

EUROPEAN RIVERIA CRUISE & ENGLAND 2011

INTRODUCTION

Ever since 2007, when we flew across the Atlantic 4 times in 3 months, we have been trying to cut down on the number of crossings when we travel. Last year we combined a 14 day river cruise with an 11 day Baltic cruise. This year we combined an 11 day Western European cruise with a private tour of Cornwall in western England and a week in London.

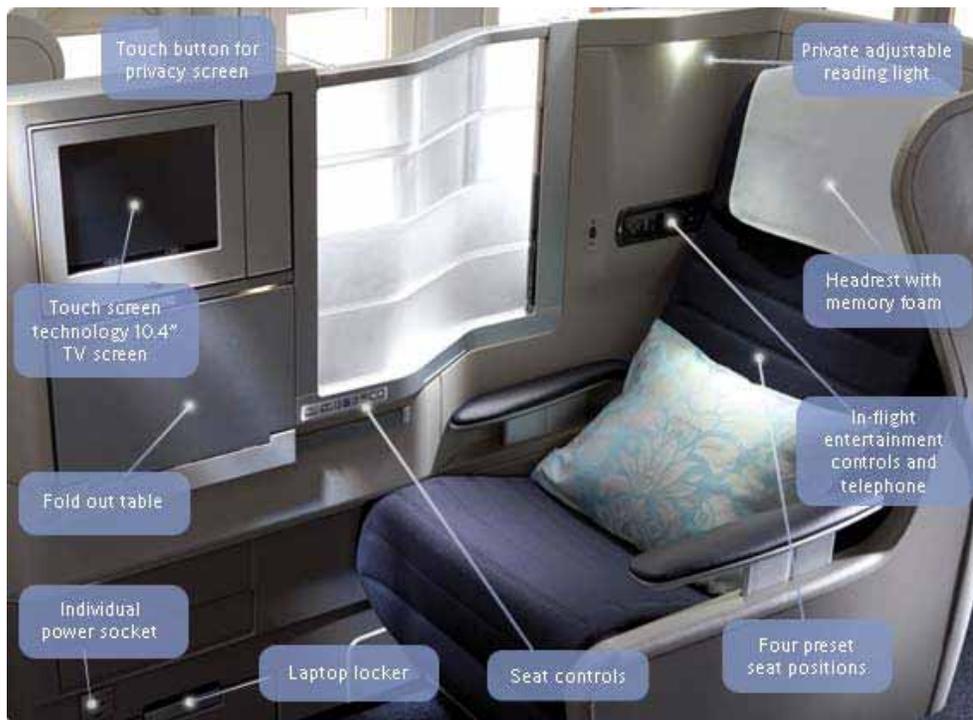
Kathy observed that the 3 segments were so different that they should each have a separate trip story. It made sense, as editing a long story with pictures in it was a nuisance.

PART ONE- WESTERN EUROPE AND THE RIVIERA

This one started off a little differently. Last year we were overnighing at Dulles Airport before our flight to Budapest, and Kathy was watching a program on Spain on the Travel Channel on TV. Well, she said she would like to see Spain, and that was all it took! I went to the hotel business center and checked on cruises that went to Spain.

I found a couple of them, and when we got back home we chose an 11 day cruise from Rome to London.

A few days after we got back, I got an e-mail from British Airways telling me I had been awarded a companion ticket! Well, I showed Kathy a picture of what Business Class looked like, and she called it obscene! You have your own personal space, sort of like a bathtub, with all sorts of amenities! Fortunately, I had enough miles on my frequent flyer account to swing it.



The only problem was that we would have to stay overnight at Heathrow, so I discovered there was a Sofitel Hotel right at the terminal, and British Airways got a discounted rate, so that solved the problem.

We wanted our bags checked through to Rome to avoid the excess baggage charges we paid in Copenhagen last year, so we made sure we had nightclothes and toiletries for the overnight stay.

I pre-ordered our Britrail passes and cards for our bus rides in London so we are good to go.

On our past cruises, we have had a minisuite. After looking at the difference in prices between the minisuite and the balcony cabin, we opted for the latter. The differences are; shower instead of tub, one TV vs. 2, and smaller storage space.

We had previously sailed on Oceania's Insignia in 2007, which is identical to the Ocean Princess, so we were familiar with the layout. One thing we did do, however, was bring a copy of the deck plans from a Princess Brochure. The little booklet they give you only has a side view of the ship, and the

plan view makes it a lot easier, especially to find bathrooms! Since the ship only held 670 passengers and was 30,000 tons instead of 100,000 tons, it was a lot easier to get around.



LOS ANGELES

Two days before we were scheduled to depart, that volcano in Iceland erupted again. It spewed ash high into the atmosphere, and the winds were blowing it toward Scotland. Depending on which way the winds blow, we may or may not be affected. I kept checking the British Airways website, and up to our departure time, both flights were OK. If anyone travels at all, flexibility is the key.

In visiting the British Airways website, we discovered that as Business Class passengers, we were entitled to use the lounges both at Los Angeles and Heathrow. After we checked in and got our boarding passes, we headed for the lounge.

The lounge at LAX was huge! There were about a dozen computer stations, plus sitting areas. There was complimentary wine, champagne, and soft drinks as well as a variety of hors d'oeuvres.

I sure beat sitting in the huge waiting rooms waiting to board our flight.

LONDON HEATHROW

The flight itself was great; Kathy liked it as she could stretch out and actually sleep on her side.

Unfortunately, we arrived in London in the middle of a thunderstorm! We were in a holding pattern for 45 minutes with severe bumps and a lightning strike. After finally landing at Heathrow, we passed through immigration and customs and headed to the airport hotel.

The hotel entrance was down a very long corridor and down an elevator. The room was very nice, and soundproofed. The only strange thing was the buttons to control the lights. There were a multitude for the room, and once more poor Kathy was in the bathroom when the lights went out.

ROME

We flew from London to Rome refreshed after a good night's sleep to face the Rome Airport. From our previous experiences we knew there would be some long walks. After collecting our bags, we were greeted by the Princess Representative and boarded the van for the one hour trip to the ship. When we arrived in Livorno, we were surprised to see the Oceania Insignia behind us. It was the ship we sailed on when we got married.

PISA

Since we had been to Florence when we took the "Portrait of Italy" land tour, we just opted to go to Pisa. Departing from Livorno, we took a short 30-minute motor coach ride to Pisa, one of Tuscany's most beautiful cities, and where we explored the UNESCO World Heritage Site, Il Campo dei Miracoli, or "the Field of Miracles." That is the home of the famed Leaning Tower, which is actually the cathedral's bell tower, as well the Duomo, the Baptistery, the Monumental Cemetery and museums.

A short 15-minute walk brought us to the Piazza dei Miracoli, or Square of Miracles. There our guide gave us a brief explanation and history of the Tower. Many people ask why it leans, or what was its

original purpose? The Tower was meant to be the bell tower for the Cathedral, but due to its faulty design and loose soil beneath it, it didn't come to be. Unfortunately, it started leaning soon after construction started in the 12th Century. Galileo, a native of Pisa, used this structure to help him determine his laws of gravity and acceleration. He found that different weights fell at the same speed, contrary to beliefs at the time. (He also used the Cathedral to study the movement of the pendulum)



We were then on our own for an hour to shop, and I was hoping to find some Porcini mushrooms and some truffles for Kathy. Our meeting place was at a combination restaurant and market, and that day they were offering a 20% discount on anything purchased. They had a large assortment of truffles, but their shipment of mushrooms had not come in yet. I bought Kathy a large jar of truffles, and now we just have to figure out what to cook with them. About 10 minutes before we were to leave, the owner came over with a large tray of mushrooms that had just arrived!

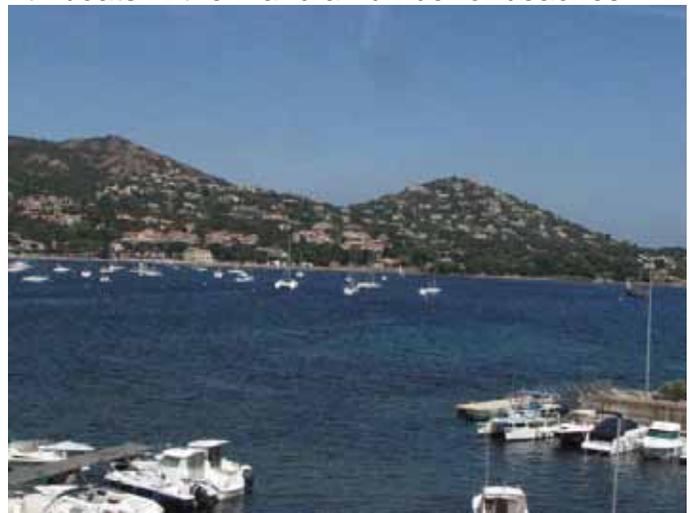
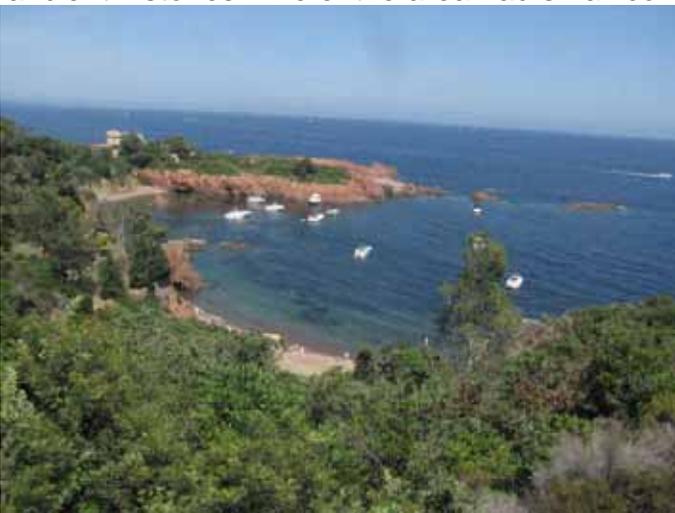
CANNES

Departing from our ship, we boarded our motor coach for a picturesque ride through the French Riviera, along the coastal road from Cannes to Saint-Raphael. Sweeping seaside vistas sit side by side the rocky Esterel Hills with their wooded slopes and pink outcrops. We made a brief photo stop along the way to capture some of the sights.

The Cannes film festival had just concluded before our arrival, and we were surprised at the number of helicopters transporting the "beautiful people" from the city.

While it's long been known as the escape for the rich and famous, the French Riviera began as a winter health resort for the British upper class at the end of the 18th century. By the first half of the 20th century, it was frequented by artists and writers such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Edith Wharton, Somerset Maugham and F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, as well as wealthy Americans and Europeans, and became a popular tourist destination and convention site after World War II. Many celebrities including Elton John, Sean "Diddy" Combs, Tom Cruise, Johnny Depp, and soccer idol David Beckham have homes in the region.

As we continued on our scenic journey, we passed through the small coastal towns of La Napoule, Port La Galere, Pointe du Cap Roux and Agay. Each one is spectacular with its sparkling bays and ancient histories. The entire area had small coves with boats in them and a number of beaches.



On the way, we also saw a large cave where a religious hermit lived for many years.



We finally arrived in the fashionable resort town of Saint-Raphael. The village offered sandy beaches, marinas, good shopping, and lots of dining possibilities, and the old harbor was lined with chic shops, boutiques and cafes. The town is full of fine old villas from the 18th and 19th centuries, with many of the Palladian style, and others evoking the Belle Époque.



There were a number of stalls on the seaside, selling everything imaginable. We found one that sold little bags of herbs de Provence and bought a couple for us and friends. We also made another photo stop on the back from Saint Raphael. We visited the D-Day Memorial commemorating the landing of the U.S. Army's 36th Division in August 1944.



BARCELONA

Barcelona is a city that boasts 68 parks, seven beaches and a stunning backdrop in the form of the Pyrenees Mountains. The first part of this bus tour took us on to Montjuic Mountain for a photo stop at the breath-taking Mirador. Here we enjoyed incomparable panoramic views of the city and harbor, before heading into the city. We could see the towers of the Sagrada Familia in the distance. There is also a cable car that goes from the city all the way out to the harbor on 2 towers.



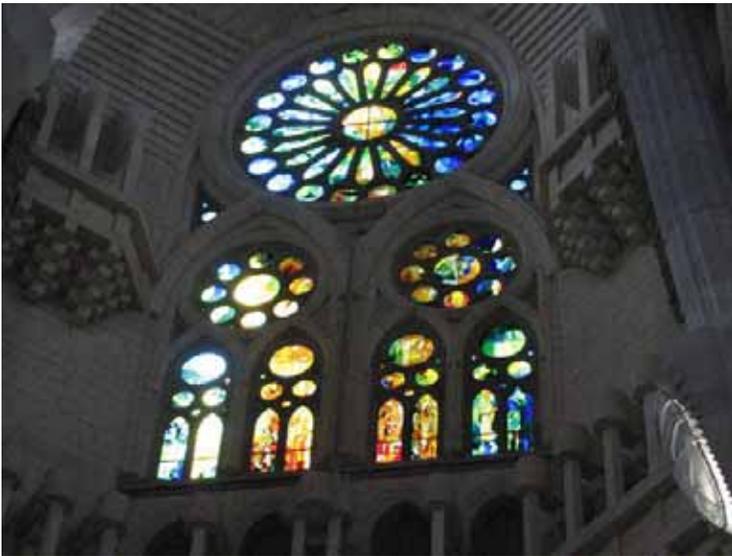
Then it was on to the awesome La Sagrada Familia church, where we explored this unfinished yet striking modernist religious center that boasts massive flamboyant spires. Incredibly, the church has been under construction since 1882 and will only be completed around 2026, but a portion of the interior is open for public worship. Considered the masterwork of Catalan architects Antoni Gaudi, who died in 1926, it has been one of Spain's top tourist attractions for many years. Our guide described the church's features in detail, including the massive nativity facade and modern stained glass windows. The Gaudi museum located on the lower levels traced the architect's life and achievements.



Below are close-ups of some of the figures on the outside of the church.



Many of the windows have regular glass in them to enclose the interior of the church, but they will eventually be replaced with stained glass. There is already some stained glass in some of the windows.



After souvenir shopping, we drove down the Paseo de Gracia, also known as the Passeig de Gracia, one of the most opulent avenues in Barcelona and an important shopping and business district, which resembled State Street in Santa Barbara, California

We then continued along to view another of Gaudi's masterpieces, the modernist house of La Pedrera. This striking building is now a museum and features undulating, smooth stone walls and elaborate iron balconies. We also drove past Casa Amatller, another modernist building that was constructed in 1898 for chocolatier Antoni Amatller, and also Gaudi's Casa Batllo, known locally as 'Casa Del Ossos', the House of Bones, thanks to its dramatic skeletal quality.



GIBRALTAR

After looking at the excursions the ship offered, we decided to take off on our own. Gibraltar is not that large, in fact the road in from Spain has to cross the airport!

There was an announcement from the captain the previous night that there was an explosion and fire of a storage tank and as a precaution we would be tendered in to port. Actually, this worked out better as the tender could get closer to town than the ship could.

When we arrived in Gibraltar, we were disappointed to see most of the rock was covered by clouds. We felt sorry for those who booked the tours of the upper part as they would not be able to see anything! The picture at the left is what we saw; the picture on the right is what we wanted to see!



We wandered around, first stopping at a glass blowing factory. It was interesting to watch the two men fashion items which were then put into an oven to slowly cool.



Well, it was very warm in the factory, as one can imagine, and it can work up a thirst. Kathy and I stopped at a small pub to replenish the lost fluids.

We then saw a shop that specialized in perfumes, and found that Lanvin had come out with a new version of Arpege, which was a much lighter scent. I remember that my mother used to wear Arpege many years ago.

In looking at the map of Gibraltar, I saw that a few synagogues were indicated. There were two of them a short walk away, so I visited both of them. Unlike most churches which were open at all times, the synagogues were only open during services for security reasons.

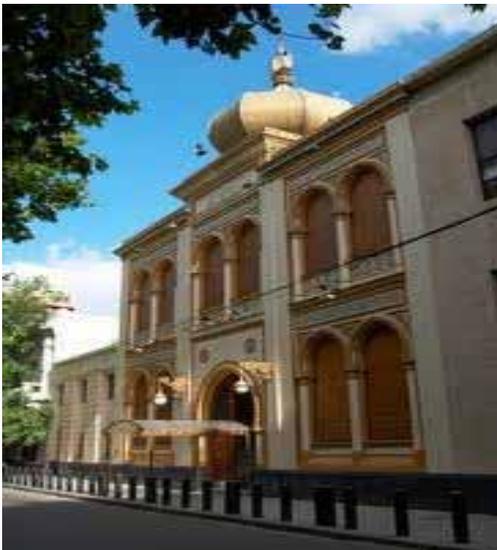
When we were in Budapest and Amsterdam last year, the synagogues were open, but there were security checkpoints in both of them.

I first visited the Great Synagogue, and the original building was destroyed during the great rainstorm of 1766, as a result of which some 80 people drowned. It was rebuilt in 1768 on a larger plan, but was

destroyed by gunfire on 17 May 1781, during the Great Siege. The synagogue was later rebuilt but had to be reconstructed again in 1812 after it had been damaged by a fire and the present vaulted ceiling dates from that time. It is the principal synagogue in Gibraltar.



I then visited the Abudarham Synagogue, which was built for new immigrants from Morocco who wanted to have a synagogue which was smaller and less formal than the Gibraltar institutions.



PORTIMAO

Portimao was a fishing village, but has lately become a very popular tourist spot.



We boarded our motor coach and traveled along the Algarve Coast toward Lagos. Our first stop was in Carvoeiro, a hilltop fishing village that has become a fashionable resort.



We stopped for stunning photographs at Ponta do Peidade, a stretch of the Algarve coast renowned for its cliffs, sea caves, natural arches and dramatic pillars. There was a strange sightseeing boat with a large dome in the front. Our thought was that it would really be hot under the dome in the sunshine.



Following the drive, we ended up in Lagos, which had a very interesting fish market.



We bought some interesting star shaped cakes that were the representations of a star that guided some lost fishermen home. We also tried the fried sardines, but they were very greasy. Leaving Lagos, our tour continued west to Cape St. Vincent traveling along a coastline of dramatic headlands, sea cliffs and crags. We then returned to Portimao, and while on our balcony, saw two types of boats used for tours.



LISBON

In the Cruise Critic website, there is a section called cruise Roll Call, where passengers going on the same cruise can get together and organize a "Meet and Greet", and also put together private tours. On this trip, we will be going with two other couples on our tour.

We started by exploring all the main busy squares of the city that truly transform Lisbon into a European capital. At the top of the highest hill of Lisbon we saw the Castle of Saint George with an astonishing view of Lisbon and the old Moorish quarter of Alfama.



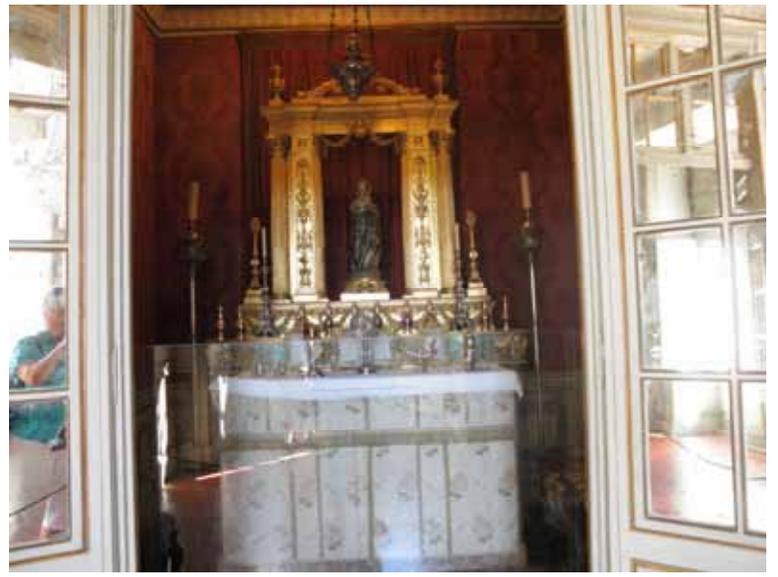


After winding through the narrow streets of the Alfama, we stopped at one of the beautiful parks in Lisbon. There was an interesting statue across the street, and it looked one of Viegland's bronzes from Oslo's Frogner Park. We checked the plaque, and it was by a Portuguese artist.



From there we went to Queloz Palace, which has a hall of mirrors that rivaled Versailles. It was sumptuously furnished in the period of hundreds of years ago.





After viewing the interior of the palace, we walked out onto the grounds, and were surprised to see a canal and bridges that were beautifully covered in tiles. It turns out the canal could be filled, and guests were brought down in boats and would disembark up the steps and over the bridge.



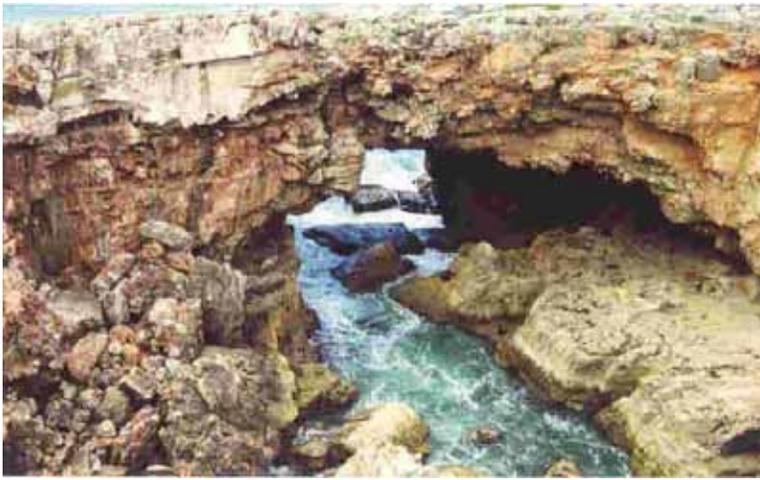
Next, we drove to the Palacio Nacional, which had unusual conical chimneys. The palace has no furnishings, and it is 100 steps up, so we decided to pass on seeing the inside.



We then took a winding mountain road from the palace in the hills down to the beautiful shores of the Estoril area. Kathy was quite impressed the beaches of Portugal, because she had never heard of them previously. The lists of beautiful beaches of the world never include these beaches, but should.



We made a brief stop at a place called "Bocha de Inferno" which means "Mouth of Hell". We got to the water's edge, and there was a natural bridge with the water surging into a dark cave, from which the place got its name.



From there we drove into the beautiful town of Cascais, which has a large harbor and a large beach.



The three couples split up for lunch, and we wandered down a side street, and found a place that looked reasonable called Ristorante Castro. We ordered some oysters, and split an order of sardines and a skewer of calamari and shrimp. We were sitting next to a table of a British expatriate, and he said we had found the best place in Cascais.



We headed back into Lisbon. We stopped in Belem, where there are two structures of interest. The first is the tower of Belem, commissioned by Manuel I; it was built as a fortress in the middle of the Tagus in 1515-21.

The second monument is the Monument to the Discoveries, with Prince Henry holding a caravel (ship) in his hand.



Many of the adventurous discoverers departed from the area of Belem. Along with new thoughts and cultures the Portuguese explorers also brought enough wealth to build the Jeronimos Monastery.



LE HAVRE

After a day at sea we docked in the French port of Le Havre. I had previously made arrangements with a taxi company for a private tour of Monet's home and gardens in Giverny, and the city of Rouen. We had seen Monet's painting of the cathedral in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and were anxious to see the real thing.

GIVERNEY

Claude Monet spent the last four decades of his life creating a magnificent garden at his home, and memorializing it in oil on canvas. Upon arriving, we walked through a flower garden called Clos Normand. Monet created his garden with an eye for how it would appear on canvas.



The Clos Normand is ablaze with color in summer, with tulips, roses, dahlias, sunflowers and nasturtiums. We then walked to the pink crushed-brick house adorned with green shutters through the garden entrance.



Inside, we visited the salon, Monet's bedroom, his Nymphs Studio, the yellow dining room and the tiled kitchen, and saw Japanese prints and the work of his artists friends line the walls throughout.



After visiting Monet's house, we continued to the water garden which was a marvelous Japanese-inspired water garden with the Japanese bridge surrounded by wisteria and azaleas. The pond and bridge were the subjects of one of Monet's late masterworks.

The pond was beautiful, with 2 Japanese bridges, and we could see as we walked around, the different aspects that Monet could paint.







After spending time walking all around the pond and gardens, we went down the road for lunch. Our driver recommended Hotel Baudy, which had a quaint little restaurant. We took his recommendation for their special French omelets, which had roast duck in them, among other ingredients.



ROUEN

We then drove to Rouen, near the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Rouen to begin our walking tour through the old section of Rouen, down narrow cobbled lanes lined with ancient, timbered houses. Rouen boasts over 700 of these medieval structures.

We continued down the Rue du Gros Horologe, passing Rouen's old fortified clock tower and law courts, housed in a Renaissance building.



We visited the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Rouen, a superb example of French Gothic architecture that took 300 years to complete. The cast iron spire is the largest in France and the central portal features an elaborately painted "Tree of Jesus." The interior, which features a Lady Chapel, the tombs of Rouen's archbishops, and impressive 15th-century stained glass windows.





After visiting the cathedral, I found the synagogue a few blocks away. The picture on the left is the outside view looking at the window over the altar. The picture on the right is the inside view of the synagogue.



DOVER

The channel crossing was uneventful, considering we were crossing across the shipping lanes. The Norwegian Dream was not that lucky some years ago, as it hit a container ship in the middle of the night.

We disembarked the ship, collected our luggage, and found John, our host for our "Cornish Welcome" tour waiting for us outside the baggage area.

See Europe 2011-Part 2 for the story of the next segment of our trip.

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