, weather wise.





A trash bin, a phone booth, and us.





DAY 292 (2012-05-03 08:37)

Saturday 28 April 2012

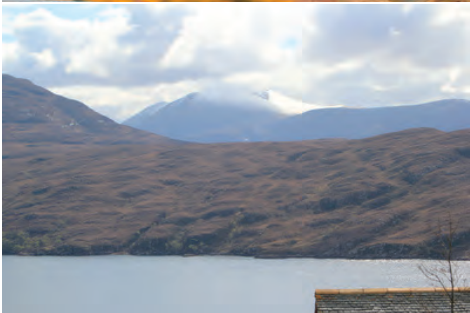


Just checking up!



With apologies to the Irish (of whom Dian and Nicole are a part) this is a joke we heard in England: "Alright lads we're outnumbered four to one, we've got to go out there and hit 'em with all we've got!" said the captain. The

one Irish lad and all the other English lads went out and there was a wild battle with mayhem and blood everywhere. Pretty soon the captain noticed the Irish lad smoking a cigarette under a tree. “What’s this all about? Why aren’t you out there fighting!” The Irishman replied, “I killed my four.”



We were still reeling from the stunning views of the day before and all of us agreed it had been a great day. After a Scottish sausage and mushroom omelette with hot chocolate we did

a load of laundry and had hot showers before finally pulling ourselves away from gorgeous Camp Scouri at 1:45. We thrilled to the sight of a large formation of geese flying overhead and honking their song of eons here. Sheep and seagulls mingled their voices in what sounded like a fond farewell as we drove out of town. We had to stop at an old woman’s house and buy a packet of oak smoked salmon (they’re famous for it here) before pulling away from Scouri and heading down the west coast to Ullapool. On the way we saw a bald man with a briefcase hitch hiking and knew of course he was the murderer/escaped convict we’d heard about through Jon at the B &B in Tongue – “He’s reported to be heading to Scotland.” (It’s interesting to note that the gallows humor DOES alleviate tension – not that we were really worried.)



Entering Ullapool



We

pulled into Ullapool, the beautiful seaport town that even had a tall ship and was having an art fair. We chatted with some of the artists and bought a card painted by a woman whose house we could see across the bay. Another kind woman found the local newspaper and showed us that there would be live music that evening at the Argyll. We parked in a big lot and walked over to the restaurant/hotel and put in a reservation for that evening.



Another

artisan



The smallest car we had ever seen (right).



A couple of hours later we were sitting in front of Martin Stevenson eating haggis with Drambuie sauce along with two delicious soups. He's quite the talker and storyteller and when he mentioned being in Albuquerque, off we go! We got to chatting, you know? He said when he landed there for a concert in Santa Fe (except his guitars went to Phoenix), the first person he met, the taxi driver, was from Liverpool. That may have been where he picked up the bolo tie he was wearing, a New Mexico thing but never seen in Europe. The charming entertainment by the generous Martin (he gave us his three CDs) and his accompanying musicians Chippy and George made for a delightful evening, just the kind

this music-loving family cherishes.

When they started off on a long vamp on "Freight Train," we got a good idea of what kind of music we were in for, and the quality. It's been fascinating to see how many European musicians are totally enamored of American music, and how many (not many) get far enough into it to be able to pull it off credibly, not just the right notes (that's fairly easy) but the right spirit, the soul of the music.

Chippy played stellar guitar all night, and George, well, George was this rather mysterious character, sitting "on stage" with hat pulled down low but resisting pleas to pick up a guitar and join in. Seems he had quite a history, making videos for Stephan Grossman, hanging out with Bob Marley and John Renbourn (who played in Ullapool three weeks ago – oooh noooo! – Charles has been wanting to see him live for 40 years).

When Martin spent a loooooong time talking with a fan, an intent bearded guy in yellow rubber boots who squatted right in front of him, Martin pretty much giving him a guitar seminar right there while the rest of us stared into our beers. It signaled how loose this gig was, and what a generous spirit Martin has. We loved him as a performer, an entertainer, so he had our free rein to be himself, wherever that went.

By 9:30 the pizza was delivered on stage, and Martin had his dinner. The show was supposed to start at 9. George picked up a guitar and vamped during pizza time and showed impressive, wistful chops. Around a quarter to 10 the set finally gets under way, with "Long Forgotten," and he stops at the end and announces, "Hi, my name is Martin and I'm an alcoholic.... 17 years sober." He gets some applause but he interrupts, "No, no, if I was in California you'd all respond, 'Hi Martin!'" and he grinned huge. Martin Stephenson grins a lot. He seemed to be a man who enjoys life immensely, and that was borne out in some intermission conversation Charles had with him outside.

He played to a dog at the bar whose tail was wagging furiously, a furry metronome.

He joked with a guy in a wheelchair. He did a talking vamp (he talk-sang a lot, but in other songs hit all the notes nicely) on Yellowman, Eek-a-Mouse and Sweet Bob Marley. He told Charles he looked like banjo great Charlie Poole (can't see it but took the musical compliment) as he picked one up and did a couple of songs and told stories that hinted at just how knowledgeable he is about American roots music.

He asked Dian and Nicole to sing a couple tunes and they responded with an original they wrote on this trip, with Robyn in Greece, "Food and Love," then really brought the house down and plastered an even bigger grin on Martin's face with their gorgeous arrangement of "Blue Bayou." We stayed till the last bell then walked back to our van.





Haggis on the left



Martin



Chippy and George



DAY 293 (2012-05-03 08:37)

Sunday 29 April 2012



We've been so close we've seen each other in all lights from picking our noses to picking our guitars. Before we pulled out of Ullapool we took a moment to take a photograph of Nicole's six original greeting cards she had created the day before. She declined to be photographed with them in her "onesie." It was sunny when we drove through Badcall and we joked that that was where bad refs went to retire. Nicole wondered if there would ever be a call for a drive through church with "to go" communion. We all knew that was unthinkable but sometimes a punchy mood and a bit of cabin fever caused our imaginations to go wild. We

saw many people in Tartan skirts (women mostly) walking to church in the drizzle and that was where Nicole got the idea for "take away wafers." Another reason we were trying to keep things light was that there were no gas stations open and we were on empty! Finally after about five false tries, we filled up our tank and bellies (Charles bought ice cream), overlooking the loch in a town not too far from Portree which was rich in war memorabilia and statues and it was easy to see why the white-haired tourists enjoyed the bus ride to thosesights.





Your typical dumpster labels in this region.



We crossed the Skye Bridge and entered the beautiful Isle of Skye. The drive up to the northern part and looping back down was wonderful and we decided that with the goal of getting to Loch Ness by evening we would cut out a further investigation of the island. Charles vowed to return someday and do a thorough drive around. As we drove over the Skye Bridge and hit the mainland again we were getting a pretty fair amount of rain.



"Wish you were here"



We arrived at Loch Ness Campground at 7:30 and with a glass of wine to unwind we sat outside in what had become COLD wind but no more rain. Soup and couscous with string beans was consumed while

Charles read from Mark Twain’s “The Innocents Abroad” and Dian debuted her original song dedicated to her shipmates.



”Highlander” was filmed at this castle



It was cold.



We spotted Nessie!



DAY 294 (2012-05-03 11:07)

Monday 30 April 2012



Since we hadn't gotten up at 4:45 AM with corn flakes and driven to nearby Fort Augustus, we missed seeing "Nessie" (this was how our campsite manager had instructed her children when they were young for a guaranteed sighting of the monster). It was just as well since Nicole had risen at 7:30 to sort photos on the computer taking advantage of the electricity included in our camping price. With the Loch a stone's throw away, we lingered a bit to enjoy the magnificent view. After showering in the nicest restrooms we had encountered (wood panelling, real glass doors, air tight rooms to change in and HOT water), we packed up and headed out of Loch Ness. While Charles filled the tank at the gas station with diesel, Nicole did an impromptu clogging dance to a Kitty Wells song and had Dian cracking up as she groped for the camera to capture the moment on video. She did.



All along the 50 mile drive down to Fort William we saw snow covered mountains – the last of our majestic highland views. Since our dear Scottish friend, Frances had recommended the town of Stirling (and her other recommendations had turned out to be sterling), we drove there by way of Loch Lomond. Of course the guitar had to come out for a final version of "On The Bonnie Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomond" and a final goodbye to Scotland with "Auld Lang Syne." The departure was capped with the last of our oak smoked salmon overlooking the loch. As we headed for Edinburgh we really weren't sure where we were going to find the Beltane Festival. All we knew was that it was on Calton Hill. Luckily our GPS had a listing for that and we drove there fairly directly. Upon arriving in the area we learned from a friendly policeman who was setting up barriers that we were close to the festival site and learned from another friendly local that we could park on the street and only have to be out by 9:30 the next morning. Perfect! As we looked out our windows we saw a group of volunteers gathering outside an apartment so we went over to them to see if we could volunteer. They were enthusiastic after hearing we had come from California but then realized the "health and safety" regulations would

need to be adhered to. They told us who to go see and so we hurriedly gathered our warm clothes and umbrellas and climbed the steep stairs to the top of Calton Hill.



Ivan, the photographer we met



There we found John Wilson, one of the event managers who kindly informed us that due to fire retardants needing to have been sprayed on our clothes it was too late to help out. He did, however give us a wonderful overview of what we were going to witness complete with an Eddie Izzard/Craig Ferguson style delivery which lasted about 10 minutes. We were given his permission to do a walk about which gave Nicole a chance to shoot some pre-show photos. We met another student photographer named Ivan with whom we ended up spending some time chatting while eating our haggis and chips and fish and chips. He was quite interesting and had grown up in Bulgaria. We also met a woman from Boston who had stayed after her tour group left so she could experience the pagan rituals of Edinburgh's 26 year old Beltane Fire Festival. We were starting to get really excited as the actors began to walk around in their costumes and make up. There was an unmistakable vibe of magic in the air and the cold mist added to

it.



Thankfully, Nicole's photos tell the best story of our experience but suffice it to say it was a real slice. After greeting the re-birthed Green Man and his May Queen at the bonfire, we walked down the hill to our van and turned the heater on full blast. Happy Summer!!!





DAY 295 (2012-05-03 11:08)

Tuesday 1 May 2012



It was the first day of summer (according to the pagan tradition) and we were fresh from the Beltane Festival experience that remarkably had left none of us worse for wear. The night before we had stood in the bone chilling cold with wind whipping at our backs and mist coming over the top of Calton Hill but NOT ONE OF US HAD A RUNNY NOSE!!! We had met Jay and his sister Claire at the Beltane Bonfire and they had recommended we visit the National Museum of Scotland. It was a perfect place to spend the morning and it was free Ffff-ruh-eeee! We enjoyed seeing "Dolly" the first cloned sheep as well as many other interesting exhibits in that fantastic museum. We stopped at a bakery for fresh bread and sandwiches then headed for Scarborough on the east coast of Eng-



land.



Along the Northumberland Coast Road we had our very last glimpses of snow capped mountains. We passed by Lindisfarne (a band Charles liked) castle in the distance and stopped at Bamburgh castle. As we were leaving Robbie Burns land we pulled out the old guitar to sing "Auld Lang Syne" one last time. There was a vintage car club

that passed us going in the other direction and Nicole got some good shots of Jaguars, Porsches and Minis. We drove through North Yorkshire and HAD to stop in Whitby. The hotel with Dracula on the front lawn caught our eyes so we asked the owner if we could take our picture with him - the vampire. The hotel owner was very nice as was his friend from whom we learned the Goth Festival had just happened and we missed it. Dang!



Many young English couples used to nip up to Scotland to get married at an earlier age than was allowed back home.



We saw over 50 of these babies



We drove down to the slightly eerie seaport and old whaling village of Whitby where Bram Stoker had drawn inspiration for "Dracula." The hearse parked near the harbor and the black roses on the park bench plus the jaw bones of a blue whale framing the castle ruins on the hill added to the weird feeling.



Whitby

local



The next town was Scarborough and Dian explained to the camping and caravan managers that she had learned the song "Are You Going To Scarborough Fair" as a

child with her mom playing the piano then later with the Simon and Garfunkel version. When she and Charles left with another spot to look at for camping, the manager said Dian reminded him of Joni Mitchell (second time someone had said that). As we pulled into the free camping place right across from the beach we met Steve and Sylvia who were also camping and they assured us the bathrooms were clean and we shouldn't have any trouble parking there overnight.



Whitby



Wednesday 2 May 2012



Steve, Sylvia and Dian



The whispered tip from the camping caravan guy turned out to be a great one. We awoke to the sound of the surf right across the street and clean, OPEN restrooms. Our new neighbors, Sylvia and Steve came over for an impromptu harmonizing on “Scarborough Fair” and with a VaVa CD as a parting gift to this genuinely cool couple, we drove off. The arcade/Coney island feel of Scarborough was appreciated and we took pictures under the sign (though there was no Fair that day).



Farm and town signs with unusual names were written down for future use. These included: Potter Brompton, Scagglethorpe, Kirby Misperton, Flaxby Coneythorpe, Wilfred, Muckles and Foolfoot. We listened to radio stations with good (finally) music for our taste including David Bowie and Jet. We witnessed a fender bender in the parking lot below York cathedral so decided not to brave the parking scene there. Further along in Harrogate we stopped for lunch in a residential area with beautiful mansions. The town had a lovely large green park at its entrance but again too many NO PARKING signs.





Whilst Dian was in the back looking over the maps she discovered that Shakespeare's birthplace was pretty much on the route we were taking to Glastonbury. The group consensus was unanimous and we programmed James (our GPS) for the slight detour.



Stratford-upon-Avon was well worth the hour we spent there. Being late in the day we parked at a bus (called coach) parking

lot and went to the home that has been preserved where William Shakespear (no "e" on some documents) was born and raised. In the gift store we bought some Shakespeare related items and as we looked out into the garden we saw two thespians practicing their roles. Since we had opted out of taking the tour we approached them with that piece of information but said it would be great if we could get a photo of them decked out in costumes. They not only complied but asked if we would fancy a short excerpt from one of Shakespeare's plays! Since Nicole had been in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" we asked for that and before you knew it a scene in Shakespeare's backyard was being performed for us. It surely couldn't get much better than that! It did though as Marco and Charlotte gave each of us either a sprig of rosemary or a flower from the garden with a salutation in Shakespeare's olde English.



Shakespeare's birthplace





Leaving the town at about 4:30 in the afternoon got us to our friends in Glastonbury by 8 with a short meal break of chicken noodle soup and grilled cheese sandwiches by some woods. It was raining lightly as we pulled into our old parking spot across from Ravi's house. Soon Ina and Richard joined us from their house and we sat down to a feast of roast turkey, potatoes and peas. We caught them up on our adventures through Wales and Scotland but couldn't persuade them to follow their original plan to visit there since the weather forecast was so bad. We called our cousin in Phoenix and had a good chat with him but missed reaching Grandmother, Grandad and Aunt Monica. Later though, Charles was able to reach them and friend Joel.

DAY 297 (2012-05-17 05:35)

Thursday 3 May 2012



Street art in Glastonbury Nicole walked with Richard to the fruit and veggies store and got some salad ingredients plus some soda bread (thoughts of Grandad's home baked soda bread came to mind). We all spent the drizzly day working on various things. Dian caught up on about five blogs, Charles and Ravi booked the ferry to Calais and Nicole hung out at Ina's house adding photos to the blogs so they could be posted. Ina was at work. Charles also helped Ravi make beer by adding sugar and finishing the fermenting process.



Slaving over the blog! After a quick - and from what Charles and Dian heard - a VERY quick drive to the store for dessert ingredients, Nicole and Richard made chocolate dipped strawberries with whipped cream while Dian made pesto, pepperoni pasta and salad. Dian gave Ina a green suede shirt that had been hers and it was a perfect fit. Ina gave

Nicole, Dian and Charles a classic children's book called "The Tiger Who Came To Tea." Dian gave Richard and Chris some Simpsons memorabilia and they seemed pleased.





The finished product! After dinner some of our group played Boggle – can you guess who won? And others played music and sang till about 10PM when Dian, who was slightly under the weather, said goodnight.



Photo by Dian



DAY 298 (2012-05-17 05:36)

Friday 4 May 2012 Dian gave Ina a green suede shirt and Ina never took it off! We got all caught up on the bla bla blog Right after Dian had bragged that she hadn't had a cold the whole trip, she got one. Ina made delicious vegetables and chicken while Charles contributed his famous "twice baked potatoes" for dinner. Afterwards Chris and his girlfriend Hollie and Richard and Nicole went out to a pub where they hung out and played pool.



When the house was empty we listened to Ina play some classical pieces on her piano. She sang along and it was lovely to hear. Just before bed she made Dian a nice cup of hot lemon water with honey. And that, dear reader, is the joy of new found friendship.

DAY 299 (2012-05-17 05:36)

Saturday 5 May 2012 Cinco de Mayo and Rosey Reed's birthday! Although Rosey has passed on, we felt her presence and knew she would have LOVED all the adventures we were having. Dian made chicken noodle soup and Ravi helped Charles screw the panel on our sliding van door in place.



We hugged Ina's sons goodbye then followed Ravi's white van to the ferry in Dover. Along the way we had a Stonehenge sighting from the road (we'd all visited there) and noticed a road sign for Windsor Castle, Legoland and Ascot Racecourse. After stopping to stretch our legs and have a free Starbucks sample at the halfway point, we continued the last two hours enjoying NOT having to navigate but simply following Ina and Ravi's van to the port.



Our van, their van By 7PM we had arrived in Dover (those white chalk cliffs) where we made dinner and ate together in their van (more spacious by nearly 10 inches at least). Finally it was time to board the ferry. We got our passports stamped and even though their van was waved over for a security check – looking for guns from British citizens only – we all got on with no problems. Soon we were sitting in comfortable chairs on the top deck and after a smooth crossing we arrived

in Calais. (Ina had graciously bought Dian a Daisy Duck Pez dispenser at the duty free shop). With many times driving to the secret place near the ferry called Sangatte, Ravi unerringly drove us there where we parked right next to a sand dune overlooking the ocean. Sleep came quickly. (By the way, Charles figured that we had traveled roughly 10,000 miles based on odometer readings in Dian's journal). Wow!!!

DAY 300 !!! (2012-05-17 05:37)

Sunday 6 May 2012



Sangatte, France was beautiful and Dian bundled up for a beach comb. The constant ferryboats crossing were fun to watch but sadly the beach was full of scum from the polluted water. After a leisurely awakening the Happy Trails Gang called Dian's dad's cousin Jerry, whom we had stayed with in Brussels just to say we were passing through Belgium. We had decided to see Bruges and Jerry wished us well and said he would see us in San Pedro in June. Leaving our friends was bittersweet but we exchanged some gifts (a hand woven Somerset scarf for Nicole and a Neptune's Tavern Book and abalone shell that had been found in Morocco for Ina and Ravi). We said our farewells then headed to Belgium as they headed towards Luxembourg and Germany.



Seashells or chocolate?



Chocolate or...





When we arrived in Bruges we were of course tempted by all the chocolate shops but opted instead to treat ourselves to Belgian fries with mayonnaise. Good decision. A minor miracle occurred when Charles leather hair tie dropped and we had to retrace our steps but lo and behold a half hour later we found it on the ground. We ate our ham and cheese sandwiches near the church square then Dian and Nicole went in for the last few numbers of a harp concert given by Luc Van Paere. It was wonderful and he even sang an original composition accompanied by the Celtic harp.



We left the handsome town of Bruges and drove

on to Holland where we found a truck stop adjacent to a 24 hour gas station and that is where we had our vermicelli and salad with Moroccan Argon oil plus a sip of port to celebrate 300 days on the road.

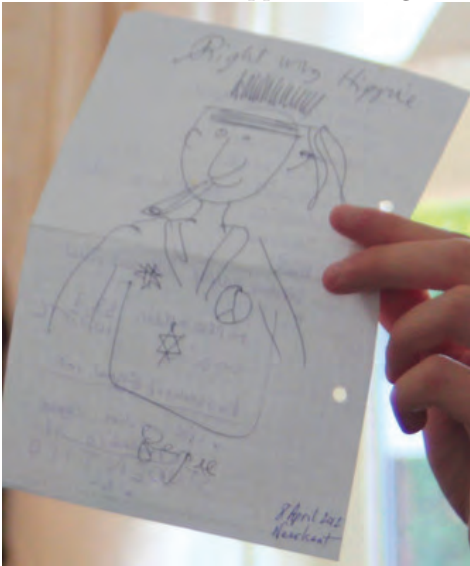


DAY 301 (2012-05-17 05:37)

Monday 7 May 2012



Our "conservative hippie" drawing of Benji.



Just as we were about to pull out of the truck stop two trucks loaded with cows pulled up. Luckily we didn't have to listen to them all night (or smell them). We headed up to our friends The Smalhouts in Amstelveen and by 1:30 we (the Beverly HillHippies as Deborah newly dubbed us) were in their driveway again. No sooner were we in the door than Deborah had delicious Dutch cheese sandwiches ready with cappuccinos for Dian and Charles (Nicole hadn't submitted to the allure of coffee and it was just as well).



A little shout out to Dian's swimming partners back home



We decided to trade in Excalibur for a fresh set of wheels





After Herman came home from his dental practice, he let Charles drive his BMW convertible to the garage for a quick fix. Benji, took Dian and Nicole to the mall where Dian bought a natural hair dye. Deborah was taking care of details for a family member's funeral and Paulo was not yet out of school.



Paulo and Nicole at Genki's



They treated us to an all you can eat sushi restaurant in Amsterdam and we were all stuffed when we left. Dian hopped on the back of Herman's motorbike and met the rest of the group at Benji's apartment. We enjoyed looking around his bachelor pad and then we drove or rode back to Herman and Deborah's.

Tuesday 8 May 2012



No longer a blonde, Dian had enjoyed the experience but decided to go back to her original “roots”. Her mother, brothers and sister plus niece and nephew were all red-heads and Dian (with the help of hairdresser Tara) joined them with a deep auburn shade. Both she and Nicole got trims and eyebrow shaping and it was fun to be pampered.



Deborah approved of the transformation and announced that Dian was “a woman again!” Yes, life on the road doesn’t always lend itself to tight clothes and make up but it’s fun sometimes to get dolled up and Dian did. Deborah took Dian to a couple of consignment stores while Charles bought groceries for an Andrews dinner.



We made chicken, vegetables and roasted rosemary potatoes and the whole family gathered in our honor again. The sister of Deborah who lived nearby was picked up by Herman to join us for some music and dancing after dinner. Since she (“Carola” as she likes to be called) has Downs syndrome , her capacity to grasp all that was happening was limited. BUT she really got into the singing

and even led Charles, Dian and Nicole in a line dance to Dolly Parton's "9 to 5." Somehow, the joy she expressed made the rest of us feel happy and when Herman took her home at 11 we all had grins on our faces.



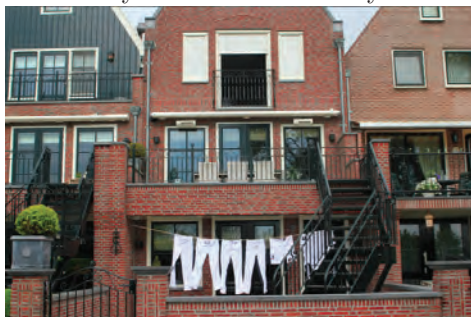
Paolo's plate. No, there aren't any vegetables, and yes, there are eight pieces of chicken there.



Paolo, Dian, Herman, Charles and Deborah

DAY 303 (2012-05-17 05:38)

Wednesday 9 May 2012



Vollendam was the seaside town Deborah and Paulo took us to for eel sandwiches and bitter ballens. We found a humorous dentist and patient statue that we just HAD to get for Herman at one of the shops and it turned out he loved it and said he would put it in his office. Walking around Nicole got extremely close to a great blue heron (her aunt Monica's favorite animal totem) and got some close ups of it's face and "pony tail". The town had some wonderful singers who became famous but still chose to live there. There was a longstanding reputation for good house cleaners that came from there and in the old days, fish (actually fish were still caught, especially eel.) It was a very charming town and afterwards we drove to a farmers market Deborah had heard of for groceries.



Dinner was delicious pasta with Bolognese sauce made by Deborah whose father had been an opera singer brought up in Italy hence the culinary prowess with an Italian meal. We chatted and then some went to bed early while others stayed up all night. Guess who?!





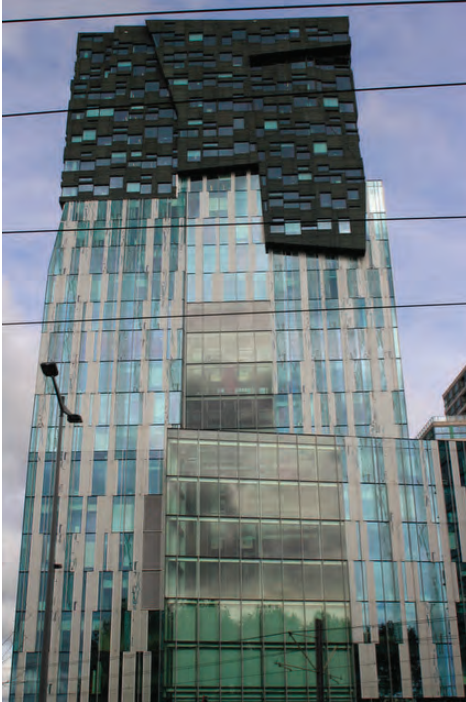


Folks getting the scum eaten off their feet by little fish. They have paid for this experience.





At the organic local market Herman opening a gift we bought him

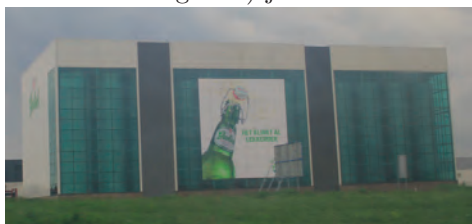


DAY 304 (2012-05-17 05:39)

Thursday 10 May 2012



A long day of driving was ahead of the Happy Trails Gang and leaving Deborah and Herman our kind hosts at 11AM was just about right for getting us to Germany around 3PM. We entered that beautiful country again and were waved through by the border officer. On the A1 we had NO SPEED LIMIT but of course that didn't affect us much except for spinning around like a water bug when some sports car sped by. We kept driving till evening and went through a 3.1 kilometer tunnel under the Elbe River then got gas (approximately nine dollars a gallon) just outside Denmark.



Beer factory! One of Charles' favorite With chicken soup and yummy sandwiches made by Deborah for dinner, we slept near another camper at a truck stop and listened to Charles read Mark Twain aloud.



We saw BOTH our vans on the same road - at least we thought so - our old one (above) and

one almost exactly the same as our current one (below).



Friday 11 May 2012



Three countries in one day - Germany, Denmark and Sweden! We got up at 9:30 and Dian and Nicole both had head colds. Not fun. We stopped in the last big town in Germany called Flensburger where we stocked up on beer and other provisions before entering EXPENSIVE SCANDINAVIA. (We weren't alone, all the other cars were packed to the gills with soda and beer).



ing into the tun-



nel

Surprisingly, Denmark seemed to have the highest speed limit we'd seen, 130 km/hr (about 80 mph), and in some places no number registered on the GPS - no speed limit? Ah, those reckless Danes. We crossed two long bridges between Nyborg to Korsø in Denmark then another one to Malmö, Sweden from Copenhagen. It was windy when we crossed the second bridge (saw a large bird attempt to fly, stop still in the air and get blown back to its perch) and with no buffer from trees or shrubs it was difficult to keep White Rabbit/Excalibur in its lane. Charles did a masterful job. We ended up watching a late sunset at a gas station parking lot where we could have hooked into electricity but didn't see it until the next morning. We ate a late dinner and had a bit more Mark Twain then hit the hay.



DAY 306 (2012-05-17 05:39)

Saturday 12 May 2012

Could it be? Our final country was about to loom on the horizon...Norway - NUMBER 30!!! Yes, we entered the wet and spectacularly gorgeous country of Norway at about 2:15 PM, having driven straight up the northern half of the west coast of Sweden from our parking spot near a gas station south of Goteborg. Since both Nicole and Dian were still not yet healthy we decided it was best to take some inside the car time and charge right through to the fjord country northwest of Oslo, without stopping and walking around in either Goteborg (save it for the return trip) or Oslo (save it for after the fjords).

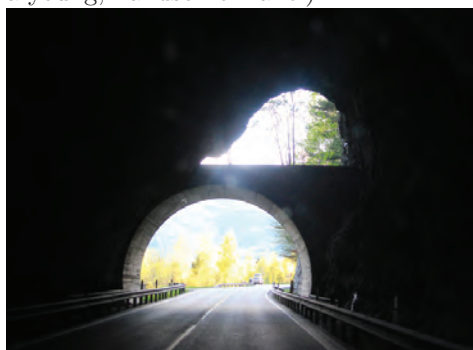
The southeast corner of Norway was unremarkable, flat and green and turning to forests. And, surprisingly, a little messier than most places we'd seen across Europe. But we saw only that one road.

We called Laara, the daughter of our good friend Colleen, with whom we stayed for several weeks in Piegario, Italy when we reached Oslo at 4, and told her we'd catch her on the down side, in time for the big Constitution Day celebration 17 May, and chatted easily with her, charmed by her ready laugh. She said if we got back by the day before the big holiday we should spend the night at her place - nice! and convenient - and we kept a-rollin'.

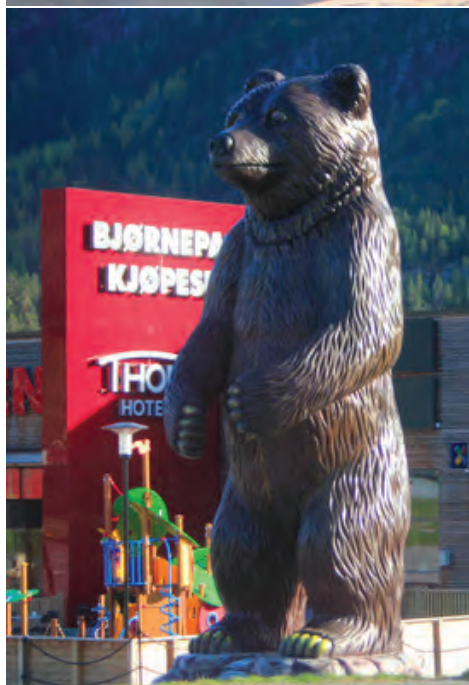
We followed the side of a huge, long lake and it got a lot more interesting, with snow covering the mountaintops and us wondering if we were going to see it on the road. (Yes, a little, by the side). We saw campsites every five kilometers! - actually not good, because they were expensive, and that didn't leave much open road for us to pull off on our own on that back road. As we headed as far as we could (without falling prey to rolling cabin fever), up the beautiful Hemsedal Valley, we came to the little namesake town, a real ski resort probably packed in the right season but pretty deserted in May, and asked if we could sleep near the gas station and were told

yes, no problem.

As we wheeled around to choose a spot a young man stopped his white VW campervan ahead of us and Charles rolled down the window and got the conversation started off warmly with, "Nice car!" Our fellow Westphalia enthusiast was named Mattias and after satisfying his curiosity with some questions about our car and journey and coming over to look at the map with us to give advice for nice things to see, he asked where we were staying that night and when we said "right here," he said "naw, why don't you come park behind my place, it's just up the hill, you'll have a better view and use of the facilities. I'll give you a key so you can come in whenever you need to." Hoping for the best, we accepted the offer. And finally, one of Dian's cherished travel scenarios came true: someone we met on the road, a complete stranger, took us home. (Probably added to the mix was that he was a young, handsome Dane.)



Tunnel with a hole





Norway's

playful



When we got to his driveway we were struck by the magnificent sight of the looming snow-capped mountains with their ski slopes, through the tall pine trees. His girlfriend Katja came unexpectedly around the corner as he was showing us up the stairs, and said "Oh! Hello! What have we here...?" We thought Mattias was about to get into a little trouble but it turned out he is active with VW camper groups and often invites travelers to stop by and stay at their place, sometimes

remembering to tell Katja, sometimes not. She asked him rather playfully, "So – how long have you known?" and Charles rushed to Mattias defense – "Five minutes!! Really!" So she fell right into step, all smiles and fine with it ("... of course!") and asked if we were staying overnight, offering a spare bedroom in their roomy, neat, mountain cabin-style upstairs apartment. We opted to use the bathroom but not the beds, and Katja insisted we come up for a nice breakfast the next morning, made all the more enticing because it would be Mothers' Day (at least, stateside - not in Sweden, where she was from). We chatted a while about their life there, why two people from different countries would come to a third to live, and the short answer was, snow, great snow, for two people who love skiing and snowboarding. They looked at Canada and a few other places, but settled on Norway where they got jobs easily, she teaching kindergarten and he working with special needs students and later with tourists (when he later took a farm job working with calves, he said they were much easier), all positions qualifying them for large government subsidies on their housing, and other benefits. They were paying next to nothing for their beautiful spacious apartment with the million-dollar view, and just got the keys to the three bedroom home they had applied for, at only \$160/mo higher than the apartment. Even though neither were now working at those government-favored occupations. Most pay around 30 % income tax in Norway, they said, yet many get subsidized cheap housing and everyone gets free schooling through university degree, complete health care, six-seven weeks paid vacation, and so on and so on. Even Danes and Swedes covet the benefits of Norway's system, much of it financed by their rich oil and gas deposits which were NOT turned over to corporate interests for obscene personal profits but instead maintained as a resource of the people of Norway, for their benefit. All the electricity needed by Norway's four million people is generated by water power, so virtually all the oil and gas is sold on

the international market and that goes in government coffers. Gee – we have such a better system in America, don't we? Aren't you fellow Americans glad Exxon makes \$4 billion PROFIT per QUARTER and your price at the pump keeps going up, up, up...?



Llama farm (but not Mattias' farm)



A GIANT trailer park



They were going to a birthday party late that night, even though Mattias had a job working on a farm with early hours he said he loved it. "I hug the calves when I feed

them, it's so nice, so... romantic..... when I'm not shoveling manure." We turned in by 10:30, even though it was still very light out.



Charles, Dian, Katja, Mattias, and Nicole (behind the camera, of course!)

DAY 307 (2012-05-17 05:40)

Sunday 13 May 2012



Our card for the couple Mothers Day was memorable for Dian and for Charles and Nicole it was pretty nice too. We started the day at 8:45 with a lovely breakfast laid out by Katja which included bread and hard Norwegian bread strips, great cheeses, cucumbers, tomatoes, cream cheese with chives, kefir, raspberry jam, honey, Turkish yoghurt, cereal, tea, milk and coffee. Wow! It turned out Katja, a kindergarten teacher, loved making breakfast but Mattias usually wasn't that hungry. We were.

After chatting with Katja about the life of a Swede and a Dane in Norway, we got down to the celebration and Nicole gave Dian a book by Sasek called "This Is Edinburgh" to add to her collection of his children's books on Paris and New York. What a perfect gift for Mother's Day and how expertly Nicole and Charles had kept it hidden from Dian. Then Katja pulled a bunch of wooden posts out of a cloth bag and placed them precisely all over the floor and introduced us to the Viking Game, or Kube, making sure we knew that the last throw required bending over and throwing it backwards through your legs. We loved it and resolved to look for one when we drove back through Sweden, since she said it was big there but hard to find in Norway.



The breakfast spread



Katja explaining the game (photo by Dian)



The "king" piece (Picture by Dian)



We went for a hike with Mattias and Katja to a gorgeous waterfall nearby that we wouldn't have found on our own. We took their dog Seco too, who hunkered way down in trepidation when crossing the shaky wooden footbridge. (Mattias told us he had to carry him across the first time. And he's a big dog.) The craggy mountains surrounding the area we were told are known as the Scandinavian Alps. When we got back to the twin white vans we all crammed inside for a bit of the Beatles "Norwegian Wood," with Dian and Nicole harmonizing and Dian strumming. We said goodbye to our new friends and they said they would follow the blog.

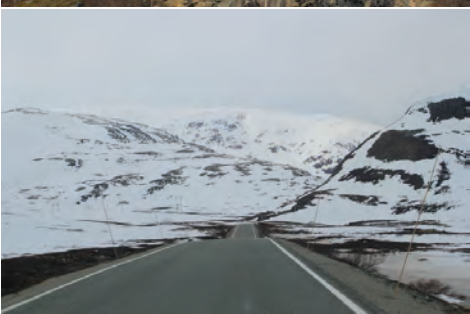


Mattias and Katja told us this was somewhat of a local attraction because of its tree-roof



It is typical in Norway to have a roof with moss and grass on top, but not usually full blown trees. The houses we saw were all beginning to have sod growing on the roof (and sometimes trees). We also stopped at an over 800-year-old STAVE church (stavkyrkje).

It was pitch black and indeed the black covering the old wood was pitch that kept the wood from rotting, for nearly a millenium. We drove along the historic route and Nicole confirmed the area was a bona fide "Woodey woo!" We read some postcards with Viking Rules and saw cherry trees that were just beginning to blossom. Brace yourselves, there are many pictures to come.





For our friend, Mary Bergen



Nicole and the stave church



We had to cross on the ferry, about 20 minutes, to get to the north side of the big fjord, and when Nicole and Dian asked Charles to look at the receipt and see how much it cost and he said 125, they freaked!

til he quickly explained that was kroners, about \$25. We walked around the little town of Laerdal, where we saw many people in colorful folk costumes, just coming from church services. We ran into some sleet and after a few tunnels we came upon our first unobstructed, spectacular view of Sognefjord which was turquoise blue. If it weren't for two pretty inaccessible fjords, in Greenland and Antarctica, this one would be the world's longest (205 km) and deepest (1.3 km). Charles wished we had "TROLLhouse" cookies to celebrate Mothers Day but instead he and Nicole gave Dian a 15-minute massage. Then we pushed on. It was raining lightly (or liquid sunshine as our friend Gretchen calls it), a tough, narrow road, sometimes one lane, and after getting tired of picking our jaws up off the floor over the constant succession of turns in the road revealing yet more endless scenic wonders, we decided late in the afternoon to take a shorter road down rather than the much longer scenic route. Just short of the ferry back to the other side we found a pull-off with a fantastic view of an arm of the fjord that looked like a very big lake, and we had spaghetti with sauce and a salad with pears and homemade garlic croutons. We called Grandmother to wish her a Happy Mothers Day (using the cell phone - a splurge because there was no Wi-Fi for miles) and turned in at 10 (it was still very light out, and the sun would be coming up around 3 AM).





Trying to get her to smile



Locals

And more locals



Our first view of Sognefjord

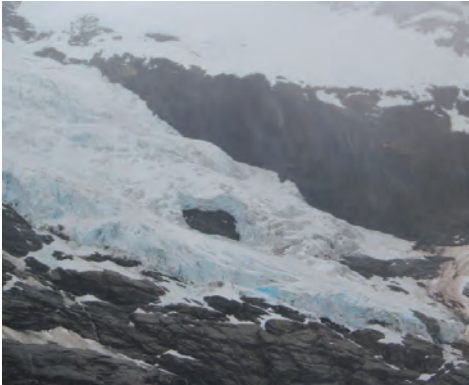
We had Spaghetti Bolognese and looked at photos from the fjord that Nicole had captured.



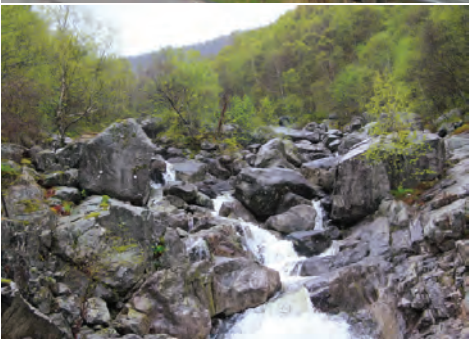
The wind was so strong it
made the metal railing moan



Excalibur, taking the cold weather quite well



So cold the ice was blue





Bologneeeese



Guess what time it was when this picture was taken? If you said 10:30 PM you'd be correct

DAY 308 (2012-05-17 05:40)

Monday 14 May 2012



On the ferry



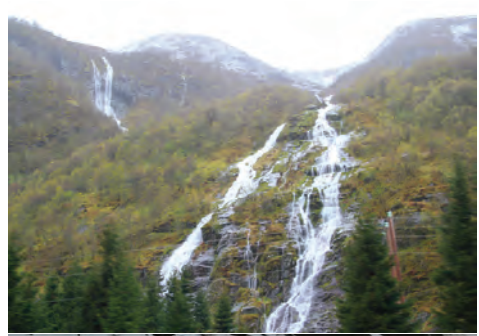
Farmers protesting outside in the rain



We

had slept at a beautiful pull-out spot near a camper with a couple who seemed to be saying the area was okay to stay in (we weren't sure since they didn't seem too willing to come to the door), and slept in until 10. Dian made fried eggs and hash browns and we left in the rain and overcast to catch the ferry from Lavik to Oppedal. Nicole and Dian were still dealing with colds and couldn't help but laugh at how similar their noses were to the mountains literally pouring waterfalls over their sides into rushing rivers. Once when Nicole was blowing her nose she was perplexed when she couldn't decide whether to finish blowing her nose or "get the shot." We were also coming up with lines like "Have you driven a Fjord lately?" We figured a bit of cabin fever had set in after seven and a half hours of driving. We parked in front of a fantastic old hotel overlooking the fjord and after chili con carne we played Boggle and fell asleep.





Now THAT'S a small island
on which to build a home





Not one rainbow,

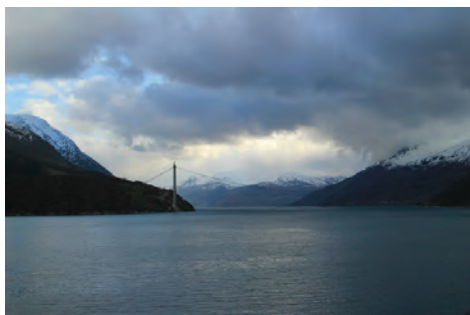


two!

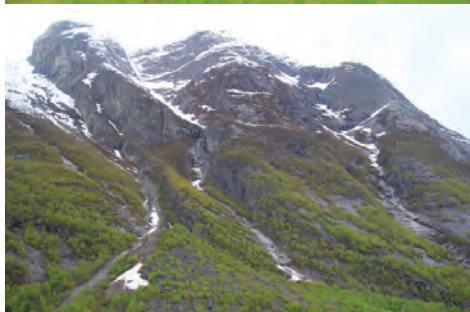
But



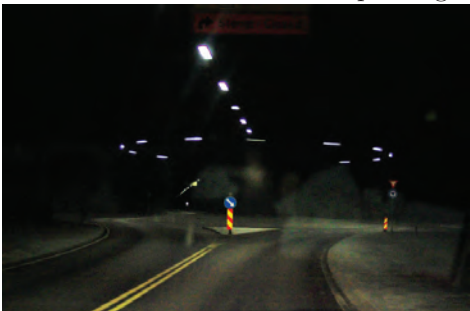
Getting fresh water straight from a stream. It was delicious



Charles getting directions from a construction worker in the pouring rain



No big deal, just the view from our camper in the place we slept



We took a very long tunnel to cut down on travel time, and the tunnel actually had a roundabout inside!





Writing notes in the Red Book



Tuesday 15 May 2012



We slept in the town of Eidfjord and were awakened by a fork lift bringing a shrub right next to our van in front of a hotel on the waterfront. Were they hinting? With the eery sight of clouds down to the bottom of the mighty mountains rising from the fjord, we left at 8:30 and nearly got into a sauna but it was closed (Dian was ready to jump into the fjord after a sauna but alas it was not meant to be). We started laughing (the only antidote to cabin fever) about a kid who introduces his dad to the "bring your dad to class day" as a mugger. "Ooh" say all the kids and his street cred goes way up but when the dad appears he has his potters wheel and sits down to demonstrate how to throw mugs. Okay, it's not funny NOW but for the third day of driving in the far reaches of Norway we were ready to laugh at anything. There were LOTS of dramatic huge rocks and breathtaking snowscapes. Pristine snow and blue skies with sunshine...finally. Almost too much beauty to absorb. By late in the afternoon it was decided that we were overloading and a decision was made to take a long tunnel rather than another scenic route.







This is a color photograph



By the time we got to Kongsberg it was 4:30 PM and we decided to stop at an ATM for kroners. We had gotten this far into Scandanavia without having to use any local cash but finally decided some Norwegian gelt would be a necessity. We called Laara just outside of Oslo to let her know we were near and she generously invited us to show up at her home anytime the next day and she would leave the door unlocked.





Charles and a puppy



Unusual architecture in the middle of nowhere



For Uncle Rick! Photo by Dian

We found parking near a marina in the tony area of Asker and chose to ignore the tractor/jack hammer behind us (which was done with the work day and drove off an hour later). Nicole made a delicious pesto pasta and by 9PM we had met the Sandman.



Sadly, our bowl broke



DAY 310 (2012-05-17 05:41)

Wednesday 16 May 2012

When the sound of many cars began at 7 AM Charles peeked out and discovered we were parked in the ferry lot, and LOTS of people were arriving all at once to take the 7:25 ferry into Oslo proper. By 7:45 the jackhammers started so he kindly drove our van to another place so Nicole and Dian could sleep a couple hours more. By 10:30 we were heading through what Charles had come to appreciate: tunnels. Especially when it rained those long tunnels were a respite from the elements. By noon we had arrived at Laara's home on a peninsula near Oslo. She is the daughter of our friend Colleen, with whom we stayed in Italy. While Laara was at her job as a photo editor for a very popular Norwegian magazine, D2, Nicole sorted photos and Dian accidentally flooded the bathroom after a bath (no damage) and Charles went out and bought some food so we could make dinner. We had a really good phone conversation with Grandmother and Grandad and got caught up with each other.



As we were just sitting down at 8:15 in the dining room guess who walked through the door? Yes, Laara had come home to find us happily ensconced in her home and about to have dinner. Perfect timing, sit down, we've got a plate ready for you! We got to know each other and found a thread of mutual ap-

preciation and love all based on our roots. It might be hard to show evidence but the root thing (i.e. being Americans, and particularly Californians) was a very strong binding force. The meal was enhanced by a nice bottle of wine and after turning in at a reasonable hour so that we would have energy for Constitution Day the next day we all said good night and tusen takk (a thousand thanks).

DAY 311 (2012-05-17 05:41)

Thursday 17 May 2012



Laara and Jonas, working the concession stand
Constitution Day! The day Norway broke away from the dominion of Sweden and Denmark nearly 200 years ago was celebrated in grand style. The 17th of May had been a destination for us to spend in Norway and we were not disappointed. We were treated to the small town of Nesodden's version of the big city, Oslo's, parades and games. As we headed up the hill on foot to Laara's son's school we saw many costumes from provinces in Norway. Old and young alike were decked out in traditional outfits that had been handed down through generations. (Interestingly no one seemed to be bursting at the seams so we gathered that most Norwegians stay fit...maybe so they can still wear grandma's dress!)





Milo is on the left, holding the rope for the banner



We found Laara working alongside the father of their son Milo at the concessions stand. Later we would be treated to a "snappy" hotdog rolled in a potato pancake with catsup and mustard. But for the moment we were happy to experience all the colors and sounds of the bands tuning up and the school kids holding banners and flags from their grades and of course Norway. Nicole was busy catching shots wherever she could and since almost everyone was decked out in their best it wasn't difficult to ask them to pose or just walk around capturing the incredible scene.





Hey, how did that flag get in there? At about 10 AM the parade started and we were on the sidelines looking for Milo who was helping hold the flag at the front of the "train." We saw the whole lineup and then the "red pants brigade" came through on top of their vans with speakers blaring and graduation "business cards" flying. Yes, the teens rented these vans and after a night of carousing, threw cards from the roofs of the customized vehicles with their names, pictures and a quote to the spectators below. Many people had to hold their ears as the 10 vehicles rolled by but afterwards they ran to the ground to "collect them all!"



Singing

folk

songs



DJ-on-a-truck, hired by the Russ kids (sort of like a big farewell at the end of high school, where graduating kids rent vans and speakers and drink beer while sitting on top of the van that goes through the parade route). The Russ kids pass out...(a little joke)...cards with their names, pictures, and "interesting" quotations and phrases.



Some didn't quite appreciate the level of the volume coming from the music in the Russ cars



After the parade families played various games like carry the potato on the spoon around an obstacle course, blindfolded wheelbarrow races, hammer a nail in a board straight and quickly, stilt walking, hit the stack of cans with a ball, gunny sack races etc. It reminded Dian of the Fireman's Picnics her family went to every year as a child. A band of local kids performed on stage and everyone ate lots of ice cream and other treats.



Children collected Russ cards after the vans went by



This gentleman made it his number one goal to get every Russ card (well, every girl's card, anyway)



A man showing his eastern European pride







Helping out in the booth





Ah, the infamous hammer-the-nail-in-straight game





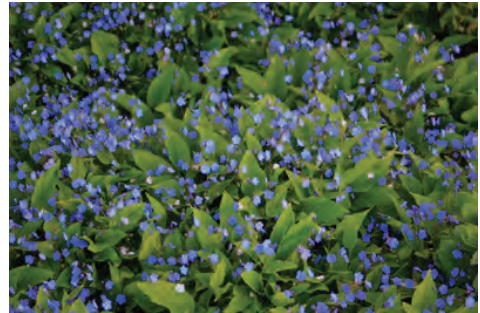
Nicole, Ronnaug and CharlesOnce we were back at Laara's, we learned that her ex had invited us all for lunch at his place down the road. We walked over and had a delicious homemade asparagus soup with various meats and cheeses and breads plus blueberry brownies for dessert (among other things like ICE CREAM). Jonas had a cool pad with lots of sunlight on the back patio and the other guests, Christina, Ronnaug and their sons Isak and Mattis - Milo's buddies - were fun to get to know during the meal.



Blueberry brownies, snagged from the dessert stand



"The lilacs bloom and summer starts right after the 17th of May", Laara told us, and sure enough we had a pleasant evening sipping wine and having a light supper after which we painted cards then fell into bed by midnight.



A portrait Laara did of Dian



Friday 18 May 2012



Dian painting Laara's table and chairs with a varnish Thankfully the 15-year-old's birthday party with thumping bass coming through Laara's walls didn't last too far into the night and we all got a good night's sleep. Nicole and Dian were pretty much over their lingering colds and so we decided we were up for a trip to a nearby island. How lucky we were to be invited to secluded Brunoya Island. We had to pull our little ferryboat over by winding a cable! The day was gorgeous and before we left we all did some chores.



More Russ buses





Dian was given a paintbrush and quickly weather proofed a table and chair for Laara's patio while Charles made breakfast eggs with cilantro, sausage and cheese. Nicole washed up dishes and Laara figured out the directions to her friends Chris and Ragnhild's house all while sweeping the floors.



We walked up to the brand new mall to buy groceries then packed Laara's car, which Charles drove. We opted to drive by downtown Oslo before heading further out into the wooded area where the island was. Dian kept a weathered eye out for a moose but no dice. (A neighbor had told her that moose sightings WERE possible).



Working for our vacation! The only access to the island was by way of a hand-powered ferry. It is in operation rain or shine.





A tree trunk going against the grain!

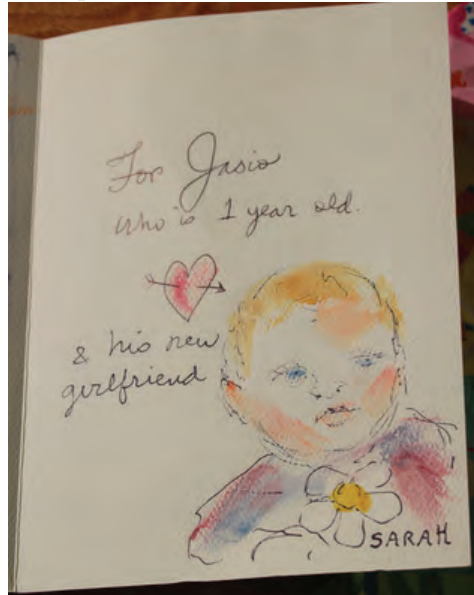


We didn't see a moose, but we did find Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. When we arrived at the island after waiting for our turn on the ferry, we still had a mile hike in front of us. Oh, what a beautiful path we took to the little house where Laara had been invited many times but had never had a chance to visit. On the way we nodded hello to a large group passing the other way and Laara, who was looking down at her GPS didn't notice it was the friends we were visiting (plus another woman, Kristine and her baby Sarah). It was comical when they all trooped back a half hour later and found us ensconced on their couch (dry, while they unfortunately got a bit wet in the rain).





The portraits Dian did of the babies:



Kristine and SarahChris, Laara and their friend Eivind all huddled together in the kitchen for a couple of hours of business talk while the Happy Trails Gang met Ragnhild's mom who proudly held her first grandchild, Jasio. Dian immediately did a sketch with water color of the two babies but having forgotten her paint brush, had to dip her finger in the coffee and then paint. The family seemed to like the finished effect though.



Nicole sketched in her sketchbook and while we were sitting in the sun (that had decided to come back out) Ragnhild's mother made waffles in two irons which were served with her homemade raspberry jam. BLISS! We were honored to be asked to sign or draw in their guest book and Nicole came up with an illustration of a Troll eating jam and waffles and Tusen Takk (Thousand Thanks).. (Laara said the Trolls in Norway can turn into rocks so we left a painted Troll rock under a tree near the pathway.)



A little troll we planted by the foot a tree



Trying to keep the candles straight was a group effort



A sort of sled used to transport groceries in the snow We left at about 5:30 for home where Laara made us DELICIOUS fresh caught cod for dinner with roasted fennel, broccoli and pesto pasta with wine. Fageddaboudit! We were definitely living the high life. After a quick call to Colleen, (Laara's mom and our friend), we chatted about LIFE then brought out the guitar for some Joni Mitchell and other folk songs that the four of us harmonized on (minus a thumping bass).



DAY 313 (2012-05-17 05:42)

Saturday 19 May 2012



Nobel Peace center Dian got up early to write the albatross, oops, blog. Seriously though you can imagine how much we tried to keep the pages current and it was a challenge. Keeping it in perspective we knew it was a small price to pay for the names, dates and memories it afforded us and hopefully the coffee table book we would print upon our return of "An Andrews Adventure."



Top row, second from the right, is Dian's hand



The most recent laureates, all women



View from the Nobel Peace center We had decided to take the ferry into Oslo and see some of the sights on our own so after taking some things to the recycling center and buying a few groceries the H.T. Gang went over to Norway's capitol and entered Alfred Nobel's Peace Museum. There was an exhibition and guided tour on Afghanistan, the three current women who had won the most recent prizes and a very cool "garden" of interactive flowers with photos and quotes from the speeches made by the past Peace Prize winners. We spent about two hours there and found it absorbing if not somewhat disturbing. The photo journalism of the conditions in Afghanistan were graphic and difficult to see but raised the awareness of our group as to the plight of many (especially women) in that country. We purchased some

things in the gift store then walked across the port area to the fortress which housed the Nazi Resistance Museum. Unfortunately it had closed but we found a lovely tourist information center that gave the history of the fort and the fierce resistance efforts of the Norwegians against Hitler back in the 1940s.



We decided to take the 5 PM boat back and who should be at the entrance but our lunch mates from the day before Christina, Ronnaug, Isak and Mattis. They had just come from a children's film event and so we sat with them for the crossing. We all bemoaned the high expense of a day in Oslo and in Scandinavia in general. All the prophesies were true. We did the best we could with picnics and not eating out but the transportation was still very steep. We took the bus back to Laara's street and Nicole made her famous burritos with guacamole and rice. Laara grilled some chicken that was a nice addition to the menu. Charles pulled some beers out of our van and we played music and then fell into bed.



Talking with Christina



Isak and Mattis Back at Laara's.



DAY 314 (2012-05-21 01:00)

Sunday 20 May 2012



View from ferry



Laara, Nicole and Charles



Ingunn (right) showing us the book she wrote and illustrated about her son. We caught the 9:40 boat to Oslo and opted to sit outside on the ferry and drink in the beautiful weather. Sitting next to us was a children's author and illustrator, Ingunn Mossberg, who, after sheepishly denying her accomplishments, confessed she was actually sitting on one of her books at that moment and showed us her charming work.



City Hall exterior. Many locals distastefully call it the "brown cheese" building, but we appreciated its WPA-like artistry.



Our next, and very important, stop was the Nobel Peace Center, where Dian finally had the glory of receiving her own "Nobel Peas Prize." We bought chocolate gold coins in the shape of the Nobel prize to give out to the grandparents' friends back home.

Close by was the famous City Hall, but when we got there there was clearly a closed event happening for droves of people in traditional garb flooded into the building with tickets. We found out from someone it was the Humanistic confirmation ceremony. A woman came up to us a few moments later with the one extra ticket there was, so we each took turns looking inside not only at the glorious and colorful murals, but the people whom they represented. At this time Laara left for a business meeting, and Nicole and Dian read about ancient Norse myths that were displayed in wooden carvings outside the City Hall while Charles stayed longer for the beginning of the ceremony. He got to see those being confirmed parade down the stairway and he heard the choir sing a song.



We took a trolley to the flea market we had planned to see and enjoyed looking around the various stalls of clothes, records, knick knacks and more. Charles surprised Dian with a fairly old Daisy Duck comic book, and he got some old coins from North Korea and 1930s Russia along with a tin to protect the Nobel Peace coins from melt-



ing.
Trying on a bit of antique armor



Lots of good people watch-
ing at the flea market.



That's almost as bad as some Welsh words!



We weren't the only ones with the idea to try the helmet on.



We're home!



Laara and Eivind



"I love Oslo" and other such street artworks sprang up after the tragedy that occurred on July 22nd 2011





Laara and her business partner Eivind met up with us at the flea market and we ate our sack lunches with ice cream as a surprise treat. Eivind took off and we boarded the EXPEN \$IVE trolley (\$25 for the three of us, good for only one hour) to Vigeland Sculpture park, home of the famous 212 bronze and granite statues created by Gustav Vigeland, representing different experiences and stages of human life. The statues were quite evocative and captured human nature very realistically.







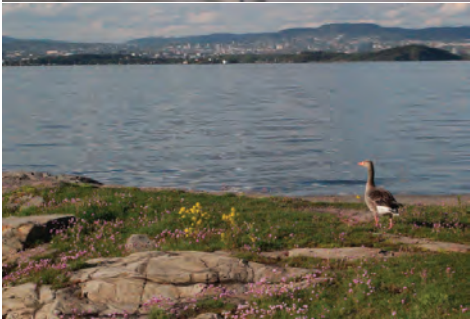
Laara pointing out her office
 Leaving the park, we stopped by Laara's office at the magazine for which she works (D2), and got to look out on Oslo with a different view than we had gotten before. Feeling a little low on energy we took the ferry home, but only briefly rested before going out to a seaside restaurant. Laara

treated us to a glass of wine at this favorite summer beach spot. Although it wasn't necessarily "summer water temperature" for some, Dian and Laara jumped in the water as a welcome to summer. We played Boggle afterwards and made a pit stop at home to make frittatas and pack firewood and blankets for a dinner-bonfire on the beach at another favorite spot of Laara's. Meanwhile Laara stopped by to see her son Milo.



The

office



One...



Two...



Three!



It was a long, unassuming trail to the water past residential homes tucked away behind trees and hillsides, but it was so worth it when we got to the shore. Nicole and Dian went beach combing for glass shards (and did not come back empty handed, to say the least) while Laara and Charles started the fire. We ate and watched the sunset, then sang a few songs on guitar before going home for an early bedtime.





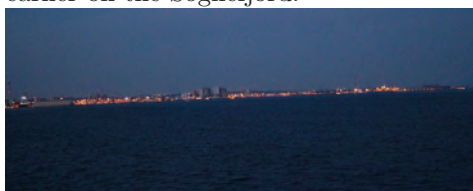
DAY 315 (2012-05-25 23:54)

Monday 21 May 2012

We arose fairly early to say goodbye to our new friend Laara who needed to be at work and had to catch a ferry. By 1 PM we had cleaned up and packed the van and were ready to head to Goteborg in Sweden.

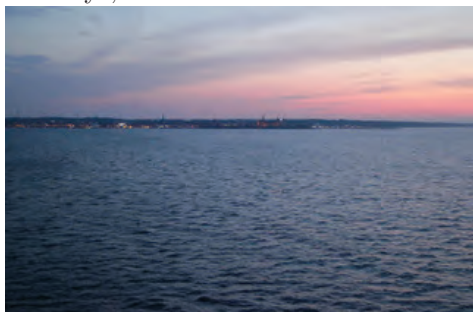


We all looked at each other in short sleeved shirts and sandals and just laughed to think how freezing cold we were only a few days earlier on the Sognefjord.



Goodbye,

Sweden



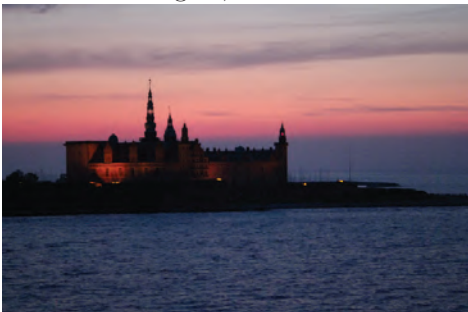
Hello, DenmarkBy 2:45 we had entered Goteborg, (our second time), since before we had only driven through on our way north. The place we found to park near the river had a breeze and we stayed to cool off for half an hour but decided not to search for more permanent parking. (Have we mentioned that that aspect of car travel is intimidating and sometimes off-putting? – since there are so many signs, often in another language, and restrictions to figure out, with expensive fines.)



Pictures of the Danish royal family on ferry



We caught the ferry to Denmark around 8PM and ran up the stairs to see Hamlet's Castle across the channel. What a beautiful sight! Kroneberg Castle inspired Shakespeare either in person or from stories other thespians told him of the castle on the sea. His "borrowing" of an old Danish story about a son who pretends to be insane in order to kill his father was expertly set in his own time, and perhaps he gave credit to the original legend, or didn't. At any rate we found parking near the castle, had Chinese sweet and sour sauce over rice, then tried to go to sleep while a man with the headlights on in his car pulled up right in front and facing us, sat till 1 AM.



The castle



DAY 316 (2012-05-25 23:54)

Tuesday 22 May 2012



Yes, besides the car pulling in and facing our van for more than an hour, past 1 AM, with lights on and engine running, did we mention we were about 25'/8m from the commuter train tracks? Oh, where's our peaceful comfy Holy Toledo Hilton? ... all in the name of a year's worth of travel – and we were fine with it.

The last to get to sleep, Charles woke at 7, took a stroll to check out the neighborhood and found a parking lot just around the corner within walking distance of the castle, four hours free parking, so he moved the car. We were in Hamlet's hunting grounds way before opening time at 11 but fortunately everything but the chambers inside were accessible so we got to spend a leisurely hour+ strolling the grounds and the ramparts and the moat paths, the courtyard and the beachside area, where Charles no sooner started fantasizing out loud about ancient warships landing on that very beach than Nicole pressed a button on a short metal kiosk there and got several minutes of recorded

dramatic reenactment – so unexpected and really fun.



Gargoyles in storage



Kronberg castle, with a sister castle on the eastern shore, controlled for centuries the

waters through which much commerce had to pass to northern Europe. The Danish kings collected a passage fee and became very wealthy and powerful. There's more, but we don't often recount all the history here, and more often we don't know it all. The old no Wi-Fi thing. Yes, we would probably appreciate more some of the things we'd seen with more background info, but we'd done our best. We found a lot of treats by popping into tourist info offices, asking locals and fellow travelers, checking out postcards, and so on.

At the end of our Kronberg time Charles finally let the others know of the surprise he told them was coming: he had decided to use part of his birthday money gift from Dian's parents to celebrate a week early and take them on a canal boat tour of Copenhagen, followed by some of the famous open-faced sandwiches. With big smiles we headed down the road to the Big C, only 40 minutes south.



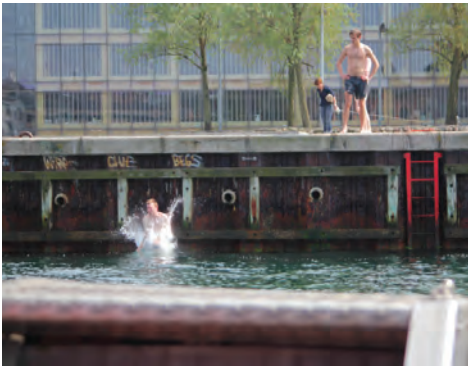
On the way there we read about the changing of the royal guard, in their really tall really fuzzy black hats (made of bear!) and sharp blue uniforms, that happens just once daily, at noon. We GPS'd straight to Amalienborg castle, found parking right around the corner and made it just in time. They marched

across town for half an hour and the changing ceremony, spread far over the vast castle courtyard, took another 20 minutes, so we had plenty of time to take it in and get some great photos and videos.



One of the royal's shuttle boats, which blew steam out for us





The Little Mermaid statueWe drove not far to where the canal boat tours left, parked and picked a good'n, and climbed aboard to meet our guide Josephina, who spent the next hour dispensing history and anecdotes and ducking, sometimes head to knees, to avoid being decapitated on the low bridges. We loved cruising way out into the big harbor, past the royal yacht with its sharp white-uniformed sailors in waiting (for the prince), the new dramatic opera house, the even more dramatic "black diamond" (great singles spot, J said) and of course a stop to see the famous Little Mermaid statue... from the back. But we knew not to expect much (she's very small).



Our guide, Josephina and the captain



These sailors couldn't wave to us because they were standing at attention, but they still subtly waved their hands behind their backs at usInteresting to hear from Josephina that famous son, Hans Christian Andersen came to the big city to join the famous Danish Royal Ballet, but failed because "He was too ugly." That seemed harsh but hey, that's

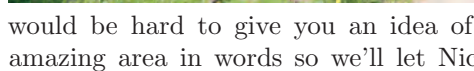
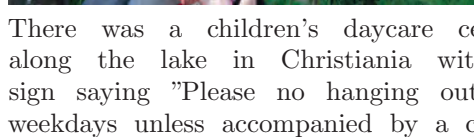
show biz, and when he turned to writing we got "Thumbelina," "The Little Mermaid," and (hmmm) "The Ugly Ducking." Look up a rendering of ol' Hans – even from the back row of the theatre he would stand out.



The great fun of our tour turned sour as soon as we got back to the car to find a parking ticket on the windshield. Even though we tried to be careful and use common sense, read the signs as best we could, and shelled out 45 kroner (nearly 8 bucks) for a voucher from the automated kiosk which was displayed in our window, we violated a 10-meters-from-the-corner rule (that was illustrated and explained in Danish on the SIDE of the kiosk, not the front where everyone stands to pay, and not on the other two sides splashed pink with advertisements). 510 kr = \$85/68 Euros! Thanks for the welcome,

Denmark/Copenhagen. You know a Dane should know better or at least be able to read the kiosk warning, but how about a little slack for a visitor's car with out-of-country plates, who was obviously trying to follow the rules by paying the expensive kiosk fee? Or.... maybe foreign plates were targeted? We waited for a while to see if the meter person would come back around and maybe we could talk to them, but finally decided to push on and go see Christiania, the bohemian part of town we had heard so much about.





A street artist at work

There was a children's daycare center along the lake in Christiania with a sign saying "Please no hanging out on weekdays unless accompanied by a child"

It would be hard to give you an idea of this amazing area in words so we'll let Nicole's

photographs do most of the telling. It's a huge area, crammed with tiny homes decorated outrageously, tiny shops selling everything including exotic selections of hashish and pot (no photographs allowed there), and even a big lake so hidden we kept walking past it until someone said, "Yeah, it's right behind me, go up the steps then down again." Art everywhere! A real feast for the senses. The area grew up in the late '60s, then.... never grew up. Europeans seemed blasé when mentioning it but we found it a living breath of fresh air in a continent crammed with cathedrals and museums honoring the distant past.



After we got our fill it was time for those open-face sandwiches but we hadn't passed any place that had them, so Charles headed out on a hunt. He went many, many blocks with no results till finally someone directed him to a terrific bakery that did not have them but had an employee who thought she knew of a place three blocks away, and bingo! She was right! But bummer, they were closed. Charles spotted a young man in the back working so he banged on the window and finally got his attention. When he came to the front door it took him a good minute of key twisting and banging with his fist and finally a serious waist-high kick before he got it unlocked... just to hear what Charles wanted to ask.



Turns out he was very gracious about selling half a dozen of his finest and even threw

in an extra "for taste." In scarily expensive Scandinavia, the seven sandwiches plus a baguette of good dark bread came to only 88 kr, \$14-something. Charles finally marched back to the van triumphantly carrying his prizes, we grabbed some libation from the nearby shop- (a tall Carlsberg Elephant for the sandwich hunter) and headed off two blocks away to the canal area to join all the locals celebrating the good weather by dining on the canal.



People brought picnics, tables with glassware, even small barbecues; families, large groups of friends, young, old, singles, lovers of all stripes (two tall thin very young very very blonde skater-types; one young female couple who were particularly striking, both gorgeous, nicely dressed, one Asian brown and the other African black as midnight), people lazily cruising down the canal on small boats. We settled onto one of the benches provided and enjoyed our special repast while also watching a man working on his beautiful masted boat in front of us. Drop down into that scene and you want to move there in a flash (ignoring the draconian parking punishments, if you can).



Having had enough of the evil side of Copenhagen we decided to hightail it out of town and drive south toward the ferry that would take us to Germany and our new friends Heinz and Luzie and doggie Don, Germans we met on the beautiful beach at Tarifa, Spain, on the Strait of Gibraltar, who said, "Please come visit us if you're in

the neighborhood,” and so we were. Not far out of Copenhagen we decided to stop, both drivers being tired from a very long day, and found a rest area for trucks and pulled into a far corner for the night.



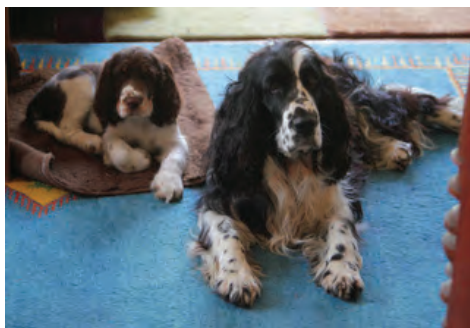
Wednesday 23 May 2012 We caught a quick breakfast before leaving the truck stop for a ferry to Germany. The breakfast was ordinary for some, a bit more unusual for others. Nicole had the second and last pack of dried seaweed her grandparents had sent her from the home country in the last big package, and she savored every strip. Then somehow the topic of the truffles from Port were brought up, and Nicole decided to have one of hers!



And with that we left perhaps one of the last truck stops we would stay at, and stowed our things for one of the last times. We were becoming more aware of some of these "lasts" as the adventure wound down (say it ain't so)!



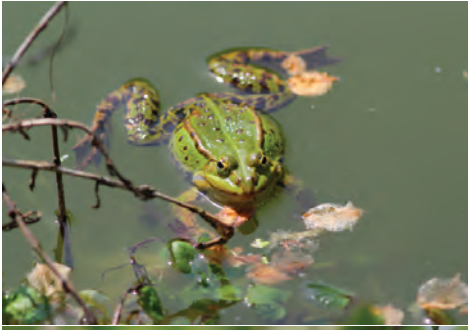
Don



Fred and Don We arrived on German turf at noon and had little to no trouble entering Lensahn, where Luzie and Heinz lived. We were greeted by their smiling faces, two happy dogs, Don, and Fred (their new puppy), and a beautiful garden fit with chirping birds, two ponds with hidden frogs, and glorious sunshine. They gave a tour of their house that used to be a farm (actually, still kind of was when they bought it over 20 years ago). Heinz showed us his workroom, and we then understood how he could have handmade so many improvements to the house.



This picture does not do justice to Heinz's incredible organization skills, for on the whole the workroom was very neat. Along with woodwork there was a plethora of handcrafted goods made by the couple, including mugs, plates, paintings, sculptures, photographs and more. Nicole laughed at the fact that there were high definition pictures Heinz had taken of snakes eating tadpoles and such located directly opposite the bed. Sweet dreams! Heinz offered to let Nicole use any of his telescopic lenses to which she readily accepted.



Icelandic

poppy

Leap

frog?



Luzie had prepared a delicious lunch of spaghetti bolognese and salad, which we ate outside in the garden. Afterwards Dian napped by the pond, Charles chatted with Luzie and Heinz while observing Don and Fred frolick, and Nicole tested out one of Heinz's excellent lenses.



A dandelion



Upon waking, Dian painted a piece of wood to look like a watermelon then went on a walk around a nearby lake with Charles, Luzie, Heinz and the dogs.



Dinner was a great spread of various cheeses, meats, wine, beer and olive bread. Nicole and Dian sang some songs and Dian presented the couple with the last copy of "Neptune's Tavern", which she sang for them as Nicole turned the pages. They were very grateful for the music and book, and Luzie was even inspired to bring out some stories she had illustrated for her kindergarten class, based on already existing children's songs.



Heinz surprised us all with a few photos he had printed of Nicole and Fred in their backyard earlier that day, and Luzie gave Dian a whistle she had made to look and sound like a cuckoo bird (they being avid bird enthusiasts, this was a very cool gift to

get). Weren't *we* supposed to be the guests bearing gifts? They had already given us so much!



DAY 318 (2012-05-25 23:56)

Thursday 24 May 2012

Luzie had two classes to teach at the kindergarten in the next town so Nicole and Dian decided to join her. Charles and Heinz stayed home to keep an eye on the puppy, Fred and his big brother, Don.



Photo by Dian



At the school Dian and Nicole participated in Luzie's music class with the 4, 5 and 6 year old kids. Each class had about 10 children who seemed very excited to have Luzie there and jumped right into her curriculum. She handed out homemade ceramic cuckoo whistles and told each child to play the 2 notes on his or her whistle a few times and the rest of the class would count. One child had Nicole and Dian plus the rest of the class cracking up as he went "cuckoo"(or pretended to be) and kept going way past the number of whistles the other kids had played. When a cuckoo version of "duck duck goose" was played Dian and Nicole each got to have the egg placed in their hands behind their backs and had to run around the circle. Luckily they both made it back to their place without getting caught. There were participatory exercises that included drawing and you

would have thought Dian and Nicole were kindergartners themselves as they happily sprawled on the floor with the others and drew the Cuckoo Bird from a photo. Finally the mother/daughter team was asked to sing "Down In the Distant Forest I Hear A Cuckoo Song." A standing ovation was received, no wait, that was recess.



Luzie, Nicole and Dian stopped at the post office for the last postcard stamps to be sent from Europe then headed home. The delicious meatballs Luzie had prepared were served at dinner - what we would call lunch - (their largest meal of the day) along with rice, tomatoes and cucumbers and pesto sauce. Heinz left for a bit of physical therapy for his elbow while Dian painted a piece of driftwood she had found to look like a barracuda. The pond erupted in frog choruses from time to time, birds swooped in and out and the puppy was always rough housing with his brother in the glorious backyard.



Choosing a cuckoo bird



Photo by DianAt 3:30 PM Luzie strapped her backpack on, said her goodbyes and walked to catch the train to Carlsrud to visit an old friend for a few days. Just before she left Dian's originals with Nicole singing harmonies were recorded on Heinz' camera then transferred to the computer. The bathtub was a popular destination for each of the Happy Trails Gang (individually) since throughout the year showers had been prevalent but bathtubs not so much.



Heinz served octopus from Spain (yummy), sausages, many varieties of cheese, pesto, tapenade, bread with horse radish and wine or beer.



Napping After dinner, Dian, Charles and Heinz added up the columns of trip expenses from Dian's journal. Charles used "mental math" and Heinz used a calculator sort of like John Henry the Steel Driving Man's race against the steam-powered drill. Charles did very well and we got a clearer picture of how much we had spent on things like museums/sights, ferries, tolls, camping, food, souvenirs, parking and metros. While Nicole had a chance to Skype with her dear friend Ariana, Charles, Dian and Heinz sipped wine downstairs and discussed different breeds of dogs. It was amazing how little trouble we had communicating and that reminded Dian of her family in Dresden.



Heinz and the dogs



The spread

DAY 319 (2012-05-25 23:57)

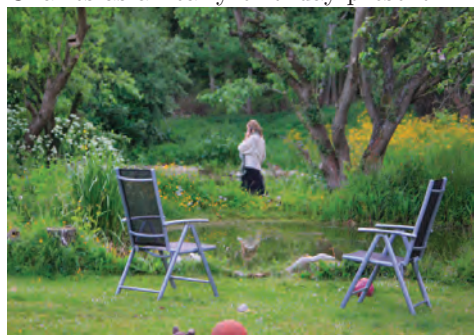
Friday 25 May 2012



The morning began with breakfast by the pond and some explanations by Heinz about the flora and fauna in the backyard. Nicole and Dian went for an electric bike ride and even though they got separated, they met up again at the house none the worse for wear. We all went out to buy some souvenir pistachio butter then came back for a delicious meal of herring, onions, sausage, pesto, cheese, tomatoes and rolls. We called Luzi and caught her up on our comings and goings.



Saturday 26 May 2012 Our awakenings were staggered, so Dian was the first to discover Heinz shooting frogs with his camera. Not wanting to disturb his subjects by possible barking dogs, she went to town to check out a thrift store and book store Heinz had told her about, though he poo-pooed the idea of the thrift store, saying they were hardly ever open and it wasn't a place where she would find good things, but Heinz did not know the full capabilities of our family's thrift store combing skills. She got quite a booty which included among other things a deck of German MAD Magazine playing cards and from a local bookstore, a 1980s guide book to Southern California, which she gave to Charles as an early birthday present.



We all talked to Luzie on the phone. Don and Fred's friend Paul came by with his master, and Heinz left with them all for a walk. He came back to find Charles and Nicole eating breakfast (can you still call it breakfast if it's 1 PM?), and joined them until Dian came back. Heinz asked when we were thinking of leaving, and we said Sunday, to which his face fell a little and he paused, then said, "Oh. So soon?" It made us all laugh and Heinz smiled, too. He left for the store shortly after and we watched the dogs.



To give you some perspective, this flower was from a tree at least 30 feet high



While Heinz prepared what was to be yet another delicious dinner of spaghetti bolognese, cheeses, herring with tomatoes and chives, and of course beer, we three went for a walk around their lake with Don and Fred. Dian and Nicole shared the load of carrying the big lens while Charles took charge of the dogs. Before leaving on the walk we looked up at the darkening clouds worriedly but Heinz calmly stated that it wouldn't rain until we got back. Sure enough, not five minutes after our return, a 10 minute downpour started as suddenly as it stopped. Nicole and Dian walked through it and admired the sunshine still present despite the strong rain.

Dinner was delicious, as always, but we got another present even before we ate. We had

all taken turns saying thanks before the meal the past few nights, so Heinz declared it was now his turn. He thanked us again for coming, that we had been great company for him, and he even got a little emotional when he said he really didn't think we would follow through with meeting up with them when we first met in Tarifa. We were all equally grateful for the new friendship.



You wouldn't notice it from the pictures, but we were constantly being bombarded by swarms of gnats





As if this wasn't enough, after dinner, Heinz asked us if we had a small amount of change. We were a little confused, though we could see a slight smile formed across his face, so we brought some change. In return we were each handed a Swiss army knife. The change needed was from an old German tradition that said whenever a friend gave another friend a knife, the recipient would have to give the friend some sort of repayment so it wouldn't seem like they were cutting off their relationship. The money made it more of a business transaction than a gift or an omen.



The dinner spread (spaghetti bolognese hidden by flowers)



Sunday 27 May 2012



Heinz setting up the lens



Can we get a witness? Can we get an AMEN?! We had to "testify" to the incredible kindness, of our new friends Heinz and Luzie. Their insistance that we not do any chores, make any meals or pay for anything but just relax in their home was above and beyond the call of duty. Hallelujah! After setting out a huge breakfast with ham, wurst, cheese, rolls, brown bread, coffee, raw ground pork with onions and juice, we began to pack up. While Dian was stowing some gear in the van Heinz appeared at the door with a wicker basket full of provisions including biscotti, rolls, sausage, jams and about six water bottles. As he and Luzie put it, "We know how it feels to be out camping on the road." We took some photos of each other out on the back porch then bade farewell to Heinz who waved back at us till we rounded the last bend of his street.





By 11AM we arrived in the once important trade route town of Lubeck. We encountered a statue of a man who looked like an old California prospector but was actually Johannes Brahms, who had visited Lubeck. The canals and winding streets through the hills reminded us that just about every town with a large source of water had something special about it. This one had marzipan. We followed Heinz' recommendation and peered at hundreds of confections all sculpted and decorated out of almond paste. Charles couldn't resist an early birthday rum ball which he generously shared while we listened to a violinist street musician. We also listened to the low toned bells that struck at noon and kept going for a half hour. Nicole decided she HAD to have a vanilla ice cream and so she bought one near the canal and old towers. The towers were listing towards each other due to being built on marshland. Inside there was a nice museum.



Look crooked? That's because it is



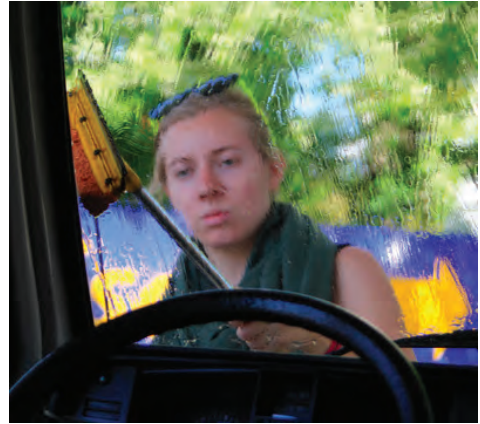
Local guys doing a push up contest downtown



When we returned to the van it was so blasted hot that we had to roll down the windows - (no AC). When we got rolling Nicole shouted over the wind, "I'm going to miss yelling in the van." On the autobahn the Sunday crowd snaked for 30 miles of stop and go traffic...ON THE OTHER SIDE. Thankfully we sailed right through Germany, entered Holland and were at Roos and Henri's house by 6:30 PM.



Over cocktails in the back yard Charles opened his "mail" as did Roos and Henri. They each received a box of See's candies compliments of Grandmother and Grandad. Nicole also received two letters and we enjoyed the sunset while catching up with each other. After sampling some of her chocolates Roos excused herself to begin making dinner while Henri started the barbecue for chicken satay. (Can we hear that AMEN??!)



At first unaware of her being photographed doing her window washing duties



Ah,

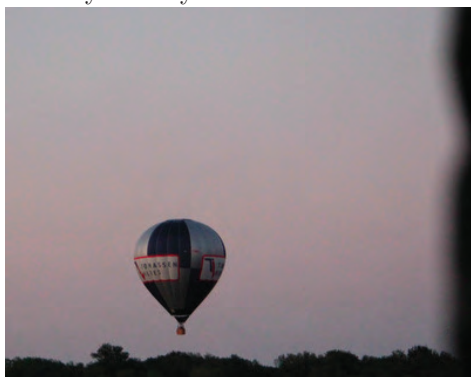
there's the cameraOne of the things Roos is good at is cooking as some of you know who have followed our blog. The peanut sauce she made was so good we thought we'd share her recipe (in simple man's terms, by Nicole): chop 4-5 onions finely use garlic press on 3 large cloves of garlic (or 6 small) coat the bottom of the pot with oil and turn on flame, stirring onions and garlic 2 normal spoonfuls of hot pepper sauce or chop up some hot peppers a good splash of sweet soy sauce 2 big spoonfuls of peanut butter, then stir for a while once stirred add in a good hefty amount of milk, then stir add more milk, then stir add ginger or ginger liquid, and lime zest and juice, stir you're done.



We called Grandmother and Grandad and got caught up with them. Nicole sent them a few photos of our time with Heinz and Luzie then we fell contentedly into our beds in our private guest house.



Monday 28 May 2012



We got up at 10 and worked on the blog. Nicole looked at all her clothes, she photographed them. When Roos came in she commented that Nicole should wear more color; a comment Grandmother has made. Nicole just laughed.

We stayed indoors most of the day while Roos went horseback riding in the rain. Henri worked on his top secret project.



Photo by Charles of Henri's gift from us: a California t-shirt! Luckily the weather lightened up by the time friends Frank and Kim came over for a barbecue. Frank had helped build the guest house.



The troops. While Charles kept an eye on the rotisserie, Nicole learned how to make peanut sauce. We had bacon, chicken satay, salad and drinks while watching Frank and Kim's dog Rebel bite at the sprinklers.



Towards the end of dinner we all looked up and saw a hot air balloon floating through the neighborhood. This was a common occurrence, and we were told the people in the balloon can land pretty much in any farmer's yard, as long as they give the land owner a gift of some sort for their trouble (wine is a common gift). Roos asked if the girls, Kim, Nicole, Dian and her, would like to track it down in the 30-year-old jeep and see it land, to which they said yes!

It was a high speed chase, going down dead end roads, nearly backing into livestock, and all in the back of a bumpy, HARD back area without seat belts. They all put on a strict drill sergeant's voice. Even quiet Kim warmed up to the others' crazy army antics.

Getting there just as it had landed, the four still watched the balloon deflate, then drove back home, waving to the locals like they were in a parade.

We all had cappuccinos and cookies, and wished Charles a happy early birthday before going to bed.



DAY 323 (2012-05-28 03:56)

Tuesday 29 May 2012 “Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Charles, happy birthday to you!”



We
awoke at 10 and decided to have breakfast
outside on the beautiful, sunny day that was
Charles' 65th birthday. We had eggs with

ham, tomatoes, cheese, mushroom, onion, and coffee and juice and apples. Still, Charles had to prove his still-concave-ness so he laid down on the lawn and gave us proof.



Roos had already gone off to work and Henri had left for a two day seminar, so it was the three of us opening presents that morning. Charles got handmade cards from Nicole and Dian for each of his gifts, one a painted card of the Loch Ness monster by Dian, and the other a rather unconventional card using a magazine with speech bubbles next to the models to convey a message. Charles loved the cards and each of his gifts: an orange shirt (perfect for Holland, their national color), a dark chocolate bar, a 21-year-old scotch whiskey from the Edinburgh Scotch Whiskey Experience, a little king figurine, and a book purchased in Ullapool.



Nicole and Dian went to Jumbo to pick up supplies for their Mexican dinner (plus birthday candles), but the store was out of avocados! What a tragedy. Still, they recovered and improvised a little and were okay. Back home, Charles read an e-mail informing us our tenants would like to stay until August 10th, an additional 10 days to the extra month they chose to take, as well. We knew this would make it harder to acclimate when we got back, but we were happy they were enjoying the place so much, so it was overall good news.



The concave lives on Roos came back home with a gift for Charles, a beautiful wine stopper, and Indian bindi stickers for Nicole. We chatted about family back home over the burrito dinner, sang a few songs, then had the chocolate cake Roos had whipped up specially for Charles right when she got home. It was delicious to say the least, but what's new? The gang wished Charles one last happy birthday, then we went to sleep.

Wednesday 30 May 2012



Drowning can occurWe were up with the rooster call which Nicole reported had been incorporated into her morning haziness as a screaming person - more than once. Life in Neerkant was decidedly at a slower pace than the Andrews were used to but it was a welcome repite from go, go, go. Cousin Roos and Henri allowed us to do our thing in their hand built guest house. Dian blogged from 6 AM to 9 then crashed again till noon. In the afternoon Dian, with dogs Mabel and Max jumped into the back of Henri's 30 year old army jeep with Roos at the wheel and Nicole riding shotgun. They headed to a canal where swimming was allowed. It didn't take long before everyone was in and it was only later that Roos mentioned the water had eels in it and rats along the shore. At least not leeches thought Dian.



Bumping along in the jeep after their swim the trio went to a bunker from WWI that was still standing in a farmer's field. They also saw where an '80s music star lived. Upon returning to the house they found that Charles had prepared a delicious Greek salad to go with the spaghetti dinner. Henri came back from a seminar and we all sat down to dinner in the backyard patio.

As soon as the meal was over Roos went out to collect door - to - door for cancer research and other causes. Charles and Dian happily contributed when she came by and then she was off again doing the volunteer job she'd done yearly. After having the last of Charles' chocolate birthday cake with ice cream for dessert, Nicole and Dian took the dogs for a walk then konked out. Well, Dian fell in bed while the NightHawks stayed up and worked on the computers. (Luckily we had Roos' to work with too!)



DAY 325 (2012-05-28 03:57)

Thursday 31 May 2012

These days may be boring to you but they were needed for us. Nicole worked super hard sorting photos and loading and arranging them on our blogs, all of us caught up writing a couple, and through Internet research and computer calls to CA made arrangements for renewing home and auto insurance, car registrations, mail unforwarding, tenant move out schedule, etc. etc. The rut begins.



Asparagus liqueur? But we planned for this time, made possible because of Roos and Henri's generous offer to come anytime and stay as long as we wanted in their guest house in southwest Netherlands. A delicious Dutch supper with them in the backyard, after work and before tennis lessons, with ham and creamy mashed potatoes and huge thick white asparagus with cheese sauce, reminded us we're still not back in Kansas.



The European trip still wasn't over. We also found out, in researching our planned two-three day drive along the Rhine River, that it was possible to take reasonably-priced all-day cruises. And that a musician friend would be playing at a blues fest just 15 minutes away on the upcoming Saturday.



The musical backdrop for this mostly-indoors day was exceptional but curious: a French-language (Belgian?) FM station with whiplash eccentricity: Dwight Yokum, Fats Domino, Moody Blues, the Chiffons, Mark Knopfler, Ray Charles, Allison Kraus, John Lee Hooker, Carl Perkins, Leonard Cohen, John Fogerty, Dean Martin, the Drifters, George Harrison, Peppermint Harris, Boz Scaggs, BB King, Lyle Lovett, Led Zep-pelin, Loudon Wainwright, Albert Collins, Patti Smith, Pink Floyd, Hal Ketchum, early Rolling Stones, the soulful original "Mocking-bird" by Inez and Charlie Foxx, Desmond Dekker's version of "You Can Get It if You Really Want," Neil Young doing doo wop and country gospel, Sting jazzing up "Dark Star" and so many more that kept us highly entertained and also amused at the scatter-shot/schizoid programming.

Dian stayed up late to finish her Keith Richards bio (thanks, Mary and Nigel). "Feh," Charles sneered, "I knew of him when he was only Keith Richard."

DAY 326 (2012-06-01 20:42)

Friday 1 June 2012

Up at various times, Charles was the first on the computer to try and reason with the Danish government, and a private company that gave us honkin' parking tickets during our last days in the country. The government ticket looked like it would be possible to parley, but he found out from the private company's website that they were pretty much goons whose mission was to "keep your neighborhood free from pesky tourists who don't understand simple parking rules!" and to "regulate your area, even if it means keeping the public out!" So we didn't have much luck, especially since there was no number to call, they were only open two hours on certain weekdays, and said it was impossible to negotiate tickets. With a heaving sigh we regretfully agreed they got us this time.



Nicole set out ALL her clothes...except the ones she was wearing at the time the photo was taken.

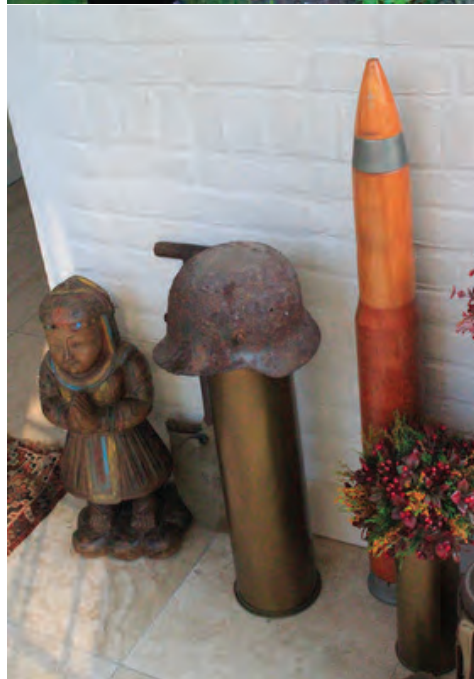
Dian and Nicole worked on editing and adding pictures to old blog days (Dian did 100 by the end of the day!) while Charles went grocery

shopping for essentials. Roos and Henri had been busy all day, but Roos came by later to ask if we wanted McDonald's for dinner. Nicole bristled, but since everyone else said yes she acquiesced to her request. She could not utter that she would like the "Big Tasty with bacon," so Dian and Charles told Roos we would take three of the aforementioned item. Dian got a soda, but Charles and Nicole got a milkshake, figuring if they were going to have it at all they might as well go all the way. After dinner Charles and Dian joined Roos on a visit to her horses Colletta and Fa (pronounced "fay" meaning "fairy" in Dutch), and they were happy to report that the horses were both okay in their new home. Later Henri and Roos left for a party, and the Happy Trails Gang blogged 'til we went to sleep.



DAY 327 (2012-06-01 20:43)

Saturday 2 June 2012

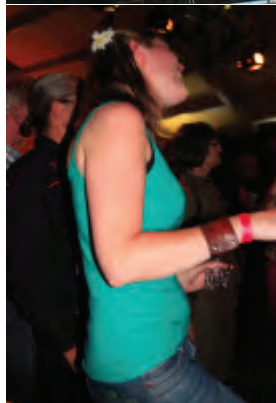


afternoon were spent catching up on the blog. At 5 PM we followed Roos and Henri to Roos' sister and brother in law's in Geldrop – the same small town our friend, Hook Herrera was performing in at a blues festival. When we arrived at Ans and Peter's beautiful home with a traditional thatched roof and large backyard we got to know them briefly but they were heading out to dinner and so we followed all of them to the site of the Blues Open then said goodbye.



Those thatched roofs are really very thick

“Oh the days dwindle down to a precious few...” Yes, the adventurers had 10 more days and that morning and part of the



Catharina "rocking out."

Photo by Dian As we entered the community auditorium the strains of blues could be heard but Hook wasn't in the area yet. The promoter kindly got him on the phone so he could talk to Charles and when it was all said and done we had 3 passes to the concert. Thank you Hook and promoters! A mother and daughter were standing outside the hall waiting for Ian Siegal to go on and we offered to buy them a wine. After a chance to chat we all headed in and thoroughly enjoyed the blues guitar stylings and story telling nature of Ian's act. He cracked us up with his demonizing of Eric Clapton. Charles went on a beer run and while he was outside he ran into Hook who was just arriving. Charles hadn't

seen the harmonica/guitarist/singer but once since he'd had him on his cable TV show years earlier but they hugged each other like old friends. When he started his set, expertly backed by Coup de Grace – a local trio, our new friends Catharina and Ingrid were favorably impressed. Unfortunately they had a train to catch so they left before Hook and the band were done. We were treated to another hour of rockin' blues that had the whole joint jumpin' and Nicole Liebowitz running around for close-ups. (Hook especially with his long black hair and sunglasses was terrific but the drummer and guitar player were also fascinating to watch).



Ian

Siegal





When the show ended about 11 PM we'd been on our feet for almost 5 hours but the pain in our feet didn't matter compared to the treat of seeing a really good concert only 15 minutes from where we were staying in Neerkant. Since we hadn't eaten at the show we came home and Dian whipped up a big bowl of guacamole which we ate then with visions of slide guitars in our heads, fell asleep.





Autographing



DAY 328 (2012-06-09 11:28)

Sunday 3 June 2012



Nicole, Lisa, Sebastian, Dian and Charles Another day of emails and blogging? - No! We prepped for our last road trip, two days out for a Rhine river cruise and a drive in the area, so we had to put some things back in the car. It all seemed strange and a little sad, but we were glad to have this one last excursion in Europe.

But first, that night we had a dinner date with Sebastian and his girlfriend Lisa, near their home near Cologne. We wanted to see them, being now so close, and also had to work out some final negotiations on the van rental.



We let him pick the restaurant and he chose Erstes Bruhler Kartoffelhaus, famous, highly rated, lots of atmosphere (potatoes overflow small

buckets and line the steps as you enter) but low-priced local spot. The food was really good and the portions large, our waitress was a bubbly addition to it all, and Nicole and Dian got to visit long with Lisa, talking much about the art work she does, while Charles and Sebastian talked long but to no agreement. In the end we parted with hugs all around and renewed our invitation for them to join us at Henri and Roos's for a going-away BBQ. Sebastian said he had a very heavy work schedule and would have to let us know.



A record in the restaurant, "Goodbye Sam, Hello Samantha"?!! We decided where our van was parked was pretty safe (Sebastian agreed) so we jumped in and sorted out our shortage of sleeping covers (hey, we got out of practice and didn't bring enough), and after some bitchin-gandmoaning everyone got what they needed, and we retired around midnight (but were surprised by the foot traffic and accompanying loud conversations in this mostly residential neighborhood at that time of night).



Nicole, Lisa, and our very friendly waitress (middle)

DAY 329 (2012-06-09 11:29)

Monday 4 June 2012



Floatin' down the Rhine



Rose gardenAfter not getting much sleep we were awakened by the alarm at a quarter to 6. We drudged through our stowing and breakfast so we could get on the road quickly and find the paddle boat cruise on the Rhine river. Unfortunately nobody (*Charles' note: that would be me*)thought to write down the company's name so we were left searching in the dark to find their

stations. It was a different set-up for the various Rhine cruises than we had expected, because they were all spread out and on different sides of the river with not much signage to follow. Luckily a man at another company told us the KD Lines paddle boat had just left for the next stop down the road, so we dashed into the car and floored the 14 kilometers to the next stop, in Braubach.



View of the paddle wheel We got there in time to park, walk through a beautiful rose garden, purchase tickets, and see the boat blow steam as it came in to land. "Just like Mark Twain would hear!" we thought.





Roos and Henri weren't lying when they said it was an activity for a slightly, okay *way* older crowd. This was, perhaps, to be expected, since the boat itself was 99 years old. This large company had many boats going up and down the Rhine but we wanted the old sidewheeler, one of only two operating in all of Europe (who would expect even one?).



Our fellow Rhiners We chatted with a few groups on board, one a woman from Kansas, Renee, and Uwe, the host for her daughter when she was a foreign exchange student living in Germany. It was kind of nice to hear a familiar accent. We chatted a bit with a younger German couple and were surprised the guy knew about the Kings being in the run for the Stanley Cup (he knew more than Charles did – hockey? in Deutschland?).



We relaxed outside sitting at the back and watched the sights go by. After 3 hours of pleasant, slow drifting, Nicole honestly got bored. After 5 hours she went stir crazy.



Our boat made an hour-long stop in Rudeshein and we toolled around the fairly plain and touristy but pretty town. Dian looked through the church's book store and bought one, and Charles bought a mini bottle of the famous Rhine *auslese* wine.



Crowding to see a castle



Back on the boat, none of us whined as we dined on some cheese and its rind, accompanied by Rhine wine. Yes, we were that starved for entertainment. Nicole had

become so torpid she coined the new phrase "convenience photography," where she took only the shots that were convenient, or took every shot conveniently as possible e.g. she hardly got out of her chair. But through rain and mental numbness, she soldiered on with her duties as trip photographer. Charles eventually moved inside to a table by the window and the steady bumping motion let him imagine he was on the Mississippi in those quaint old times of Mark Twain.

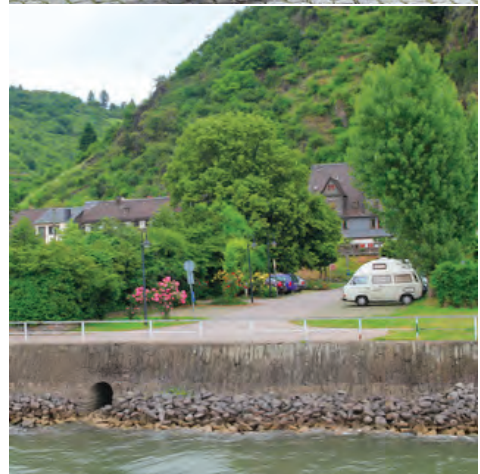




Route to Santiago de Compostela??



It was a sad state of affairs: Nicole had been saving the leftover garlic potatoes for later in the day, but when she asked for the potatoes, then asked for the time, she found out it was only 1 o'clock. "I thought it was 5!" she said despairingly. The fork also broke in half.



Excalibur! How do we get to you?! The castles we passed were numerous and pretty in the way that they were each tucked into the green hillside high above quaint, typically German towns. One of the larger of these towns was Bingen, where Hildegard von Bingen originated, our favorite medieval female composer. We thought of Dian's sister Monica as we

passed this. It was coming to our stop so we gathered our things and walked downstairs to the exit. Dian had to use the bathroom, so Nicole turned just around the corner to take a picture of the boat. As they both returned moments later they saw Charles was very upset, talking with the employees who take the dock ropes on and off. It was then that the two realized we were still moving. Charles had been standing on the platform, telling them he needed to get off, but after a 30-second (or less!) landing (we were later told by an employee that KD Lines rules say all their stops are at least five minutes), they shoved off again! And the worst part, the employees were totally unsympathetic, and were even snickering at us. No one ever said the word "sorry," and they wouldn't let us speak to the captain or anyone else.



Prime example of "convenience photography," taken sitting down and leaning backwards



Oh yeah, and it rained part of the way so we had to sit inside. After a 15-minute wait, we got off with two choices: A cab or a train. We chose the train, which, luckily, was very nearby, but our spirits were at a serious low. The station was dirty, and there was no one to talk to except for a bunch of drunk and rowdy kids, who we did ask for help, but none of them seemed to speak English or didn't care to. We had asked for their help because the automated machine to buy tickets froze and stopped working, but we figured if it was only one stop we would get on, and if someone asked for our tickets we would explain to them our situation and pay them then. Luckily no one asked, so we got to ride free.



We stepped off the train in Braubach and into

a light rain as we followed signs pointing to the Rhine. Nicole the homing pigeon got us back fairly quickly, and once we spotted the rose garden we knew we were okay.



It rained, but we did see a rainbow. That night we had more fun, namely our last night in our van. Nicole took a walk while Dian and Charles chatted, and when she got back we had a rather unusual dinner conversation: Dian, ever the school teacher, suggested we each name two of the worst times we could remember on the trip. As you can imagine, this turned into a long conversation, but in a lighthearted way. It was what some of us needed anyway, not being ready to let go of the days' previous events yet. Dinner: good old Dia pesto with Dia pasta, tomatoes and bell peppers. Sleeping arrangement: Dian on the worm, Nicole on the big bed, and Charles on the top bed.

DAY 330 (2012-06-09 14:33)

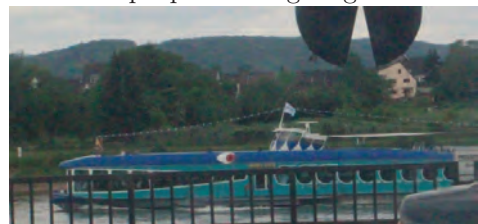
Tuesday 5 June 2012



Goodbye, old plastic bowls! (left bowl from Thai soup package Grandmother sent, middle and right from Cesky Krumlov camp food of lentils with sausage, yum!!)



The morning after our Rhine River Expedition was uneventful. Taking Nicole's cue to eat breakfast in the beautiful rose garden next to where we parked on the Rhine, we enjoyed the tranquility and only wished we'd made a banner to hang on the dock saying KD LINES DON'T CARE so that when our "friends" pulled in at 9 AM they'd see it as well as all the people waiting to get on the boat.





Since Charles wanted to follow the Rhine to above Bonn (which used to be the capitol of West Germany), we all got ready to do some navigating by following the blue squiggly line instead of taking our GPS's verbal commands for the fastest way back to Roos and Henri's. While getting a little lost in a small town we asked a kind woman if she knew where we could get wurst. She sent us to Imbiss where we had four kinds of wurst with curry, gravy, cheese and mushroom and onions, plus really good french fries. Delicious! We all agreed, as we stood at the outdoor table, that it was the best wurst experience we'd ever had.



When we got to Roos and Henri's house at about 3:30 PM they were still at work but when Henri returned he gave us a full tour of the CSI van he drove home. We were fascinated by all the paraphernalia he

has to use for crime scene investigation.



Roos made a wonderful canned peach with sautéed chicken and cashews over rice dinner plus vegies made in the wok. After dinner Roos and Henri translated the children's book Dian had purchased in Germany and we all had a good laugh. We returned to our guesthouse to catch up the blog or be flogged.



DAY 331 (2012-06-11 15:34)

Wednesday 6 June 2012



It rained in the morning. We had leftover coffee cakes from the German bakery, and while Charles was finishing his blog day, Dian was editing 150 blogs, and Nicole was putting pictures on every single day.



Nicole made a Mexican dinner, and after dinner she, Dian and Roos went to see Roos'

horses Fa and Coletta at the stable.



DAY 332 (2012-06-11 15:35)

Thursday 7 June 2012

For breakfast we three made eggs and ate outside. Then, we cracked down on THE BLOG. This was an all day event. We accomplished so much, however, that Dian finished editing every single day we had written thus far!



Roos dropped by once or twice during the day, and later on neighbors Harrie and Ietje and their daughter Robbin came by and invited us to Robbin's 20th birthday party on Sunday! We were delighted at the offer and accepted. Afterwards we went right back to blogging and sorting and packing. We had a typical Dutch dinner of sausage wrapped in bacon, little itty bitty baked potatoes, green beans, and, though not so typical but still delicious, homemade mustard soup.



DAY 333 (2012-06-11 15:35)

Friday 8 June 2012



Entrance to Efteling



Roos made sack lunches, and we were off the The Efteling amusement park. It is a park that is slightly older than Disneyland, but shares many similarities, though its attractions are more based on fairytales. Nicole opted to ditch her camera for the day, so nearly every picture was taken by Charles! As a bonus, his journalist pass got him in for free!



"Papier here!" The trash can at the park. If you throw something in he burps or says thank you. Our first stop was the haunted house, then twelve more scary and fun attractions.



Typical Dutch "food vending machine" design, you can see what food is in the tray behind glass, you pay your money, the take it out hot.

Saturday 9 June 2012
Thee days left?! Oh my gosh!



We emptied out the van and cleaned it with lots of elbow grease. Nicole, Robbin and a friend of Roos' got a cake decorating lesson all morning. Meanwhile Dian and Henri went grocery shopping for the barbecue. Charles continued working on the blog.



Robbin and NicoleThat evening we watched Holland vs. Denmark while eating *bitterballs*, *croquettes*, french fries and sausage. Typical Dutch "fast food."



Finished fondant foundation



Nicole wanted her cake (right) to be as "garish, bawdy and rococo" as possible.





We're back in Morocco!



View of the whole of Eftel-

ing from the Gondola ride



"Typical, Dutch right typical, here." - typical Roos



In the middle we had hot chocolate and *poffertjes* (typical Dutch mini pancake-like treat with powdered sugar and butter), not to mention a bounty of candy from the park's candy store.





From an old fairytale, this donkey poops out a gold coin if you give it a small donation.



The old forest sage. A bit of a rambler, this was Roos and her mother and sister's favorite part of the park, the old man was so funny



By 6PM the new water show had started, which was glorious. After seeing trolls and fairies, we drove the hour back to Neerkant where we all watched a movie, then afterwards conked out.



DAY 335 (2012-06-11 15:35)

Sunday 10 June 2012



After coffee we went to the humble yet charming Neerkant craft fair. Then we went to Harrie and Ietje's to celebrate their daughter Robbin's 20TH birthday with the whole family. We brought a guitar over and played some music at their request. We were asked to play "Country Rose" and told them it was "Country Roads" but Roos insisted on singing it the old way! A small clay figurine was given to Robbin that had a happy and sad face on it. She imitated the sad face perfectly but cautioned us NEVER to post the photo on the internet. We got a preview of what Nicole's cake might taste like while eating Robbin's far more tastefully decorated creation. It was delicious!! At about 5PM we went back home (literally across the street) to prepare for *our* party.



It was a full house with Gert, Inga, Peter, Ans, Deborah, Herman, Benji, Paolo, and all five of us, but the bounty and quality, unsurprisingly, did not disappoint. Herman even picked up the guitar later and played a bit, to the surprise of even his wife and kids. By 11:30 our farewell BBQ had broken up and we said

goodbye to our Amsterdam friends. and Roos' family.



DAY 336 (2012-06-11 15:36)

Monday 11 June 2012



On the second to last day of our adventure we were packed and tied up loose ends in the guest house. With a couple of confirmation calls to Air Berlin regarding weight and size restrictions we managed to squeeze 11 months worth of travel treasures and left overs into two checked bags each (the second one costing 50 euros).



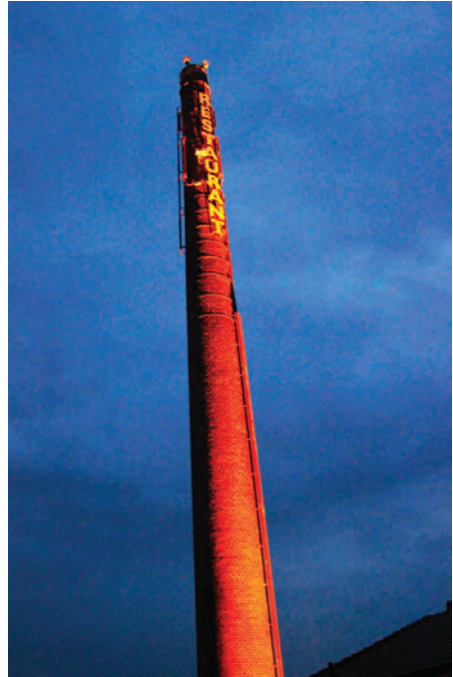


We had a nice cup of coffee and Nicole's cake with the family from across the street who saw our suitcases and realized there was no place to sit. Roos, ever the hostess whisked everyone back to her kitchen where we chatted and got to know Harrie, Eitje, Vicky, Robbin and Lucas a little better. It had begun to rain when Henri came home and after walking the dogs and showing the family the bullet holes in their house (now filled in) from the war years, they left.



We got ready for dinner out, our treat. The restaurant was in the nearby town of Helmond and was a great choice. Called "De Steenoven", it turned out Roos went to school with one of the owners, Doreen who converted the old brick oven into a wonderful restaurant where we had five courses of excellent food from guinea fowl to jumbo shrimp. By 11 we were back in our guest house and ready for bed. It felt good to be going home.





DAY 337 (2012-06-11 15:36)

Tuesday 12 June 2012

It arrived. Finally. That mythic day – that seemed so far away, then despite being ignored crept closer and closer – has dawned. Dian got up around dawn, Nicole a little later, because we wanted to leave for Dusseldorf by 7:30 or so, and had to say our goodbyes to early-to-work policeman Henri.



Charles did not sleep. He worried and fussed over our ancient, bulging, some patched together with tape, some too light some too heavy suitcases, concerned that the checked bags would be over limit and we'd be charged an extra 50 euros/ \$63 each (times six!), and that the carry-ons were so ridiculously pushing the regulations that they'd be disallowed as we tried to board. Even laughed at. And then what?



So he used his superior packing skills to tear apart and reassemble, and just when he thought he could get a couple hours sleep he realized the cell phones we'd be losing were full of precious memories (messages) and phone numbers so spent two hours transferring them. That's OK. His usual philosophy of "You can sleep when you're dead" became "You can sleep on the plane" (and he did!). The goodbyes to Henri and then

Roos were brief and full of good feeling, any sadness offset by knowing that they would be coming to the Andrews family Thanksgiving gathering in Tempe, AZ in November, and then a drive out to the coast after.



We got off around 8 – no problem, the drive to Dusseldorf Int'l was only a little more than an hour. Last journey in the White Rabbit! Last mission for Excalibur – to arrive in one piece and be turned back to its rightful owner for the buyback. Charles felt a little pressure but relaxed into his I-can-do-this mode. We found our terminal then drove out about five minutes to wait for a phone call from Lisa, Sebastian's girlfriend, saying she had arrived by train. She was right on schedule (gotta love those Germans) and we drove up to see her smiling face in front of the Air Berlin sign. It took a while to unload our unwieldy cargo onto a couple of carts, for which we had to beg coins for bills, then more strangers to ask to get the right amount for the final settlement for Sebastian. At LAX security would be threatening you away from the curb after 15 seconds, but this is Europe where security seems fine but more sensible; they didn't ask us to remove shoes, belts, tattoos, but Dian and Charles both got pulled aside and "wanded" when their shoes caused a beep (Charles' cowboy boots always do, steel shank construction, for Dian it was a first). It was a nostalgic moment when we took some photos and said our goodbyes to Lisa and watched her drive off with our faithful white buddy, our home and transportation for the

last seven months of this remarkable journey.



Monica putting the last finishing touches on the meal We held our breath but sailed through all the Air Berlin checkpoints with no questions and settled into our seats with high fives – we did it! No sad thoughts at this moment, just relief and anticipation of getting home and seeing family and friends and god ol' southern California. The plane food was not bad and the final one had a German potato salad that was excellent. A little Rhine wine and Wersteiner beer let us know we were still in German air space as we drifted off – dreaming of the next journey?



Dian with her parents, Joe and Marie When we landed we had to have a photo in front of Barack Obama's portrait which security hurriedly shoed us away from. No matter. With all clearances passed we saw Myles at the end of the long ramp, waving and giving us a welcoming smile. After chatting with him we took a shuttle to Dian's parent's house in Rancho Palos Verdes. The trip through some of Southern California's most beautiful beach towns, (Hermosa, Redondo, Manhattan) reminded us that all the places we visited were on a par but could not surpass our homeland's beauty.

On the driveway Dian's sister, Monica and

her parents were doing a dance and singing a song they had made up to welcome the weary travelers. Festive balloons and signs adorned the entryway and after a quick perusal we all agreed we were none the worse for wear - on both sides!



Monica's homemade Texas pecan pie
Folks might find it interesting to note the sums we tallied for our trip. (Remember these are rough estimates). Here they are:

Food: \$8,000.00

Airfare: \$3,000.00

Camps: \$2,500.00

Diesel: \$6,500.00

Ferries and Tolls: \$1,200.00

Museums and Attractions: \$1,200.00

Gifts and Souvenirs: \$300.00

Postage and Letters: \$3,000.00

Tech Equipment: \$500.00

Van (maintenance, tows, insurance, roadside assistance, registration, and purchase with buyback option): \$9,000.00

TOTAL: \$35,200.00

At Home Costs: \$19,000.00

TOTAL: \$54,200.00

Having tenants helped with a large part of the cost.

Would we do it again? Yes!