

2022 EUROPEAN VACATION

Preface

Planning for our spring of 2022 adventure actually began in the spring of 2019, shortly after we returned from Hawaii. By September, with the help of my friends Tom and Sheila, we had scheduled and mostly paid for an October 2020 Viking river cruise on the Rhine River from Basel (Switzerland) to Amsterdam (The Netherlands). My friends Mike and Leslie were also booked to join us. Excitement began grow. Then, in the spring of 2020, our plans were thwarted by a global pandemic. Maybe you've heard about it. It was, and apparently remains, a pretty big deal.

In the spring of 2020, the October 2020 trip was Covid-cancelled and we chose to let Viking hold on to our payment to be used toward a future adventure in exchange for a 20% bonus on our payment. We still wanted to go on the trip and the bonus would hopefully offset post-pandemic price increases.

In October of 2020, around the time we had planned to be in Europe, we went up north for a get-away weekend with our friends Craig and Michelle. They expressed an interest in joining us when we were finally able to rebook the adventure. By spring of 2021, we were all booked for a spring of 2022 adventure. Suzanne and I, Mike and Leslie, Craig and Michelle, plus Jane and Beth who live with Mike/Leslie. Surely the world would be back to normal by then, right?

Earlier this year, it started to look like the trip was going to be sabotaged again. I personally questioned the wisdom of traveling to an Omicron BA.2 hotspot less than 1,000 from a war zone. Fuck it. We've been vaxxed and boosted (a requirement to fly into Switzerland), and I'm not about to let a 2-bit dictator / war criminal ruin our vacation! Even if it's a vacation I was reluctant to take in the first place. (Some of you may be aware that I am not a fan of international travel.)

Chapter 1 - Basel

An Ominous Start. The day before departure we got word that our connecting flight to Basel from Amsterdam was cancelled because of a baggage handlers strike in Amsterdam. Tom worked feverishly with Viking to re-book our flights with a layover in Paris. Our flight to Paris arrived a few minutes late, but it wouldn't have mattered. The layover was only for 1 hour and 20 minutes. We de-planed, sprinted from one end of the airport to the other (no idea how many steps because my phone was turned off), stood in line for over half an hour to get through security, cleared customs, then took a tram to what is probably the most remote terminal at the Paris airport. We didn't "just miss" the connection, it wasn't even close. Boarding doors typically close 10 minutes before departure and the plane was already wheels-up when we got to the gate and a new plane was boarding for some other destination.

Next flight to Basel is in 8 hours. Oh no... there are no seats available on that flight. By 10:30 am, customer services had found a solution and we were re-booked on a 6:10 pm flight. To Frankfurt, Germany. Once there, we had a 3-hour layover before departing for our final destination. We, of course, had to change terminals and clear security. Fortunately, three hours was plenty of time even with German airport security being more militant than Detroit and Paris.

Our afternoon in Paris was painful. We didn't dare leave terminal 2G because getting back would be arduous. Uncomfortable, somewhat crowded (probably by dozens of others who had missed connecting flights), and minimal services available. Suzanne and I shared a can of Pringles and some bottled water for lunch. Bon appetite.

We had left the house around 2:30 pm Thursday to catch our flight to Paris. We finally arrived to our room at Hotel Basel at 10:55 pm local time, over 26 hours later. Shake it off... vacation starts tomorrow.



Seen in Terminal A – Frankfurt Airport, Germany

Saturday - April 30. 14,079 steps. Half of which were probably spent wandering around trying to find a covid testing location to obtain a lab-certified negative Covid-19 test, required before boarding the Viking longship. The place near the hotel couldn't accommodate us. The pharmacy a block away that was recommended by the hotel desk didn't do covid testing. We finally found a place and made appointments for late afternoon. Most of the other half of the steps were from wandering aimlessly through some neighborhoods near the river. Because, apparently, that's how we roll.

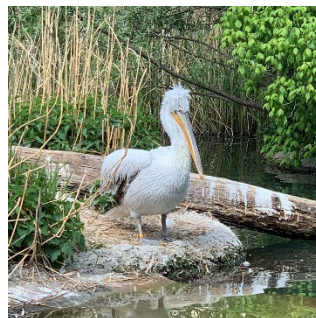
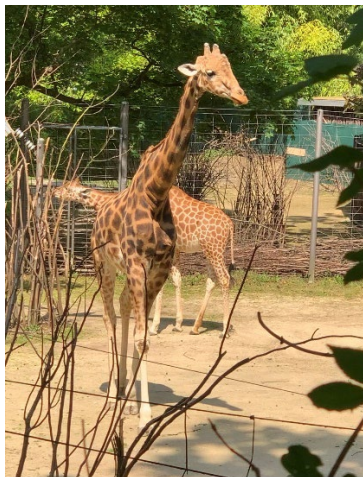


Later in the afternoon it was time for happy hour at Zum Braumen Mutz after we all tested negative for covid. Then we attempted to find a dinner place that could accommodate all eight of us traveling together and our various dietary proclivities. This turned out to be more difficult than expected, including a brief stop by three of us to look at a menu posted outside of a nearly

empty Italian restaurant. A man from the restaurant navigated the empty outdoor seating area and came up to us to say that they were booked up for the night and would not be able to accommodate us. (Really? Place looks pretty empty to me.) When he walked away, we continued to look at the menu for a minute which prompted the man to come back and shoo us away. I'm not sure what he actually said, but what I heard was "Stop looking at our menu. Go away. We don't serve Americans. You go now."

We ended up back at the Mutz place for dinner. Mike declared it to be one of his favorite places going way back. (He's never been to Switzerland before.) Our waiter was a delightful young man, decidedly NOT from Switzerland, with a jagged 6-inch scar on his head. I imagined that he had received it from a broken beer bottle during a bar fight. He was clearly sweet on Beth, but she wasn't having it. A delightful meal was had, and the day was done.

Sunday – May 1. Embarkment day. But not before taking in a few of the local sites. 11,081 steps. Our fellow travelers all went in different directions. Suzanne and I chose to check out the Basel Zoo, the oldest zoo in Switzerland, which opened in 1874. While we were there, Mike had an interesting encounter with a heavily accented woman in the hotel lobby. She approached him and asked if he was waiting for the bus to the *biking tour*. He heard *Viking tour* and I'm guessing that comedy ensued. Clearly the mistake was on her. What gave her the idea that a senior, in decidedly NOT bicycling attire and sipping a glass of red wine, was waiting to join a bike tour?

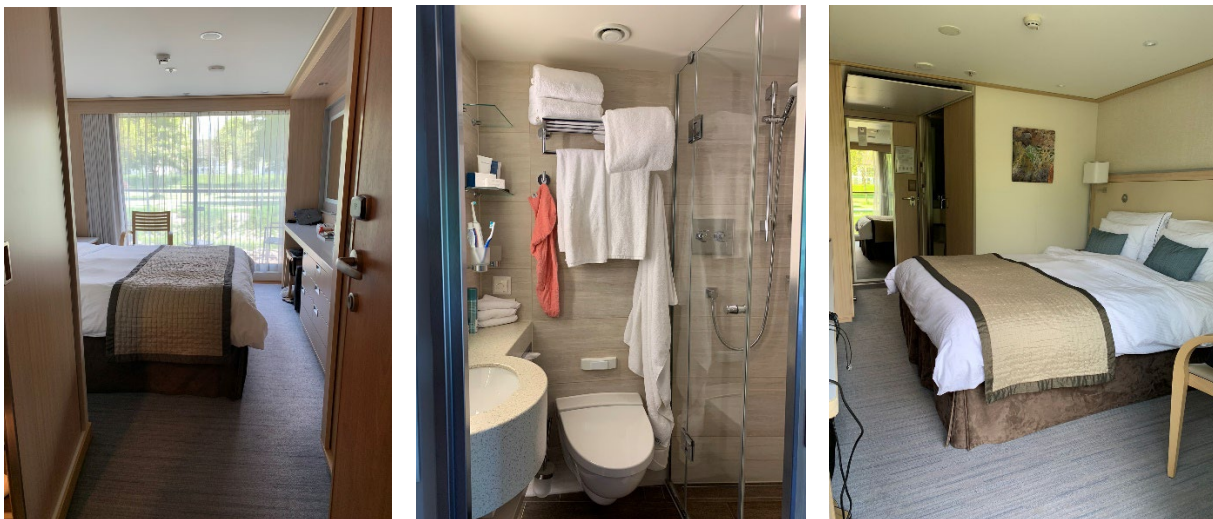


On the way to the zoo, we passed some sort of demonstration. On the way back to collect our luggage and head to the boat we noticed a lot of graffiti that seemed pretty fresh. Apparently, it was Switzerland's version of Labor Day and "May 1 Means Resistance." Participants seem to have a beef with banks, the police, and capitalism. Maybe it's time to leave Switzerland.

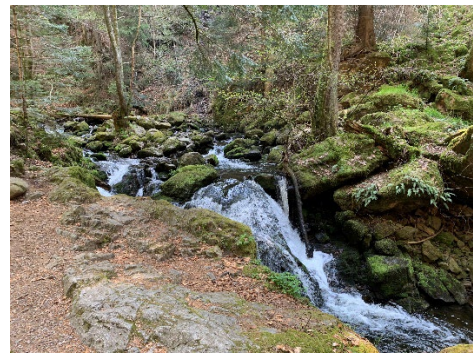
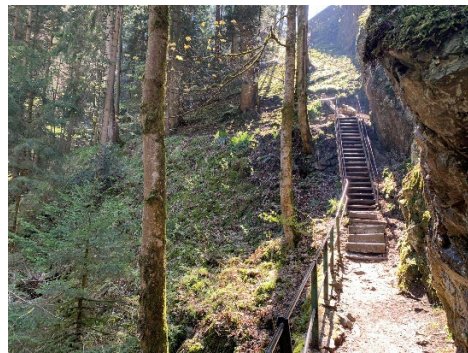


Chapter 2 – Viking

Embarkment. We arrived at the boat mid-afternoon, checked in, were administered another covid test, then went to our stateroom to unpack. This is home for the next 7 nights. Because of the well thought out floorplan and features of the room, it made a lot more sense to "move in" rather than live out of suitcases for the week. Then it was time for happy hour, a short presentation about the next day's port-of-call and related excursions, and dinner with our traveling companions. After we left the dock, we went through the first of several locks for the week. We went topside to observe, but (admittedly) I may have been a little tipsy.

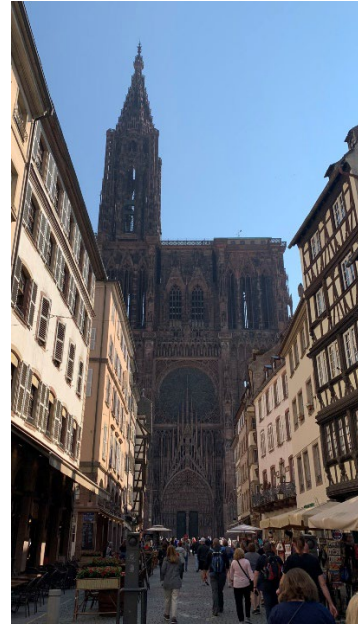


Breisach, Germany. 7,940 steps. Our chosen excursion for the day was a bus trip to The Black Forest. There were further options once we arrived at the destination. Some chose presentations about cuckoo clocks and making Black Forest Cake. Suzanne chose those options while I decided to go for a walk in the woods. An hour and a half on a bus to go for a 50-minute walk in the woods, followed by an hour ride back to the boat. Trees, river, small waterfall... nothing I can't see back here in Michigan or neighboring states. Seemed like a long way to go for a stroll. At least the weather was nice.

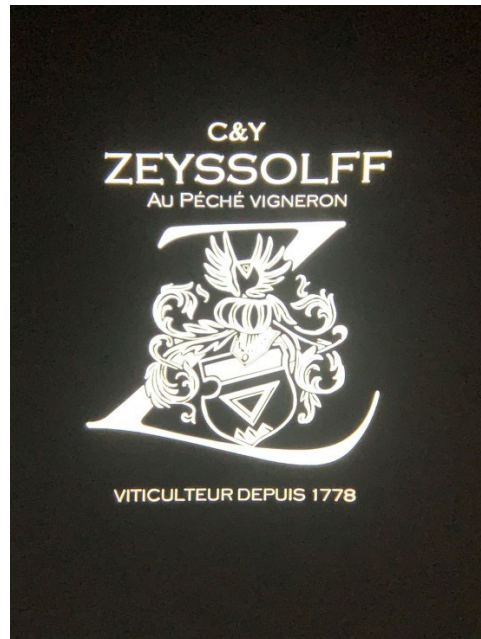


In the afternoon, Suzanne and I took a stroll through the little town adjacent to where we were docked. Basically, to and from the local cathedral. Is it time for happy hour yet?

Stasbourg, France. We woke up docked in Kehl, Germany. Apparently, there is nothing to see there, so across the bridge to Strasbourg we went for a "Strasbourg Highlights" walking tour. Our guide, Valerie, was pleasant enough and occasionally a bit cheeky. Surprise... Strasbourg has a cathedral.

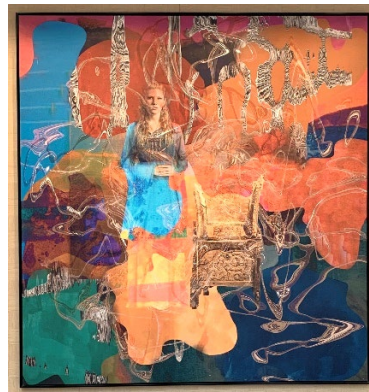


In the afternoon and with the same guide, we took a short trip to an Alsatian Wine Tasting. Part of Valerie's charm was that she didn't hide her disdain for the sweet white wines of Germany. The dry Rieslings and other white wines from Alsace are arguably better. Including the sparkling wine, a crémant (not Champagne because it isn't from the Champagne region), that Mike and I picked up for 10 Euro per bottle. Oh, by the way, 13,249 steps for the day.



Speyer, Germany. Before I go into detail about the day's activities, I'd like to pause and say a few words about Viking. Our river cruise took place on the Viking longship called Hlin. 95 staterooms and a crew of 50. One crew member for every four guests if sold out, and our trip wasn't sold out. The crew was phenomenal. I can't say enough good things about them. Every crew member we encountered was competent, exceedingly friendly, and eager to serve. Our room steward greeted us in the hall every time we passed her. By name! I theorized that they were all on some really good drugs or under some type of hypnotic spell. I'll bet if I had asked one of them to cluck like a chicken or bark like a dog, they would have done it. Happily!

Seriously, the Viking cruise organization is a class act. If I were to consider another adventure by boat, and I'm not saying that I am, I would definitely consider another Viking cruise. One caveat... if your package includes air fare and they route you through Paris, make sure the layover is greater than 2.5 hours.



Ok... back to Speyer. Walking tour of the city. Our guide was Ernst. Retired military and he knew a LOT about the local cathedral. I don't remember most of what he said but, believe me, he was very knowledgeable. I was a little concerned at first. His age, his pace, and his heavy breathing into the microphone made me wonder if someone should be charging up the paddles. But he rallied as we got closer to the cathedral and he was actually interesting. I bought a nice

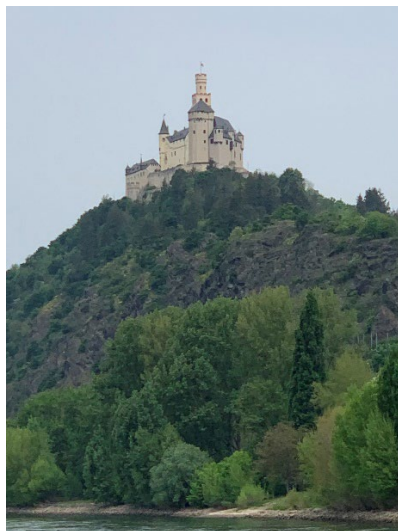
shirt in town during a break in the tour and got a picture of the clock tower with two clock faces, one for hours and one for minutes. The hour face was older and the minutes face was added later. Something to do with trains. Whatever.

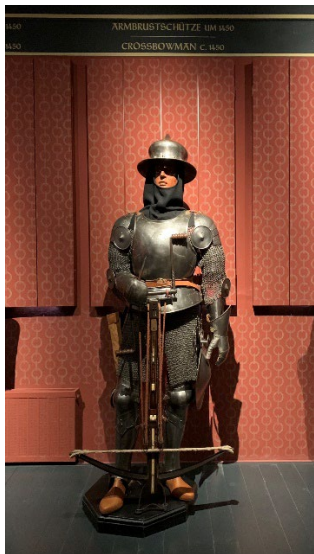


The boat cast off during lunch and docked in Rudesheim by late afternoon. During the float we saw the first of many RV/camper parks we would see along the Rhine River. Apparently, the Germans (and the Dutch) like their recreational vehicle vacations? We took a short, self-guided stroll around town where I bought a new hat then headed back for dinner. After dinner, there was a glassblowing demonstration in the lounge that was interesting. We bought a coronavirus themed x-mas ornament and had it shipped home with Mike's large purchase of handblown items. Hopefully it gets here in time for Christmas. 11,821 steps for the day.



Koblenz, Germany. We cast off during breakfast to float by about 2 dozen castles by lunch time. It was a bit chilly and breezy outside, but I managed to get a few castle pictures. The cruise director narrated some of the history as we passed each of the castles. When were they built, for whom and why, blah blah blah. Glad there isn't a test. After lunch, we docked in Koblenz and a sub-group of our traveling companions joined us for a tour of the Medieval Marksburg Castle. Most of us were largely unimpressed. 9,723 steps for the day.



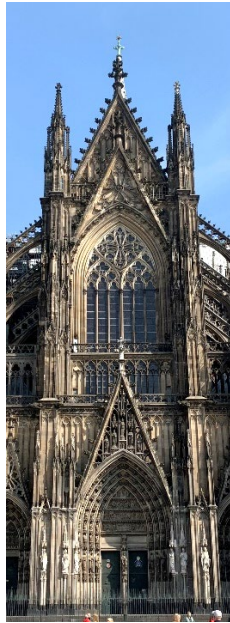
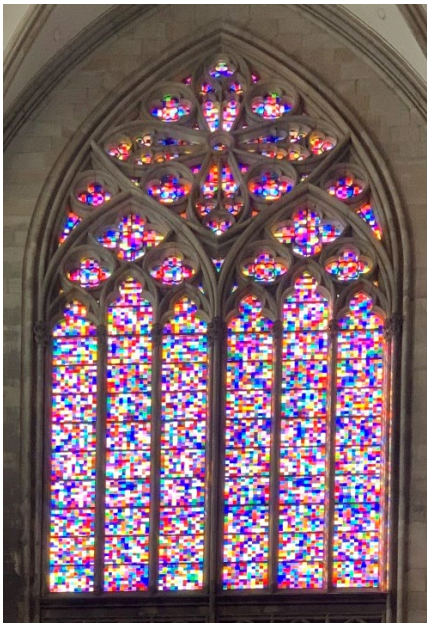


Suzanne and I also celebrated our fourth wedding anniversary in Koblenz. Mike and I had our waiter pop the bottles on crémant that we had purchased in Strasbourg and served them for us at dinner. At the end of dinner, our waitstaff serenaded us with a rendition of “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” and served up *another* dessert. After dinner, we enjoyed a nightcap in the lounge with some live entertainment. The advertised “string quartet” turned out to be a duo. I’m no symphonic aficionado, but those guys were crazy good. The company, the wine, the best menu of the week, the serenade, and the two desserts made this the best night of the trip. I’m glad that Suzanne made me change out of that flannel shirt for dinner.

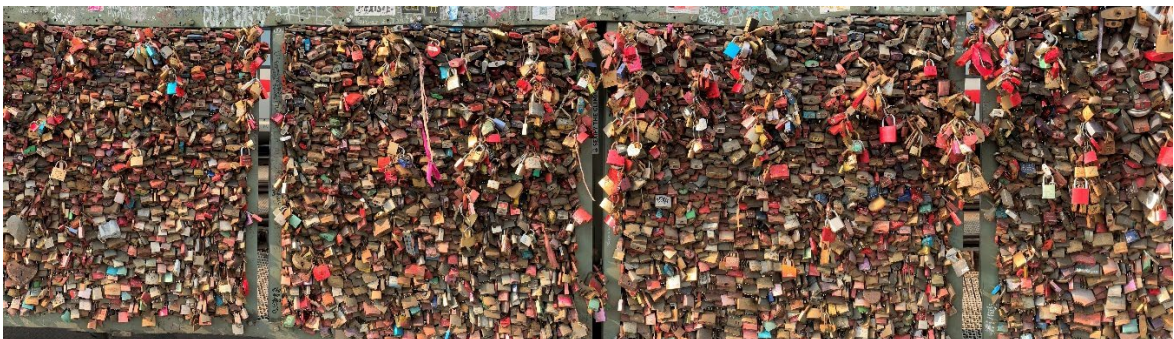


Cologne, Germany. Another walking tour? Are you serious?! Let me guess... they have a cathedral. (*Insert eye-rolling maneuver here.*) On the way to the cathedral, our young guide, Mark, shared a story about the head of a man under a clock sticking his tongue out. I’ve already forgotten most of the story, but the response from across the square is essentially “kiss my ass.”





We were on our own for the afternoon, so after lunch and a break we wandered around town. Then we dropped 20 Euro on a lock and basically threw it away. We locked it on a fence at the entrance to a bridge that was jam packed with locks from one end to the other. The things we do for love. 14,301 steps for the day.





(Note: Suzy hates this picture because of her Ryan Reynolds Deadpool hand, that appears to be in the early stages of growing back after being shot off, that is pointing at the lock. But I think it captures the moment that we locked in our love forever after breaking off the key to the lock.)



Kinderdijk, The Netherlands. Easy morning (*finally*) with a cruise director presentation about the next day's disembarkation details. Basically, be packed and out of your room by 8 am with your bags in the hall to be taken ashore by the crew. After lunch, we left the boat for our shore excursion - a visit to a farm that makes cheese then a quick ride to see a bunch of windmills. Only 7,686 steps for the day.

At the farm, we met the farmer's daughter and her younger brother's new wife. We bought 3 pounds of gouda then went out to the barn to meet the farmer and the cows who produced the milk for the cheese we had just purchased.



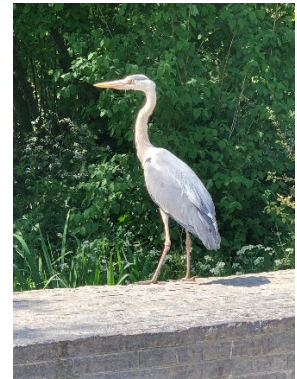


After the cheese farm it was time to see windmills. Dead birds everywhere. Hope I don't catch cancer from getting so close. *(Of course I'm kidding. What's wrong with you?)*



Chapter 3 – Amsterdam

Sunday, May 8. Disembarkation and transportation to INK Hotel went fairly well. (A couple of missed bags for Craig and Michelle was easily corrected.) Rooms were ready for early check in and we had the afternoon to wander. We purchased tickets for the Hop On Hop Off bus tour. We hopped on and off a couple of times, took a walk in a park, lunched at Hard Rock Café, and even took a stroll through the Red Light District early in the evening. RLD seemed a little sleepy. Not sure if it was because it was a Sunday or because we were there too early in the evening. 15,078 steps for the day.



Monday, May 9. 14,042 steps. Wandering in the morning with a stop at some flower market where you can't buy flower bulbs to take home because of importing rules. Friets for lunch – you freaks go ahead with Mayo on your fries, I'll stick with ketchup thank you very much. Ann Frank House (21 Euro pissed away). An entertaining boat ride with Those Dam Boat Guys, who Suzanne found in Rick Steves Pocket Amsterdam. Ended the day with another stroll through the Red Light District. A little more activity going on. I couldn't get Suzanne into any of the sex shops and the t-shirts in the souvenir shops were lame. (I really wanted a cool RLD t-shirt. Sad.) A few scantily clad women behind glass in tiny rooms for passers by to ogle, but nothing crazy. One particularly buxom "woman" had an Adam's apple and needed a shave. We're done here.



Tuesday, May 10. 18,524 steps. Apparently we saved maximum pain for our last full day. First up – Van Gogh Museum (19 Euro pissed away). Indirect path back with stops for beverages (modified pub crawl). Then we took measures to obtain lab certified negative covid tests that are required to fly home, most of us with "on demand via internet" test kits from our hotel. Early dinner with some interesting photos and odd things hanging about, then Suzanne and I paid a visit to Holland Casino. "Paid" being the operative word. Ice cream with some of the crew then back to the hotel to pack and get some sleep. Transportation to the airport is picking us up at 8:30 am the next day. Time to go home.





Amsterdam – Here’s what I know.

I often had difficulty getting my bearings. Roads are not laid out in any discernable pattern, are not well marked, and sometimes are questionable as to whether they are for cars (and/or trams), bicycles, or pedestrians. Many storefronts and restaurants were along narrow alleys and small “streets” not accessible by car. Parking was almost non-existent and bicycles were EVERYWHERE. Pedestrians need to keep sharp and seek out “pedestrian lanes” to avoid being clobbered by a cyclist while noting that some “lanes” are apparently one-way. Not that the direction is marked, but the locals all seem to know which direction you should go as if it’s embedded in their DNA.

Marijuana, “magic” mushrooms, and other mood enhancers seemed readily available, but I stuck with what I know. Booze. The Red Light District was disappointing and the casino was less than exciting, probably because we waited until our last day, near the end of an 18 thousand step day, to stop in just so that we could say that we had.

Chapter 4 – Final Thoughts

I’ve seen enough castles and cathedrals for a lifetime. Small old European towns with cobblestone roads and walkways too. The words “Walking Tour” will likely haunt me for weeks or months to come.

On the plus side, we were unbelievably lucky with the weather. A little chilly the morning we floated by castles and on the day we got to Amsterdam, but otherwise fantastic. I really enjoyed spending time with our fellow travelers and the Viking experience far exceeded expectations.

Special thanks to Tom for booking, rebooking, researching, and assisting at every turn of our adventure. Your efforts were greatly appreciated.

Auf Wiedersehen