



Sunday, December 31, 2006

Our journey to London began on a cold, sleet and snow covered evening in Des Moines. As we made it to the airport a little early, we found out our plane to Chicago had been delayed by about a half hour. It was delayed further by a plane that was deicing on the runway, blocking our airplane. After a little deicing ourselves, we were finally off to Chicago.

We'd discussed our options in the flight to Chicago – do we try to make our flight and forsake our checked bags or did we want our bags when we arrived? Jenni, the sporting type she is, decided we'd gamble and try to catch the connecting flight to London.

We made it to Chicago just in time to run (flat-*ss sprint) to our next gate (luckily, it was only half a terminal away). As we sprinted down the terminal, the departure signs were flashing "BOARDING". There was no line when we came rushing up and ground crew hustled us onto the 777. We were darn near the last ones on the plane.

After our rush, we settled in for a nice, calm 8 ½ hour plane ride, filled with movies, reading, music, eating and of course, sleeping. A couple of times over the course of our travels, we celebrated the new year – once on Eastern time and once on Central time.

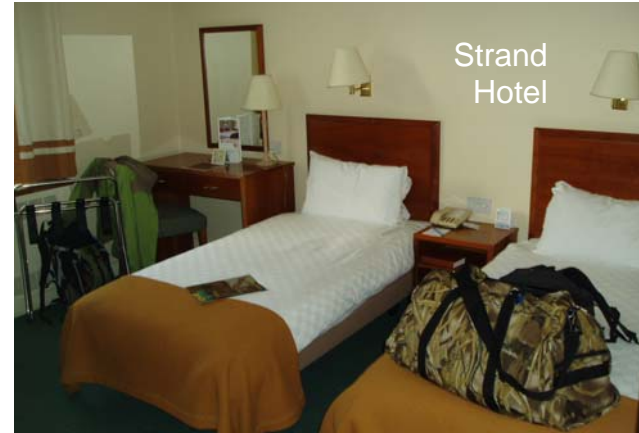
Monday, January 1, 2007

We made it to London Heathrow safely a little earlier than our scheduled 11:00 arrival. After walking for what seemed like miles, we made it to baggage claim to fill out our lost bag slips. To our amazement, one of our bags came on the belt, then another one, things were looking good considering we thought none of them would make it due to our having to sprint to the gate in Chicago. Our third bag, however, didn't make it, confirming Pete's trend that United loses his bag(s) every third trip. After finding out that our bag did indeed arrive in London, but was nowhere to be found, we left with the promise it would be delivered to our hotel as quickly as possible.

Our next feat was to find our way to the hotel using the train. We stood in line with half the German nation to buy subway/train passes called the "Oyster". We bought seven day passes and pulled out our handy tube map to find our way (an

approximately 1998 version which Pete's Mom gave us). About an hour later, we landed in the Covent Garden Tube Station and set out to find our hotel.

We settled ourselves into a cozy little twin room (771) at the Strand Palace Hotel, unpacked and freshened up and hit the town running, following everyone's advice to keep moving until bedtime (London-time). We thought the British Museum was to be open on New Year's Day (according to everything we had read and to the concierge), but once we got there, we found it wasn't. So we found the nearest Oyster station and headed out to the Victoria and Albert Museum.



The Victoria and Albert Museum is the greatest decorative-arts museum in the world. One of our favorite areas to visit was the Costume Gallery – which housed clothes from the 16th century to the 20th century. This area made Jenni exclaim “I’m so glad I didn’t live back in the days of the corset!” And Pete enjoyed the “skin-tight leather Jerkin” from the 1970s. We decided the 60s and 70s were very rough fashion years...The museum closed before we got to see everything, but as we said many times throughout the week – “we have to save some things to visit on our next trip back.”

After dinner at Zizzi's we retreated back to our hotel room for a relaxing evening and to prepare for our first full day in Londontown. It didn't take us long to realize how tired we were, as Pete fell asleep holding his book upright.



Tuesday, January 2, 2007

We were awakened this morning by United, stating that our bag had been recovered and would be headed to our hotel later that day. We prepped for the day and had our first hotel provided “English breakfast” of mini baguettes, croissants, mixed fruit, yogurt, cereal and drinks. All was good until I took a sip of my warm orange juice - if you've never tried room temperature orange juice, don't! (more on drinks and refrigeration later)

Our first stop of the morning was St. Paul's Cathedral. St Paul's Cathedral is first and foremost the Cathedral Church for the Diocese of London. During World War II, it stood while bombings

destroyed everything around it. Having burned 3 times, the current structure was built between 1675 and 1710. This beautiful building is a masterpiece of architecture featuring a beautiful dome that can be seen from a distance, and many smaller domes. While there, we climbed many many stairs (some straight, some spiral, some concrete, some metal) to 3 different levels within the Cathedral dome – the Whispering Gallery, the Stone Gallery and the Inner Golden Gallery (at Stone and Inner Golden Gallery levels, we could see a 360 degree view of the city). It was at this point that I vowed to get into better shape when I got home. If we only knew this was just the beginning of the number of steps we would see over the course of the week!



Jenni on St. Paul Cathedral's Dome – River Thames in the background

There were no pictures allowed inside the Cathedral, so you'll have to go to London yourself to take in this masterpiece.

We were lucky enough to finish our stair climbing just in time to take part in the noon church service, which included Communion. It was a memorable experience to be able to take part in the Holy Eucharist in this very holy place. Fortunately, we were able to figure the kneeler situation without any serious injuries – it was touch and go for awhile.

St. Paul's is loaded with effigies and memorials to dead British men, especially Generals, Admirals and those that addicted half of China to opium. Jenni was fortunate to be with Pete, who regaled her with the histories of "China" Gordon, Cornwallis the Younger and the many famous Deans of the Cathedral.

After catching a quick lunch of Chicken Spring Rolls (yummy!) and Salt & Vinegar chips, we made our way on foot to the Imperial War Museum. There are actually 5 Imperial War Museums, of which Jenni visited two and Pete visited three (see Thursday and Friday for more details). I believe Pete's words, when we entered were, "I've wanted to come here for so long." The entrance to the museum is grand with twin gun barrels to greet visitors, and lots of green space over the sprawling city block.

Pete spent the first hour and a half explaining the various equipment and weapons (tanks, submarines, etc) to Jenni – how it worked, what it's purpose was, when it was used. He also exclaimed a lot "I would like to have one of these of my own!" Jenni got to try out the sleeping quarters on a submarine (claustrophobic). Next we ventured down to the lower level to view the large collections of World War I & II memorabilia. There were realistic reconstructions



Jenni checks out submarine conditions at the Imperial War Museum-London

of things like a World War I trench, complete with everything from dampness, little space to move, and a very realistic smell. After about 4 hours, the museum closed before we had a chance to explore the many other floors, convincing us that we would need to find time later on to come back.

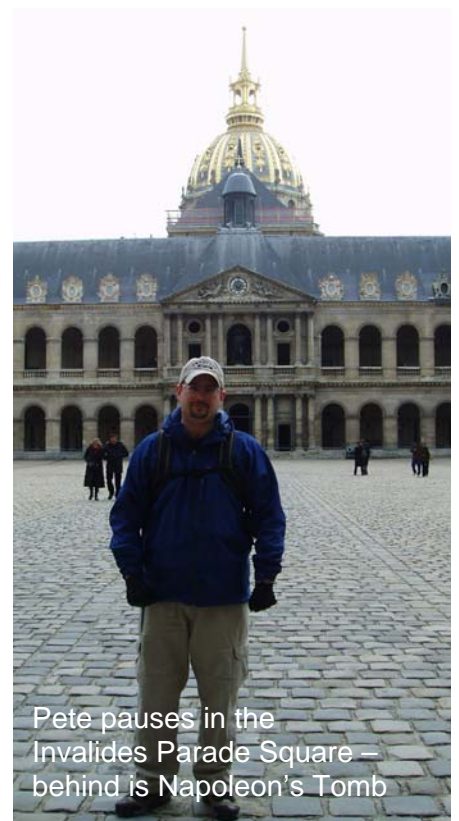
Tuesday evening was spent exploring Covent Garden which has a thriving nightlife. Lots of retail stores and pubs make up the area surrounding the daytime Covent Garden markets. Most of the shops were closed for the evening (or closing), though Jenni was excited to see several Body Shops (yes, I know there is one in West Des Moines – but the English ones had a better product selection and were cheaper). We found a pub to have dinner at and Jenni was excited to have her first batch of fish and chips!



Pete at the Imperial War Museum-London

Wednesday, January 3, 2007

We woke up early this morning (4:00 early) to head to Waterloo International Station to take the train to Paris. At 5:40, the Golden Tours representative FINALLY showed up to give us our tickets and instructions for what to do and who to meet once we got to Paris. The train took us through the countryside of both England and France, with a 20 minute period under the channel connecting the two. (No, other than the slight descent down, we couldn't tell we were traveling underwater). Once in London we met up with Sammy, our Golden Tours representative and several other people on two different tours. We loaded up on a red, two tier bus and headed out to many of our stops. This bus was something we could ride all day – getting on and off as we liked. We decided to take advantage of it for about the first hour. On the bus, we saw Arc de Triomphe and the Eiffel Tower – which had about a thousand people standing outside of it. We got off on the opposite side of the Eiffel Tower (the grassy area) and began our walk from there towards the Invalides, a 18th Century Veterans' hospital that now serves as the tomb of Napoleon I.



Pete pauses in the Invalides Parade Square – behind is Napoleon's Tomb

We decided along the way to have a nice lunch and set out to find a place. We found a nice little bistro south east of Invalides. We lived dangerously – ordering both an entrée and a more traditional dinner each. Jenni had Country



Jenni poses above the Invalides Parade Square

Chicken and Pete had Duck Confit. Very good food and a relaxing repast in the day.

Following our late lunch we hightailed in to the Invalides. As we were walking to the entrance, Pete stepped into a little courtyard garden. The garden bore a bust and tablet honoring Antoine St. Exupery, a French pilot/poet who died in World War II action (Jenni got to hear the story).

The Invalides also includes the Musee d' Armee, the French Army Museum. We did a very fast tour of the Franco-Prussian to Post-WWII exhibits but didn't visit any of the pre-Second Empire holdings of the Musee. The Musee displays were good and warranted a more detailed visit. Short English-language labels were available on most cases. Pete did get scolded for taking

a picture of Villar-Persosa submachine gun (I'd never been so close to one before!) The Musee also had a good collection of Red Army (USSR) items, loaned from Russia collections.

We quickly visited Napoleon Bonaparte's tomb. Truthfully it was much grander than anything we had expected. It is a large domed hall that gives the US Capitol Rotunda a run for it's money.

We then headed up to Notre Dame by bus as the light faded. Notre Dame is smaller in scale than I expected, but undoubtedly one of the most ornate pieces of human endeavor. It was crowded - about 50% of Tokyo appeared to be visiting. A large line queued for about a half-block to get in, but it moved very fast and deposited us inside in less than 10 minutes.

We were admitted through the superb Gothic entrance - which we were happy to pass, being named the St. Anne Portal. The stone faces and decoration surrounding the doors are beyond description.

Inside it was like a railway station - loud, crowded and not very church-like. Whereas St. Paul's in London was clearly a complete place of worship, Notre Dame de Paris has a more egalitarian bent.



Jenni and Pete at Notre Dame de Paris

The sheer noise of the hundreds of people inside competed with Mass taken place. That said, the majesty of the Rose windows and individual chapels can't be over|sold. We took the opportunity to light a candle for Abby Munson among shrines.

We had run out of time to visit the Lourve, so we kicked along the Seine for awhile. We did end up walking around the exterior of the Lourve and paused to look at the Pyramid, but then continued to see the city. Paris's cultural attractions close between 5:00 and 6:00pm, so we visited several shops and enjoyed the air (which is much dirtier than home but didn't seem as bad as London).

We took the Paris Subway several times as well. In the tourist sections, it pretty clean, but confused us country folk. As we took the Subway north to Gare d' Noir Station, it got much more "sporting." Pete peered out at one point and noticed the Subway station had been hit with an Iowa tornado - refuse everywhere.

We left the subway and returned to the International Departures platform for the trip back to London. The French Eurostar Lounge was night-and-day from the tidy (and clean) British version. The highlight was standing in front of the baker's case selecting a pastry while a pigeon did what pigeons do beside us.

The Eurostar trains are very nice - excepting the French version of sanitation, they are like an aircraft. Flip down tray tables, aircraft-like bathrooms and quiet. They are priced accordingly, but the 3-hour trip between Paris and London is effortless.

We made it home late from Paris and collapsed into our beds.

Thursday, January 4, 2007

We woke up weary from the day in Paris, but determined to have another packed day of seeing the sites. After breakfast, we hit the pavement to the Tower of London and London Bridge. We walked across the Bridge using the pedestrian walkway, lining the top of the Bridge. We visited the Engine Room which showed how the bridge is opened and closed for barges to go through. We found out that in the summer, the bridge can open and close up to 16 times per day. Unfortunately, nothing was scheduled until Saturday, so we wouldn't be able to see it in action.

Just a short walk away was our next stop - the HMS Belfast, part of the Imperial War Museum. The Belfast saw distinguished service during the Russian convoy



Jenni and Pete on the HMS Belfast



period, D-Day and the Korean War. We spent the next several hours touring the many layers of the ship – getting a feel for what life was like on the ship. We had gotten familiar with the term “Mind the Gap” on the subway, but the key words on the Belfast were “Mind Your Head” as the stairs were steep and narrow, with small openings from one level to the next. One of our favorite sites on the ship was the potato storage room, which had a cat that looked just like Foo in it. But that wasn’t even the best part – that was the rat hanging out of its mouth and the cat’s half eaten off ears! This made us start picturing Foo on the Belfast, slinking along the walls, stalking the rodents – which made us laugh for quite some time.

After some walking around the area, some souvenir shopping and a quick trip back to the hotel, we headed out again. We had a mission – to reach the Museum of Freemasonry before it closed – and we did just that. While we would have loved to tour the entire building, we were limited to the museum.

The British Museum was open late, so that was our evening stop for Thursday. This was by far the busiest museum we had been to all week. While touted as one of the top attractions for London, Jenni gave this museum 2 thumbs down. While we got to see how they mummified cats, we saw ten too many mummified people.

Jenni listened to Pete describe the acquisition of the Elgin Marbles, which seemed to typify the rapacious pedigree of the majority of the artifacts on display.

The highlight of the visit was seeing the Rosetta Stone – especially for Pete – as it solidifies his claim “and I still don’t understand what my wife is saying!”

Dinner found us at another pub, and Jenni enjoying another plate of fish and chips. This pub was a favorite of ours though as they brought us an entire pitcher of ice water – with lemon and lime wedges in it – for free!

Friday, January 5, 2007

We split up today to explore different areas of England. Jenni stayed in London to do a little shopping while Pete explored an airplane museum in Duxford, northeast of London.



The Belfast's stuffed cat – eating a rat - sure looked like Foo, our tomcat



Jenni poses with Emperor Trajan at the British Museum



Pete and a Rosetta Stone copy at the British Museum

Jenni's first stop was Harrods. With over 300 departments, Harrods is huge, and this time of year it was crowded with their "After Christmas sale". I enjoyed strolling through the Food Halls, like Candy Land (which also had ice cream - yum!) I took a look at every floor, but soon realized I was out of my comfort zone, as the first item I looked at in the "Cheap and Chic" section was 499 pounds - or over \$1000!

My next stop was the Covent Garden Market - an outdoor market with. Not only was this a place to go for nightlife, it was also a local shopper's paradise! It's the most famous market in all of England. In addition to local shops, I was in shopper's heaven! It reminded me of the local market Pete and I visited with my brother in Portland.

My final shopping adventure, besides some souvenir shopping, was Foyles Bookshop. It was starting to rain by this time, so I took the train to this London landmark. It claims to be the world's largest bookstore, though I would say Powells in Portland Oregon was definitely bigger. That said, it was a treat to see some of the books that were released first in England, as we wait for them to be released in the US, including one of my favorite authors - Maeve Binchy's newest novel.

It was back to the hotel to start some packing, when Pete and I met back up and set out for our last night in London. On his walk back from the train station, he had seen a nice restaurant so we set out to try it. Bistro One had a large, primarily Greek focused menu, and included 2 or 3 courses - a set price for either one. We enjoyed dinner together and set out for a quick look at Big Ben and Parliament.



Spitfire at Duxford - the first ever Spitfire flight was from Duxford

Pete visited Duxford, the Imperial War Museum outside of Cambridge in Anglia. This is a former RAF Spitfire and Hurricane base taken over by the US Army Air Corps for the rest of the war. It now houses a huge collection of aircraft, most in flying condition.

A description of Duxford surpasses the limitations of this document. It was overpowering and my allotted 5 hours only gave it a cursory one-over. Having visited the Udvar-Hazy Smithsonian facility in 2004 and the Seattle Museum of Flight in 2005, I hit the trifecta with Duxford.

The entry to the Museum warns of "windy conditions" - what an understatement. Pack appropriately.



Duxford isn't all airplanes. It has a staggering collection of large exhibits. 9.2 inch guns and casement mounting from Gibraltar, V-1 Buzz Bomb on original launching rails and the new Land Warfare Hall.



Land Warfare Hall at Imperial War Museum-Duxford

The Land Warfare Hall is a huge, designed-from-scratch building that houses an extensive military vehicle and artillery collection. Like with the aircraft, many of the vehicles are in working order. The massive German Tiger tank replica created for the movie "Saving Private Ryan" is on display in an impressive static display.

My only sour note is the lack of much serious comment on the Japanese conduct in WWII. In both the London and Duxford Imperial War Museums, the Nazi-manufactured Holocaust is featured for great condemnation, but the Rape of Nanking and brutal Japanese repression goes almost unmentioned. I may be a little more sensitized by recently reading "Flags of our Fathers" and "Flyboys", but it seems curiously absent. This is a trend I picked up on in the Victoria & Albert Museum our first night in London.

Saturday, January 6, 2007

Our last morning in London started out with rain - and lots of it. We set out from the hotel to try to find Big Ben and Parliament again. This time, we were successful, and though we couldn't get in due to the weekend, enjoyed taking in the site, and walking around the area, including Westminster Abbey.

We returned to the Imperial War Museum to take in some of the displays we hadn't seen on our visit on Tuesday. This included an exhibit on how children were affected by the war, and their Holocaust Exhibition (better than the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. which we visited in Nov 2005).

It was back to the hotel to grab all of our stuff, refresh a bit, grab some lunch, and head to the subway station to take us to Heathrow.

We had seen signs all week that the Covent Garden station gets crowded at night and on the weekends, and we found out just how true that was - it was standing room only - a



Jenni stands next to Berlin Wall at the Imperial War Museum-London

challenge with our luggage and the number of people we found ourselves getting close to. By the time we got closer to Heathrow, the crowd weaned off, but was still more than we had experienced going the other direction on Monday.

Heathrow was a challenge. We got checked in and our bags checked in fairly quickly, but soon found ourselves on a trek through security. We went through 2 security areas – one for our bags and bodies, and one specifically for our shoes. By the time we got to our gate, they were nearly ready to board the plane.

We were happy to find that this time we had the two seats on one side of the plane, giving us more room and making it easier to move about. The plane ride to Chicago went fairly smoothly, was less turbulent and had a much nicer flight crew than the trip to Heathrow.

In Chicago we spent about 30 minutes in line to go through Immigration (and were moved to a less crowded area finally), about 30 minutes waiting for our bags and about 2 minutes going through Customs and getting our bags rechecked. We would soon officially be on our way back to Des Moines.

Once in Des Moines I went to get the car while Pete got the luggage. By 10:00 we were home and the cats were thrilled to see us.