

Day 1 12-13 October 201 Brisbane- Dubai - Vienna

Our Emirates Airline plane a B777 was an hour late leaving, after waiting for passengers connecting from Auckland. We left in darkness at 10.00 pm and arrive in darkness in Dubai at 6.00 am after a 14 hour flight.

Dubai airport massive and chaotic with more aircraft than I have ever seen on the ground at the same time in the same place and 90% belonged to Emirate Airlines. It seemed to be the hub to everywhere in the world and the "Middle" in Middle East assumed anew meaning as we watched the endless parade of planes and people from every nation passing before us speaking in so many different languages but with English being the *lingua franca*.

Daylight Flight: The flight out of Dubai though was the most interesting. It was daylight and we had a window seat and after passing over Bahrien and the Persian Gulf we passed over the cradle of civilization across the degraded delta area of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers then we must have crossed over Basra, Bagdad, following up the fertile crescent to Mosul and then skirting around Syria to get to Turkey with snow capped peaks and the source of most of the water in the Middle East. We noted from a great height the wetlands of the lower Euphrates that had been drained by Saddam Hussein in what must have been one of the greatest examples of intentional environmental vandalism of the 20th Century when he drained them to punish the march Arabs who had sided with the Iranians during the protracted war. WE could read little of the landscape from there on except for noting how dependent on the rivers the cultivated land was. In Turkey we noted many snow-capped mountains and water storages.

After the Black Sea we saw little ground because of cloud until we got near Vienna. We missed Bulgaria altogether. However happily the air over Austria was fine and clear and we had a great view of a verdant almost perfectly manicured landscape. As we got nearer Vienna the landscape was peppered with wind turbines. New turbines could be seen under construction everywhere and it seems this industry is undergoing massive and rapid expansion.

We caught the CAT (City Airport Train) from the airport and then a canb to the Hotel Papageno. The drive took us past many of the iconic landmarks of Vienna and while Vienna wasn't rated as highly as other cities I was most impressed at this very good introduction.

After booking in Su was anxious to secure our rail tickets for Budapest so at 4.30 we went to the Wiener Melling Rail station (the long distance terminus) and found the ticket office and settled. We then found an underground shopping centre and procured wine, fruit and nibbles found our way by tram back to the Papageno and collapsed after a long extended day since departing Brisbane.

Day 2 Sunday, 14th October 2012 Vienna - City of My Dreams

We enjoyed a wonderful breakfast at the Hotel Papageno. If we thought we were going to get a Spartan continental breakfast we were wrong. It was as good as the four star breakfast I had last Sunday at Kingfisher Resort. We later discovered that Trip Advisor rates the Papageno as a Four Star hotel and that is more than we had anticipated

It was a sparkling Sunday and the weather was just perfect to move about. The sky was clear and cloudless and a brilliant blue. There wasn't a hint of smog or air pollution and that was surprising, but as we moved about it became more apparent as to why that was so. The Viennese and their visitors are happy without being so dependent on private motor vehicles to get around. I just couldn't help being impressed by the lack of cars and just how happy people seemed as pedestrians just strolling around. There was no congestion and people spread themselves comfortably around.

Before we set out to see the sights, especially the World Heritage sites of this fabled city Su wanted to check how we could arrange to see Lobau National Park that we had read about with interest. Neither hotel nor Tourist Information Centre know much about this tour and it turned out that being Sunday we couldn't book ahead so we decided we would take "pot luck" being at the quay at 9.00 am on Monday morning.

While hesitating near the Opera House we purchased tickets to see Mozart Opera "Don Giovanni" in the Opera Theatre that night. It was where it was first performed. We paid 42 Euros for tickets from a scalper. We later learnt that these were 12 Euros but 42 Euros is still considerably cheaper than we would pay to attend any opera in Australia.

Then decided to book into an all day hop-on hop-off bus tour of the city. This exposed us to all of the World Heritage sites, and there seemed to be many. The World Heritage web site said focus on I.R.S. ie Innere Stadt, Ringstrasse and Schonbrunn Palace. We had just a day to fit all of this in and we were

reasonable successful. It was made easier because it was a golden early Autumn day with foliage just acquiring its chlorophyll free colouring.

Vienna meets three World Heritage cultural criteria justifying its inscription:

Criterion (ii): *The urban and architectural qualities of the Historic Centre of Vienna bear outstanding witness to a continuing interchange of values throughout the second millennium.*

Criterion (iv): *Three key periods of European cultural and political development – the Middle Ages, the Baroque period, and the Gründerzeit – are exceptionally well illustrated by the urban and architectural heritage of the Historic Centre of Vienna.*

Criterion (vi): *Since the 16th century Vienna has been universally acknowledged to be the musical capital of Europe.*

Vienna has a population of 2.4 million (25% of the total Austrian population.) IWe were told it was one of the five most visited cities in the world and having experienced it we can understand that. A 2005 study of 127 world cities ranked Vienna first (with Vancouver) for quality of life and having observed that on this golden Sunday we can agree with that assessment also.

We started with a full day Hop-on Hop-off bus tour of the city. In the morning we took the Red Tour. This focussed on the inner city (the "I" and the "R" of IRS). We hopped off as many places as we could starting at Heroes Square and taking in the ruins of early Roman occupation of the city as well as so many relics of the Hapsberg dynasty that ruled this country for so long with a great degree of benevolence,

The most impressive buildings were the Parliament House, the City Hall, some grand public monuments, cathedrals, museums and the University. The whole ambience of the city has an exceptional degree of refinement and adornment both externally with a prodigious number of sculptures and internally where every room seemed to be finished with a such finesses that indicated both the pride and craft of the artisans.

Coincidental with this was our appreciation of the number of Viennese out strolling around and enjoying their city with a relaxed life-style to be envied.

We spent the afternoon exploring Schonbrunn Palace and gardens. Here we discovered that it cost 65 cents or 0.5 Euro to "spend a penny". However the magnificence of this Palace defies verbal description. Unfortunately we were unable to take any photos inside the Palace that has so much history. We did enjoy our exploration of the

grounds and gardens and we walked down from Gloriette to the Palace where we took the Grand Tour before heading back to the Papegeno and collecting some Sushi to be ready at the Opera at 7.00 pm.

The culmination of the day was going to Mozart's opera, "Don Giovanni" in the Opera House where it was first performed. It was the same vast theatre where the Viennese hold their famous New Year Eve celebrations. It holds 2,200 people and although we were in the gallery with only half the stage in view the ambience and the acoustics were superb. The music is still swirling around in my brain.

The sophistication of the Viennese culture and the contrast with Australia is best demonstrated by comparing the savagery and debauchery of the Australian convict era and the genocide of Aborigines that was taking place while Mozart was producing his outstanding symphonies, concertos, operas and chamber music. That pervading thought niggled me all day as I observed the incredibly prolific art adorning this city. From the Schonbrunn Palace to the Hotel Papageno to the cafes and shops we passed

Day 3

Monday, 15th October 2012 Lobau National Park and Vienna

The beautiful fine weather since our arrival continued although the air was crisper and there was a strong wind that added a chill factor when we were exposed in the Lobau National Park and on the Danube.

Our first adventure of the day was finding our way to the Franz Joseph Quays to catch the National Park boat and hope that it was running. This meant Negotiating our way to the Karl Platz Railway station, finding the right line, right platform and more relevantly getting a ticket when the station was awash with morning commuters heading off to work and none anxious to stop and help people who didn't speak or understand German. We made it to the Quays but had a bit of a sprint to find the small National Park boat with only a few minutes to spare. The trip down the canal was just so full of interest. There was a very informative commentary (if only we had understood German) and an exciting ever-changing landscape. It took 40 minutes going with the flow (10 knots or 20 kph current) to reach the Danube. The water in the Danube was surprisingly clear but the wind whistling across it prevented any reflections of blue.

We tied up at the National Park wharf on the opposite side of the canal to a huge oil refinery anticipating being close to a visitor centre. We were

then advised that the visitor centre was 90 minutes away (walking and we had only an hour before the boat returned to Vienna so we went for a walk in the Viennese woods without seeing a soul. It was pleasant and an opportunity to see a little of nature and wetlands that were once so much more extensive throughout Central Europe.

The trip to the National Park had taken only one hour. The return trip against the current took an extra 35 minutes but a relaxing enjoyable experience. We were in the company of a crew of three, 10 students about age 14-15 and three teachers. Our experience quite in contrast to that of tourists on a huge fast tourist boat that overtook us on the canal.

Back in the city we had a wonderful seafood lunch near the Opera House and then ambled back to Papageno via some park full of kids and a great museum. Then after such activity for the previous 48 hours relaxed until 6.00 pm

We were off to a concert of Strauss and Mozart at 8.30 and decided to stay in the Viennese flavour by dining on local cuisine at a nearby restaurant. Su ate Wiener Snitzel and I had an interesting goulash. The wind of earlier in the day had abated to be replaced by light rain as we made our way to the concert held in a beautiful building adjacent to Heroes Square. There were about 500 people (mostly members of tour groups) who packed the opulent hall. There was a 13 piece orchestra with sound to fill the room and two dancers to waltz, polka and dance to illustrate the inspiring music as well as a tenor and soprano to sing from Strauss operettas and from "Don Giovanni". It was a wonderful concert that we enjoyed almost as much as the musicians who played with relish, enthusiasm and incredible harmony.

Day 4 Tuesday, 16th October 2012 Vienna to Budapest

We rose early to a drizzly day outside and packed discovering some misplaced items but with no luck as far as the earpiece to my right hearing aid was concerned. It just couldn't be located in the room and the assumption is it must be somewhere unknown in the luggage we are carrying.

After another fine Pappageno breakfast we headed for the railway by taxi rather than confront the rain and sat for some time on an open and cold railway platform for 30 minutes to wait for the train

I look forward to train journeys and seeing the countryside but the further we went the heavier the

rain became and it was difficult to see much. Just once we glimpsed the Danube as we raced south to Budapest where it was still raining but easing off a little after the deluge.

We found the Elite Apartments easily but getting access when the outside entry is like Fort Knox proved challenging. Eventually though we were in and had a deadline to (a) procure the cash in Forints that the walking tour guides had specified and (b) getting to the rendezvous. It took time to exchange the money but we were surprised to see the Aussie Dollar quoted on the exchange rate board. Then it was a rush to the rendezvous that the Walking Company said was only five minutes from our apartment and the apartments manager said was ten minutes.

Reading the street signs and the soggy map proved difficult. Finding people who spoke English proved difficult too but when we did they tried hard to be helpful but alas each encounter delayed us and didn't help us reach the rendezvous. We walked and walked in the rain but failed to find the rendezvous and an hour after the appointed 2.30 time we headed back to our apartment and that proved equally difficult and took us 90 minutes to walk what should have taken less than 15.

We stopped at the recommended local supermarket, collected some victuals and headed for home, connected to the internet and Skyped our friend Louise and then collapsed.

Day 5 Wednesday, 17th October 2012 Exploring Budapest

We awoke to a fine crisp day. Our spirits lifted as we saw sunshine again after a wet miserable day. Our first assignment was to rendezvous with our friend, Louise Lakos. We met Louise when Su & I were working together on a post-Ramsar conference trip to Fraser Island in 1996. Louise was a senior bureaucrat with the Hungarian Environment Ministry and a member of their delegation to the Brisbane conference. We have kept in touch for the sixteen years since and she helped us determine to focus our European trip around a visit to Budapest.

Our comfortable Elite Apartment though is like Fort Knox admitting only guests. So we decided to rendezvous with her outside the Great Synagogue adjacent to our apartment. Louise took us to a yuppie coffee shop her daughter had recommended that was a pleasant stroll away and enjoyed cheesecake and coffee over an animated and interesting conversation over such a range of politics.

We left Louise outside St Stephen's Basilica at noon and joined a Hop-On hop-off Bus tour that would absorb the remainder of the daylight hours. Louise had recommended that we focus the afternoon on the Buda side of the river around the Buda Castle and this proved to be excellent advice because it is on the western side of the river and the sun sparkled on the dazzling buildings lining the Pest side of the Danube.

Getting to the castle gave us an appreciation of the grandeur of this city with an incredible number of most impressive buildings, giving us a foretaste of Andrassy Avenue and Heroes Square that we decided to return to later. Then we crossed the Danube and made our way to the castle. We hopped off adjacent to the Chain Bridge, one of the six bridges crossing the Danube in Budapest and its most feted. It was built by a couple of canny Scots to unite Buda and Pest. Then we took the funicular railway to ascend to the Castle.

Budapest, including the Banks of the Danube, the Buda Castle Quarter were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1987 as meeting Criteria: (ii) and (iv) From the Castle we had a marvellous vantage view of the both Banks of the Danube especially the magnificent architecture evident close to the river on the Pest side.

While we didn't explore the interior of the castle it gave us a stunning view of the buildings and the city opposite with the outstanding building being the Hungarian Parliament House. However the whole of the Banks of the Danube are inscribed on the World Heritage List and I was impressed by the number of World Heritage brass plaques to seen around the city when the Fraser Island plaque seems to have been lost and nobody cares. The views were enhanced by the early autumn colouring of the trees that was especially obvious on the hill ascending to the Castle.

The number and detail of the sculptures around the Castle defy description. Oddly enough though the adjacent building, the Presidential Palace guarded by armed soldiers was unadorned and unimpressive. It became the Presidential Palace before Hungary had shaken off the shackles of Russian communism that had been imposed on the Hungarians.

It has to be remembered that in Hungarian History it has been conquered 31 times and each new invasion has created havoc and required rebuilding after them. It is a sore point that apart from the second Turkish invasion centuries ago, the greatest damage wrought on the city was by the Germans in the Second World War. They bombed every bridge and railway station and it took decades to rebuild.

The Hungarians though are committed to rebuilding with authenticity. I was impressed to see and photograph a cobblestone street being relaid with cobblestones. It is small wonder then that they went back to the original drawings to reconstruct the bridges the Germans had knocked out to the exact detail.

After a bus ride to the Citadel we caught an hour long boat ride along the Danube. This was fascinating and the very illuminating and articulate commentary gave me a much greater appreciation of this wonderful city. Most impressive though were the number of churches. It is surprising how so many of these survived the communist era, but they have and they are dazzling in their presentation.

We walked home from the boat and after a little more shopping had another quiet evening meal in our apartment to catch up.

Day 6 **Thursday, 18th October 2012** **Exploring Budapest**

We started the day meeting up again with our friend Louise outside the Synagogue where she gave us a CD of Hungarian folk music and a magnificent book on Hungary's National Parks and World Heritage sites. Then she took us around to show us where Europe's first underground railway was constructed that is still operating and is now inscribed on the World Heritage List. She explained and helped us procure tickets.

We then farewelled Louise and having seen most of the sites on the Buda side of the Danube, decided to focus on the Pest side to explore. We first caught the Hop-on hop-off bus that took us down Andrassy Avenue to Heroes Square where we wandered and caught the next bus crossing the Danube twice and ending up at Parliament House. Then it was back to the start of the tour at St Stephens Basilica. Here we explored the rich interior. Then after a wonderful and inexpensive lunch of Hungarian Goulash Soup at a sidewalk café and wandering around the park precinct we decided to explore Andrassy Avenue in more detail beginning with a ride on the underground railway below the street to the Opera House and a reminder that Franz Liszt was an Hungarian who contributed much to the cultural life of the city. We took a few more rides on the underground to explore in more detail this avenue that was added to the World Heritage List in 2002.

One thing we did observe was the impact of acid rain on some of the external walls of the various buildings. Just as there are no longer fishermen

working on the Danube, this is another indicator of the price of "progress".

The Roman and Gothic heritage of the city have influenced its architecture of various periods. It is one of the world's outstanding urban landscapes and illustrates the great periods in the history.

We then became more adventurous riding on the Metro and having seen most of what we came for we decided to call at the main Railway station on the way back to the apartment to check the ticket for the morrow's journey. Then it was back to the apartment for Happy Hour and relaxation before crossing the street for a very traditional and wonderful Hungarian meal at the Blue Moon Restaurant. It included a delicious desert differently presented but with some similarities to Tiramisu.

Back in the apartment we reflected on our travels so far and compared the two wonderful cities — Vienna and Budapest. We liked both. Both had outstanding displays of architecture and craftsmanship. However both of us could sense some residue of almost half a century of Communist rule in Budapest that didn't project the same sense of relaxed feeling one had in Vienna that wasn't inside the Iron Curtain. If it was a choice of where to live we both chose Vienna.

Day 7

Friday, 19th October 2012

Budapest to Prague

Having experienced the crowded Metro during yesterday afternoon's rush, we had some trepidations about taking the Metro this morning but it turned out to be a breeze. It was a relaxed ride to the main station. It was an even more relaxed start to our journey at the main station as we spent more than an hour shuffling about, changing locos, adding new cars and experiencing indeterminate and unexplained delay. Finally thought we were on our way, flowing the Danube for most of the journey into Slovakia.

One of the surprises of this trip has been to discover the clarity of the air. It may bring acid rain (CO₂) but it is clear of dust and particulates. Today being cloudless, the sky is particularly blue.

In the few days since we have been in Europe there has been a significant advance in the autumn colours and the train journey had splashes of colour that reminded us of our experience in the Adirondacks last year.

Our train journey took us through some spectacular countryside mainly flowing the Danube River. The hillside were draped with autumn colours. We had

only a minor problem. The train was an hour late in setting out and ended up two and a half hours late arriving in Prague at about 7.00 pm.

We decided to walk to our hotel since it was nearby but we weren't well orientated and our lack of language meant that it took us almost an hour for what should have been a ten minute walk. In the process we passed the Opera House and the National Museum.

Once ensconced we went out to a lovely French restaurant nearby and enjoyed a superb dinner of lamb baked quite differently to the way we are used to baked lamb.

Day 8

Saturday, 20th October 2012

Prague — Cesky Krumlov

The weather forecast for Prague today was predicting drizzling rain but we were committed to visit the World Heritage Medieval Village of Cesky Krumlov. We set off catching the Metro from Museum Station to the Old Town Square. At street level there was a fog but no rain but the streets were relatively deserted and we wandered around like lost sheep before locating our bus stop.

We found some other interesting people in our group of 7 including another Japanese Miki and an Australian who had his passport stolen some days earlier and a Rumanian woman.

It was a three-hour drive from Prague towards the Austrian border. We made just one stop along the way driving in light fog that obscured the marvellous autumn colours reaching their peak. However just as we arrived at Cesky Krumlov the fog lifted and it was a clear and magnificent afternoon to explore this picturesque village.

We started our walking tour at the top of the hill above the town strolling down through the castle gardens to and through the main castle precinct and into the village below. The mood was awesome and the golden leaves of the trees gilded the day.

It was just like walking through one of those villages of Fairy tales and seeing though the castle was illuminating of the structure of the society.

I am not going to try to describe this wonderfully preserved village. My photos (and there are lots of them) will do that and I have set aside a folder especially for Cesky Krumlov. It truly deserves its World Heritage status.

We arrived back in Prague after 7.00 pm and were able to negotiate the public transport back to our hotel comfortably. We feel like well-seasoned

travellers considering how quickly we acquire familiarity with our new surroundings.

Day 9 Sunday 21st October 2012 Prague World Heritage

Today we set out to explore the World Heritage listed, Historic Centre of Prague. It was inscribed in 1997 as meeting Criteria: (ii)(iv)(vi)

It was a foggy day and we booked in for a ten-hour tour of Prague that involved walking for most of it with our guide David, an art historian who is working on his PhD. We also had a couple of bus legs and a boat cruise. It was a most comprehensive exploration of Prague and at the end of the day we found out we had ticked everything that people had suggested we had to see in Prague.

The World Heritage citation notes:

Built between the 11th and 18th centuries, the Old Town, the Lesser Town and the New Town speak of the great architectural and cultural influence enjoyed by this city since the Middle Ages. The many magnificent monuments, such as Hradcany Castle, St Vitus Cathedral, Charles Bridge and numerous churches and palaces, built mostly in the 14th century under the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles IV.

Criterion (ii): *The historic centre of Prague admirably illustrates the process of continuous urban growth from the Middle Ages to the present day. Its important role in the political, economic, social, and cultural evolution of central Europe from the 14th century onwards and the richness of its architectural and artistic traditions meant that it served as a major model for urban development for much of central and eastern Europe.*

Criterion (iv): *Prague is an urban architectural ensemble of outstanding quality, in terms of both its individual monuments and its townscape, and one that is deservedly world-famous.*

Criterion (vi): *The role of Prague in the medieval development of Christianity in central Europe was an outstanding one, as was its formative influence in the evolution of towns. By virtue of its political significance in the later Middle Ages and after, it attracted architects and artists from all over Europe, who contributed to its wealth of architectural and artistic treasures. The 14th century foundation of Charles University made Prague a renowned seat of learning, a reputation that it has preserved up to the present day. Since the reign of Charles IV, Prague has also been the intellectual and cultural centre of central Europe, and is indelibly associated with such*

world-famous names as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Franz Kafka.

It was a very long, tiring but rewarding day. The autumn tones were brilliant. It is just a pity that the fog made it a grey day. We finished the tour at the Old Town Square and stopped off at KFC for a quick dinner on our way to the Metro back to the motel.

Day 10 Monday 22nd October 2012 Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad)

We decided that we were saturated from the dazzling display of architecture and culture of Prague and sought a change by taking another ride through the Bohemian countryside to Karlovy Vary or also known by its English name Carsbad. The drive proved worthwhile because the colours along forested sections rivalled the Adirondacks but perhaps without so many rusty colours.

It was again a grey smoggy day but an interesting drive. From our third tour guide in three days we heard a lot about Czech beer and famous breweries. There was great pride taken in the quality of the local product. We did pass a brewery and many hops farms. I did ask the guide about what crop was growing. I had seen it in many places but wasn't sure if it was rape to feed to cattle or sugar beet. The guide's reply was that he was a city man and wouldn't know one crop from another.

Carlsbad is a small town about 150 kilometres from the centre of Prague (North east) famous for its glass/crystal manufacture, the hot water spas and the film festival. To that I would add a fourth. It seems the equivalent to many crafty towns/communities about 100 to 150 kilometres from any Australian capital such as Daylesford, Montville, Berrima or York because it seemed that there was an endless array of souvenirs. There also seems to be an endless parade of people to sell them to with Russians dominating the number of tourists.

Our guide who had graduated from the School of Tourism in Carlsbad was resentful of the 42 years of Russian occupation of Central Europe and even more resentful that the Russians still seemed to lord it over the Czechs in their demeanour.

We did hear a lot about the film festival but more about the celebrities it attracted and the filming of Casino Royale in Carlsbad which is now the second most important tourist draw in the Czech Republic.

The spas in the town and for immersing the body in but for putting inside the body. They are hot and mineralized and alleged to be therapeutic but we

were advised not to drink if we were feeling well. Only one of the spas exploded like a geyser but they were interesting.

The most interesting part of our Carlsblad visit though was the visit to the Moser glass factory to see the craftsmen (and there were only men) blowing and producing the finest crystal in the world. We had lunch with a Jewish couple from New Jersey who run an antique business and they were well aware of the quality and value of Moser Crystal. Unfortunately we saw only the start of the process and not the finishing, inlaying and engraving that is a tightly held trade secret. There were even signs in shop windows saying that we were not allowed to photograph the finished products on display.

We had a good run back to Prague but arrived back with a bit of a sniffle and decided a quiet night was the best therapy

Day 11
Monday 23rd October 2012
Prague to London

It is yet another day in Prague with a grey sky and I have woken up with a head cold and a very runny nose (not a good thing for such a large nose).

We decide to stay in the hotel until checkout time to avoid worsening the situation. At 11.30 we moved via the Metro and an airport bus on the very efficient public transport system. It is small wonder that Prague public transport is the most intensively used in the world resulting in 1,2 billion passenger journeys annually.

At the airport it was a long wait made even later by the late arrival of the plane. Thus it was dark when we left Prague and we saw nothing of the ground below until we landed in London almost two hours late.