

Alpine Countries Tour with Globus—1st July'12 to 15th July'12

29th June 2012—to Frankfurt, to join the Globus Tour of the Alpine Countries

29th July was the start of our trip to join a coach tour of Alpine countries. It was a first for us to take an organized tour. Globus was the group we joined. We were going a day earlier. The tour was to start on the 2nd for which we had to meet up on the evening of the 1st. The flight was cramped but okay otherwise. The two guys in front of us were sleeping throughout with seats so way back, that though I survived, Bijjan had a tough time. We had dozed off when they came with snack and drinks. I had the vegetarian Frankie and a glass of wine but he did not have anything. Breakfast was not bad. We landed about 7.15am and were in the hotel in an hour. Everything was smooth, including the Pakistani taxi driver we got as soon as we got out. Sheraton Congress Hotel Frankfurt was just 15mins 18 Euros away. We were worried they may give us the room only at check in time, but we settled in immediately. It was good to bathe and rest before we got out by 10.45am.

The tram stop was just outside the hotel. We were still fumbling about which tram to take for City Centre, when a tram came and we got on. As soon as we got on we realized that the ticket had to be bought at the stop. So we travelled ticketless for two stops! We got off and walked a fair distance, enjoying the greenery and cleanliness of the city. We were finally helped by an English speaking girl to buy a day ticket for 6.20 Euros which is good for tram and metro and bus too. This is something all tourists should know.

So we went to Zeil - Frankfurt's main shopping district –The Zeil is popular with locals and visitors who enjoy the high end shopping experiences. Often dubbed "The Fifth Avenue of Germany", the Zeil has



something for everyone. So you have people loitering around, eating street food, drinking beer and other drinks, with a few cafeterias too. Since it was Saturday, there was also a Farmers' Market at the end of the Square which made everything more festive. There were stalls of fresh vegetables and fruit, jams, home baked goodies and street food. It was too hot to stand or sit there, so Bijjan got one Brackwurst and one Chilliwurst. Both the sausages were the same big ones. The difference is that

Chilliwurst was served sliced with a lot of ketchup sprinkled with some seasoning and Brackwurst was plain. A slice of sour dough bread accompanied each. Some metro journey later we reached the Willy Brandt Platz to walk by the river. Pretty place but the heat and exhaustion made us leave faster. We were happy to get a direct tram to the hotel. I rather enjoy travelling by tram. It is slow enough to enjoy the city as you go along.

We returned to the hotel to try and catch up with some lost sleep. But in vain! So I went down to the lobby for some free Internet and Bijjan went to the health club. Around 5 we took a tram straight to Romerberg. This is the area around a cathedral called Dom, actually Kaiserdom. Despite its name the Kaiserdom is not an actual cathedral since it has never been the seat of a bishop. It received this title in the 18th century because German kings and emperors were crowned here. A large fire destroyed much of the church in 1867. It was rebuilt in 1880 only to be destroyed again at the end of World War II. In a span of just four years, from 1950 until 1953, the Kaiserdom was once again rebuilt.

We had actually planned to see if we could get a boat cruise this evening, but when we got off the bus, we walked in the opposite direction by mistake. This seemed like the centre of all action in Frankfurt! Like the Zeil, this was a huge broad stretch with shops on one side and restaurants on the other. The shops here were smaller though. Each restaurant had tables galore and I would say 75% occupied, tourists making up the majority. Walking towards the end we discovered we had reached Ziel!

Then we walked back towards River Main (other side of the road where we had got off). Sure enough this was where the tourist office was and

sure enough it was closed by now! The Cathedral was also this side so we had a peep. Service was on so we could not go right in but had a good enough view. There were cafes on this side too. We missed the last



boat literally by seconds. The girl at the counter suggested we request the guy to hold on for us, but even as I requested him, he just looked at me disdainfully and carried on to remove the anchor. By now we were tired and ready to sit in one of the cafes. So we sampled a beer in one along with some tomato and mozzarella salad. Beer was not too cold but salad was nice. Actually we should have taken a seat on the mobile carts with a beer counter which took you on a ride while you sipped your drink! Missed doing that one!

We then walked across the road to see what to eat. The pizzas were rather tempting so we ordered a pizza and some more beer. Interestingly, I asked her if they had pepperoni and she said yes very confidently. So we ordered half margarita and half pepperoni. When it came the pepperoni was not obviously visible so we started to taste it, thinking it would be under the cheese perhaps. It took us some time to realize that there were jalapeño peppers on one half! I guess pepperoni here is salami!

By this time we were ready to go 'home' and took the tram back. Here also we missed one, as Bijjan was just round the corner and I requested the driver to wait but he went on. Realized later that had I opened one gate (you have to push a button to open the gate when getting on and off) then he would have had to wait. Actually a girl had done that for us in the morning. Needless to say we did not take long to crash out, once we reached our room!

1st July---start of the tour, meeting up and getting introduced

On the second day of our arrival in Frankfurt, after a good breakfast, we set off to do the Main river cruise. Instead of taking the direct, tried and tested route Bijjan decided to experiment with a combination of tram and metro to save time. As a result it took us more than an hour and extra mileage to reach. I thoroughly enjoyed the almost 2hour cruise up and down the river. We got a good introduction to the city lining the banks of the river with the guide pointing out the important buildings.

Getting off the boat we walked across the Iron Bridge. The Eiserner Steg (Iron Bridge) is already well over one hundred years old. The engraved water levels show how high the water once stood in Frankfurt. This is a third bridge across the Main connecting the center of Frankfurt with Sachsenhausen. The bridge itself



was an interesting crossover—the railing of the bridge was full of locks tied on it. The locks are said to represent lovers who have 'locked' their love and thrown their key, to last for ever. I wonder how many came back to look for the key! Sachsenhausen is known for its pubs and bars and some well known cider and Apfelwein (applewine) houses. It is also known as the arty and cultural part of Frankfurt on Main. Unfortunately we did not find a place to try some apple wine and a bite but ended up crossing back to the other side and finding a cafe in the Romer square instead. We shared a bowl of celeriac soup and an apple pie which was

good and a glass of Apple wine which we thought a waste of money. It was 4pm by the time we returned. 10.30 am to 4 pm was a long day!

The welcome dinner by Globus was at 6pm. The group was in the lobby pretty much by 6 from where Susanna escorted us to the restaurant. We found ourselves seated on the table with Fatima and Noora—two sisters from Bahrain. Lynda and Dan from Chicago were on the next table. We were 33 in all, with Susanna the tour director and Giuliano the driver adding up to 35. A batch from Australia, in fact the largest---Perth, Brisbane and around, the two sisters from Bahrain, Dan and Lynda from Chicago, few from Canada, US and one couple from Puerto Rico. The dinner was bad and we could not eat it. Wine too was bad. The attitude of the waiter when we complained was an expression of 'take it or leave it'. Everyone introduced themselves from their places and the introduction was done. I tried the net before going up--it was free for 45 minutes in the lobby and 16 euro in the room for the day.

Day 2—the tour starts. Driving to Munich via Rothenburg

The day started early. The routine had been set! A wake up call at 6.30, bags ready by 7 and departure 8 after breakfast. Everyone was punctual so we could leave 'on dot'! A new experience had started: Our first stop was a 'comfort stop'. Susanna told us that the rest place that we were to stop at had paying toilets! You

go through a turnstile gate after paying 70 cents and pulling a ticket. Use the toilet and take the ticket to their shop and spend 50 cents there. The trick was that there was nothing decent available for 50, so you ended up spending more!! We ended up buying a small bottle of water for 2.25 Euro! As it turned out though we preserved that bottle throughout the tour, because water in taps in all those countries is potable, and buying it is irksome. So we filled it and it travelled with us in the bus all the time and was disposed off only at Frankfurt airport before our flight back to Delhi!!

We were now travelling on the Romantic Road leading to the Alps. Germany was desperate to rebuild a tourism industry in the post-war times and the idea of the formal "route" was created in 1950 (not long after the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany and the end of the military-administered occupation). The Romantic Road combines the historic cities of Würzburg and Augsburg with the three medieval walled towns of Rothenburg ob der Tauber, Dinkelsbühl and Nördlingen, and then finishes off with the tourist highlights of Neuschwanstein Castle and the Alps. Oh, it was all so beautiful! Luxuriantly fertile hills, with farms in front, creating various shades of green spotted with colourful flowers. In some places though, instead of farming they had 'farms' of solar panels. Solar heating is in a big way in Germany. Many of the villagers now rent out their farm land for solar panels and power thus produced is supplied to the villages.



Our stopover was in Rothenburg for a tour round the city and lunch. The name "Rothenburg ob der Tauber" means, "Red fortress above the Tauber". This is so because the town is located on a plateau overlooking the Taube River. It is an extremely charismatic town bounded by a thick stone wall all around. We entered through one of its gates, following Susanna with our headsets on, listening to her introduction of the town. Through narrow by lanes lined with small shops and eateries we reached the centre of town. Standing in front of the town hall we got a briefing of things all around---the church, the tower, the shop for Schneebälle /Snowballs, etc. Schneebälle is a specialty of the town, made with fried balls of dough dipped in coatings like chocolate, sugar, etc. Hearing the description I was not tempted at all. I suppose something like our shakkar paras in a different shape with a variety of coatings. We walked around town, getting into two churches—which are always very peaceful. On reaching the wall at the other end, the view was breathtaking! Lush green hills dotted with red roof topped houses with mist creeping in. Having walked around, we chose an interesting place to eat. It looked like a pastry shop from the outside but extended into a courtyard which housed a full fledged restaurant with painted walls and decorative fans. The service and food was good and I would love to recommend it, but unfortunately have forgotten the name! After lunch it was time to meet back at the square where all of us gathered and walked down to the bus. A great beginning to the sights of the Alpine Countries' Tour!

The next stop before Munich was a Farmer's Market. This was a big covered market with sections of herbs, preserves, vegetables and fruits. One section was a cafeteria where Bijjan tried an ice cream which was not very nice and I had a delicious cup of coffee. I picked up a packet of herbs for spaghetti! It was nice to reach the hotel, which was Holiday Inn Munich City. A huge hotel compared to the Sheraton Congress in Frankfurt. This was a bigger room and also had provision for tea and coffee. Having settled into the room we set out for Marienplatz which is the heart of the city of Munich. In the Middle Ages, the square used to be a market place as well as the place where tournaments and festivities took place. The metro was right below the hotel and the girl at the reception directed us how to buy a 24 hour ticket. Every time you did that, travelling became so much easier and cheaper.

Marien Platz was surely buzzing. Teeming with tourists, like all town centres there were old buildings and a lot of character. After walking around for sometime we decided on a meal of Weiner Schnitzel—a typical food of Austria. We ordered one to be shared as the helpings are rather large. So we enjoyed a pork Schnitzel with beer. Replete with the meal we decided on an ice cream. We had spotted a Hagen Daaz shop so that is where we went and enjoyed an ice cream each, sitting on the tables outside. By now we were ready to call it a day, so traced our way back. All was well till we got confused about the exit from the station and took a wrong one. The result was that instead of just climbing up to the hotel we took a long and circuitous route around it in the drizzling rain!!

Day 3—tour of Munich and Lindorf Palace

Globus has a policy of seat rotation. Every day you move one seat clockwise. So that is how we took our seats at 8.30 this morning and got ready for the city tour---item No. 1 on the agenda for today. This one was with a local guide, Maria—a fairly stern looking middle aged lady, with a much ‘studied’ sense of humour. The result was that most of her humour did not emit any response. Of course she made it a point to comment a few times that we were all perhaps jet lagged which explained why we did not respond! This was a city tour and the only place we got off was at the Nymphenburg Palace (*Schloss Nymphenburg*) Located just west of Munich, the Nymphenburg Palace was commissioned in 1664 by Elector Ferdinand Maria, to celebrate the birth of his son, Maximilian Emanuel. The elector was to make this his summer residence and would live here with his consort and the mother of his child, Henriette Adelaide of Savoy. Apparently it did not turn out as planned!



At this time of the year you see a lot of people working in the gardens. Tourist groups were also all over including a group of kindergarten children all lined up to be photographed. So we all had half an hour to roam around the grounds, front and back, passing through a curio shop before we piled into the bus again to finish the rest of the tour, ending at Marienplatz. Having said goodbye to Maria we had two hours to spend on our own before getting into the bus again to go to Lindorf Castle.



We had walked around Marienplatz the night before so off we went looking for the famous Haubrau Haus, Munich's largest, most famous, and most tourist-packed beer hall! This place is quite a concept. There is a huge hall with tables spreading to the outdoors too. Having selected a place to sit we ordered our pints of beer each and some food to go with it. There was a girl selling pretzels inside the hall too. As we watched the Hall filled up, the atmosphere turned from quiet to a ‘happy’ noise. Just before we left a band came on and we watched for sometime before making our way back

to the bus. By now it had started to rain and we had to wait a bit before we caught up with the group waiting for the bus.

Soon we were once again in the bus on our way to Lindorf Palace built by Ludwig II in a grand French Rocco style and now a well preserved and presented national treasure. The drive which took 1 hour 15 minutes was through beautiful countryside, lined with houses with sloping roofs and hanging baskets. Some of the houses were painted on the outside with all kinds of ‘graffito’ art. This included topics like Hansel and Gretel, Red Riding Hood, etc. We also passed a monastery of Benedictine Monks, which had its own brewery.

The Lindorf Palace is beautifully located, but turned out to be much smaller than we expected. The main palace had a conducted tour of each of the rooms, which were overcrowded with artifacts from all over the world. There was not an inch of space on the walls which was empty --- gold tapestry, gold plated wood work, porcelain statues, etc. King Ludwig was also called ‘Mad King Ludwig’. He liked to eat alone and for that there was this special dining table which was on an elevator. The food was laid out in the kitchen and then sent up, so he could be all alone when he had his meal. The view and surroundings were very pretty. The front of the palace faced a hill which was manicured with flower patches and right at the top was a Venus statue. The Palace complex had other small monuments too, like the Moroccan and Moorish kiosks. Having looked around we started our return journey which had to be a walk in the rain to reach the bus.



Next on the agenda was a little town called Oberammergau which is known for its Passion Play. Oberammergau Passion Play is a passion play performed since 1634 as a tradition by the inhabitants of the village of Oberammergau, Bavaria, Germany. The town's residents vowed that if God spared them from the

effects of the plague ravaging the region, they would produce a play every ten years thereafter for all time depicting the life and death of Jesus. Oberammergau is known for its wood carvings and fascinated us most by its flower baskets too. The wood carvings were really beautiful in the shops. They looked like porcelain at first glance. There was a Pastry Shop where Bijjan had an ice cream and I had an apple strudel. I rather liked this little town.



The tour ended with us reaching the hotel at 7.30pm. We had a couple of drinks in the room before joining the group for a buffet dinner. This dinner was rather nice, but since we reached late, some dishes were finished. A very full day indeed!

Day 4 to Vienna via Salzburg

Today we drove through southern Bavaria to Austria. En route to Vienna, we passed through lush green hills and also saw a few cattle in the fields for a change. The belief is that if the cattle are sitting and grazing the weather is likely to stay good, and if they are standing the weather is not likely to be good! So every time I passed cattle grazing, I tried to gauge the weather! Our lunch time stop was Salzburg, and we passed Lake Chiemese on the way there. This is a fresh water lake between Rosenheim in Germany and Salzburg in Austria. At the comfort stop there was an interesting contraption. When you got up the seat got cleaned automatically—it rotated while being cleaned by a swab!

We soon arrived in Salzburg---the name derived from the Salt Mines. ‘Salz’ means Salt. On arrival we were met by Gaby our local guide. Gaby took us through the Mirabell garden. A garden considered to be one of the most beautiful Baroque gardens of Europe. On the balustrades themselves you will see statues of Roman gods. There is the Pegasus Fountain around which the some songs from Sound of Music were shot.

After the gardens we walked through the town, seeing the market place and St Peter’s Abbey. St Peter’s Abbey in Salzburg is a Benedictine monastery in Austria. It is considered one of the oldest monasteries in the German-speaking area, if not in fact the oldest. The market street has one strict rule, that all signage should be in wrought iron—even McDonald’s had a wrought iron signage! The Mozart House is one of the landmarks in Salzburg. The whole town was indeed very pretty with a combination of the elements of water, land and mountains, interspersed with a lot of green. After Gaby left us to be on our own, we went into the church and enjoyed the peaceful atmosphere for some time. After that we checked out the fruit and vegetable stalls. I was totally fascinated by the anjeers (figs). Having roamed around, we sat down for lunch at Fabrizi Espresso, of Frankfurters and the local Austrian Beer, Stiegl. What we did not end up trying was Salzburg Knockles, another name for the dessert ‘Floating Islands’.



Having had a taste of Salzburg we drove our last lap to Vienna. We arrived at the Mercure Grandhotel, Biedermeier Wien. This hotel is quite different from it's namesake in Beijing. This is a restored heritage property with a lot of character. It is rather long and of course we had to get a room at the end of the 'tunnel'! The room was small but appealing.

Most people were going to a vineyard in the Vienna Woods but we did not want to take that excursion. So we celebrated our 48th anniversary with drinks in the room and then dinner at nearby Bier Devil on Beethoven Strausse. Highly recommended by the guy at the reception, it was a nice pub like place. We also ordered what he suggested, as we wanted local food other than sausages or schnitzel. So we shared a dish of Bierteulfran, which was pork fillets, grilled and topped with a tomato and peppers based sauce. Rather nice especially with 2 glasses of wine each. Thus the day ended on a 'happy' note.

Day 5---Vienna

Breakfast area also had an attached courtyard where we took a table. Good



breakfast. Sharp at 7.45 the bus left the hotel with local guide who took us first to the Schonbrunn palace. Schönbrunn Palace is a former imperial 1,441-room Rococo summer residence in modern Vienna, Austria. One of the most important cultural monuments in the country, since the 1960s it has been one of the major tourist attractions in Vienna.

The Palace is huge with extensive grounds all with manicured gardens and fountains. The steps of the palace were surprisingly low and very comfortable. We were told that was so that the women when they climbed up they did not need to pick up their skirts more than their ankle, as it was against modestly to show more---no matter how much of the top body is visible! It was surely interesting to see the art and artifacts. There were also some miniatures from India (rather faded though). This was a rather hot day. After the tour she left us to wander around on our own for about half an hour. I took a seat in the shade in the garden and let Bijjan wander around. It was rather interesting to see the assortment of tourists as they came and went. This was peak season so there were innumerable tourists from all over the world, posing here and posing there, some with infants in prams, some honeymooners, etc.

Back in the bus we continued on a drive through the city ending outside the St. Stevens Cathedral, at exactly 11.30. Susanna was here to take over and ask if anybody wanted to go back to the hotel, otherwise we were free to be on our own. We walked back to the Francis Josef palace and walked through its grounds. Here we passed a group of girls who looked like from Jharkhand or Ranchi. Turned out to be nuns or novices from Kolkatta, come to attend a religious meet. There were horse carriage rides which took you around palace grounds, quite exorbitantly priced. Hunger pangs drove us to look for food. We walked back to the square and had a beer and fish. We realized that we paid more by mistake but could not communicate to the girl and had to bear the 'loss'. The Square was packed to capacity and we used our umbrella for a while against the sun. We now made tracks back towards the hotel. There is a huge park called the Stadt Park The Viennese City Park (German: Wiener Stadtpark) extends from the Parkring in the First District of Vienna up to the Heumarkt (a street, literally translated as hay market) in the Third District and is visited both by tourists and by native Viennese. Walking towards the Park we bought some cherries, sat in the park and had them. At such times I felt one should come to these places in May, when the weather is cooler. Having gobbled the delicious cherries we thought we would be able to walk back, but had to take the bus.



We enjoyed the much needed break to cool off, rest and then get out after tea. Here too we had bought a day ticket for transport. We headed towards the Danube—getting a little lost between trains, but reaching our destination nevertheless. As we reached the bridge over the river, it got cloudy and windy. The cool spell was really welcome! It was lovely just walking across the bridge, dodging the cyclists and stopping here and there. There was a family which had got into the river with their dogs!

Walking in the drizzle we reached the other side of the river, where there was a church of St. Francis of Assisi and a little square. After visiting the church we decided to go back to town to have the famous Sacher Torte! Reaching the Sacher Hotel, we took a table outside and awaited the legendary cake. It started to drizzle again, but we sat under the table umbrella watching the world go by. The cake and coffee arrived. I must say that when one expects too much, one is often disappointed. The cake could have been moister and the coffee was avoidable. Replete with our evening snack we returned to the hotel, picking up a bucket of ice on our way to the room. We had decided to try a restaurant around the hotel for dinner.

When we came down the Wagners were sitting with an after dinner drink and enjoying the activity of passersby. We found a cute restaurant down the road, which was bustling with people. We took a table outside and looked for a typical Viennese dish. Königsberger Klopse looked good---veal meat balls with a creamy mushroom sauce and gooey mashed potatoes. As soon as the dish came Bijjan thought it looked insufficient and before I could say anything, ordered a second one! Well, it did turn out to be too much. Neither of us could finish the dish in spite of it being absolutely delicious!

Day 6 driving to Villach in Austria through Styria

This day we had to pack our bags and have them out by 8 even though we had the morning free. Part of the group had taken the excursion to Bratislava and we would be picked up at 12.45pm. So we had a leisurely breakfast in the lovely courtyard of Hotel Mercure. Today they had champagne too for breakfast.

When we got out roaming around Vienna, we realized that Bijjan's 24 hour pass had gone in his jeans which were packed in the bag! They don't check tickets at all in the bus or tram or metro, so I suggested since our conscience was clear anyway let us carry on. But Bijjan said we should not take a chance and bought another ticket. So out we went and hopped on to a tram to go around the city. We just got off wherever we felt like, the first stop being the University. We just walked in. There was a big courtyard and people were sitting and studying. In fact I even used the toilet (free!). We also got off at the Town Hall. A film festival was on. They had a huge screen out doors in the front where they screened films everyday. We also stopped at the museum buildings just to admire them from outside. We were rather enjoying hopping on and off the tram. When we returned to the hotel, there was still a little time to grab a bite. We found a great shawarma joint and enjoyed one and were just in time to meet the bus which had returned punctually as usual.

And thus we were on our way to Villach, in Austria, crossing over the Semmering Pass. On the way we stopped at Kindberg. Kindberg is located in the North Eastern part of Styria. Since the 14th century Kindberg is known for its iron trade. At the end of the 19th century the town became also an important place for summer tourism. Since some years Kindberg tries to settle electronic industry. In 2003 Kindberg was elected to be the most beautiful flower city of Europe.



No doubt there was an immensely beautiful display of flowers around the town and a beautiful Totem Pole. There was a line of Konditorien (Confectionery shops), so most of us had something to eat. We had an ice cream each.

We reached Villach in Styria Austria around 5pm. Villach is the second largest city in the Carinthia state in the southern Austria, at the Drava River and represents an important traffic junction for Austria and the whole Alpe-Adria region. The Hotel Holiday Inn, Europlatz was our residence for the night. . This was an ultra modern hotel and the good news was that internet and calls to landlines anywhere in the world were free! We had about 45 minutes before dinner which was on the house today.



After settling in when we came down for dinner everyone was comparing notes as to who made how many calls. Unfortunately it was not the right time for India so we did not make many. The dinner was a buffet and for a change they had large round tables so per force about 12 had to sit at one table. The hotel was very close to the River Drau. So after dinner everyone went for a walk along the river and to the town centre. Like most of these small towns, this was also quaint and the River always adds to the landscape. So everyone kept bumping into each other. The town had a transformed and very beautiful look when the lights came up. They had special lights along the river which made it all look very festive.

On the 7th day we travelled from Villach to Innsbruck via the Italian Dolomites.

The first thing I did in the morning was to make as many calls to India as possible. Called my daughter and had a long conversation, my sisters, cousins, home, etc. what a great feeling calling uselessly to chat and the thrill of doing it all free!! Last night I had called my sister in the US too. Had I had more landline numbers, I would have called more.....

And then the SHOCK---when we went to return our key, we were slapped with a bill of Euro 150 for making calls to India!!! Could not believe what we heard! The calls were supposed to be free!! What were they talking about? The receptionist informed us that that was not for India, 'and see the Indian code was

not even listed in their booklet in the room' she said. That was all beside the point. We were even told by the tour director that it was free all over the world!

After much argument and feeling absolutely cheated, we left after leaving our credit card number with the hotel, with the understanding that the matter will be looked into on Monday when the manager came. Susanna looked pretty miserable too, as she had made the general announcement in the bus. Now to fast forward a bit—on the Monday we were informed that Holiday Inn would not relent. The consolation was that what we heard as 150 was 115 and Susanna was nice enough to waive the cost of one of the excursions, which was 44 Euro!

So we left Villach for Innsbruck through the South Tyrolean border. There was a panoramic view of the Central Dolomites for a long distance. The Dolomites are without doubt one of the great biking areas of the Alps. There is a very high density of mountain passes all within the same area. Many of them interconnect without the need for the boring main road in between. The Dolomite Mountains have a characteristic flat topped, vertical monolith appearance, which is unique within the Alps. Driving around the circuitous route around Crystal Mountain, which is one of the famous peaks, we reached Lake Misurina. The crystal clear water bounded by craggy mountains, the lake had a beautiful beach. Having had a comfortable and beautiful coffee break, we were back in the bus heading for Cortina D'Ampezzo where we would also have lunch.



Located in the heart of the Dolomites in an alpine valley, Cortina D'Ampezzo is a popular winter sport resort known for its ski-ranges, scenery, accommodations and shops. Some popular movies like, The Pink Panther, For Your Eyes Only and Cliffhanger have been shot here. It is also known for its Jet set and European aristocracy crowd. Cortina D'Ampezzo This was another fascinating little town on a slope and abounding with flowers at this time of the year. This was a 45 minute lunch stop. We found a pizzeria called 5 Torri Pizzeria where we had a spinach and ricotta pizza. There were tourists, tourists and tourists! All these places are very cheerful and colourful with an extremely happy atmosphere. We were just in time to go up the slope and on to the bus again. Thus we continued the scenic drive through the Brenner Pass to Innsbruck in the Tyrolean Alps.

The Maximilian Stadthaus Penz was a hotel in the heart of town. Right behind it was the town centre. The rooms were extremely tiny. We accommodated our bags with great difficulty. In fact the bathrooms were not only small but had openings in the glass door frames, which is very uncomfortable for people sharing the room. One of the few hotels in the tour not to be recommended. Immediately on arrival Susanna walked us out and around the hotel to the town centre for an orientation of Innsbruck. Innsbruck is the home of Swaroski and has the main factory there. We did not go to the factory but they have a big outlet in



the centre. A visit to this outlet is encouraged and rightly so, there were many purchases. The Golden Roof is another landmark of Innsbruck; The Golden Roof is actually the three-story balcony on the central plaza at the heart of the Old Town. It was constructed for Emperor Maximilian I to serve as a royal box where he could sit in state and enjoy tournaments in the square below. We walked around before sitting down with a beer. Some of the group was going off for a Tyrolean Dance show, and dinner was at the hotel before that. The dinner comprised of a Chicken Schnitzel which was rather nice.

Innsbruck is truly an enchanting city surrounded by snow capped peaks that break through the clouds. After dinner we walked along the River Inn, which is tributary of the Danube running through Switzerland, Germany and Austria. The riverside drives are truly awesome in these countries. Everything is clean, the water is clear and you can just keep staring at the flow for a long time. We came across some of our friends doing the same. Part of the riverfront looked like Amsterdam, with similar houses. There was a Chinese man practicing some martial art, while some children were playing in the parks along the River. When we

went back to the centre there was a band playing in front of the Golden Roof and then it went off towards the other end. Having treated ourselves to some ice cream we went back to the hotel and bed.

Day 8 was the drive from Innsbruck to St. Moritz, Switzerland

As usual the bus left punctually at 8am. The scenic drive absorbed everyone's attention till we reached the border and had coffee and exchanged some currency. Switzerland was the only place where the Euro did not work. It was rather cold at the spot where we got off. The drive was not too long and we reached the outskirts of St. Moritz, Pontresina.

Pontresina is a noted tourist destination in its own right, but is often overshadowed by its more famous neighbor St. Moritz. It consists of some old village sections and the new sections on the mountain slopes. Nearby glaciers include the Morteratsch Glacier and the Roseg Glacier. We had lunch here after which some of us had opted for a horse carriage ride to the Roseg Glacier. We were three carriage loads in a two horse carriage each. No doubt the green hills in front of taller mountains, interspersed with rivulets and water falls held everybody's attention when going up. We were also impressed by the trekkers walking up to the 6.562 ft. Glacier. Some had bikes, some had bikes attached to which was a pram for their little ones.



The ride was a little more than an hour and the Glacier was in full view (it had fog earlier on). Needless to say a lot of photography sessions happened---by the river, in front of the glacial view, etc. On our way back it took an hour too. The ride was getting a bit tiring at times. Down hill there was an 8-10 year old girl, who tried to race our carriage down hill. Some way down her jacket was out and she was enjoying herself thoroughly and urging her father to catch up with her. It was quite a sport for her.

Susanna was waiting to take us to the hotel with our keys in hand. The plan was to go back to the hotel, deposit our hand baggage and go with her for an orientation of St. Moritz. As soon as we entered the La Margna Hotel, we all let out a big 'Wow'! This is indeed a refreshingly charming hotel. The lobby itself takes your breath away. A bit of a sunken lobby with a view of the lake and very warmly decorated. It is an old property run by a family, has a very heritage look, rustic looking bedrooms with light pine like wooden furniture. Our room had a panoramic view of the Lake and the Alps, and had a lot of Pine in way of furniture and logs on the ceiling. A little bay window housed a table for two in case you wanted to have a meal there. In short this hotel took our breath away!



When we went down I told Susanna that I wanted to stay here another day! Not surprising, many of us did! Having soaked in the nuances of La Margna, we went out to get an idea of the city. Of course this is one of the popular ski resorts in winter. We were just a two minute walk to the station. Not very far away was the Palace Hotel. This seemed very grand from the outside and as if to emphasise it, there was a Rolls standing outside. The leaning tower of the St. Mauritius Church is one of the attractions of St. Moritz. There was the Conditorei Hanselmann (Bakery shop) with its elaborate Graffico on the façade. We also passed a couple of ski schools. What was interesting was the escalator near the parking lot (almost centre of town). This escalator took you up and down about 4 floors or so. So if you were not a walker, you could go anywhere down town without bearing your own weight---the escalator takes care of that. And that is what we did---climbed right down to the last level which opened out to a bridge which had a few stairs taking you to the lake (there was also a lift for this last bit!). Having soaked in the natural beauty of this place, we walked back to the hotel and joined the group for dinner after a couple of drinks. Food was great, and service was with a smile too! I would love to go back to this place some day! We were sitting with Pam and Margaret from Australia and were joined in by Debbie and Michael. All too soon the day ended in this delightful town of St. Moritz with this delightful hotel. This hotel was a last minute change just before the tour started and we were surely joyous about it!

Day 9 driving from St. Moritz to Lugano

We left the beautiful ski resort of St. Moritz this morning at 9am! And that was sheer luxury, as we have been averaging 8am departure all along.

Off we were driving towards Lugano. We made an early stop for coffee in about half an hour. The place we stopped at had such an awesome array of baked goods, that I was absolutely fascinated! I could not resist a tiny strawberry tart--a puff pastry tart (granulated sugar sprinkled on the pastry before baking. It had a custard layer at base, topped with strawberries covered with a jelly layer). Their home products were really a feast for the eyes as well as the stomach! We were to pass through Lake Como and crossed over at Mayola Pass. The drive at one point was on hair pin bends, which brought us down to lake level quite fast. It was interesting to see how they had wooden frame works on the steep slopes to hold snow during winter, so it would not come down and destroy villages or block roads.

Lake Como, *Lago di Como* in Italian, is Italy's most popular lake and also it's deepest. Lake Como is shaped like an inverted Y giving it a long perimeter. The lake is surrounded by beautiful villas and resort villages as well as hiking paths and it's popular for boat trips and water activities. With the result we drove along the Lake for a long distance. We stopped at Como for about half an hour. This is a very touristy town and is popular with many a celebrity---George Clooney, Richard Branson, Madonna and the likes have villas here. Susanna actually pointed out Clooney's villa. As soon as we crossed the Mayola Pass we were in Switzerland. We reached Lugano around noon.



Lugano is a city in the south of Switzerland, in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino, which borders Italy. It is the 9th largest city of Switzerland by population and the largest Italian-speaking city outside of Italy. The city lies on Lake Lugano, and its warm summers and the fact that in recent years it has attracted an ever growing number of celebrities, entertainers and successful athletes have given it the nickname of the "Monte Carlo of Switzerland".

Susanna dropped us off down town for two hours to do our own thing, while she organized the rooms before coming back for us. When she left us in town, we first had a sandwich and a strawberry tart. This pedestrian 'centre of town' like all towns had eating places and shops galore. This one even had a mall. There was an ice cream vendor, so we had one each. The lake front was more interesting to walk and then we walked over to the Museum Garden which is on the edge of the lake. One never tires of admiring their flowers and it felt so good to see sparrows which seem to have become extinct in our cities. It was a hot day, so we were trying to stick to the shade. When Susanna arrived, we were quite ready to go to the hotel. It was the Hotel De La Paix, Via Cattori 18, CH Lugano, Switzerland. Good rooms. No tea facility but had a great tub bath.

After resting a while we went strolling along the lake front. The majority of the group had gone on an optional excursion which included dinner. After a while, we spotted a snack bar across the road which seemed to have quite a few people so decided to have a drink there. The Snack Bar Golfo Tea Room turned out to be a pleasant surprise. she brought a substantial snack platter (for the first and last time during our tour) with our drinks---cocktail sized pieces of pizza, olives, wafers and thin Swiss roll type savories in a thin pita roll with ham, cheese and something else rolled in it. The wine was a good Italian one from Tuscany—Greco di Topo. We felt we should try another place for dinner so went to the Hotel Victoria's Pizzeria and had spaghetti Bolognese which was not very nice. Walked around the water front some more, had an ice cream in drizzling rain and then decided we were ready for bed. So ended the day by walking back to the hotel and a good soak in the tub.



Day 10 driving from Lugano to Zermatt via Lake Maggiore, Italy

We started from Lugano at 8.45am. A lot of the drive was along Lake Lugano and then another lake. Then we climbed up and crossed mountain and dodging through winding roads and verdant hills Giuliano drove us through Lombardy region into Piedmont. This kind of beauty I find difficult to describe. We reached Lake Maggiore in Stresa. Lake Maggiore is a large lake located on the south side of the Alps. It is the second largest lake in Italy and largest lake of the canton of Ticino, Switzerland.

From here we headed for Isola Bella. Isola Bella ('beautiful island') is one of the Borromean Islands of Lago Maggiore in north Italy. The island is situated 400 meters from the lakeside town of Stresa. Isola Bella is 320 meters long by 400 meters wide and is entirely occupied by the Borromean Palace and its Italian garden. It was a 10 minutes boat ride to the island and at the palace The most famous of the islands, Isola Bella, is crowned by the princely Borromeo Palace with its formal Italian-style gardens laid out on ten terraces. The Baroque palace contains a wealth of artifacts: original furnishings, gold and silk Flemish tapestries, period weapons, sculptures, paintings and frescoes from the 16th to the 19th centuries.

At the palace we were met by an interesting Italian guide who took charge. This was more interesting than the Schornbrunn Palace. The guide was full of humour too. He was talking about how romantic he is right now, but if we came 10 years later he would be rheumatic! There was a statue of a nude woman lying down on her stomach and promised the men that if they came the next day he would ask her to turn!



After the main palace tour we had time to walk around the beautifully laid out gardens, which had several white peacocks moving around. The peacocks were not at all perturbed by the crowds and sometimes seemed to be posing in full glory too. It was at this stage that the camera went dead! So we have those pictures only in our minds till they last! We had time to browse through the touristy market before it was time to go back to Stresa. Some people shopped, some had lunch, and some browsed, before collecting in the bus again.

We stopped at the Simplon Pass for a coffee break. It was extremely cold and windy. We had a plate of sausages, and enjoyed the cold before continuing on the journey. At the pass there is majestic statue of a bald eagle in stone---'guarding Switzerland from Italy' as they say.

Closer to Zermatt the snow shelters along the road were increasing in numbers. I had seen such shelters only once before---either New Zealand or the Canadian Rockies. In many places the water falls would go over the shelters and one could see the spray of water coming down. Driving through the Rhone Valley we crossed a town called Brigg. This town had a lot of Apricot trees which were all laden with ripe fruit. Wish I could have stopped and plucked a few. As we proceeded there were vineyards on slopes on both sides. We passed through the St. Nicklaus, a town where people send cards addressed to Santa and they do get replies too! We crossed a high bridge over the river and soon after that a chapel. Susanna said they have that in a few places, to pray for safety before crossing over.

And thus we reached Tasch. Tasch is where one takes a mountain train up to Zermatt. There are no cars in Zermatt. All the vehicles park in Tasch. We bought some Lindt chocolate at the station and were surprised as to how much better it tasted compared to what we carry home! The train ride was about 40 minutes. The walk to the hotel from the station in Zermatt was barely 10 minutes. So we arrived at Hotel Pollux in Zermatt, which was right on the main road. After Susanna organized the rooms we took our heavy wooden key chains to our rooms. Ours' was facing the road. One was always thankful of the bags reaching and leaving our rooms without our effort! Zermatt is one of the most exquisite towns and also abounds in beautiful flower baskets. We had begun to feel that the flower baskets in Austria were far more striking than Switzerland, but Zermatt took the cake!

Since the weather was holding it was decided to do one of the excursions right away instead of the following day. Within half an hour of arrival we set out for the ride of Europe's highest rack-railway to 10,272 feet Gornergrat. Susanna told us to look out for mountain sheep and marmots on our way up. We did spot some sheep grazing alright. It is amazing how close to the top one reaches! We had an almost 360

degree view of snow peaks. There was a big hotel on top too. With such excellent view points, everyone was clicking away, while we were watching wistfully! Susanna asked us why we were not taking any pictures. When she heard about our camera battery she took some pictures of ours. Gornergrat is a place to spot Ibex too. Just as we were walking down, I saw a statue of one and was showing it to Bijjan when we noticed an almost imperceptible movement of the mouth. It was a real Ibex and was licking at salt that is left out for them. Hope somebody does send me a picture of it! The word soon spread and everyone was capturing it in their cameras and was further rewarded by another one and yet another one joining in! They are amazingly still!



On the train ride down we even saw the marmots. A very satisfied lot reached the hotel and met up for dinner that evening. The dinner though was slow and disappointing. We had Sam and Claudia on our table and he was not his usual chirpy self. He was very distracted with his internet connection. We ordered some beer with it. We went to bed that night hoping for a clear morning so our trip to the Klien Matterhorn would happen.

Day 11---second day in Zermatt

I would certainly not rate this hotel for its culinary prowess. Break fast was very basic. Even the scrambled eggs were not tasty. I had mostly bread and cheese. They have these little taxis (like our Maruti Vans) to ply people and baggage around. These are what took us to the cable car station for the Klein Matterhorn.

The Klein Matterhorn (Pennine Alps) (marketed as the "Matterhorn Glacier Paradise") is the highest point in the Zermatt-Cervinia ski area in Switzerland, and the end point of the highest cable car in Europe. The peak is at 3,883 metres (12,740 ft) with the cable car terminal at 3,820 metres (12,533 ft).

Susanna was in our car going up. Thank fully our camera was functioning today. So we could take some pictures of hers too. The view was breathtaking! One felt like the snow peaks were all zooming in towards you! To think of the arduous treks we in India have to undertake to reach any such mesmerizing sight! There were 4-5 stations that the train stopped at, and one could get off and on any where as long as it was in one direction. We got off at the last one. It is mind boggling as to how at each remote corner irrespective of height and distance they have these beautiful shops and facilities! From this station one got into a big gondola, standing space to reach the top most level. This one really filled up like a herd of cattle. I managed a place by the window so could enjoy the feeling of the possibility of touching the snowy heights as we glided upwards.

There was a huge cafeteria with a souvenir shop, right outside which was the SNOW! This is where a lot of people were skiing. Some had come up from the Swiss side like us, and at a short distance we could see the station that belonged to Italy, where the people were coming up from the Italian side! It was cold and windy outside. My shoes would not allow me to walk on the snow, but most of the people did, but not for too long! When sufficiently cold we went in and I had a well earned coffee and really enjoyed it. We went out just once more before starting our descent. We told Susanna we would make our own way down, thinking we would stop mid way, but spent some more time at the cable car station instead. We went rather berserk taking photographs. I still have to delete quite a few. The Matterhorn was kind enough to shoo away the clouds so we could see it in its glory, till we said, 'enough!'



When we got into the cable car three kids asked if they could join us. They were 1 Swiss boy, 15, American girls, 15 and 17 on a trek. They had just been trekking to the mountain next to the Matterhorn and spent overnight on the way. It was rather interesting talking with them. They had joined some kind of a youth group and opted for this camp. It's quite heartening to see such kids.

Back into town we explored the lanes and by lanes also with a view to decide where to eat. Ultimately we decided to go to the main street only and picked the hotel next to ours which had an open terrace too. The

Boothbys were sitting on one table and we took the one next to them, but soon moved to their table as the sun got too hot. They had ordered a raclette, which seemed quite little. We ordered beer and a cheese fondue. I thought they would serve it with a variety of things like vegetables or meats and bread, but all they give you is a baguette cut into small pieces. It was tasty though and we were more than full by the time we finished. The conversation with the Boothbys was a lot about their curiosity about Indian weddings and freedom of the country. They were Puerto Ricans.

We walked a bit more before I returned to the hotel and Bijjan carried on for some more time. I had a good tub bath. Feeling relaxed we joined the 'happy hour' at the bar of the group---with paying for your drinks of course! This was also for Susanna to tie up a lot of things regarding flight bookings etc. Sitting there we discovered that the most popular jeweler in the country, Bucherer had given coupons for a free spoon per person. I promptly took the two coupons and hopped across to collect the spoons.

It was nice to get out of the hotel after that. We walked towards the other end of the town where Bijjan had earlier in the day spotted a Roesti Restaurant. Moving towards that side not too far from the hotel was an area where there seemed to be a huge party on the street. All shops had their food and wine stalls and had put tables on the road too. There was one spot where there was live singing by one man who seemed to hold the audience. Further down was the quieter area with chalets and serviced apartments. There was a deep gorge with the river flowing down below, probably part of the Gornergorge.

On our way back towards the roesti café, we met an Indian couple from Canada. They were staying in one of the service apartments and spoke well of them. We ordered a ham and cheese roesti. This roesti was different from the ones I had been seeing. Most of them were of grated potatoes. This one was of thinly sliced potatoes with the ham and cheese placed on top and grilled. I would have liked the grated variety with the ham and cheese mixed into it! Anyway, this was tasty nevertheless. Bijjan had planned to try the ribs in the open market square, but was too full after the roesti. Unfortunately he decided to try a slice of cheesecake instead---it was the most tasteless cheesecake! We had to throw part of it away. The square by now was vibrant with people eating and drinking and the singer had quite an audience by now. People were dancing too. Had I not been inhibited I would have joined in the dancing! We were sad that this was our last night in Zermatt!

Day 12 we drove from Zermatt to Lucerne, via Berne and Interlaken

We were all collected outside the Polluck Hotel in Zermatt by 8.30, I think. Hand baggage and all, we walked towards the station for our train to Tasch. Soaking in the beauty of this part of the Alpine trip, we reached Tasch and hopped on to the bus, seeing Giuliano after a gap of two days.

We back tracked part of the way to Brigg through the Rhone Valley, through St. Niklaus and Sion. The rivers in these countries are so contained and bound on both sides. I wish we could even now do something about our rivers. These rivers are so clean, because no body reaches them and one can drink the water off them! I suppose that was how it was in our country too, many many moons ago! Driving along Lake Geneva we clearly spotted the Chateau Sion in the Lake.



We reached Berne the capital of Switzerland and had a walk through the town with Susanna. According to the local legend, the founder of the city of Bern, vowed to name the city after the first animal he met on the hunt, and this turned out to be a bear. The bear was the heraldic animal of the seal and coat of arms of Bern (a red field a yellow diagonal band charged with a black bear walking upwards toward the hoist) from at least the 1220s.

The clock tower was the first landmark. Berne has a lot of statues. It is said that each statue outside an establishment, denotes what the establishment is about. Like a delicatessen or restaurant had a butcher's statue. Some of the statues are rather weird. One of them had a man eating a baby!! Can't figure out what that meant. During the war they had cellars where people hid during an attack. These are now converted into shops and their entry is still on the main road with new doors replacing the

old ones in the same frame work. This was interesting. There were bear pits which seemed an important part of Berne. Of course there happened to be only one bear in the pit! The old city was rather cute. The roofs are steeply sloping so that no snow collects on them. The river flowing between rows of houses adds to the charm.

We were now on our way to Interlaken. Interlaken is so named because it is between two lakes. Since we had only a couple of hours in town we could not consider climbing the top of Jungfrau but were doing the Trummelbach Falls. On arrival we had a quick meal at Migros, a Deli down town. The slightly spicy grilled chicken we had was rather nice. It is a hot buffet they serve, where you fill your tray with whatever you want and pay by weight. We did not know that, otherwise we might have added some more items. Before the excursion to the Falls we had some time so we walked around town. The view of Jungfrau had cleared for sometime so we could take some photographs.



The Trummelbach Falls (In German: *Trümmelbachfälle*) are a series of ten glacier-waterfalls inside the mountain. The falls are made accessible by the funicular; a tunnel-lift and some are also illuminated. The funicular takes you a few steps down the 10th falls. I am always fascinated how in these places they can take you so close to such inaccessible points. The gushing sound and sight of water is immensely captivating! On the return it was all down hill seeing the rest of the falls. Of course the intensity of the falls are difficult to word. Near the parking we met an Indian family traveling from Holland with their parents.

Picking up the rest of the group we continued our journey to Lucerne. We passed William Tell County and another big lake on the way. Lucerne is situated at the heart of four cantons. The lake is the form of four arms that form a cross, called the 'Cross of Lucerne'. This cross is visible in an aerial view of Lucerne. We reached Hotel Europe around 5 pm. The hotel was quite average. It had too modern a style of furniture, but -no hooks in bathrooms, the towel rack is such that the towel gets wet while you have a bath, bedside tables were inconvenient, etc. The interesting thing was the automatic lights leading to the bathroom. The view was very pleasant.

Having settled our bags, we got some ice and had a couple of drinks. At 6 we all set out for the boat ride on the Lake. This was a private boat and one drink was included. We had an enjoyable tour round the lake, with the various sights being pointed out to us. These included a Nunnery on top of a hill, a 5 star hotel which had recently been sold to a Russian, etc. I just love boat rides and felt it ended too soon.

On disembarking we all walked to the town square from where the group left by bus for a dinner program and the rest of us who had not taken that excursion went wandering around seeing the town. The action packed area was all around the River Reuss. The Wooden Bridge or Kapellbrücke (Chapel Bridge) is a landmark connecting the two sides of the river. In reality, the bridge isn't as old as it looks. The Kapellbrücke was nearly destroyed by a 1993 fire, and much of what stands today is an excellent reproduction (of course they say 'restoration'). The bridge has a row of flowering pots all along its length and makes a very pretty picture. The town centre side of the bridge is lined with eateries of all kinds. After examining these we picked one which was closest to the river where we could see the swans and ducks in action. While awaiting our order a couple asked if they could share our table. He was Swiss and she was Malaysian. They told us that this place is also a brewery and serves its own beer. No doubt we promptly ordered some beer. We were soon joined by the gentleman's brother and his friend. He had been to India and when we told him we were just coming from Zermatt he informed us that he had a cottage in Tasch. They were all very friendly. Maybe we should have exchanged addresses.



We decided to walk back to the hotel and started to stroll down by the lakeside. At one spot there was a group of youngsters singing with their guitar. We stood by to listen to them and then asked them if they knew English and suggested they sing an English song. They promptly obliged. Rather sweet! It took us almost half an hour of comfortable strolling to reach the hotel.

Day 13—a full day in Lucerne.

At Grand Hotel Europe they are very strict about groups sitting on tables reserved for them even if other tables are empty. I saw a waitress make 2 people get up and go to the right place. Breakfast here like Zermatt, was not very elaborate.

Susanna took us to a tour of some of the cities high lights. Driving past the museum and post office, railway station etc., we stopped at the Thorwaldsen's Lion Monument. Also called the Sad Lion, this was the carving of a lion lying in pain with a dagger stabbed near his heart---The 'Dead Lion of Lucerne' This monument was erected in memory of the Swiss Guards who died defending the Tuileries Palace in Paris in August 1792, when an angry mob attacked the palace, then the residence of the royal family. The Danish-Icelandic sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen made the blueprint for the memorial, which was carved into a natural stone face. It is said that the sculptor was not paid his due amount so he came back and carved the outline of a pig around it! The outline is pretty perceptible.

The next stop was the Jesuit Church near the Wooden Bridge. Lucerne's Jesuit Church is the first large baroque church built in Switzerland north of the Alps. All churches are universally peaceful. This one had beautiful baroque art work. The group moved on to the Wooden Bridge after the church. This time we saw it with commentary by Susanna. Of course everyone took pictures with the bridge and that was the end of the city tour. We had a little time to spare before the bus arrived so shopped a bit. Those who had their coupons for the Bucherer spoons (yes, like Zermatt, they had this here too), collected theirs.

Even though Pilatus was covered with fog we decided to go ahead with the excursion to it. So we drove to the train station for Pilatus. The Pilatus Railway or Pilatusbahn (PB) is a mountain railway in Switzerland and is the steepest rack railway in the world, with a maximum gradient of 48%. The line runs from Alpnachstad, on Lake Lucerne, to a terminus near the summit of Mount Pilatus at an altitude of 2,132m (6,995 ft). One really feels the gradient while sitting in the train. There were quite a few trekkers that we spotted on the way. Reaching the top unfortunately there was no view, but we walked along the hill for sometime and then had a beer, joined by Susanna who was having coffee. I told her how excited I was as I had been hearing about Pilatus as a teen, after my parents had visited here. Going down was by Cable car. We shared the car with an Indian couple from the US. It was nice talking with them. Fortunately, the fog cleared on this side of the mountain and we could view the Cross of Lake Lucerne! It was a nice ride of about 30 minutes.



The coach was waiting to take us to the Square. The afternoon was now free till dinner at 7pm. We first looked for chocolates and then browsed around the restaurants and shops for sometime. Fondue was what we were looking for. Then we remembered the Swiss gentleman from last night who had pointed out a place for it. So back we were by River Reuss and found our restaurant, Des Alps. Having relished our fondue lunch with some beer, we took a bus and went back to the hotel. It was nice to have enough time to relax before going down for dinner at 7pm. The dinner of grilled fish was rather nice. We shared the table with Pam and Margaret and were joined by Aimee who was the last to arrive, so had to take the last seat available. Tonight was a very animated Aimee who told us how they swam in the lake and planned to go back at night too. She packed some bread for the ducks too.

Even though it was drizzling we went for an after dinner stroll on the lake front. We should have taken our umbrellas though. There were residential complexes on the front which were absolutely gorgeously located. Returning to the hotel we packed and were in bed by 9.15 for the last day of the tour, which would take us back to Frankfurt.

Day 14—drive to Frankfurt via Heidelberg

This was the earliest departure! Breakfast was at 6.30am and departure at 7.30am!

It was rather cloudy in the morning and seemed like it had rained last night. The view of Pilatus was absolutely clear this day.

Our first stop was the Rhine falls. The **Rhine Falls** (*Rheinfall* in German) is the largest plain waterfall in Europe. The falls are located on the Upper Rhine near the town of Schaffhausen in northern Switzerland, between the cantons of Schaffhausen and Zürich. The falls cannot be climbed by fish, except by eels that are able to worm their way up over the rocks.

The first thing we see was a kiosk for Indian snacks! I believe these are not uncommon in the touristy places. And then we saw the Falls! What a fabulous site! The water was gushing at full force creating a mist like Niagara Falls. There was a large area to move around to be near different parts of the fall. We all wished we could have spent more time here. So everyone was walking around taking pictures.

The Swiss francs were to be used up too so I went off to what seemed like the only shop. On our way to the bus the owner of the Indian kiosk was at work. Tried chatting with him but he was rather uncommunicative. Punctually as always we left the Rhine falls.

At the border we stopped briefly for people to get their vat registered. Both the countries had their own customs' booths---Swiss and German. We were soon driving through the Black Forest region with thicker forests and greener pastures. House of Black Forest Clocks was where we stopped. This is supposedly the original place for Cuckoo Clocks. As soon as we alighted from the bus we got a loud and cheerful welcome by someone standing with a tray of little containers of what we discovered was Cherry Wine! The owner Adolf himself was greeting us with a complimentary taste of his produce! We were all soon posing in a group with the drink in our hands!



The outside of the shop was remarkable. Little miniature figures in windows of a 'house'. Different scenes were predicted. They had also displayed a traditional thatched roof of the region. And then we entered the shop. The owner Adolf Herr does not have a huge factory. He loves working on the carving bench and in his workshop on the third floor of the store. Assisted by his wife, his son, and his daughter Adolf Herr runs a family business in an old family tradition. The shop is packed to the hilt with a variety of wood carvings of different sizes, some pottery, some embroidered items, etc.

On the top floor is a cafeteria where most of us had a our lunch. Bijjan had a Bratwurst with Sauerkraut, while I had their German ravioli—pasta rolled like Swiss roll with filling of spinach and other vegetables, bound with mixture of flour and vegetables, served with a nice potato salad and a green salad. When we left Adolf gave us all a post card with the recipe for Black Forest Cake.

Our next destination was Heidelberg. For the first time we got caught in a rather long drawn traffic jam. Giuliano took a diversion but it was still slow. In fact Susanna said we might have to touch France! We were quite thrilled at the prospect, but it never happened. We were finally out of the jam and soon reached Heidelberg. What an enchanting place! Heidelberg is the location of the University, well known far beyond Germany's borders. Heidelberg is a popular tourist destination due to its romantic and picturesque cityscape, including Heidelberg and the baroque style Old Town. We reached there early afternoon and people were thronging to the town square which has a Church of Holy Spirit in the centre. The Heidelberg Castle is in full view from here. We walked up to The Old Bridge, another landmark of the city. There were many breweries with their outlets in Heidelberg. The popular one is the Cultural Brewery Heidelberg (Kulturbrauerei). With its long history, Kulturbrauerei is a cultural experience in itself. The establishment is gigantic. Not only is it grounds for a brew house, but it's also a hotel and restaurant. There are multiple options for seating here – inside, at the massive dining hall, next door in a cozy, quaint dining room, upstairs in the gallery overlooking the brew house, or outside under the warm sun at the beer garden. Each offers a different



dining experience. Even though we did have time to really enjoy the place, I had decided to have a beer there. We got a little lost and finally we reached there with 20 minutes in hand—to order and drink! Believe it or not, we did it!

We were now on the final lap of the drive to Frankfurt. Isabel and Roger had written and planned a song for Susanna. We were all given the words to join in the chorus, the tune being that of the popular song, 'O Susanna'. Isabel had also picked up a card of a coach full of monkeys, on the other side of which she wrote for Susanna, 'there is a photograph of all of us and your challenge is to guess the names of all!'. And then it was signed by all of us. Well when dinner started Susanna took a long time to make an appearance. She arrived just before desert when she spoke a few farewell words before Isabel and team came forward and we all sang. Dinner had been rather slow, so we started our good byes soon after desert and coffee. I had taken everyone's email ids and then Susanna had also circulated a copy. Promising everyone that I would send them a copy we said our good byes.

Day 15---on our own as the tour had finished

We reached the breakfast room at 9am and found it quite deserted. Since we had the whole day ahead of us and we had decided on an 11.15 tour of the Rhine, we decided to take it easy. We did bump into some of the group who had later flights or were staying an extra day like us. When we left the hotel Nick and Val and Sam and Claudia were sitting in the lobby. They were also leaving the following day. We thought buying a day ticket for the transport would now be a cake walk for us. The girl at the reception said we could also buy a 2 day ticket for 8Euro which we thought was even better than one for 6.20 Euro for 24 hours. So we walked very confidently to the bus stop and even though we could get the English translation just did not manage to get the 2 day pass. We had to request a cyclist passing by to help us, but even he could not manage the 2 day ticket so we ended up buying one only for reaching town, and would buy a 24 hour one on our return so it would last us for the duration of our stay the next day too. While we were waiting for the tram some Americans who had just arrived to join the same Globus tour were figuring out how to buy a ticket. And guess what? Mr. Gupta became their guide and advised them about the day ticket and helped them buy one! They were surely happy about it, especially when we told them the benefits. From novice to advisor!

We reached the tour shop, bought our tickets and had about 15 minutes to spare. Having just been on a tour where punctuality was the norm the almost 15 minute delay of this tour really irked us. There was a young Gujerati couple with a toddler who we chatted with. Finally we were on the go, but Bijjan and I got separate seats. We drove on and on like a city tour, and after about an hour reached the hill top near the Niederwald monument, from where you could opt for a chair lift to take you down the hill to Assmannshausen, paying 6 Euro per person. I love these kinds of rides and soon we were on one! You have to be very fast to get on and off the chair lift---the cable cars in comparison are a comfortable speed. It was down the hill through the Valley of Loreley. You get an interesting over view of some of the houses too.

In Assmannshausen we were guided to the restaurant where we were to have lunch. This was one weird restaurant called Zum Anker. The décor was overwhelmingly dark and gloomy with artifacts covering every inch. The owner was a loud 'Hitler' kind of person who 'ordered' us to our seating. The chicken she served was not too bad and when we ordered wine it took a long time to come. We shared the table with two ladies from New Zealand. When we finished our lunch and did not want any dessert or coffee, we had to stay captive in a corner as she went on to serve people and would not allow anyone else to get the bill and collect payment. When we told her we wanted to leave she told us rudely that we had to wait till she finished! I told her we were outside and she could collect our payment there. The other ladies had only had water and all of us just waited. After retorting that we should learn to wait, she did bring the bill ultimately, which shocked us! Two glasses of wine and one bottle of water for 20 Euros! Was I glad to get out of that place!

It was only after lunch that the cruise of 1 hour 15 minutes started. I had imagined about 3 hours on the boat from Frankfurt itself. The cruise went past 8-10 castles and lot of vineyards on slopes. It was pretty indeed. When we got off at the wharf we piled on to the bus and headed for the wine tasting. Guess where the wine tasting was?? Yes, At the Zum Anker! We were loathe going to that place again, but could not

help it. We managed to sit with our companions from New Zealand again. They had the same reaction and one of them was looking rather exasperated at the thought of sitting there again! After a lot of tall stories about how many grapes were used to make just one bottle of wine, the ordeal was over. Of course she tried to be very humorous but I was in no mood to be charitable to her. In drizzling rain we returned to the bus. We had barely started to drive back, when we realized we were in a traffic jam. After a short distance the guide announced that some people wanted to buy curios so we would have a half hour stop at a souvenir shop! By the time we reached Frankfurt it was 6 pm.

Frankly we had had quite a full day and either we ate now and went to the hotel or as Bijjan suggested we carry a take away and eat in the room. I jumped at the suggestion and we carried a Shawarma with us. It was interesting to see how they rolled the pita for it. They had this table top electrical, vertical roller. Passing a lump of dough through it about 3 times they got a thin flat piece of dough about 10" in diameter. This was put on a flat metal plate with a long handle and shoved into an oven to cook first on one side and then the other. You could see him put the filling on to the wrap, roll it and pack it!

It was a great joy to go to the room, change, have a drink and then enjoy the 'dinner'. No rushing, no early morning, nothing! And that was our last night at the Sheraton Congress Hotel, Frankfurt. The next day we checked out before getting out in the morning and left our bags at the hotel. On somebody's recommendation we went to see the botanical gardens, but they were nothing very great. We reached the hotel by 2.30pm and left for the airport in soon after. It was a nice feeling as always to be heading for home!

Niru Gupta: [niru_gupta@ hotmail.com](mailto:niru_gupta@hotmail.com)