

A Baltic Princess



a travelogue by
David Christopher

“How was the cast party?” Mac asked as I stumbled down the stairs for breakfast. I had gotten home at 2:00AM.

“It was a ‘Beast’! That cast really knows how to party.”

“Well, I’m glad that show is over. It took too much out of you in this heat.”

This was the morning after the closing of the Plays-in-the-Park production of “Beauty and the Beast”, the summer of 2008. I played Belle’s father in a white, fright wig. It was the hottest summer I can remember at the Park. My friend, Hamp, who played the Beast, had the hardest time because he kept sweating off his rubber beast make-up. I sat next to him in the dressing room as he frantically re-applied spirit gum to his “pig-snout” every break he got.

But all of us suffered every night with the oppressive heat and bulky costumes. It was also the year that they had trouble with the air conditioners in the dressing rooms.

What I remember most though is the horrible contraption I had to ride around in on that sweltering stage.



“You should just rest today, but I want to tell you my idea for a vacation this year.”

“Some place cold, I hope, maybe the North Pole.” We usually took our vacations in September, because I didn’t begin my acting classes until October. Mac could take off whenever he wanted, being self employed in his clock restoration business.

“Well, take a look at what I got in the mail yesterday.” He handed me a brochure for Princess Cruise Line. “Take a look at the page I marked for the Baltic cruise.”

“Gosh, a cruise? That other one we took was pretty terrible.” The only other cruise we’d taken was a cheapo from New York to Nassau. Not a good experience.

“Yeah, yeah, but this is a first-class ship, just look at the size of it. And the places it goes on this trip look great. It’s not some tacky island like the Bahamas.”

I took the brochure from him and looked it over. “Wow, St. Petersburg! That does sound exciting. And Copenhagen, I was there before I met you and I loved it.”

“Yes, and these other ports, Stockholm, Helsinki, Tallin, Gdansk and Oslo; I think it looks quite wonderful. Let’s book it for this September sailing.”

So, that’s how it started. Our first major cruise which turned out to be terrific and started us on our love of cruising.

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Since our ship, the *Crown Princess*, departed from Copenhagen, we decided to arrive to that city 3 days early so we could explore it on our own. After a not unpleasant, 6-hour flight to Amsterdam and a 1½ hour flight to Denmark, we arrived at the airport groggy but excited.

Mac is always good at finding our way around a city, so he got us on a train to Central Station, where it was only a 3 block walk to the Absolam Hotel, that we had booked in advance.

When we got in our small, but cheerful room, I said, “I’m knocked out. I know you’re raring to go, but could we please take a bit of a nap before we set out on our Danish adventure?”

We did, and when I woke up, it was early afternoon. “Come on, sleepy head, let’s get crackin’. Places to go, people to see!”

I saw outside the hotel a large, brick square and I stepped out onto the street. “Look at all the bicycles. There’s hundreds parked over by that wall.”

Mac grabbed my arm and pulled me back, “Watch out, goofus, here come a bunch of them. You’ll get yourself killed!” At that moment, six handsome young men on bikes rode by, laughing and chatting to each other, and paying no attention to foolish tourists.

We discovered two truths about Copenhagen at that moment: 1) about everyone rides bikes and woe betide the pedestrian who walks in the cycle lane, 2) Danish young men were mostly blond and extremely handsome.



We spent the rest of the afternoon and evening roaming the streets, viewing the charming architecture (quite different from France and England), and having our first Danish meal. It was quite expensive, but delicious. Finally, succumbing to jetlag, we retired early to rest up for the next day’s exploration.

The hotel breakfast buffet was huge and sumptuous. Lots of new fishy items we weren’t used to and great breads, cheeses, and jams.

While munching on a roll with some disgusting pickled fishy thing on it, Mac said, “It looks like a drizzly day, so let’s plan on some indoor activities. The guidebook highly suggests the Carlsberg Glyptotek.”

“What is it, a beer hall. Carlsberg is a Danish beer.”

“No, silly, it’s an art museum containing the Carlsberg collection. It says that Herren Carlsberg, the beer baron, was a huge art collector and that the museum has been recently renovated. It doesn’t open until 10:00 though, so we’ll have to wander around a bit until it opens.”

It wasn't raining yet, so we had some time to see more of the sights, and finally we came across the magnificent façade of the Carlsberg museum. When it opened, we found that the inside was as impressive as the outside. There were hundreds of Roman, Egyptian, and Greek sculptures. It was extremely impressive, and we were grateful that we had found this museum.

“I think we should have lots of Carlsberg beer for lunch, Mac?” Which I did, but he didn't.





The rest of the day was spent dodging drizzle or in other museums that were much less interesting than the Carlsberg. The National Art Museum was primarily Danish art, which was rather bland and derivative of Dutch and Italian works. A small history museum was of little interest, since all the description was in Danish.

So, after a nice dinner we retired to our hotel, resting, and preparing for our last day in Copenhagen.

We had heard from a man in the elevator, who was leaving on a cruise the next day as well, that he was boarding at 1:00 for an 8:00 sailing. “That way you get a free lunch on board.” This sounded like a good idea to us, but we had one more place I absolutely wanted to visit, which I hoped we could do in the morning.

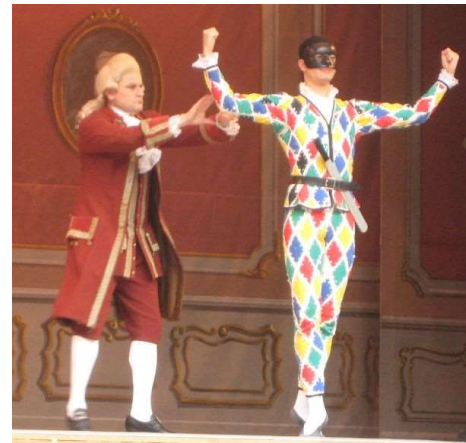
At breakfast I had told Mac, “One of my fondest memories of Copenhagen when I was here in ‘66, was going to The Tivoli Gardens. I remember it as such a beautiful park and there was a concert where I actually saw Marlene Dietrich. So, I would love you to see this magical place again.”

He gave me a snarky look, “Isn’t that when you were having the fling with that Danish kid, Eric?”

With a sappy Southern accent I retorted, “Oh, yes (*sigh*). He’s the one who took me there. It will always have a special place in my heart.”

“Ha, well then we can squeeze it in this morning before we go to the ship.”

When we got to the Tivoli, I have to say it was a bit disappointing. It seemed much seedier than I remembered it, more a carnival/amusement park feeling. But some of the places I remembered were there, particularly the Peacock outdoor theater, where I saw Dietrich in her famous glittery gown. The stage was set for a Comedia Del Arte performance that we saw some of. And the garden with the Turkish castle was quite beautiful.



When I'd seen enough, I cried, "To the Ship!" This always brought a laugh from Mac. It was a reference to when I was Captain Hook in "Peter Pan". He came to a rehearsal where we kept repeating the pirate's complicated exit scene. "To the Ship!" was repeated ad nauseum that rehearsal, and Mac has never let me forget it.

Back at the hotel, we gathered our bags and set off "To the Ship." We had noticed that a block from our hotel was a bus stop for the #28 bus, which had a sign on front saying "To the Cruise Ships" on the front. Waiting at the bus stop, we saw

a #28 bus, but I said, “The cruise ship sign isn’t on this one, just some sign in Danish.”

“Yeah, let’s wait for the one with the English sign,” which we did. When the right bus did arrive, we got on and it took us out to the piers.

But when we got off, we looked for our ship, the *Crown Princess*, but it wasn’t there. “I see the *Aida* and the *Arcadia*, but no *Crown Princess*.” There was a group of tourist boarding the *Aida* with some official men checking them in. “Let’s ask that guy over there.”

Mac showed the dock attendant our pass and he shook his head and said, “You are on wrong pier. You belong on pier #2, over there.” He pointed to some ships in the distance.

“What? How do we get there?”

“You must walk back that way to the end of this pier, then go down the road to pier #2. You will find the *Crown* on that pier.”

Dragging our suitcases, we proceeded on a hot, sweaty, 30-minute walk to the next pier, where we indeed see the *Crown* moored. But just as we got there, I pointed to a #28 bus that was arriving. “Oh no, look, it’s the bus with the Danish sign, and it’s dropping off people right in front of our ship.” Well, live and learn.

3



Since that trip, we have been on many cruise ships, some even bigger than the *Crown Princess*, but our first experience on a large, luxury ship was eye-opening and particularly thrilling.

As I stepped out of the cruise terminal, I looked up at the behemoth of a ship. “Holy Crap! Will you look at the size of that thing?” It was at least 3 times as big as the dinky ship we took to the Bahamas. “Let’s see if we can find our room. I hope it’s better than room in the last ship we took.”

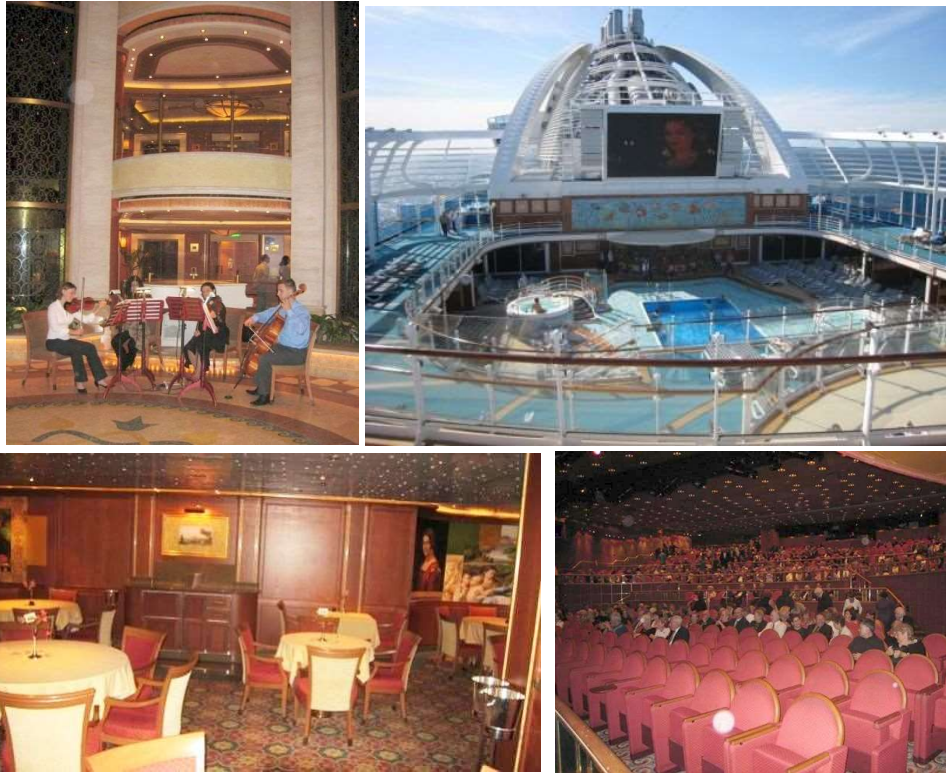
When we found it on the 7th floor, we were blown away at how big and comfortable it was. It had 2 large single beds, a desk on one side and a cabinet with TV on the other side, plus an armchair. And most exciting was our own private balcony. The bathroom was spacious, with a shower, and a closet large enough for all the fancy clothes that are expected for a posh trip like this.

As I unpacked our meager belongings, I said, “We sure don’t need all this space, but I’m damned impressed, none-the-less. As Annie sings, ‘I think I’m gonna like it here.’”



Next, we went to explore the ship, which would take us days to feel like we knew where we were going. On the top floor, we found the cafeteria, where we gobbled a variety of foods that were offered. We ended up eating most of our breakfasts and lunches there.

Then we found the Pool and the Lobby and the Theater and the Dining Room. Mac just shook his head, “This place is like a Floating 4 Star Hotel.”



As I said, we've been on many cruises since, and have gotten used to these luxuries, but on that cruise, everything was new and exciting.

That first evening I asked Mac, "Do we have a specific time for our meal tonight?" On the Bermuda cruise we'd had a 6:00 seating with the same people every meal.

"No, I chose 'Anytime Dining', which means that we go to either the Michelangelo or DaVinci dining rooms whenever we want. And we can ask for sharing a table. That way we get to meet different people at each meal."

"Oh, I hope they are friendly. What will they think of a gay couple?"

"We'll just have to find out. If it gets unpleasant, we can request a private table."

Well, I turned out that sharing tables with new folks every meal was delightful. No one batted an eye about us as a couple (at least not out loud), and we met some really nice people. The first line of conversation was always, "Where are you from?" So, it was fun to meet folks from all over the world and the table talk was usually fascinating.

Over the years we always share tables at dinner, and some of the people we've met that way, we are still in contact with, at least on Facebook.

This cruise had something we never expected, which were everyday lectures by an historian/travel advisor. He gave entertaining and invaluable lectures on the places we would visit the next day. We never missed one of his lectures and they not only taught us about the history of a city but gave touring tips that were extremely helpful when we explored it on our own.

Every night there was some sort of entertainment in the Theater, but I don't remember much of it since I've seen so many similar shows on so many other cruises. Always talented dancers and singers working their buns off on a tiny stage.

But we had a terrific personal performing experience that we haven't had anywhere else. One day I dragged Mac out of the stateroom, "Come with me, I've signed us up for the Princess Show Choir. Rehearsal begins in 10 minutes."

In the rehearsal room there was a motley bunch of shipmates and our cute, young assistant cruise director, Arnie, who welcomed us and handed out song sheets. One of the songs was Queen's "We are the Champions", I remember.

"Alright, folks, we have our accompaniment on this tape recorder, so all you have to do is sing along with it. We'll put in some movement later." And off we went, and it sounded surprisingly good. Frankly, I was simply happy to watch Arnie as he bounced along directing us.

We rehearsed primarily on our "sea day" traveling from Gdansk to Oslo, preparing for our concert on the last day of the cruise. Arnie gave us silly hand gestures to go with the words, which I found slightly embarrassing, but went along because everyone was having such fun. But on the day of the show, Mac said, "Do we really have to do this in front of an audience?"

"Aw come on, it'll be fine. I know you're not a performer by nature, but this is just a hoot. Everyone will love it." Grudgingly he acquiesced and we walked down to the lobby to join the group. I could tell many of the choir were quite nervous, but Arnie came in and his bubbly personality calmed everyone down.

As we got into our semi-circular formation Mac nudged me, "Look, there are people lining the balconies and stairs to watch us. I'm not sure about this." But it

was too late. Arnie raised his arms and the music started. We got through all the songs, with all the silly gestures, and the crowds went wild. Well not wild, but we got a healthy round of applause and even Mac had to agree, we were a hit.

That night was our final formal dinner, because we would land back in Copenhagen the next morning. All in all, the Crown Princess was a joyful experience, which lead us to take all the other cruises since.



4



And now begins our Baltic adventure. A new city every day.

Our first port was Stockholm, Sweden. In order for the ship to reach the port it had to navigate through miles of an archipelago, made up of hundreds islands, large and small. It took 4 hours to get through them. But sitting on our balcony, with a cup of coffee, was a delightful way to spend the morning.



My sister-in-law, Solveig, grew up in Stockholm. She wrote to her sister, who lives there, asking her to meet us and show us around the city.

“Boy, I hope she does meet us, Mac, that will make Stockholm really special.”

“How are we supposed to know her? It’s a big city.”

“Solveig said that she’s got flaming red hair, cut short, so we should be able to spot her.”

And as we came down the gangplank, we saw a bright-red head of hair and thought it must be her. When she saw us looking at her, she grinned and waved, and we knew we’d made the connection.

As I approached her, she said, “Hello, welcome to Stockholm. I am Marianne and you must be David. It’s so nice to meet you both. Solveig has told me so much about you.”

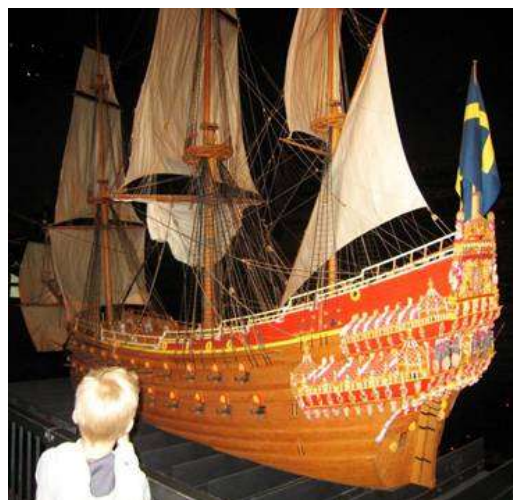
“How nice of you to meet us at the pier. This is my partner Mac. We’re certainly looking forward to seeing your city. It’s so good of you to give us a personal tour.”

“Nonsense, it’s a pleasure. Come this way. My son, Nicholi has a car waiting. The first place we’re visiting is not in the center of the city.” And thus, began a wonderful day in Stockholm.

Nicholi turned out to be a quiet young man, with long, blond hair. I got the impression that he wasn’t too happy having to drive around American tourists, but his mother had made him. Marianne kept up a running narration about places we passed and where we were going. Our sullen driver didn’t say a word, so I thought perhaps he didn’t speak English.

“I think you will be amazed by the Vasa Museum; it holds one of our most treasured artifacts. You will see a huge fighting ship that was built in 1628. But before it set sail, the King decided he wanted another deck build to make it bigger. He wanted to impress the King of Denmark, who was his hated rival. But unfortunately, the new deck made the ship top-heavy, so it tipped over and sank. It was not salvaged until 1957 and amazingly, not rotted much at all, and so reconstruction was possible. You will see it in it’s restored state, looking very much like it did in 1628.”

When we entered the dark museum, we were awed by the enormity of this ancient ship. It took up almost the entire room, and as we walked around it, we could easily imagine how it looked when it was built. The wood didn’t maintain any of the original paint though, but a model showed how it must have looked in all it’s glory. Before it sank, that is.



After we'd finished gawking, Marianne said, "Let us move along, I have lots to show you. We have at least one more museum to see."

Mac pulled out his trusty guidebook, "I hope we can see the National Art Museum. It says here that it has an amazing clock collection."

"I heard from Solveig that you are a clockmaker, so that is the next place I had planned to take you."

When we got back to the car, Nicholi was leaning on the hood, smoking a foul-smelling cigarette. "It is about time, mother. I have other things to do today!" So, he did speak English. We found that in these Scandinavian countries, most young people studied English in grammar school and beyond. I got the feeling that he was showing off, but also letting us know that he didn't want to be our chauffeur.

"Just drive, Nikki, you can go once we're back in city center."

When we arrived and got out of the car, I said, "Nice to meet you, Nicholi, thank you for driving us around." To which he grunted and took off.

"Please don't mind Nikki, he is a teenager and having a rough time in school at the moment. He's not usually so rude. Across the street is the Art Museum."

When we came up to the entrance of the museum, Marianne excused herself, "You boys enjoy the museum, I will wait for you in that café over there."

"Oh, don't you want to come with us?"

"No, I have seen it too many times. My mother and my teachers brought me here again and again. My sister is the art lover, not me. When you are done, we will have some lunch. Take as much time as you want."

I followed the excited Mac as he found the clock collection. He got a pad out and started making notes. We weren't allowed to take photos, so he wanted to put down some information about some of these clocks. "I'm surprised how many French clocks are in this collection, and some rare ones too."

"I'm going to wander around and look at some of the other art. I'll meet you in the lobby in a half an hour. Okay?"

“Sure, sure, I’ll see you then.” And I left that gallery in search of some impressionist paintings that they had on the posters.

In a half an hour (well, 40 minutes) Mac arrived at the lobby and we left the museum. He was glowing with appreciation of what he’d seen. When we joined Marianne he effused, “Wow, that was a fabulous collection! Thank you so much for bringing me here.”

“I’m so glad you enjoyed it. Now let us get some lunch.”

After walking through some quaint, tiny streets, we arrived at a market section, where there was a charming, outdoor restaurant. The menu, however, was a mystery to me since it was in Swedish. “Marianne, what are all these items on the menu?”

“Almost everything in this restaurant are fish dishes. Many of them raw fish served in delicious ways. What kind of thing to you like, boys?”

“Mac will eat anything, but I think I’d much prefer my fish to be cooked. But other than that, I’m open to trying anything. Oh, but no asparagus, please.”

“OK, let me choose for you. I eat here often, and I think I know what you would enjoy.” So, she did, and indeed, we loved what she chose for us.

When we’d finished, Marianne said, “I have one more place I’d like to take you before I must leave. Do you see that cliff over there? The view from the top is wonderful and gives you an overview of the whole city.”

“That sounds terrific, but how do we get up there?”

“They have constructed a glass elevator for the tourists. If you’re not afraid of heights, the ride up is supposed to be fun. At least I hear it is, there is no way I’d ever go up that thing.”

Mac said, “Oh, come on! You have to join us. If you’ve never done it before, it’s time you did.”

I chimed in, “Yes, please Marianne. I’m not crazy about heights, either. I’ll hold your hand and we can be scared together.”

She laughed, shaking her head, “Well, I must say, my children have been teasing me for years about not going up on that elevator. They love it. Maybe, if they are not here to make fun of me, seeing me quake in fear, I’ll try it. But don’t be surprised if I cry like a baby.”

The elevator hugged the side of the cliff, with 3 glass walls. I paid for our tickets and holding Marianne’s hand, we stepped in. We both stayed by the door wall, pressing our backs to it. Mac, of course, went right up front, his nose against the glass.

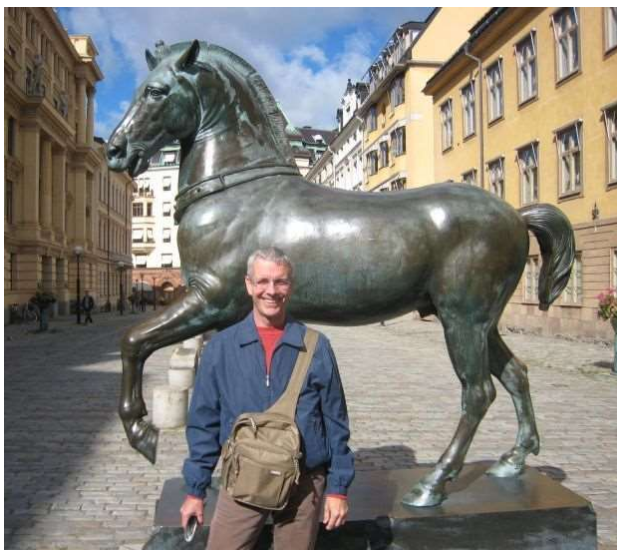
The ascent was smooth and slow, but as we went higher and higher, Marianne closed her eyes and began humming some song. For me, the ride wasn’t as bad as I’d feared, but she was not having a good time. When the doors opened behind us, we burst out onto the platform, and she let out her breath in relief.

“Good, now I can tell the kids that I finally rode that damn thing, but never again! You guys go look at the view, while I call Nicholi to have him pick me up here.”

The view was certainly spectacular and well worth the elevator ride for us. When Nicholi came with the car, he looked at me directly for the first time and smiled. “Did you really get my mother to go up on the elevator? Good for you. Do you want a ride down the hill?”

Mac said, “No thanks, I think we’ll take the elevator back after we gaze over this beautiful city some more.”

We both hugged Marianne, thanking her profusely for making our day in Stockholm special. When we went down the elevator, I made myself stand close to the glass, and it really was a lovely ride. Then wandering around the city some more, we made our way back to the pier and onto the *Crown*. We were tired, but happy.



The concept of having an elegant dinner, seeing a show, going to sleep, and waking up in a new country, was new to us. So, the next morning I was excited to step out on our balcony to see Helsinki, Finland. “Wow, we’re in Finland. What are we going to do today to see this city, Mac? We don’t have a Marianne to show us around.”

“I’ve booked a tour called “Highlights of Helsinki” for this morning, which should give us an overview. Then we can explore areas that we found interesting in the afternoon. Let’s go upstairs to the café and grab some breakfast. We’re meeting our tour group at 9:00.”

When we got down on the pier to the tour bus, we were pleased that it was a new, modern bus with an articulate and personable guide.

“Hello, good people. My name is Heikki, which means “Ruler of the House”, but for you I am only ruler of this bus. This morning we will be visiting three important places in Helsinki, the Johan Sibelius Memorial Park, the Temppeliaukio Rock Church, and Olympic Stadium. Along the way to these places, I will discuss other sites, as we pass them. Please sit back and enjoy our beautiful city, and to the best of my abilities, I make you love Helsinki, as I do.”

We soon reached the Sibelius Park, which was quite large, with interesting sculptures seated on rock formations. The most impressive was a huge gathering of at least a hundred metal tubes.

Heikki told us, “This sculpture was built to be an organ, where each of those pipes would sound as the wind blew over them. This was meant to represent the music of the great Finnish composer, Johan Sibelius. But it turned out that the sound it made was a cacophony of dissonance that was extremely un-musical, and indeed quite unpleasant. So, they had to block up the pipes, which now remain silent. But I still think it’s an impressive piece of art, don’t you?”

Around the park were several other works which we found quite interesting. Also, a small museum with letters and scores of Sibelius. We perused these awhile, then were called back to the bus.



Our next stop was the Temppeliaukio Rock Church, which was quite astounding. Heikki explained, “The architects chose a ‘solid rock upon which to build the church’, like St. Peter. They proceeded to blast into the rock and build it primarily underground. When you are inside, look up to the dome, which is constructed with miles of copper wire. And watch your step on the stone floor, it’s extremely uneven.”

We’d certainly never seen a church like this one. The organ was playing when we were there and it was quite impressive.



The next stop was not that interesting for us, it was the Olympic Stadium, but we couldn't go in, just see it from the outside. There was a small museum honoring the Finnish athletes that had played there, particularly a famous runner, Paavo Nurmi. We didn't stay long, but we liked his naked stature.



As usual, the bus let us off in a large square with lots of “purchasing opportunities”. I pointed to one of the little shops, “Look at that fur stall. You can tell that they have a bitter winter in Helsinki.” They were selling winter accessories of Reindeer, Minx and Fox Furs.

After a tasty lunch, we spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around the city. By late afternoon, we felt that we really had captured this charming city in one day and were ready to board the ship for our night’s entertainment.



At the end of the show that night, the cruise director had made it clear about what we could and couldn't do the next two days. "Tomorrow we will be docking in St. Petersburg, Russia. The rules there are different from other cities that we will visit. Unless you have purchased a special visa, you are not allowed to wander the city on your own. Therefore, I assume that most of you have booked tours for the two days we are there. Therefore, you must, I repeat MUST, stay with your tour at all times."

We had, indeed, booked 2 full-day tours for St. Petersburg, and I had no idea what to expect. As we walked to our first tour bus, I said to Mac, "I would imagine that most of the city will look like it was when it was Leningrad."

"I think you'll find that our tours will be more into the history of Tsarist Russia, than Communist Russia. Much of the grandeur of that era has been restored."

But when the bus moved into the city, we found it to be a bustling, modern, working-class city. There were miles of worker flats near the pier, then newer apartment complexes as we came into the center city. It was alive with all sorts of folks taking buses and trams to work that morning.



"See, Mac, this is sort of what I expected Leningrad to look like now."

"Ah, but wait until you see where we're headed."

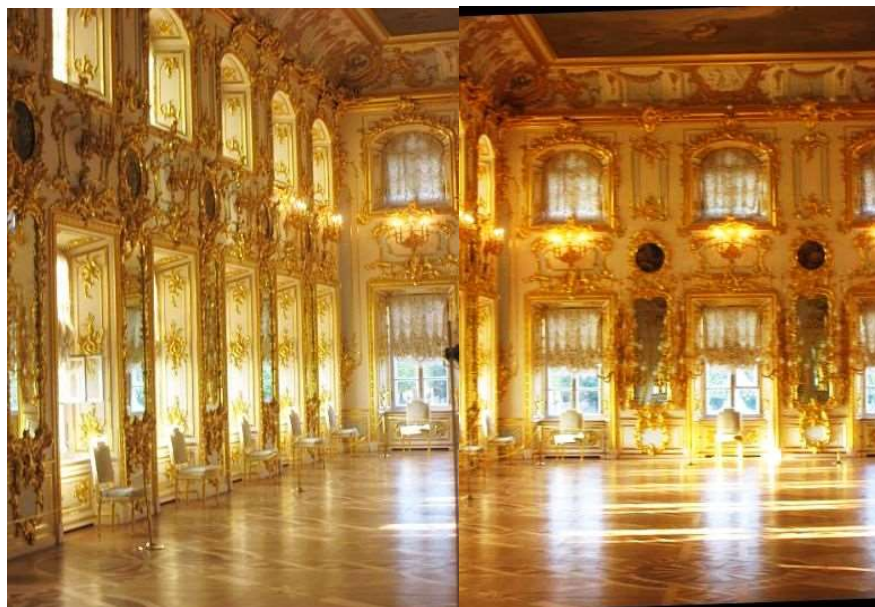
Just then the tour guide, a small, energetic woman with striking blond hair, named Olga, told us all to put our headphones on. All of us were each given a pair of wireless headsets, which we wore throughout both day's tours. It was a terrific way for a tour guide to communicate with her pack. We could hear her clearly no matter how far away from her we were. I've never had tour guide lectures given this clearly since.

“We will be leaving city center soon and proceeding to our morning’s destination, Peterhof. This was once the Summer Palace of Tsar Peter I. When he had it built, he wanted the rooms and gardens to surpass Versailles. And I think you will find that they do.”

When the bus pulled into the parking lot, we got a glimpse of what would be one of the most gorgeous places I’d ever seen.

“You must realize that beginning in 1991, when the city was renamed St. Petersburg, these Tsarist palaces were renovated and restored to their original beauty. The furniture you will see in the rooms is almost all from the palace’s golden years. It was put into storage and brought out when the palace was renovated.”

For the rest of the morning, we moved from room to glorious room, and then out into the gardens, which were equally amazing. I will let the photos speak for themselves.





Back in the bus I said to Mac, “The Peterhof is a hard act to follow, but we have the rest of today and tomorrow left of touring. What can they show us to top that?”

“From what I’ve read, St. Petersburg has quite a lot to offer. Let’s just sit back and enjoy it.”

Then the fisty, Olga’s voice came out of our headphones, “I hope you all found Peterhof as sumptuous as I predicted. We are now headed to a smaller Palace, but quite remarkable in its own way. It has a bloody history with Tsar Nicholas II that you should find interesting. We are now going to the Yusupov Palace.”

When we arrived at an impressive building on a residential street. It didn’t have the look of a palace, until we got inside. As we passed through a huge entryway, with a stunning chandelier hanging over it, our guide began her narrative. “The Yusupovs were good friends with Nicholas and Alexandra, who visited this home often. And it was here that the murderous plot to kill Rasputin was planned and executed. As we pass through these elegant rooms, be aware that all the furnishings are original to this house.”

I whispered to Mac, “You can see the wealth that the revolutionaries were furious about. This is just someone’s home, not even royalty.”





We followed our guide into a grandiose room that was a full-sized theater, with a stage and row of balconies.

“You see the center box? That was reserved for the Tsar and his family when the Yusupovs showed theatrical productions. Only the highest level of society would have seen these presentations.

“Oh, Mac, what a great theater! How I’d love to put on some plays here.”

“Now I will tell you of the murder of Rasputin. We don’t know if Nicholas was directly involved in the plot, but Yusupov and several other friends of the Tsar felt that Rasputin was ruining the country with his influence over the Tsar’s family. They lured him to this house and in a room downstairs offered him food and drink, poisoning him. When the poison didn’t seem to do him much harm, they stabbed him. But still he wouldn’t die, and they finally shot him in the head.”

We exited from this amazing house from the basement floor, where a room was set up to represent the murder of Rasputin.



Our next stop was to a large hotel with a grand banquet hall. “You will now partake of a typical Russian meal, including vodka, caviar and champagne. And some folk performers will entertain you with song and dance. Enjoy.”

The hall held at least 10 busloads of tourists, but our group sat together around one table. The food was not elegant, but tasty, the drink strong, and the chatter amiable. And we certainly enjoyed the entertainment. All in all, for a tour bus lunch, it was one of the best.



Our next stop was across town, so the bus ride was about half an hour. They let us off in one area, where there were two interesting sights. “Look, Mac, there’s the famous Kirov Ballet Theater. I saw on a kiosk over there that they have a ballet this week. If we could get off the boat tonight, I’d love to see them dance.”

He laughed, “Fortunately, we can’t. And who wants to see all those adults leaping about, anyway?” At which point I playfully slapped him in the arm. He makes fun of ballet all the time, but I love it.

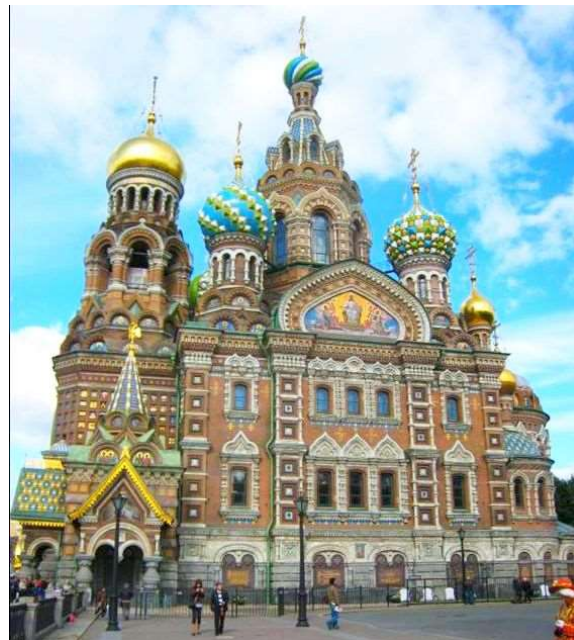


Olga told us to follow her across a bridge over the Neva River. “This bridge is called the Hare Bridge, because of the stature of a hare you see below us. It is said that you should throw coins to the hare and if the coins stay on the pilings it is good luck. You can try if you like.” And she handed us all some penny coins.

Many of us tried, but few had them land on the pilings; it was damned hard.



The grand finale of the day was the awe-inspiring, Church of the Savior on the Spilled Blood. I can't say that the name inspired interest, but as we approached this gigantic building from the parking lot, I just had to stop and stare. “I've never seen anything like this, Mac, what an amazing edifice.” He pulled me along to keep up with the group, but I could tell that everyone was as blown away as I was.

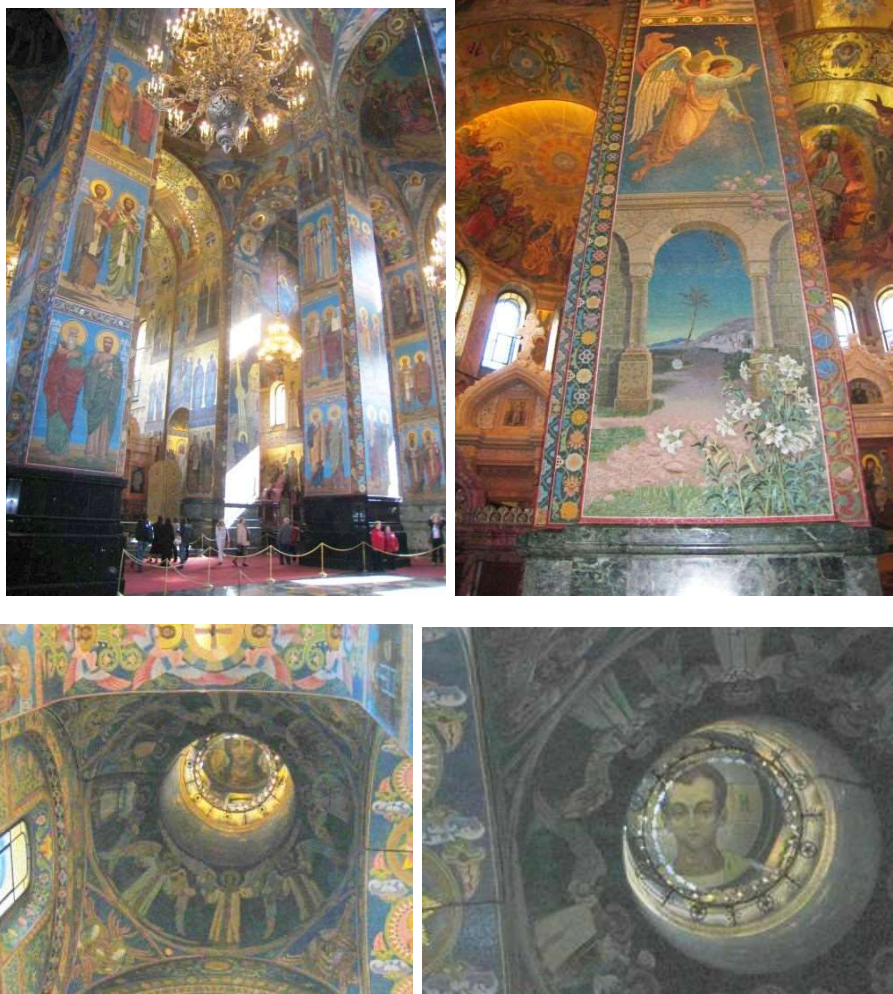


And inside was even more glorious. Our guide spoke reverently about this place, seeming to be as in awe of it as we were. “This was a former Russian Orthodox church between 1883 and 1907, when it was closed by the Soviets. After World War II, it was in terrible shape and the Soviets decided to restore it to its former glory and turn it into a museum.”

Mac whispered, “They knew it would be a major tourist attraction, but it’s pretty astounding that they put this much money and effort into a church.”

“Please note that all the artwork in this church is ceramic mosaic, not painted. But you can see that the detail is extremely delicate and precise, so it looks painted. Look up in the two towers and you can see Christ’s head at two different ages.”

This was certainly true; I’d never seen such beautiful and detailed mosaic work. All the walls were covered in this amazing art and it was simply amazing.



That ended our first day of tours in St. Petersburg. I couldn't imagine how the second day could possibly be as thrilling, but I was wrong.

7

At dinner on the ship, I found out that some of our table mates had book a tour to the Kirov Ballet that night. I was sorry we hadn't, until I saw how much it cost. Instead, we had a show on board, the Troika Dance Troupe, which was terrible.

As we left the theater, Mac said, "Can you believe how untalented that bunch was? The lead male singer wailed like a cat in heat."

"And the dancers could barely kick and certainly couldn't do the traditional Russian dancing. Boy, do I wish we could have afforded the Kirov Ballet! This show was cringe-making."

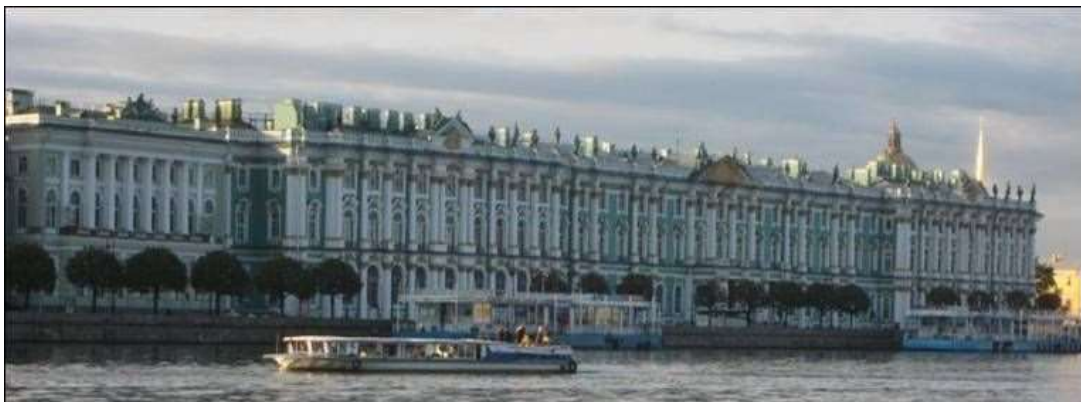
"Let's turn in now, because we have to be up at 6:00 for tomorrow's tour."

"Why so bloody early?"

"Muster for the bus is at 7:00 and I want a good breakfast before we leave. It's going to be a long day."

So, in the morning, our tour began with a bus ride around the stately government and office buildings of St. Petersburg, which were impressive, especially in the early morning light. We then transferred to a ferry boat, which took us along the Neva River, like the *batteau mouche* in Paris, viewing more magnificent buildings.





Our morning tour ended with walk through Saint Isaac’s Cathedral. “I have to say, Mac, it is magnificent, rivaling St. Peter’s in Rome, but having seen so many cathedrals over the years, I much prefer the Church of Spilled Blood.”

“Me too. And now I hope they have a good lunch for us, I’m starving!”



For lunch they took us to a much more elegant and intimate setting than the day before. It was in a beautiful home of someone, with a large dining room, and there were only two other tour groups. The food was better, too, with more champagne and vodka, plus a cute, blond waiter.



As we munched away, we didn’t realize that the highlight of our time in St. Petersburg, and maybe in all our travels, was yet to come.

As we got back on the bus, the Olga said, “Well folks, I hope you had a good meal, because we have a lot to see this afternoon. We will be touring The Hermitage Museum. This vast museum is contained in six buildings, but only five of them are open to the public, including the Winter Palace of Empress Catherine the Great.”

Mac said to me, “We passed that huge complex on our river cruise today. Remember that long, blue and white building?”

“The museum was founded in 1764 by Catherine the Great, when she acquired an impressive collection of paintings from a merchant in Berlin. And as more and more works of art were accumulated, the museum grew to fill these six buildings. However, it was only open to the public in 1852. And now millions of visitors explore the wonders of this museum every year. Please be sure your headsets are secure, as I will be commenting on things as we pass, and there will be crowds of people in every room.”

The first building we entered was the Winter Palace. From the moment we stepped into the grand entrance hallway, I saw that it was even more glorious than yesterday’s Summer Palace. And as we went from room to room, I just gawked in amazement. “Look at these furnishings! I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“The clocks alone, make this place a knock-out for me.” And so, we went from room to room, listening to our guide, but mostly just being blown away by everything we saw. And that was just the Winter Palace.

As the afternoon rolled on, we moved from one building to another, viewing countless works of Art of all types, in rooms that were simply astounding.

In one area, that was a complete surprise, but we weren’t allowed to take photographs, which was extremely disappointing. Here there was a huge collection of French Impressionist paintings that had not been seen by anyone from the West. It was only recently that this wing been open to the public. There were paintings by Monet, Degas, Picasso, Renoir, and many more that I had never seen reproductions of in any of my Art classes or anywhere else.

“Oh Mac, I wish she wouldn’t go so fast! I could spend an entire day in this wing alone.” I’m going to let the photos speak for themselves but be aware that they are just a hint of the wonders at The Hermitage.





As we wandered through these rooms, the guide enlightened us about many of the pieces of Art, but my favorite tidbit was, “Legend tells that the small rhinoceros clock here, stopped the minute Tsar Nicholas II was killed.”



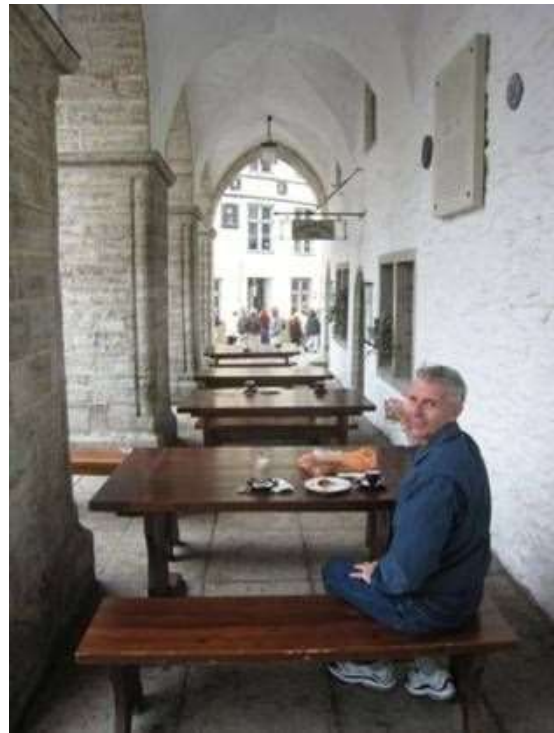
So, there you have it. A taste of the magnificent Hermitage. I shall never forget it and I would go back in a minute to study it more carefully. But I fear that a guided tour is the only way to see it, and I'm not sure I want to return to Russia at the moment.

We hadn't booked any tour for the next day, when we were going to land in Tallin, Estonia. I asked Mac, "I don't know anything about this city, I never heard of it. I don't even know where Estonia is. Should we have booked a tour?"

"From what I've read it's a small city and very 'walkable', so it will be nice to do some exploring on our own, I think."

And he was right. We spent the whole day wandering round this charming Medieval city. Much of the ancient buildings had been spruced up to their original look, making it a perfect tourist city.





The markets in the squares were particularly fun, and we got a chance to talk to some of the locals who ran the stalls. Everyone was extremely friendly and spoke English quite well.

“Look Mac, all those wool shops in the old town walls. Let’s so some shopping! When we saw that wool shop in Helsinki, we didn’t buy anything, so let’s try for something here.”

“Well, they have some cool winter hats, maybe one for each of us?”

So, we bought two, great hats, which we wore for several years, until mine was chewed up by a friend’s dog.



And so, our day in Tallin went beautifully. It had been a lot of walking, so I was pretty pooped by the end of it and happy to get back to the ship. That night we ate in the fancy dining room, and we shared our experiences with other cruisers. Those that took tours were not particularly pleased with them. I told them that with no guided tour we didn’t learn much history or facts, but we enjoyed experiencing the city on our own. It reminded me of the many trips we’d taken before cruising.

That night our ship took us to Poland, where we were to visit the city of Gdansk. Unfortunately, this did not prove to be as pleasant or interesting as Tallin.

When the ship docked in the morning, I looked out from our balcony, “Ugh, we’re in a vast industrial, shipping yard. How far is the city?”

“It’s quite a ways from here. Actually, we’re in Gdynia, on the coast, and it’s a one-hour bus ride to get to Gdansk. Luckily, I heard about this yesterday at that lecture you didn’t bother to attend. Afterwards, I rushed down to the tour agent in the lobby and booked us a bus tour of the city, so we’d have a way to get there.”

After a quick breakfast, we boarded a bus that was not nearly as nice as the one in St. Petersburg. The long bus ride went through industrial and residential areas with nothing noteworthy or scenic. This wasn’t helped by the gaunt, grumpy guide who spoke terrible English and read his commentaries from cards in a monotone.

“Did you hear what he said when he was talking about White Russia, Mac?” I giggled, “He said, ‘White Trashia’ He’s the worst guide I’ve ever heard.”

Once we got to Gdansk, I have to say there were amazing things to see, particularly when we got off the bus and did a walking tour. Though we didn’t pay much attention to our guide, we did learn that Gdansk was almost completely destroyed by the Soviets in WWII. Now the center, older part of the city has been entirely reconstructed to look exactly like it did in the 19th Century. They even used a great deal of the original stonework, that was salvaged from the rubble.

This made the city a prosperous tourist destination, but it never felt like a real city, with local people living in it. As I pointed to a magnificent clock tower, I said, “It reminds me of a huge Disney-made city. It’s beautiful, but false, somehow.”

“And the teeming number of tourists doesn’t make it any better. There are some amazing public clocks, however, which of course I love.”

We were given about an hour to roam by ourselves once our tour was over, but we spent most of it in a café having coffee and ice cream.





In order to reach our final destination, Oslo, Norway, we needed an extra day at sea to get there. Therefore, this was our first “sea day”, and it was interesting finding things to do on our ship during the day. One activity was rehearsing for our “Princess Show Choir”, which was such fun. There was also a terrific lecture about Norway, which was the last of the history/tourist lectures on the voyage. I think these were Mac’s favorite thing about the *Crown Princess*.

We reached our port overnight, so we couldn’t watch the docking. But in the morning when I went out onto the balcony I was thrilled. “Oh look, Mac, we’re right in the city already. We can see the city walls and some of the great buildings right from our balcony.” It was the only place where we didn’t dock far outside the city.

“I remember the lecturer told us this, so I ordered a room service breakfast. We’ll eat it right here on the balcony.” That was a real treat.



When we left the ship, we found that everything was walking distance, so we were able to spend the morning exploring this fascinating city. It was different from the other cities on the Baltic. It seemed to emphasize two things: ships and sculptures. The architecture was quite different, too.

As we wandered the streets of the city, we encountered the city’s love of Art. The number and variety of public sculptures was amazing. There were fascinating sculptures all over the city. And the excursion Mac had planned for the afternoon would exemplify this even more.



One thing I was excited to see was their National Theater. “That’s a statue of Henrik Ibsen. I never think of him as Norwegian, but of course he was.”

“The architecture in Oslo is fascinating, too.” And he smiled, “On the other hand, we’ve only seen one public clock. And it’s in that weird brick bus terminal.”



At lunch, Mac told me about our afternoon's adventure. "Do you remember at the lecture yesterday when he told us about Vigeland Sculpture Park?"

"Oh yes, the one with all the naked statures."

"Right. He said that it is a 'must see' and it's easy to get to by tram."

"I love trams!" I said as one rumbled right by us in front of the restaurant.

"Well, across the street we will catch the tram to take us there. Let's pay the check and get going."

I enjoyed the 30-minute ride on the tram, but I was not prepared for the overwhelming experience of seeing this phenomenal park. Gustav Vigeland was a popular Norwegian artist, so popular that the city gave him this entire, large park to create his vision of Family and Human Relationships.

The brochure claims it to be "the largest sculpture park in the world dedicated to a single artist. There are 212 sculptures made from bronze and granite, spread over an 850-meter space. The sculptures consist of naked human figures, in all variety of poses and situations, from pastoral to downright surreal, exploring the human form and human life at its purest."



This is the only clothed statue.







We spent the entire afternoon in this huge park, and it was certainly one of the highlights of our trip. After a tram ride back to the ship, we collapsed in our room until the ship departed in the early evening.

Fortunately, it was still light when the ship left Oslo because we had one more wonder to see before our first major cruise was over. To get back to the sea, we had over an hour of sailing past multitudes of fjords and islands, with beautiful sailboats everywhere. Sitting on our balcony, with coffee and dessert, made a perfect ending to our Baltic Princess adventure.



The End