

Hebridean Princess, Wales, and Paris

September 2006

I have been interested in taking a cruise on this ship for years, as it only holds 46 passengers, and is furnished like an English manor house. The area it cruises is the islands off the west coast of Scotland. On a cruise last year, I was chatting with an Englishman, and we were discussing a cruise of the Inner Hebrides. I said there is only one way to do it, and we responded as one-The Hebridean Princess.

After a few requests, I received the 2006 brochure on a Saturday, and spent the weekend perusing the brochure. I selected a cruise called "Scottish Temptations", which visits a number of the islands, and to my delight, two distilleries. On Sunday, taking advantage of the time difference between California and England, I sent them an e-mail with a number of questions. I also sent an e-mail to a couple in Wales who own a guest house, who were friends of our hairdresser.

The plan is to fly to Glasgow, cruise for 7 days, take the train to Wales, spend time there, and then to London to visit two caregivers I met on the Brain Injury chat room.

I received a very warm response from the folks in Wales, and started laying out the trip on a calendar. I was cleaning out some brochures in our travel bookcase and happened on a brochure for the British Pullman-part of the Orient Express. It seems they run day trips from London on the days I would be in London, so I requested their 2006 brochure. They featured a lunch train ride through England for \$390-that was kind of expensive, but I figured it would be a great experience.

However, some time later, there was an article in the Travel section of the LA Times talking about the Louvre, and what to see in a half day. I checked the Chunnel price, and it was \$180 round trip, which was much less than the British Pullman trip. So I booked it and my ticket to the Louvre on line, and they arrived in plenty of time

I worked a half day, and then caught the bus to the airport. The trip over was uneventful, other than leaving late because we were at a remote terminal. I had to change planes in London to get to Glasgow, and when I hit security the lines were enormous. I spoke to someone and showed my boarding pass, and they "Fast Tracked" me through. I then went to immigration, and they asked me how long I was going to be in England, and I said 8 days. They then asked what I was doing after that, and I said I was going to Wales. The officer said, "Would you like to try that again?" I apologized and told him I was a little fuzzy from the flight and then recited my entire itinerary, which satisfied him.

The flight to Glasgow turned out to be very interesting. A young lady was seated next to me, and she saw I asked for a single malt scotch from the cart. She asked me which were my favorites, and I said, "Bowmore". She asked which ones I had tried, and I told her I had 5 in my cabinet at home and ticked them off to her. I also mentioned I was making a "pilgrimage" to the distillery on my cruise. She seemed quite pleased, and handed me her business card. It turned out she was the General Manager of the distillery! She invited me to ask for her when I got there, and I said I would.

When I arrived in Glasgow, my luggage did not. I figured since we were late in arriving, it did not make the transfer. I had changed my reservation to the earlier flight to make connections with the transfer bus to the ship, other wise it would cost me about \$400 to take a private car.

Well, because of a concept I call the balance of nature, I made the earlier flight, my luggage made the later one. The shuttle bus came to collect me, and I told them the problem, and they made arrangements for the later bus to pick me up. After a couple of anxious hours, the later plane came in and my luggage showed up. I almost kissed it when I saw it!

The bus trip was interesting. At one point, outside of Invererry, there was a traffic light, but no cross street. I looked up ahead, and saw the reason for the light. There was a one lane bridge!

We made a pit stop in the town, and there was a floating museum there, but we did not have time to go through it.



We arrived at the ship, and were welcomed aboard by the chief purser. He took me aside, and told me my cabin was now on the main deck to the left of the gangway! I thanked him profusely, as my original cabin was 3 decks down and had no windows. I checked the price difference, and it was about \$1600, plus the single supplement!

I toured the upper deck of the ship, and the lounge area and bar area were very nice. There was a nice selection of single malts which were complimentary.



As we left the pier, I got a picture of McCaig's tower, which was built in 1900 to give employment to locals during a slump. The walls are 2 feet thick and 40 feet high and it is circular like the Coliseum in Rome. . I also got a picture of a lighthouse for my brother in law.



ISLE OF CANNA

Our first stop was on the isle of Canna, and I walked with a fellow passenger. We passed an interesting little church with a round bell tower. The church had a Celtic cross in its graveyard, so we did not have to trek another mile to see another one, which others were going to see.



CARBOST-TALISKER

We returned to the ship for lunch, and then landed near the Talisker Distillery. We had a tasting, then a tour. When asked if we could take pictures, the guide said we could not because of the alcohol. I knew that was hogwash because I took pictures in Glenmorangie and Ben Nevis without a problem.



DUNVEGAN CASTLE

The next day we anchored near Dunvegan Castle on the Isle of Skye. It is the place the "Fairy Flag" is kept, which dates back about 400 years. It is supposedly the oldest continuously inhabited castle in Scotland



The castle had some beautiful gardens around it, as well as a waterfall. All in all, it was a very pleasant walk.



There was only one seating for dinner, and I was at the Chief Engineer's table with a nice group including a photographer who took pictures for the ship's brochures and for calendars. We had some very interesting discussions about techniques and composition.

My highlight was when the Chief Engineer joined us for dinner. He was Scottish and I asked him for a favor. He asked what I wanted, and I said please say, "Captain I canna get more than Warp 3 from the engines".

INVEREWE GARDENS

During lunch we sailed to Gairloch on the mainland to visit the gardens. They were beautiful, but the midges were at full strength. After a bunch of waving and slapping, we evacuated the gardens.



That night we were entertained by the "Highlander", who was dressed in kilts and carried a claymore (broadsword) and shield. He told of the story of the 1745 battle at Culloden Moor, and of Bonnie Prince Charlie. He also discussed the use of various weapons he had.



ISLE OF EIGG

The next day we sailed to the Isle of Eigg. The prominent landmark was a volcanic crag called Ang Sur that was on the west side of the island. From one aspect, it looked like Devil's Tower. I hiked around part of the island, following a series of colored dots that marked the trail, but they disappeared about an hour into the hike, so we headed back to the pier to catch the ship's tender.



ISLE OF COLONSAY

Our next port of call was the isle of Colonsay. A group of us were led by our guide up the paved road, which then turned into 2 tracks, which turned into a footpath. I was thinking that it better not get any narrower than this.



We hiked along this track, and then went through a small gate. About 50 yards beyond the gate the area opened up and it was the gardens of Colonsay Hotel, considered the most remote hotel in Great Britain.



ISLE OF JURA

After lunch on the ship, we landed on the isle of Jura and walked from the pier into town. There was a distillery there called strangely enough, Isle of Jura. We went into the tasting room and had a sample of their whisky. They had 2 varieties, so I bought miniatures of both to have a tasting at home. On the way back to the pier we passed some Highland cattle, which looked cute because they had bangs between their horns. There was also a seal offshore balancing on a small rock.



ISLE OF ISLAY

We were taken by bus to my Mecca, the Bowmore Distillery. I showed them the card the lady gave me and they sent me on a tour of the distillery while they contacted her. It was quite interesting, as they do their own floor malting. This is where the barley is moistened and laid out to germinate to develop the sugars. It is then dried over peat fire, which gives it the smoky flavor then ground up. It is then put into large vats with water and yeast and the yeast turns the sugars to alcohol. It is then run through 2 stills and becomes whisky.



Malting Floor



Mash Tun

The distillate is run through a device called a spirit safe, where only the center part or "heart" of the distillate is used. The other parts are returned to the still to be reused.



Whisky Still



Spirit Safe

At the end of the tour, I went back to the tasting room where I met the lady from the plane, and she pointed to an array of bottles of the better whiskeys, and asked which one I would like to try. Talk about a kid in a candy store! I selected a 16 year old whisky that had been matured in sherry casks to taste. It had to be diluted with a little water because of its strength, but it was wonderful. I asked if I could take her picture, and she said yes, so I took one of her holding the glass I was about to taste.



Unfortunately, the tasting was cut short by the arrival of the coach taking us back to the Kidalton Chapel. I thanked the lady profusely and promised I would keep buying her whiskies. The ride to the chapel was interesting, as we passed 3 other distilleries on the way. The chapel had no roof, and is best known for a large Celtic cross in the graveyard. The cross was carved with biblical stories, but was quite weathered.



ISLE OF GIGHA

On the isle of Ghiga, we toured the Achamore Gardens. They had a large collection of Rhododendrons. I always thought they were a small bush, but there were large trees.



CRINAN

On our last full day on the ship, we visited the Crinan Canal, which allows small boats to avoid some nasty water around the Sound of Jura. We had quite a climb to the top of the hill, especially for one plucky lady who had to be helped up over some of the higher stepping places. The view at the top was worth the climb, though.



We walked along the canal towpath for a few miles, and then reversed course to return to the dock to catch the ship's tender.



ARDUAINE GARDENS

Our last afternoon on board was spent visiting Arduaine Gardens. They had a clever set of arrows with numbers so you knew exactly where your were, as opposed to Canna, where the dots disappeared. One set of arrows led up to a View Point, and the view was great.



The tenders we used held about 10 people each and were stored on the “water deck”. It was quite interesting to sit in the lounge and watch them being winched on and off the ship. Well as they swung the boat inboard, I stood up and held 2 pieces of paper against the window to signify “9.5” as their score. Both the winch operator and the boat handler cracked up.



Sadly, all good things come to an end, as we have to leave the ship tomorrow. The last night was the Captain's Farewell Gala, complete with the haggis ceremony. This consisted of the haggis being piped in to the dining room, the captain reciting, "To a Haggis" by Robert Burns, and plunging a knife into it. We were all given a dram of whisky at our place to toast the haggis, but 2 of the people did not like scotch, so I ended up with 3 glasses in front of me!



The next morning we debarked at a civilized hour and were taken to Glasgow to catch the train. About half way into the trip we stopped by Loch Lomond for a rest stop. There was an announcement made that there were coffee, tea, and biscuits available. I was looking around outside and did not see anywhere that had them. We had 2 of the staff riding with us, and they went to the baggage compartment under the bus and pulled out large thermos type dispensers of coffee and tea and tins of chocolate chip cookies!

We got into Glasgow and the traffic was a nightmare of one way streets. We actually went past the train station and had to make 3 right turns to end up in front of it. We got our luggage on to trolleys and I checked to see if we could get on an earlier train. Fortunately we were early, and that got me to Wales at 8 PM instead of 10 PM.

WALES

I arrived at the station in Wales a little late, as part of the line is single track, and the train had to wait at a passing track for the one in the other direction. I was met by David, who was the husband of the manager of the guest house and my driver.

When I arrived at the guest house, I was welcomed by Angela and Gareth, who were the owners, and they kindly invited me to go to dinner with them. They were charming hosts, and Angela gave me a small gift to take back to our hairdresser.

FESTINIOG RAILROAD

We set out the next morning on our mission to ride the trains. We drove over a small mountain road, which cut out a lot of distance, and ended at Porthmagog. The locomotive was what was called a "double ender"



TALLYLLYN RAILROAD

We stopped for lunch in the town of Tywyn, and then I got on the train- the locomotive was really cute.



WELSH HIGHLAND RAILROAD (PORTHMADOG)

The next day we went back to Porthmadog to ride the short Welsh Highland train. The track is only about a mile, but at the end there was a museum and the train works. I asked if I could ride the footplate (floor) on the way back and the engineer said yes. It was really fun to do that. On the Trans Siberian, the lady I met spoke of wanting to do that.



WELSHPOOL AND LLANFAIR RAILROAD

We stopped for lunch in Welshpool near the station and I got on the train for a round trip. There was a house next to the tracks that had the neatest backyard with a pond. After I got off the train we headed to explore Powys Castle.



POWYS CASTLE

We took a drive through the castle grounds, but because of time limitation we did not go through the castle.



WELSH HIGHLAND RAILROAD (CAENERFON)

The following day we headed for the other Welsh Highland Railroad. The station was right near Caenarfon Castle, so we walked around the outside to kill some time until it was time to go. The train took us past Lake Cwellyn, which was really beautiful.



LLANBERIS LAKE

As had been our routine, we ate lunch and I got on the train. I asked for a ride on the footplate and got one on the way back to the station. The weather had been beautiful so far and the lake was pretty.



The next day was a non-train day, so we explored a couple of castles. The first one was the best known one in Wales, Caernarfon, where Prince Charles was invested as the Prince of Wales.



From Caernarfon we went across the Britannia Bridge to Anglesey Island to visit Beaumaris Castle. This castle was designed with concentric walls, but it was never finished.



LLECHWEDD SLATE CAVERNS

After lunch we went to the slate cavern. They offered 2 tours, one by tram and the other to a deep mine. There was a sound and light show that described how slate was mined in Victorian times. There were 4 man teams, with one man boring holes on the rock with an iron tool, and another filling the resultant hole with powder and setting it off. The other two men worked topside and split and dressed the slate for roofing. They worked by candlelight and 12 hrs 5 days a week.



VALE OF RHEIDOL RAILROAD

This trip had to be the best of the 8 trains I rode. The train tracks were on the top of the hills, and we could look down into the beautiful green valley



BALA LAKE RAILROAD

The eighth railway I rode was at Bala Lake. After lunch, I got on the train and rode it to the terminus where most people got off. On the way back I was able to ride the footplate half way to the station which was fine.



ENGLAND

The next day I was taken to the train station to go to London. As my theory of the balance in nature was still working, the train was an hour late, making up for me getting into Wales early. Plus, there was a terrible lightning storm the previous night and it knocked out some of the signals.

We were given the option of going north to Crewe, and then south from Crewe to London. The other option was to take a bus to Wolverhampton and then to London. I looked at the map and it seemed the better choice as I would at least be going in the right direction.

I finally got to London, but by missing my original train, it was the middle of rush hour. I checked into the hotel and found a mall down the street. I was looking for some place to have dinner, and lo and behold, they had a sushi bar!

It was really interesting. You sat down, and there was this little conveyor belt going by with all the different dishes on it. Each dish had a different color, indicating the price of the item, and when you were done, they added up the dishes!

NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

I found out I had picked an ideal location for my hotel. It was a block from the Underground and the main street had all kinds of shops and restaurants. I took the Underground to the museum, and toured various sections of it.

They had a great display of minerals and of fossils. My timing was good (for a change), because as I left a horde of school children were coming in.



LONDON EYE

I then took the Underground to the Waterloo train station for 2 reasons-one was to get on the London Eye-a huge Ferris wheel, and the other was to find out where the Chunnel train left from. The Eye was great, it moved about one revolution per hour, and each enclosed pod held about 20 people.



London Eye



Big Ben



Cleopatra's Needle



St. Paul's Cathedral



London Eye Pod



Big Ben & Houses of Parliament

PARIS

I got up at 5 AM to catch the 6:30 train to Paris. I only had to wait 5 minutes for the first train, but the second one came 20 minutes later. I got to Waterloo Station just about at 6 AM. I was really glad I had done the dry run the day before.

The train was very comfortable, and I arrived in Paris about 10:30 (there is an hour time difference between England and the Continent). I did not want to chance the Metro, so I took a taxi to the Eiffel Tower. When I got there I discovered the lines for the elevator were about an hour and a half long! I went to the southwest and there was a sign that said "Escaliers" which I knew meant stairs, and there was no waiting. So I climbed the stairs to the first level, some 400 or so steps.

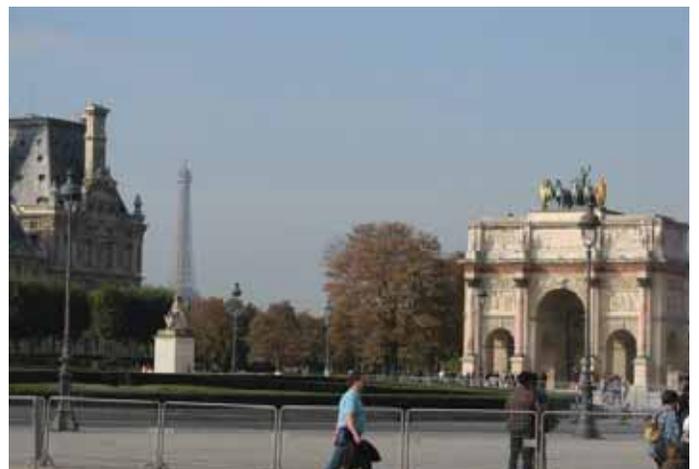
. When I got my heart rate down to under 100, I wandered around and took some pictures.

EIFFEL TOWER



LOUVRE

After doing all I wanted to, I went down the stairs and caught a taxi to the Louvre. I had an old guidebook with me, but when I tried to use the entrance indicated in the guidebook, I was told to enter at the pyramid.



My first stop was at the inverted pyramid that was featured in Dan Brown's book "The Da Vinci Code. I then oriented myself with the map of the museum and viewed some of the most famous pieces, "Winged Victory" and Venus de Milo



There were areas of the museum where picture taking was not allowed, such as in front of the Mona Lisa, and the Grand Format paintings.

After doing all I wanted to, I found a restaurant in the museum, and treated myself to a French lunch. I had langoustines and rice done in a cream sauce, and a half bottle of Macon, a dry French wine. I decided to walk off lunch by walking back to the train station, and I passed by the Paris Opera House and the famous Café de la Paix.



Well, a short time later, my legs let me know what climbing the Eiffel Tower did, so I used the universal word-Taxi! The trip back to London was uneventful, and I packed that night for the trip back to Los Angeles.

When I got to Heathrow, I did the 3 things I always do as I am leaving-a pint of bitter (beer) a sausage, and a visit to the World of Whisky.

Well so ends a very exciting trip, but at this point my life is at a crossroads. I have no idea when my next trip is or where it will be to. Time will tell

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