

Travellers' Notebook

Newsletter of the Blackbourne U3A

Travel and Tourism Group

November 2005

Some seasonal memories . . .

Singapore was an excellent stopover for Christmas shopping. We were fascinated by the meld of different cultures where East meets West: Santa riding a dragon, Christmas jingles in the stores, and even a giant snowman (70 miles from the equator!). In New Zealand we celebrated Christmas just like at home, but better in the warm sunshine: a soak in the thermal springs at Hot Water Beach on Boxing Day followed by a dip in the Pacific Ocean was much more fun than our usual bracing walk around the old airfield. Funchal had the best illuminations we have ever seen, while La Croisette at Cannes was the place to show off your new mink coat. Rounding Cape Horn on Royal Princess one Christmas Day was a great adventure: we could only admire the courage of our maritime forbears on their long hazardous voyages in small sailing vessels. But for sheer magic, the divine music of Mozart, romantic castles, baroque churches and sleigh rides in the snow, Salzburg was our dream Christmas come true. JC

TRAVEL NOTES

Niagara Falls

On 11 July we learned about the Indian myths and legends associated with Niagara Falls and the possibility of seeing the 'maid of the mist' even today. The Europeans recognised the strategic importance of the falls and fought to gain possession of the Indians' territory. Since 1815, when fighting ceased, Niagara has attracted visitors. The steam vessel *Areawala* took tourists close to the Falls and death-defying stunts were performed by tight-rope walkers. Annie Walker, a teacher, at the age of 63, had herself stuffed into a barrel (with her cat) and left in the river to go over the falls – amazingly both Annie and the cat survived. Today, although tourism has changed the surroundings, the falls remain as awesome as ever.

Motoring in Europe

Taking your car to Europe is straightforward, but there are some important details to check before you go: motor insurance and roadside recovery; headlamp beam adapters; GB plate; warning triangle (two for Spain); pack of spare bulbs for all exterior lights; first aid kit and fire extinguisher. To be safe and be seen wear a reflective vest at the roadside – in Spain and Italy this is a legal requirement.

The best deals are one-day, five-day and ten-day returns mid-week. For the crossing carriers include Stena Line, Hoverspeed, P&O Ferries, Brittany Ferries, DFDS, Norfolk Line and Eurotunnel. Plan your route, take detailed maps and remember to drive on the right *specially when exiting filling stations and restaurants!* Observe the speed limits, and take care at roundabouts where priorities may not be obvious. Police can impose heavy on-the-spot fines for traffic infringements.

NOTICE BOARD

Marrakech

This trip will be **3–10 April 2006**. The itinerary, organised by Tailored Travel, includes the Ourika Valley, the palaces of Bahia and El Badia, Ourazazate, the Kasbah of Taourirt and Essaouria. The trip (cost £749, SS £109) will shortly be open to all Blackbourne U3A members *Tony Sear 01359 230423*.

Monday 14 November

New Zealand *David and Mya Turgoose*

Monday 12 December

The Garden Route of South Africa *David Love*

Wednesday 14 December

Our Christmas dinner this year will be at Stowmarket Golf Club. Menu choices and payment of £17.25 per person to *Val Adams* by 14 November please.

FLORIDA

At our meeting in August, Bob Mountfort told us about the trip he and Frankie made to Florida in November 2004. They flew Delta Airlines to Atlanta where they found immigration procedures efficient, then on to Sarasota. The flights cost £668 for two. Sarasota has a great beach, good museums and botanical gardens where they spotted poison dart frogs. There was more wildlife at the Myakka River nature reserve which could be seen from viewing platforms at tree canopy level.

An interesting experience was at the Villages, a retirement community designed specifically for the over 55s. Various types of home are available, many with a 'garage' for the ubiquitous golf cart. There are facilities for sports, dancing, educational courses, as well as bars, restaurants, and golf courses. Everyone who lived there looked extremely happy, although the all-American lifestyle seemed a bit surreal.

Bob and Frankie enjoyed Naples, Venice, Tampa and the Keys, where they stayed next to the beach, but the highlight of their trip was the Dolphin Research Center at Grassy Keys where tourists can swim with dolphins. For Bob this was a memorable experience. The dolphins were great fun and sensitive to the differing needs of people in the water.

BANGLADESH

David Love gave us another fascinating talk in October. In 1995 he spent several months at Sardah in Bangladesh investigating requirements for police training. He stayed in the guest house and was looked after by two Bengali boys who spoke little English. Bangladesh was part of India until partition in 1947 when it became East Pakistan. They gained independence in 1971. It is a low-lying, largely rural, country with a population of 120 million.

Most recruits to the police force have low education, as they leave school at the age of 10. Their training, dating from the days of the Raj, was military in style. Only Bengalis with degrees entered the force at a higher level. There were some 1400 trainees at Sardah; after initial training they continued at regional training centres. David visited one at Rangpur and also went to Natore, where he stayed in an imposing guest house originally owned by a wealthy family, there being no hotels.

Although the GDP is low, David found the infrastructure better than expected, with proper roads, electricity, telephone etc. Polluted rivers and sanitation are a problem though. The currency is the taka; the denominations of the notes are difficult to decipher, but most people seemed to be honest. Pedal power is the usual means of local transport, with crowded buses and trains in the towns.

TALLINN, ESTONIA

by Bob Mountfort

Twenty of us were scheduled to take a three-day trip to Tallinn. Unfortunately, for medical reasons, four members had to forego the journey. For the rest of us it was a very early start on 26 September, leaving New Green at 0330 on the coach to Stansted to join the EasyJet 0645 flight to Tallinn.

On our arrival we were met by the Newmarket Holiday tour manager, Pat, a less than congenial lady from Manchester. Joined by others on the city break Pat told us that because not enough people had booked for the optional excursion to Laheema National Park and Palmse Manor it was not going ahead. Which then meant that the city tour scheduled for the following day would take place an hour or so after we had checked into our hotels. Consternation all round. A quick count up on the bus showed that there were indeed more than 20 people who had booked for the excursion. Pat was asked to check with Newmarket to get the excursion back on track.

We checked in to the well equipped, good standard, three-star Reval Central Hotel. After a snack lunch we set off to meet up with Pat and a local guide at the Viru Gate to start the guided walking tour of the old city. With its winding cobblestone streets, spectacular, steeped churches and ancient buildings, Tallinn was added to the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1997, and, like all other visitors, we were enthralled by the beauty of Estonia's delightful capital.

Surviving intact behind the imposing defensive walls, the Old Town's medieval heart is full of storybook houses, half hidden courtyards, barns and merchants' buildings all watched over by Toompea Castle, originally built to defend the city from invasion, and today serving in part as the seat of government. It is quite remarkable that in spite of invasions from the Germans and the Russians so much of the town has survived and that which was damaged has been lovingly restored. The guided tour was a great success, so much to see, marvel at and enjoy, although some of us were puffing a bit when it came to climbing the ramparts for incredible views over the city and the modern port beyond.

After the tour, for some of us it was back to the hotel for a rest while others adjourned to a 'Tea Room' renowned for its cakes and pastries and a loo with view!! Then another walk around the town when the ladies went souvenir shopping before some of us met up at Grandma's ancient and quaint restaurant, built into a cellar, for an excellent dinner. The remainder of the party dined either at the hotel or the Pepper Sack restaurant. And so to bed.

On Tuesday some of the party took the city tour on the top deck of a bus and others walked to the Occupation Museum where there were exhibits from both the German and the Russian occupation. English is taught in the schools and is spoken in most establishments. It appears with Estonian on road signs and has become Estonia's second language, surpassing both Russian and German.

For lunch most of us met up at Tallinn's Brewery Restaurant where we were able to sample the local beer with a light luncheon. After that we split into small groups for more town exploration, shopping and a look at the docks where ferries depart to, among other places, Helsinki in Finland.

In the evening Pat had organised dinner for us all at the Olde Hansa Restaurant which served a medieval menu accompanied by mead and other traditional fare. Just our luck that the planned medieval entertainment did not happen. Maybe due to a labour dispute or just a lack of enthusiasm. In spite of that we enjoyed the company and the *large* servings.

Wednesday, with the weather still unseasonably fine, we all set off on the reinstated excursion to Laheema National Park and Palmse Manor. Our guide was excellent and very knowledgeable. En route we saw the environmental damage wrought on this part of Estonia during the Russian occupation by their mining for phosphates. Also of note were the major road works being carried out under the auspices of an EU grant. We learned that the National Park, which covers many square kilometres of woodland and open fields, had been established during the Russian occupation.

Prior to entering Palmse Manor we went to the adjacent National Park Information Centre where we viewed an excellent PowerPoint presentation of the National Park, its history and environment. Palmse Manor was rebuilt in 1782–85 and restored between 1975 and 1985 to give a full picture of a typical Baltic manorial estate (see www.svm.ee).

After a quick tour of the Manor and its adjacent museum we set off to visit the 400 year old fishing village of Altja, passing by the Sagadi Baltic Manor which time did not allow us to stop at. Today little fishing takes place; the once thriving villages are shadows of their former selves. On the way back to Tallinn we stopped off at the Viitna Tavern for a late lunch. It was here that the unfortunate Pat slipped on a stone step and fell, severely bruising her chin and fracturing her wrist. Ouch!! Only half a day was allotted for this excursion which was really not long enough. This resulted in part of the excursion being hurried.

We returned to Tallinn as the weather broke and a light rain fell. Before dinner the more hardy souls with their shopping desires still unsatisfied set off for one final attempt to find that elusive gift or souvenir. Then we all met up in the Reval Hotel restaurant for our final dinner together.

Thursday morning it was a 1000 departure from the hotel to catch the 1205 EasyJet flight to Stansted and our coach back to Thurston. Our unfortunate guide Pat, with her arm in a sling set off for her return flight to Manchester.

It is fair to say that a good time was had by all and this first experience of tagging on to an established city break was a great success.

TRAVEL TIPS

Bob Mountfort notes that flights to Vancouver are now available from Stansted.

Gordon Dalrymple has been to Ireland by coach. The trip was direct from BSE via Wales to Rosslair. The places they visited included Dublin and County Wicklow. He observed that the EU has brought about many changes in the country.

Joy Pinel went to Menorca in July. Peter found a better deal with First Choice rather than booking online. Although she enjoyed the island the weather was unbearably hot and humid.

Ann and Tony Sear recommend fossil hunting at Charmouth, Dorset, as being particularly suitable for holidays with grandchildren.

Kathleen Beaurain has details of an airport minibus service to Stansted at Stowmarket. It collects passengers around the villages according to demand and must be booked in advance on 01449 677737.

Judith Constantine has been on a cruise in the Mediterranean on *Grand Princess* (109,000 tonnes). Although very large with 2600 passengers, everything was well organised, the ship was not crowded and there were no queues, even at tender ports. Food and service were excellent, staterooms were very comfortable, many with good-size balconies. While in Greece and Italy, Judith and Andrew found the new health insurance card very useful as an ID for getting concessions (EU citizens over 65) at art galleries, museums, and archaeological sites – safer than taking passports everywhere.