

Europe 2010

Land of Luther & Oberammergau

(The Bus Trip, or part 1)



Aug 3 – Aug 12, 2010

Europe 2010 - The Bus Trip (or part 1)

This is going to be a grand adventure: my family in a big bus with 35 other people!

Nearly three years ago now, I began to put this trip into motion. I did not want to miss the Oberammergau Passion Play again, as I had done ten years ago, and I wanted to bring my family along, so I began to look into how I might organize and lead such an event for our church (the kids were kept in the dark about their inclusion in this trip until Christmas 2009!). Well, tickets couldn't be purchased without a tour, so I was immediately forced into organizing this event through a tour group – not my first choice certainly, but as it was the only choice, I went with the guys we had used for the last 20 years – Nawas. Because Pastor Nate and Laura also wanted to go, we either had to recruit a lot of people to go at our church, or enlist the help of another church. I asked Pastor Mike if he'd like to join us on the bus and he said yes. Over the next few years, we had up to 53 people signed up between our two churches, but then Pastor Nate left for another church, we had a death in the group, some injuries & illnesses occurred, and there were a few financial misfortunes as well. By the time we left, we had 39 people signed up, but then only 34 arrived on the first day in Berlin because there was a death in the family at Mike's church that affected five tour members just a few days before the trip. They would arrive from Chicago on day three of our trip (Thanks to Nawas, who really scrambled to rearrange their trip so they could attend the funeral).

In addition to traveling on this 10 day journey from Berlin, through "Luther Country," to Prague, Munich then finally Oberammergau, my family will extend another eight days and travel through Austria, Italy & Switzerland. It should be fun... and exhausting!

Tuesday 8/3

I worked 'til noon. I didn't see the point of taking the day off, and I really didn't have the vacation time to spare. My family had packed over the last three days so final preparation prior to our trip to the airport was completely without stress.

Ray & Rosa showed up just before 1PM and we took our van to the airport to be there slightly ahead of our group (which was to meet at 2PM). Moments after departing, we got a call from Dan & Cheryl; they were already at the airport. They wanted to know what to do so I told them to go ahead and check in. We'd call them once we got to SFO.

When we arrived at 1:45... we were the last ones there! Everyone must have been excited about this journey. Doris, Diane, Karen and Kathy were already in line; the rest (those who had mostly never gone international, and those who were patient) had waited for us. We all got through the line just fine. Some of us were subjected to the new body scanner at the first security check. One randomly selected person got patted-down. That random person was Courtney, so Barbara had to be present because Courtney was a minor (at the time of this trip, Courtney is 12 and Jeffrey is 14, almost 15).

The wait for the plane was fairly uneventful. All of us, except Doris in row 34, would be seated at the back of the British Airways 747 in rows 49 – 52.

The flight seemed relatively short (10.5 hours). Cindy switched with someone and got a bulkhead seat with more leg room. Courtney's TV screen didn't work so after Barbara watched one movie, she switched with Courtney. I watched 5.5 movies. Sometime before our flight, Barbara and I decided to order Hindi meals, just to be different, but man, did we get some unloving stares from the flight attendant as she served us our special meals. I have almost no doubt that she was Hindi. We got merely confused looks from the blonde flight attendant who served us our Hindi breakfast (which was no different from the regular breakfast, except that, being "special," we got served way before anyone else. If you are bold enough to order Hindi, or Kosher, or Vegetarian, you will get served first as your reward.).



Cheryl, Alice, Natalie, Cindy, Culley & Ray at SFO

Wednesday 8/4

There was confusion almost immediately upon exiting the airplane – our next flight was not listed on the departure board, so we followed the purple signs down several flights of stairs to the tram. Question: should we get on? We didn't know so I went for some answers. The answer was 'yes.' Once we exited the tram, we were subjected to another (unnecessary in my opinion) security check. Those who hadn't drunk the water in their water bottles on the plane had to guzzle it before the screening, or lose their bottle. I was one of those people.

Once we got through security, nothing had changed – still no departure gate listed, though now at least, our flight was on the board. We would be assigned a gate one hour prior to departure. I seem to recall from prior flights through Heathrow that they don't have a strict gate assignment policy; airplanes park at the first available gate, or some such nonsense.

Some of us went shopping; others hung out by the departure sign until our gate was announced. Once announced, we headed downstairs. Just as the gates were opening, Mike and his group arrived. It was good to see Mike, Kathy and Tim again; it was good to finally combine our two groups.

The flight was uneventful and passport control was a breeze. We were met by our Nawas-appointed bag handlers and they did a great job of grabbing every Nawas-tagged bag. Andre, our tour guide for the next 10 days, met us outside the gate. The bus ride to Hotel Berlin was fairly brief and offered a few views of the city. It was at this point that Barbara remembered that she had left the water on in her garden – wow, 15 hours... so far! She texted Julie, who is staying at our house.

After a quick freshening-up in our room, Barbara and I decided to take a quick walk to the Hard Rock Café, Berlin. Jeffrey wanted to sleep, but Courtney was awake, so she joined us. We didn't find anyone downstairs so we set out alone. It's too bad the hotel ATM wouldn't work with our card; we would have to find a bank. Fortunately, there were many around here (wherever there are tourists...). We got Euros then continued to walk. The old Hard Rock was three blocks from our hotel; the new one was 1.5 – 2 miles away. It took 45 minutes to get there. Along the way, we saw the KaDeWe (largest store in Europe) and the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. When we got to the Hard Rock, the store was small, crowded, and oppressively hot. There were no XXL or XXXL shirts in the whole place, so I left empty-handed. The girls did not want a shirt. We didn't have much time to get back for dinner (and to wake up Jeff), so we took the most direct path home and walked briskly. On the way home, we saw the Berlin Zoo (entrance) and we saw a scuffle between a cyclist and the pedestrian he had just hit. The cyclist got a punch in the jaw and was now spitting blood into every trash can he saw as he pedaled away. I really felt for him – yes, he had clipped that pedestrian, but there was no reason for such retaliation. We got back with 15 minutes to spare.

Dinner was good, though not spectacular, and the service was typically European – that is, slow. It was Gretchen's birthday, so the other group had brought cookies for all and an electric candle/cupcake for Gretchen to "blow out." Gretchen was brought to tears by this outpouring of love. I must admit that I was a bit teary as well – what love in that group!

After dinner, Andre, Mike and I had an hour-and-a-half long "fifteen minute" meeting on the upcoming tour. We changed the flow of the tour a bit, because some of the Luther sites were being renovated (Luther's birth and death places). The change definitely benefited the group. Yes, we would skip Eisleben, but this would add more time in Leipzig, and we would possibly visit Dresden – a place that I very much wanted to get to in my lifetime – if the bus driver was willing to travel that quicker but longer route to Prague.

Thursday 8/5

Courtney called our room at 4AM. She said she had been up since 2AM. I was sort of up at 3AM, so it was no big deal to get the phone call. I was out of bed at 5AM, so I wrote a little and planned how I might survive today's "death march" that I had planned. Yesterday's "quick" three miles had left me somewhat hobbled by dinner (I've had *plantar fasciitis* for about a month – my left heel is killing me!), so I was really concerned that I wouldn't survive today. To counter this, I was taking massive amounts of Motrin (doctor prescribed before the trip), and for my arthritic knee; glucosimine chondroitin. By breakfast time, I was feeling no pain. Breakfast, by the way, was excellent.



Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church

We mostly got on the bus on time; I think we pulled out four minutes late, so not too bad. Our local tour guide for the morning was Heiko. No, he wasn't Japanese: Heiko is a shortened, diminutive form of Heinrich; popular with parents of the 1970s. He was very informative during this mostly "drive-by shooting" bus tour (driving while shooting pictures). We did stop and get out at the remnants of the Berlin Wall



Berlin Wall & SS Basement

and former SS building basement / interrogation rooms, Checkpoint Charlie, Berliner Dom, and the Brandenburg Gate – all interesting stops. Those who wanted to get out at the Brandenburg Gate, rather than at the Zoo by the hotel, were allowed to finish the bus tour



Checkpoint Charlie

here. This was ideal for my purposes, so the "death march" group of Knitters, Hacketts, Cindy, Ray, Cheryl F. and Alice got off here, as did Mike's "gentle stroll" group.

The first thing we did was look for a bank – some in the group still didn't have cash. We found a commercial bank, which we discovered doesn't give money out to people. Looking around, all the banks we could see were commercial banks, so we decided to head towards the Reichstag to see what we could see. Nearby, there was a protest about a possible stoning in Iran. Our guide had explained that there was always some sort of protest by the Brandenburg Gate because: 1) there was always media coverage there; 2) If they got on the air, anyone in the world would know where they were.



Milpitas Post group at the Brandenburg Gate

We did get a “Milpitas Post” picture with our Milpitas group at the Brandenburg Gate. We also got a picture in front of the American Embassy. For a brief moment, Dan “visited America” by stepping on to the Embassy property (and near the Embassy is the hotel where Michael Jackson had dangled his son over a ledge).

We passed through the Brandenburg Gate and headed towards the Reichstag. The building was stunning, but the line to get in was way too long today to get up to the glass dome. We took our pictures (as did Mike’s group who was already there), then went to look for a bank on the main drag – Unter den Linden. There were no banks by the Reichstag, and no banks for a very long time. Cindy and I eventually went inside a Volkswagen dealership and asked for directions. As it turned out, the Deutschebank was one

block away. We got our money, and also got water, since they had a dispenser there, and then continued down the boulevard. We were already at the equestrian statue of Frederick, so no need to take a bus to Museum Island anymore – we could see it. In a way, this was good because it gave us an opportunity to see Humboldt University. We went to the “Hitler” book burning site, then to a “Rick Steves approved” restaurant nearby – the Operencafe. It was good, and the Weiss bier was excellent.

After lunch, we went to the Berliner Dom (where we had been earlier in the day). The exterior (1905 – done in Baroque style) was exquisite; the interior was vast. I made the mistake of not setting a



Knitter family at the Reichstag



Dan visits America - in Germany

time or place to meet afterwards, so it took 40 minutes to gather everyone after the first group exited the building. I won’t make that mistake again!

We stood in line for a while and got tickets to see Nefertiti’s head at the Neues Museum at 4:30. We were also told by the somewhat angry ticket agent that all the museums would be free from 6 – 10PM; not ideal for us, but I liked the price.

After stowing our bags in the very hot coat check area within the Neues Museum, we played “find that Nefertiti head,” since it was not apparent where that piece of art was, the provided map was useless, and there was no signage anywhere pointing the way. Jeffrey won – it was on the second floor – he had asked a guard. Yup, it looked like the pictures. It wasn’t better looking than the pictures, but it sure looked good for being 3300 years old. Courtney was very excited; this was the one thing she wanted to see in Europe.



Our group with a Berliner Bear

We were told, incorrectly, that we could get into the Neue Galerie with our tickets. We did get to see some sculptures at the entrance, but we did not get in. We had 45 minutes to kill, so we headed towards the Radisson Hotel, which housed the world’s largest free-standing fish tank in the lobby. On the way, we saw some bronze nudes, so we took a picture or two. We also took group pictures with one of the local Berlin Bears.

The fish tank was huge – maybe five stories tall with an elevator running through the middle. On the way back to the Museum, we stopped for some cake and very fancy ice creams. Two from our group wanted to do some shopping, so they took bus 100 and left. The remaining eight went to the Pergamon Museum.

When we got there, the line seemed to be moving fine, but then it stopped, and did not start again for 20 minutes at a time. Standing in line can really hurt tired feet! We were in that line for an hour. It was totally worth it though – the Temple of Zeus was absolutely huge (and the museum only has a third of it!) and the Ishtar Gate (Nebuchadnezzar’s entryway to the “Hanging Gardens of Babylon,” one of the seven wonders of the ancient world) was absolutely gorgeous. What a highlight!



Ishtar Gate

When we headed to the bus stop, we found a sign to the “Lustgarten.” We had a lot of fun with that sign. In the Lustgarten itself, in front of the Berliner Dom, some youth were dressed in togas and they were taking pictures by the fountain. We found that bus 200 would take us to where we wanted to go, so we took that. The bus was very hot and crowded – I was getting very sweaty. Ray decided to go to the hotel so he continued on after we stopped at the Gemaldegalerie.

Before our group of seven went inside the Gemaldegalerie, we really needed fluids. I was easily a quart low when we got on the bus, and was now maybe two quarts low. We got water by an outdoor movie theater that was being set up.

There was a lot of world-class art in that museum. I think we hit all but two rooms. Unfortunately, I missed the two Vermeers in the place – the whole reason for coming here! I guess I got overwhelmed by all that great art, and it completely slipped my mind that I was here to see Vermeer. Guess I’ll have to come back. Our group of seven actually closed the place; leaving at 10PM (they kicked us out!). We walked along the river on the way home, passing by the Bauhaus. I was hoping that the building would be lit up, but it was not. Our hotel was certainly lit-up, and it looked great after this 10 mile day. Once I stopped moving, I could not move again!



Berliner Dom and Lustgarten



The kids experience museum overload



Jeffrey at the end of the evening

Friday 8/6

Courtney brings joy to our trips through her quirkiness. So far, she has started collecting “Gypsy rocks,” which she keeps in her pants pockets so that if a Gypsy tries to pick her pocket, all he/she will get are rocks. She’s had the rocks for more than half a day now so of course, she has named them. Today, she was obsessed with finding out how to say: “May I pet your dog?” in German. Andre was kind enough to print it out for her. Courtney spent the morning assaulting unsuspecting German dog owners with a phrase that sure sounds like “May I strike your dog.” A couple of dog owners refused. I tried to tell her that the verb for ‘pet’ was ‘essen,’ but she’s smarter than that – she’s been around me too long. She trusts Andre’s German over mine.

Oh ya, both Courtney and Jeffery also spent the better part of yesterday trying to corner and catch pigeons. This trend would continue today.

Aside from all that fun, Courtney has been very loving, but clingy. I guess this is her reaction to being in unfamiliar surroundings. For the most part, I don’t mind, but when it’s hot out and she’s hot – like yesterday – it’s no fun. Today it was cool and rainy, so her constant affection was quite alright.

Breakfast was awesome again, and I was the first one there at 6:15. My family joined me at 6:30. It was nice to see that they were all in one piece after yesterday’s long march. I was tired and achy.

We got our bags ready by eight, and we were downstairs by 8:30. For some reason, I thought we were leaving then. The bus (nice bus!) did pull out at 9AM with all aboard.

First stop was Wittenberg. We saw the Luther House, a former monastery where Luther had been a monk, but then later became the owner when John the Steadfast bequeathed it to him. It was a very big place (now a museum) with many Luther documents & books, and many Cranach paintings. It was a very well done museum. The kids got bored after a while and played hide and seek in the place.



Luther House

From there, we strolled down the cobbled main street. The main (and really only) street had really been dolled-up after so many years of Communism; at least attempting to regain some of its former glory. Five hundred years ago, this was the site of an impressive university, and the Prince/Elector's palace home. Just down the street, we stopped to look at Melanchthon's home. A little further down, we looked at the Rathaus and at the Marian Church where Luther preached every Sunday. We had time for a quick lunch, so our busload of 40 spread out in all directions. My family tried to get service at an outdoor café, but they were painfully slow, so we left. Down the street, we found a place that served Turkish 'donner' (think Greek gyros), so we ate there. The food was cheap! The whole family ate for under ten Euros, so we splurged on ice cream.

At the Rathaus, there was a recently married couple taking pictures by the limo they had arrived in. We followed them to the Castle Church. This is where Luther posted his 95 theses. He posted his theses at this church, rather than at the Marian church, because this was



Wittenberg and the Castle Church



"95 Theses" door

the government and university church, and Luther wanted to debate with his colleagues and Frederick the Wise, not the common man.

I found it interesting that Luther never preached at the Castle Church; he's buried here, as is Melanchthon, Frederick and John.

The kids wanted to climb the impressive tower (with "Mighty Fortress" written on it), but I only had 100 Euro bills, and we couldn't find Barbara for 1 Euro coins. By the time we found her (exiting the bathroom across the street), it was too late.

I fell asleep for most of the ride to Leipzig. When I was awake, I would talk to Tom about architecture. He had been an Architectural planner for years, and then became a college Architecture teacher. Courtney, sitting beside me, would ask Tom and wife Kathy all kinds of random questions. I thought this might annoy them after a while, but they seemed to like it.

It was raining when we got to Leipzig. The first church we saw there was the Thomas Church where Bach had played for much of his career, and where he was now buried. It was a large church, but I wouldn't call it impressive. Truthfully, it looked much better from the outside. It did have two organs on the inside, and it wasn't too long before a lady began playing on one of them. The acoustics were so great – it almost brought me to tears. The sound was ethereal!

Ray and I found a dead royal or knight depicted in sculpture above his grave, so we copied the pose on a nearby bench and took pictures. It somehow felt sacrilegious, but it was fun.



Thomas Church, burial site of Bach



Ray takes a nap

devil, tempting Professor Faust (or Faustus... which means "lucky").

Next up was the Nicholas Church. Now there's a church! The exterior wasn't much to write home about, but the interior was the most unique and beautiful I have ever seen! It was "Hawaiian Tropic" themed "Romantic Baroque." The pillars were green palm trees with light pink on the walls. It looked like a party church – it looked like spumoni! – though this was also the church where a peaceful movement started that eventually led to the fall of "the wall" and Communism in 1989. I really felt connected and at home in this place – who wouldn't want to come to this church!

The walk through town was nice, even with the rain. It was apparent that the merchants of Leipzig were quite wealthy; lots of gold on those buildings! We briefly looked at some statues of Goethe's "Faust" with Mephisto (or Mephistopheles if you prefer), the



Nicholas Church has a conga-line ministry!

A short bus ride took us to our hotel for the night: The Westin. This might just be the best hotel we will sleep in the entire trip. Even though the hotel was great, the dinner was only OK; as was the Dunkel disguised as a Schwartz beer. That beer had no substance! The soup was phenomenal, but the best thing for the main course was the broccoli. After dinner, Barbara and Courtney donned bathing suits & robes to go swimming while I took Ray, Cheryl F. and Cindy to see the large and impressive train station. We went to see 24 tracks of German efficiency, and then went to the post office downstairs to get stamps. Cindy used all the German she had picked up so far to successfully talk to the postal clerk. I was really impressed. Cheryl got a piggy bank for one of her kids. On the way home, several of us took pictures of a metal sculpture that many pairs of shoes had been thrown on.

When I got back to my room, Barbara told me that she and Courtney had encountered a naked Oriental in the sauna. Neither was fazed by this because they knew this was culturally acceptable by both Japanese Orientals, and by Germans. Some of the women in our group were also there and were apparently a little freaked-out by this. Barb and Courtney stayed to talk to their new Oriental friend, though they did keep their clothes on.

Back up in my room, I took a bath (rather than a shower) for the first time in 20ish years because our room came with a bath big enough to fit me. It brought back childhood memories of me playing with toy boats, and being a 'submarine' every time I submerged.



Leipzig Train Terminal



"Shoe Tree" sculpture

Saturday 8/7

We had a lot to do today, and a set time at Wartburg Castle, so breakfast was at 6:30, and the bus left at 8:00. The breakfast was simply spectacular – good meats, veggies and cheese. The ride to the castle was through rolling countryside, dotted with modern windmills (7% of Germany's energy needs are supplied by wind power). The views were pretty spectacular because Courtney and I grabbed the front seats today. Every once in a while, we'd see some nice steeple or castle on a hill.



Wartburg Castle

On the bus, Andre was talking about Luther getting kidnapped by Frederick, then being taken to Wartburg. Shortly after that speech, we passed a sign saying "Entering Thuringia." That got me thinking: If Frederick was from Saxony, then how could he get Luther into a Thuringen castle? Andre didn't know, but would be happy to research it for me.

At the rest stop, we got some "kinder joy" eggs for the kids and I got a cappuccino.

The climb to the castle was a bit of an effort, but on the whole, not bad. It was a great looking castle, though smaller than I thought it would be. When we got to the top, Barbara noticed that

her camera was missing. She checked her bag and her jacket, but it wasn't there. She came to the conclusion that she had left it in her bathrobe last night, since she had taken it with her to the pool. Andre was nice enough to call the hotel, but they couldn't find it. Someone either had a new camera, or it was in some washing machine being beaten to death.

Our castle tour guide was funny and informative – he really made the hour-long tour go quick. Room after room got better and better. The women's sitting room, all done in (two million!) mosaic tesserae, mostly gold, was just stunning. It was a shame that so much of this castle was not original, but all the original stuff had been carried off a long time ago by fans of Luther. It was actually Goethe who made the plea to restore this castle, and for people to return the original furniture. Very little of the original furniture did return, but many donated similar period furniture instead. I seem to recall in my readings that Hitler considered



One small section of the mosaic work

Wartburg to be the perfect, archetypal German Castle. I agree, but I'd also cast a vote for Burg Eltz on the Mosel. The history of the "singing death match," where the loser of the event in this castle lost his life, was an interesting bit of trivia. The tour guide also had the answer to the question I posed to Andre earlier. After St. Elizabeth of Hungary lost her husband (they were living in Wartburg Castle), she got kicked out of the castle. Her husband's brother took over, and there was a war (two wars actually). The brother lost the war, but retained Thuringia until he died. He died with no male heir. The Saxon ruler, who had won the war, took over Thuringia upon the brother's death, and it was still in the hands of Saxony at the time of Luther.

The grand hall on the upper floor of the castle had great acoustics and was all done up in "Romantic Medieval." The composer Handel had created the interior, or at least improved it. The old roof was flat and it gave the place terrible acoustics. He vaulted the roof and put wood and flags everywhere to deaden the "bounce."



The Grand Hall



Luther's Room

Of course, the room everyone wanted to see was the Luther room. It was small and plain, and way at the end of the castle where he wouldn't be disturbed, but it was packed with significant history – this is where the first Greek to German New Testament, which was translated in only 10 weeks, had been written (this works out to 22 translated, hand-written pages a day!).

Mike's knee had been giving him trouble and this castle did him in. He could no longer move his knee and it was swollen to the size of a grapefruit. The rest of the trip will not be fun for him – I've been there a few times (on Europe trips no less), and it doesn't end well.

The kids didn't want bratwurst at the base of the hill, so we left them with money and some bus-mates at the top of the hill. Our brats and beer were very good, though maybe not the "best in Germany" as the sign claimed.

We had the time, so we were able to tour the town on Eisenach at the bottom of the hill. First, we went to Bach's birth house. This may or may not have been his house, but it was within a short distance of the city center, and it was large enough to house his museum. There is no evidence that Bach's dad was rich, so this house seemed really unlikely – the house



Bach's house? Probably not, but it was large enough for the museum

was huge. Down the road was Luther's boyhood home. Martin's dad was rich, and this home was definitely his. A little further beyond that was St. George's Church. The exterior (pink Baroque) was ghastly, but the interior, Baroque with three gallery floors, was quite nice. Both Bach and Luther had sung in the choir here as children, though not at the same time.

Luther also preached here on his return home from the "Diet of Worms."

As we left Eisenach, we saw one of those extremely rare Wartburg convertibles.

These were handcrafted cars, built in Eisenach, for communist Party Officials. Today, it held a recently married couple. This 3-cylinder, 2-stroke mini convertible was well maintained and absolutely gorgeous!



This was Luther's boyhood home -- facing the main square

We got to Erfurt an hour later, and began our walking tour at the Augustine Monastery where Luther had become a monk. The church at the monastery, though large, was very simple, even by Romanesque standards. The usual highlight of this place, the original stained glass windows, were out for restoration. It was from these windows that Luther got the idea for the symbol for the Lutheran Church.

On the way out, I passed by some candles sitting in sand. Courtney had drawn a signature smiley face in the sand. We saw the free parts of the monastery, and most importantly, the gate Luther would enter every day. As we were leaving the monastery, another NAWAS group was entering. They had their nametags on and everything (I didn't even pass our nametags out – I hate nametags!). I believe this NAWAS group was ELCA Lutheran because their pastor was female.



The gate to the monastery



The Kammerbrucke Bridge

We strolled for a bit and came to Kammerbrucke, the only bridge with houses on it this side of the Alps. It was very cute. The whole town was cute! Most all of these buildings had fallen into disrepair under Communism, but thanks to the “Reunification Tax,” which West Germans hate, these buildings were being restored and

dolled-up. In the fish market square, we saw two buildings side-by-side with similar facades, but one was very colorful and the other one was mostly uniform in color. Ray and I were joking about a mixed-up paint order: “Man, what am I going to do with 20 gallons of non-refundable ochre paint!”

Courtney ran over to a dog owner and this time, handed them her note. This worked better than her broken German. They were very amused and they let her pet their dog.



“Ochre” House on the Fish Market Square

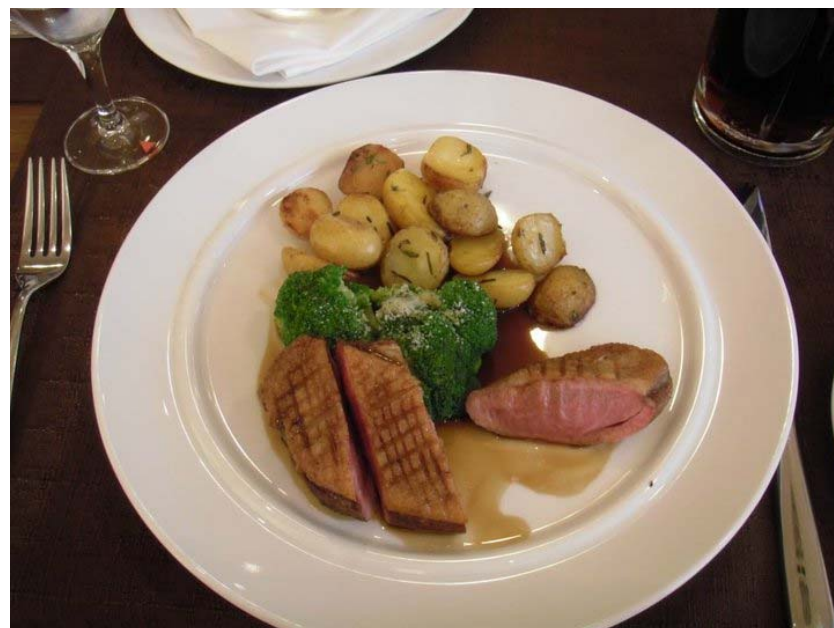
The Erfurt Cathedral and St. Severus church were impressive from afar. There was a whole bunch of stuff in front of the Cathedral because the city was preparing for a Handel's Messiah song and dance fest. These churches were on top of a hill, so 67 steps to get there.

The Erfurt Cathedral turned out to be a double church. One side was Gothic, 14th century, and the other side appeared to be Neo-Gothic, 15th century. The Gothic side, with a Baroque Apse (sitting on top of the original c. 750 St. Boniface Church), was great, even with the glass windows in desperate need of cleaning. Mike's camera had run out of batteries so he asked me to take pictures for him. My camera ran out of batteries just as I snapped my last picture of the choir seats where Luther would have sat. I was less impressed with the Neo-Gothic side, though it did have a massive, multi-story baptistery. Next door at St. Severus, they had an equally massive baptistery, and a fantastic Baroque organ. Too bad I had no batteries left!

Our hotel was kind of funky. I could see that they were trying to pull off the look of a grand hotel, but really, they were connecting two old hotels with glass in the middle. It was just odd; wonderful and attentive staff though.



Erfurt Cathedral (L) and St. Severus Church (R)



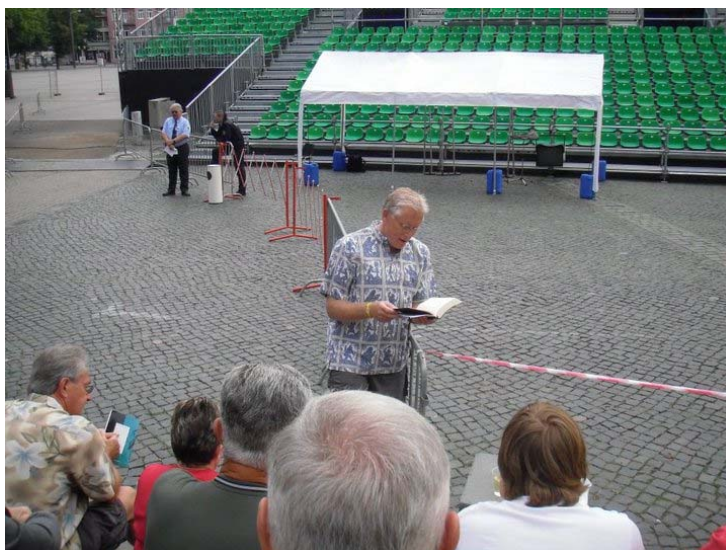
Duck, potatoes and black beer

In the hour we had before dinner, Barbara and I walked to a grocery store for communion wine, figuring that the stores could be closed after dinner. Dinner was duck (which rhymes with 'yuck'). This was very posh, and no doubt expensive, but a lot of Americans don't like it. We sure didn't. At my table, maybe half the duck got eaten. Hey, the local black beer was good and sweet, though pricy for this region, as was the outrageously expensive scotch that a few of us had at the bar afterwards (Oban, 16.50 euros per glass!). Some went to see the choir practice on the church steps. I was too tired so I went to bed.

Sunday 8/8

This funky little hotel did have a great breakfast, which even included spring rolls and chow mein in addition to the traditional German fare. This was the best breakfast to date! Until 7AM, it was only me, Ann, Karen & Kathy. I learned during our conversation that we had all been Great Dane owners at some point in our life (Cheryl H. also had a Great Dane, but she wasn't at breakfast). The two who came next were Jeffrey and Tim. I was shocked – Jeffrey is usually a late morning person. I met Courtney on the way down as I was going up. She was tired and feeling queasy; she had a cold as well. She ate light that morning. I roused Barbara out of bed, and she went down to eat with Courtney.

We had a brief communion service on the steps of Erfurt Cathedral (where Luther became a priest). It was lovely: Pastor Mike talked about St. Martin of Tours (Luther's namesake) and Pastor Joe



Communion service on the steps of Erfurt Cathedral

talked about Luther's views on communion. We intincted to save time. Courtney had her first communion there (Courtney totally gets all aspects of communion, so we allowed it). Afterwards, we took pictures on the steps with our local papers. I wound up with a lot of leftover wine to dump, carry or consume.

Dresden was added to our itinerary for a few reasons, but mostly because our bus driver wanted to take that route. Dresden was incredible; all that was flattened had been restored. The communists restored the civic buildings, and the Western Germans restored the churches after the fall of Communism. To restore the churches, the builders/planners used hundreds of pictures & sketches, plus the still useable stones to rebuild. You could tell which stones were original because they were soot-black. Maybe 10% of the main church was original. That church took 15 years to rebuild, which to me was absolutely amazing – even with modern equipment; and that was just one of many churches in this town being rebuilt, all at the same time. Amazing.



One of the recently rebuilt churches in Dresden



The family in Dresden's main square

My favorite building was the “Orangerie,” which was the size of a fortress – all so that they could protect fruit trees in winter.

After our brief tour, we looked for fast food because the kids were hungry, yet we were time-constrained. The bratwurst guy we found had just run out of brats, so we went to the museum. The kids were cranky, but I explained to them that they would eat again, but we may never be in Dresden again. I don't think they got it, but I did not want to miss seeing the Dresden Vermeer in the gallery, since we were here, and may never be here again. We must have done the fastest tour of that museum ever; essentially looking for a single painting. I found it first, having had the advantage of knowing what it looked like, though Jeffrey sure tried hard. The painting was much larger than some of the other Vermeers, and it was, of course, simply stunning. Afterwards, we went to the museum café, but there was nothing on the menu that the kids would eat, so lunch was gelato out on the square. It was not filling. At the next rest

stop, just the other side of the border in the Czech Republic, we sought food and bathrooms in a McDonalds. The bathrooms were closed due to a “technical difficulty” (like a tour bus arriving), so we got out of there before the kids were able to get food. I had energy bars in my bag, so I gave them to the kids.

Just prior to arriving at our hotel in Prague, we ran into traffic. There was a soccer match at the arena and the crowds were rowdy. The police were out in force; some on horseback.

Our hotel turned out to be a 1950s Soviet Era building; though a luxurious version for Party Officials. It was still oppressive-looking, and had a very old feel to it. It even smelled old. Why did Crowne Plaza buy this? The word “relic” comes to mind.

For once, the soup was bad but the main course was good. I had a Czech beer which tasted exactly like Budweiser. This makes sense, because Budweiser came from Czechoslovakia originally. After dinner, the kids and I did laundry. No one in our group wanted to leave the hotel (except for Kathy & Karen) so Barb and I turned in early. We, along with darn near everyone else, wanted to rest up for tomorrow's activities.



Our sinister-looking hotel in Prague

Monday 8/9

It was overcast when I woke up. The TV confirmed a chance of rain (It had been flooding in our area, and yesterday, we saw a couple of rivers that were over their banks. Parts of Dresden were flooded.) Breakfast was good, and the music in the background was late 70s.

We met our local guide on the bus at 9AM, and proceeded to the palace area. The palace was nice, but the true gem of this place was St. Vitus Cathedral. The church was an impressive (French) Gothic with a semi-copied Cologne façade. This church had been built up to the transept in medieval times then stopped until the 19th/20th century. Inside, there was some impressive 20th century glass and a huge silver tomb for St. John of Neopmuk (a Christian Martyr who was drowned on the orders of the guy in the other room...). The



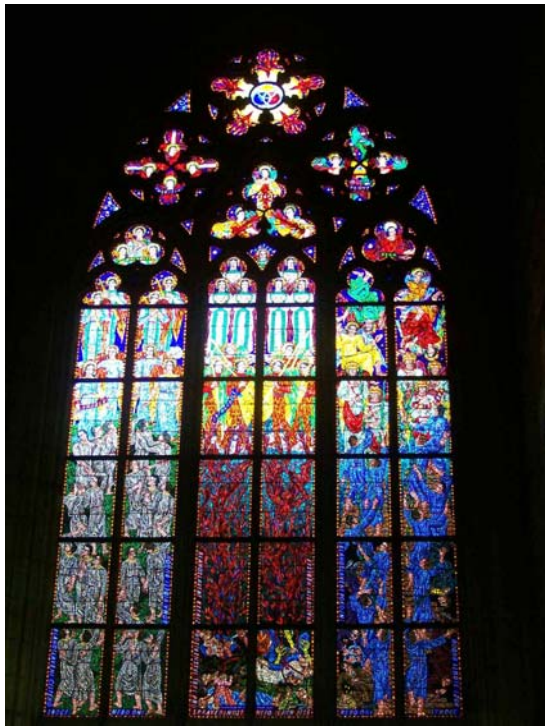
St. Vitus Facade & interior



Neopmuk's Tomb

royals had their own entrance (the Golden Entrance) at the south transept, and St. Wenceslas was buried right at the entry below the royal gallery seating (as in Good King Wenceslas... who also had John of Neopmuk thrown off a bridge and drowned).

Unfortunately, no one seemed to be able to hear our guide – her voice got lost in the mix of the room. She was also competing with other, louder groups. She took us outside St. Vitus and around the south side to look at the Golden Entry and at the impressive tower. We also saw a modern obelisque which stood for the unity of Czechoslovakia, except the two countries split in 1993, so now it was historic.



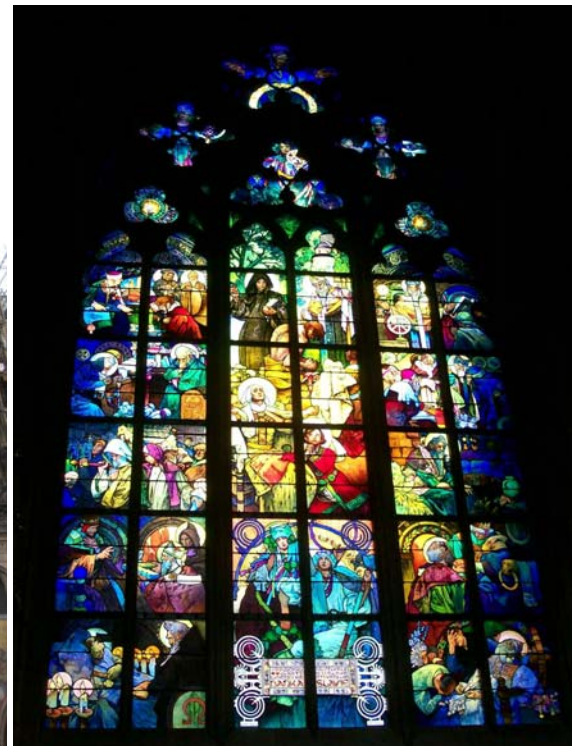
Modern Glass



Apse Exterior



Golden Entrance



More Modern Glass - very Art Deco

We next entered a large room in the palace. This was a reception and concert hall. Courtney liked the roof. Nearby were some crown jewels. We then spent a lot of time in a chapel-like room and talked about “fenestration” – throwing people whose ideas differed with yours out the window. The Prague court seemed to like to do this. In one story our guide told us, three people were thrown out of a 25 meter high window and lived; only one had broken a leg; the rest were only winded. They had landed on a pile of refuse. Eventually, one of these men became king. He put an end to the practice of fenestration.

We were competing with two other groups to get into and out of a narrow passageway. It was not fun. It took forever to get our entire group out. We next saw St. George’s church, with no comment from our guide, and headed out the palace gates. In the distance, you could see the lower city and the site of our afternoon quest; the Strahov Monastery. Nearby were two of the musicians who had been featured in a Rick Steves Prague video. The flautist was excellent.



The family on the Charles Bridge

Some of our gals left in taxis while the rest of us walked the cobbled slopes of the old town down to the Charles Bridge. The downhill was not kind to knees and toes, but the views were nice (no addresses on the buildings, just signs of what these people did. Our guide grew up in this part of the city back when it was quiet; no cars, only horse-drawn carriages during communist rule.).

We next crossed the Charles Bridge, which I will admit was a lot more stunning than I thought it would be. The views all around were terrific (thanks to NOT being bombed during Nazi occupation).

In the main square, we stopped at the astronomical clock and watched it go off at 1PM. It began to rain just as the clock started. With that, our four hour guided tour was over.

Eleven of us (Knitters, Hacketts, Christensens, Cindy, Cheryl F. and Ray) opted to go to Prague's Hard Rock Café for a "quick" lunch before taking the tram to the monastery. The guy running the place was very friendly, and came from Pittsburgh. He had been living in Prague for five years, and had lived in Munich before that. He gave us some tips, and also told us that half the monastery museum had been closed for renovation, and that it currently wasn't worth the trip up there.

Lunch took two hours. The place may have been American, but the service was definitely European. No one wanted to go to the monastery for the "best beer in the Czech Republic," and they wanted to catch the 4PM bus back to the hotel, so we went back to the city square; most opted to go shopping. I took the Christensens, Ray & Jeffrey to see Our Lady After Tyn, but this church was closed on Mondays. We had a beer instead at a café while we waited. We kept seeing other tour members, even our guide (who was nice enough to sit with us for a while), as Culley and I had the most excellent beer of the entire trip. The Czech Republic is known for their pilsners, but this dark beer was better than any dark I had ever had; period. Tour members would see us, come over, and chat for a while and then leave. Eventually, it was also time for us to depart. The waitress short-changed me on purpose (I had read that this occurred frequently in Prague). I didn't bother to complain because the beer was so good, and the experience of being short-changed by a crafty Czech waitress was worth the \$1.50.



The family on the square near Our Lady Before Tyn

Our group gathered at the astronomical clock, then took a leisurely 25 minute walk to the bus; viewing all the magical Baroque and Art Nuevo architecture along the way. Prague is a great city – clearly worth several days and not just one afternoon.

Dinner was at an Italian restaurant near our hotel. Twenty-four people went. It was pretty good too. I had anchovy, olive & caper pizza. Both kids had what looked (and tasted like) top ramen. Courtney had bacon and mushrooms on hers; Jeffrey had steak and marinara. Surprisingly, both kids loved this place. Barbara, who wasn't hungry, went outside and photographed Czech signs, cars and trams for a class activity. The kids said that they were tired, so we left without conversing with the rest of our group. Those who had ordered salads hadn't gotten their main course yet.

Those kids lied – they were really just bored! The second they got out the door, they got silly and active. They practically skipped the whole way home. That evening, we pretty much just crashed. The day was pretty exhausting. Jeffrey's laundry was still wet – he really shouldn't have packed jeans for this trip.

Tuesday 8/10

The Crowne Plaza really did have a funky smell to it. I couldn't quite place it, other than it was an "old" smell. The last time I smelled this was at the Waldorf Astoria in NYC.

Breakfast, again, was good. I was pretty much alone. I did catch Pastor Mike at the bar by the elevator. He was there because the place offered free wi-fi. Mike and I agreed that our group was getting worn-out. Today's long bus ride would fit the bill.

The high rolling hills of the Czech Republic gradually got lower and lower as we approached the German border. We made our last stop on the Czech side for a bathroom break (or as Andre calls it, a "comfort stop."), and to unload the rest of our Czech Kroners. Shortly after that, we were back in Germany.

It rained for a little while, though not bad. Every once in a while, we would pass some cute village. Our lunch stop had some warm food (good too!), and a Burger King. Jeff went with the familiar and the rest of the family ate local. I think that we were the ones who got rewarded. I had some sort of curried meat patty thing that I hope to duplicate when I get back to the States.

When we got to Munich, we parked at the Isartor Gate and met our guide, Bernadette. She showed us around the city center, and then the Nymphenburg Palace. At the start of our tour, we stopped to look



Our gang entering the Hofbrauhaus

at some of the old wall foundations. We then looked at an old courtyard with its own water source, and then we took a quick march through the Hofbrauhaus. We saw where the locals parked their beer steins and where they washed them. It was then on to Marienplatz. We saw St. Peters Church and the Rathaus with the glockenspiel.

Nymphenburg Palace, which started as a "hunting lodge," was a heck of a lot larger than I thought it would be. The gardens were lovely, as was the large ballroom on the second floor.

Bernadette mentioned that a biergarten was usually outdoors under chestnut trees, and the original tables were tree trunks. The tables served the purpose of meeting places to discuss matters of importance. Rathauses generally had a table and a brewery in the basement. Each town and district had their own meeting place to discuss things, which is why there are so many biergartens in Germany. The officials and regulars had their own stein (meaning 'stone') locker, with steins being passed down through the generations.



The Glockenspiel at the Rathaus

Bernadette left us at our hotel. Our hotel, the 'drei lowen' (three lions), was in the middle of a Turkish district within view of the bahnhof. It wasn't a five star hotel, but I really liked it. The rooms were a little older, but had the best bathrooms to date.

Dinner was very good, though not everyone at our table liked "mushroom soup" on their chicken. I did, so I wound up with a lot of mushrooms.

The after dinner event was a walk to a place with a nice view and the best beer and sausages in Munich, according to Trip Advisor. I had been to the Hofbrauhaus House on a few occasions and found it loud and crowded with tourists. I wanted a more mellow community feel.

We got to the spot on the map by Frauenkirche, but saw no evidence of the place so we asked some locals. On the third try, we got good directions. When we got to the Nuremburger, we found Pastor Mike's group there (they had left before us so they could go see the glockenspiel move). They seemed to have gotten the last seats, and the place was packed. Our group of 14 had to split into two groups at the neighboring umbrellas that served the same beer from the same cellar, but not the sausages. I tried the Augustiner Helles and their Edelstoff, which came from a wood cask. Courtney ordered an alcohol-free

beer, but found it too "hoppy." We were looking for that nutrient-rich "pregnant mother & children's" beer that Andre had mentioned, but our location didn't serve it (though the waitress totally knew what we were talking about – she had been raised on it).

After Mike's group left, my group moved over from the Augustiner Dom, where we had been seated (great view of the Frauenkirche from here!) to the Nuremburger. Culley ordered potato salad for all (it was great!) and a 60 euro plate of sausages and kraut (also great!). I tried the Dunkel here... it was only OK. I liked the other two much better, and the Helles the best. Our group closed the place at 11:30, and made it back to our hotel by midnight.





Hohenschwangau and Neuschwanstein

Wednesday 8/11

The hotel does need to do something with their breakfast food area. All the other hotels had wide open spaces, but Drei Lowen has a miniature horseshoe design with only one opening in or out – the food is on the inside of the horseshoe. This is very inefficient for a German place. The food was good though; I had never had weiss sausage for breakfast, but our guide Andre told us that weiss sausage was typically served at breakfast, and that you were to peel off the casing of the sausage. I had always had weiss

sausage in the evening with the casing. Who knew; sixteen years of doing it wrong! This was the best weiss sausage ever! I now like weiss sausage!

The first stop of the day was to a small church with a view of Neuschwanstein Castle. Our second stop was a nice place below the castle where we could shop, take pictures, and eat apple strudel. Mike and I knew that one of Ludwig's other castles, Hohenschwangau, was nearby so we hiked up the hill past the long ticket line to snap a few shots. As we left that area, we saw paragliders jumping off the hillside; floating overhead and landing near cows in a field.

Not too long later, we stopped off at the Baroque-Rococo Wieskirche (Wies means meadow; not white). It was simply stunning, and this time, for me, there was no church service going on so I was able to spend a lot of time looking at details. Down the hill, for the first time, I noticed that the rear most wheels of Anton's bus turn slightly with the turn of the front wheels. This allows the bus to turn much tighter – tighter than a non-stretch bus according to Anton.



Interior of Weis Church

We got to Oberammergau and began to drop people off; our group was to be split up among six different homes and hotels throughout the city. Even though my family could have gotten off with the first group, I stayed on so I could see where everyone else was. It also allowed me to meet Gabby, one of the two NAWAS representatives who lived in this city. She got my family on a minibus that took me straight to our home. Before I left Andre and Anton, I gave them our spare meal tickets and they were elated.

Back in California, Mike and I had assigned places to our group. It was a few days later that the NAWAS rep called me and told me what the “secret codes” on the bottom of the hotel/meal/play tickets meant (I had written names on each packet in ink, so I didn’t want to change things). Letters were for accommodations types (Hotel, Pension, or room at a home), and then there was a number rating of the room based on size and features (1 – bad to 4 – fantastic). The rep told me to make sure I got a 3 or a 4. I had given my family a 1 – the lowest rating. I don’t mind rustic accommodations, and in fact, I sort of don’t like really fancy places, so I left things the way they were. My family also had two rooms in a home – also my preference. Why do I mention all this; because if my accommodations were a “1,” then everyone else must have incredible accommodations! Ours were first rate, and this particular home at the base of the local char-lift was rated “best winter apartments” in Oberammergau, 2008. Our hosts, Albert & Diane were young and energetic, even with three toe-head



Gasthaus Gerta, where some of our folks stayed in Oberammergau

kids under the age of eight running around. I think Albert would make a great school teacher; he expresses what he knows in a way that is easy to understand and he does so with passion (he is actually a lifeguard at the local pool – I hope it’s indoors!). Courtney thought he looked like Jesus. As a cast member in the Passion Play (he did all the crowd scenes, and one of the Old Testament “stills”), he had grown out his hair and beard, and he looked thoroughly Jewish... although he is Catholic. His oldest son, Felix, was also in the play (he’s in the very first scene, holding on to Peter’s hand as they walk across the stage, and he’s in the next crowd scene... then it’s off to bed!). When we got upstairs, we had to laugh because the Oberammergau brochures in our (fantastic!) room featured Albert & Diane. In both brochures, Albert was clean-shaven with very short hair; and he was wearing lederhosen. He looked rugged, and very Arian. The brochures were probably made 10 years ago, so before children. Diane is attractive now, but WOW!, in a white bikini 10 years ago... Albert is a lucky man. These two may very well have met each other as models some years ago.



The walk down from the dinner spot

We had some time to fit in shopping before our very late 8PM dinner, so we walked to the main street: Dorfstrasse. My feet were killing me (I had taken no drugs today for the first time on this trip to see how my heel was doing – I guess I still need the drugs), but I was determined to see all the stores. We decided to reconnoiter, rather than purchase haphazardly, and then procure (rather than shop) between acts of the play tomorrow. After two hours or so, we had seen all the stores and we had everything we wanted picked-out.

We headed (hobbled) back to our flat, and then took a hike up the hill to our “nearby” food place. The place was “near-ish” – I could see it from 150 feet below, but it took a bit of time to hike up the hill to get there. Man, am I out of shape! When we got into this new Italian Restaurant at the bottom of the local ski slope, it must have been 80 degrees inside. I sweated for a long time. Every bit of the food – except for Barb’s lasagna – was excellent. The service was typically slow though; my kids were so bored, and we pretty much went to bed at 10:30 the moment we got home.



Courtney reads with a friend

Thursday 8/12

Play Day! Our whole trip was leading up to this day.

During breakfast, Albert explained the play (Passionately!), which really helped. He also had on the official shirt, and was showing us the official book. I take it that the actors get a percentage of the proceeds from these two items. We then asked him point-blank if he went to church. He explained that he was a good Catholic, but that he was mad at the government and the church, so he did not attend often. The government charges a church tax on all Germans. In part, this is to keep the historic (and touristic) churches beautiful, but it also pays the priests' salary (or so Albert believes). The church also asks for money, but because the government pays the priests, according to Albert, there is no incentive for the priest or the church to offer anything decent, program-wise, that would appeal to anyone. Church is boring, and all they want is your money (where have I heard that before!). Albert does not take his children to church, because there is nothing to offer them.

This morning, some of our group would go to the Linderhof. This is the only castle Ludwig ever completed in his lifetime. Our group would need to be tenacious though: today it was raining.

T e n
joined our
group, and
boy, what a
treat it was! It
had almost
s t o p p e d
raining when
we got there
and the rain
stopped by the
time we got to
this estate.
Ludwig was a
huge fan of
Versailles and
of Louis 14th
and 15th, so
this place was
to mirror that.
It didn't, but it
wasn't shabby
either. It's too



The family at the front yard of the Linderhof

bad we couldn't take pictures – the inside was so well done in Baroque with mirrors all around, gold, and Meissen ceramics everywhere. There were also Chinese vases everywhere, since that was the style of the day. Each room had its own color and theme, and the second floor (Ludwig's floor) was built around a central staircase. His bedroom was to imitate Louis 14th's room, which it certainly did in grandeur (even though Louis' canopy had 40 pounds of gold thread in it, and Ludwig had 8.8 pounds in the whole house, I thought Ludwig's room looked nicer), but unlike Louis, Ludwig never actually used his bedroom for entertainment and business. Ludwig also slept by day and walked around at night. Another room Ludwig never used was his signature room (office), except to read in. His "breakfast nook," where he had all his meals, was awesome. His table would descend through the second floor to the first floor and the second floor would close behind it. When the table reappeared, there would be food on it.



Side view of the Linderhof

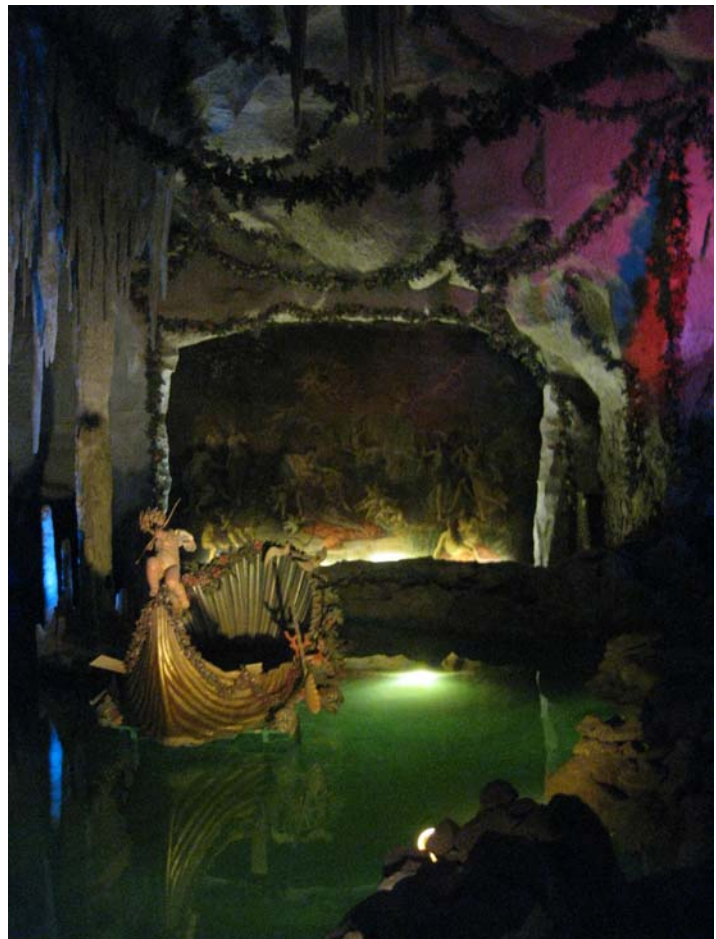
We realized about this time that we had 10 minutes to walk a little over a mile to our bus. We clearly weren't going to make it. We arrived in waves. Barbara had to go to the bathroom at the top of the hill, so she was the last one down. I waited for her at the fork in the road because she can't read German and there were no English subtitles. She'd have a 50% chance of finding the right path. We made it to the bus seven minutes late; not bad considering the bathroom break plus the steep descent. We certainly made it home on time for a little rest before tackling the ski slope to lunch.

After lunch, we rested, and then took the bus to the city center. Before you knew it, it was time for the play.

First off, I must say that I was really impressed with the building; plenty of openings to get people in and out, the stage was open-air, but had a canopy that could be extended on rainy days (like today; or even snowy days. I was less impressed with the bathroom access, and really unimpressed with the chairs. They were too close together, and really uncomfortable. I know Jesus suffers in the play, but must we?

One of his chandeliers was made entirely out of ivory. It was stunning... and obviously couldn't be replicated (legally) today.

A very steep climb uphill led us to Ludwig's "Grotto," which was a 100% man-made cave with the first ever electric lights inside (steam powered!) to put color floods on the wall. Magnificent! Nearby was the Turkish Kiosk; also very nice.



The Grotto

I was really good about reading ahead whenever the chorus sang (since the play is in German), and I did see Felix and Albert on stage, but after two hours, I began to nod-off. It became a struggle to stay awake, and I was getting sore from the seat. Great play though! I liked the human “still lifes” that connected the Old Testament stories typologically with what was going on in Christ’s Passion. The bass soloist in the chorus was awesome. The soprano and alto soloists were good. The tenor though... sheesh, was he a fill-in for the good tenor who was home sick in bed?

Courtney didn’t think Jesus should be blonde; Jeffrey, amazingly enough, was paying attention and reading the English version of the script.

Dinnertime came too soon and yet not soon enough. We certainly weren’t hungry, but my back, side and butt could sure use the break! This time, the shuttle bus took us up the hill to the restaurant. Yeah! Barb and the kids were too anxious to wait for the shuttle to take us down the hill. They wanted to get on sweaters, and then do our procuring before the play started again. We actually did all our shopping with time to spare. We shipped our wood-carved booty home so we wouldn’t have to carry it for the next nine days. This left Barbara free to shop for an hour while the kids and I had coffee & ice cream (in an attempt to stay awake for the second half of the play). While sitting under our protective canopy, avoiding the driving rain, Courtney spotted Ray, so we invited him to join us. Two different waitresses scolded me for allowing Courtney to drink coffee; I guess that is verboten here (yet... she wouldn’t be given a second glance if she ordered an alcohol-free beer).



The second half of the play was much more dramatic, and the sections between choruses were much longer. I couldn't read ahead (now with a flashlight), so I gave up and just watched. I fell asleep briefly until the crowd woke me up shouting the German equivalent of "We want Barabbas!" I stayed awake after that by pinching myself. The crucifixion scene was so well done. I wish the resurrection was given more emphasis, but I guess that's not the Catholic thing to do (Protestants emphasize the resurrection; Catholics emphasize Christ's pain and suffering).

When we got back to our home, Diane was waiting for us to inquire about tomorrow's plans. Good news for her – we weren't leaving with the 3AM crowd.

As I end part one of this journal, I should mention that one large, noticeable thing in our host home is a large, autographed clay pot sitting in the breakfast room. They break one of these pots every practice and performance (Jesus and the money changers in the temple scene). What most people don't know is that every one of those pots is glued back together, marked with the year of the performance, and then signed by the principal cast. Anyone who participated in the play may purchase one of these pots, probably for the cost of the pot. Albert already has his "Passionspiele 2010" pot, and upstairs, you can find his dad's 1970 pot (his Dad died some time ago, and left Albert this pot, and the house that came with it. Albert was living in Stuttgart up to this point. There is a lot of custom craftsmanship in this home – if I had to guess, I'd say that Albert's father spent his entire life fixing this place up. His father's passion for woodworking is apparent).

