

Dear All,

The final instalment of our diary!

Leon and Audrey's World Tour Part 24

Sunday 1 February 2009

We walked to the airport at 6 am, wheeling the borrowed luggage trolley which had remained in the room for the last 2 nights. Leon was happy that we got value for the US\$4 fee for the trolley! The long flight was uneventful, with omelettes with cream cheese and a cheese and garlic sauce for breakfast which was edible. Waited ages for our bags but all eventually appeared. Hopped into a taxi to the hotel.

When I booked hotels back in July and August last year I had a terrible time with New York – all were ridiculously expensive. I eventually found the cheapest reasonable option for US\$291 for 2 nights and reluctantly booked it. The room we got is a suite, with a separate sitting room, a kitchen containing a bar fridge, a microwave and a sink and nothing else. Just as well we have our picnic set with us! The space is brilliant for the final reorganising of the luggage – we can now have 32 kgs per bag on Qantas, and we can take 6 bags in total! This is good because we do have a bit of a shopping list for New York.

It was interesting driving through the streets of Manhattan. It is the first time we've been among high rise buildings since Hong Kong – all throughout Europe we haven't been in the high-rise areas. It was very reminiscent of Melbourne with the old buildings and the high-rise buildings jumbled together, with massive long shadows of the buildings in the bright sunlight.

After dropping our bags off we went out to the local supermarket and grabbed a cheap microwave dinner (my digestion has been complaining bitterly about that omelette on the plane but four urgent sprints for the loo fixed it – the first such issue either of us had had the entire trip) then stayed in for the evening, watching the ridiculously enormous TV we have in our sitting room (we don't like it).

Monday 2 February 2009

Some statistics: we have slept in 30 different beds, as well as spending a night on a plane. We spent 28 nights in the flat in Düsseldorf.

We slept in, leapt out of bed, quick shower then down to the hotel's "continental breakfast". We had this in San Francisco as well, and like in San Francisco here they use plastic plates and cutlery and paper cups for the coffee. It's quite bizarre, eating in an elegant room with uniformed staff and a plastic plate. On offer were bagels, pastries and croissants, toast, and 2 cereals. It's the French concept of "continental breakfast".

Breakfasted, we headed out to explore, starting by taking the Metro to Macy's, where I wanted to look for shoes (useless). We then walked to one of the biggest and cheapest camera shops in the world - B & H. (Stopping at various other interesting places along the way.) It's a fascinating place, swarming with sales staff so you can barely look at anything without someone popping up to explain it. It's a Jewish owned business which takes the Sabbath so seriously that even their website doesn't take orders on the Sabbath. (And many other shops in New York were also closed on Saturdays and open Sundays.) The lens Leon wanted to buy here is still not available which was annoying, but we looked at light-weight tripods and all sorts of other things, Leon eventually buying a large camera cleaning kit which he has been wanting. The logistics of this place were amazing. All sales are done through the many computers through the shop and the items then sent down a conveyor belt to the collection area, while you get a slip. Leon has done mail order from them before so he was in their computer

system already. You add further purchases to your order, and when finished you go to the checkout, pay the only female staff present in the place, then present your receipt to collect your things. It's very efficient, and given the value of the stock they carry nice and secure for them as well. There were a couple of armed, uniformed NYPD officers at the exit to ensure that there was no trouble – does the shop pay to have them on the premises, I wonder?

Staggering under the weight of 2 one inch thick catalogues as well as Leon's cleaning kit we headed over the road to a diner, where we had an inoffensive lunch. The waitress was friendly, chatty, helpful and we were happy to leave her a decent tip – she earned it!

We then decided we needed to unload, and that the several shoe shops we'd looked at had been useless so it might be an idea to ring around a few places, so we caught a bus back to the room, Leon made the calls and we identified a place that specialises in difficult feet. We headed out again, first to another camera shop, Adorama. This was small and disappointing, so we caught another bus to the shoe shop, Eneslow, where they measured my feet and declared that I have short toes and therefore no-one has ever measured the width of my feet properly! I ended up with a pair of shoes that seem to fit and not pinch my toes, and they are a standard brand so I should be able to order them in Australia. Thank goodness!

On the way back to the room we stopped in to look at a pharmacy type place, a large chain, similar to DM in Germany or Priceline in Australia. I've been looking for cotton buds (Wattestäbchen) all through the trip, because I need the ones with the paper stem (to clean and scratch my ears – you try running around with a solid lump of plastic in your ears 16 hours a day! The plastic ones are too flexible and also have sharp edges if the cotton comes off.) and they are no longer available in Australia. I've been using the DM ones from Germany for years, and when we arrived in Germany I bought one box at DM and they then changed over to the plastic which was most annoying! Anyway, in America we found out that Q-Tips, the standard product there, comes in both plastic and also in paper in the baby aisle. So we grabbed about a year's supply.

For dinner we weren't really hungry so we grabbed a single take-away pasta and shared it for dinner, and then spent the evening packing all our shopping and making room to pack our warm boots and coats.

Tuesday 3 February 2009

Quick breakfast at hotel, then headed out to Grand Central Station, the setting of one of our favourite novels. We had intended to take the bus there but got mixed up as to where the bus ran so just walked instead – it was 3 cross town blocks and 15 downtown blocks. The walk was cold and there was the odd flurry of snow. Arrived at the station in light snow, wandered around a bit admiring the impressive building – it's nothing like the European train stations! It was built to be grandiose and they succeeded. We then went to look at the main facade outside, but the snow was getting heavier and heavier so we only had a brief look before dashing back inside! We then headed for a Metro train to Wall St.

When we reached Wall St it was snowing hard, and we unfortunately didn't have an umbrella with us. I took my hearing aids off and stashed them safely in Leon's camera bag then not caring if I got wet (it was only 0 degrees so it wasn't really cold) we walked down Wall St, looking to take a picture for a friend of mine who wants a nice picture to blow up and hang on his wall. With the heavy snow it was hard to get good pictures and Leon wasn't satisfied with any of them. He had hoped for a snow covered sign but it hadn't been snowing long enough for that sort of thing. We walked the full length of Wall St, then walked along the river to the Brooklyn Bridge, which wasn't very visible in the snow. We decided that it would be too painful to attempt to walk on the bridge in the conditions and instead went looking for a bus back to the hotel.

Back at the hotel we finished packing stuff up and took it all downstairs at the 12 noon checkout time and booked a car to the airport at 1:30, then wandered a few doors down the street to a shop selling watches. Leon explained to the owner what he wanted (a silver quarter repeater in a hunter case) and the shopkeeper said it would be about \$10,000, then called over a very downtrodden assistant to show Leon some watches. Most of the instructions were in Yiddish with only “show him some nice watches” in English and the assistant (who spoke very little English) proceeded to show us what was obviously the shop’s rubbish pile. Leon picked out one heavily tarnished English silver watch and asked for a price, but was told to keep looking and find more, so he picked out one of those watches that were so common in Istanbul, an English watch marked “Constantinople” on the dial. With 2 watches in hand the owner proceeded to write out an appraisal valuing each watch at around \$6,000 then to write an invoice with the English watch at \$1,000 and the Constantinople watch at \$1,500, then asked Leon to fill out his name and address on it! We escaped 5 minutes later after a slightly hairy time, “we’re only looking and will think about it over lunch and no we aren’t going to pay a deposit on them”.

Once out, we were sharing opinions on the experience – the ridiculous prices and the rubbish watches we were shown. We’ve obviously been sized up as not good customers and treated appropriately. Oh, well, it was an experience! It’s a shame we didn’t get to learn anything about watches, though.

We then headed up the street to an Italian restaurant for lunch. We had planned to visit a deli and eat some of the traditional New York Jewish food but the snow was now making the ground slippery and us very wet, and the watches had taken longer than planned, so we didn’t have time to go looking for one. Had an OK lunch, then went back to the hotel next door for our car to the airport.

We had a very smooth run to the airport despite the weather and were too early to check in. We made use of the time though, Leon taking off and packing his thermals, and we both packed our warm boots and excess coats so that we didn’t have to lug them all the way home! We then checked in, where we were astounded to be told that we’d been upgraded to first class for free! What an excellent way to finish the trip off! No window seat unfortunately, which is a shame, but we should have a fairly good view anyway at the pointy end where the aircraft is narrow.

We went through security and to the first class lounge which wasn’t really all that good, sat by the window where we could watch the snow falling – it was now a couple of inches thick on the ground. Our plane was listed as being 20 minutes late but we knew that given the weather it would be much later than that – the plane will need to be de-iced which takes time, and which we’ve never seen before so it will be interesting! We boarded 20 minutes late, and after taxiing to the far end of the airport to be sprayed with a milky liquid to get all the ice off the aeroplane we then taxied back to the other end of the airport to wait for take off, and ended up taking off 2 hours late.

A very pleasant flight to Los Angeles – only one other person was in first class for this leg, then we all had to get off and wait while they loaded on the extra baggage and fuelled the plane for the long flight to Sydney. Finally got back on and off to Sydney.

We had planned our trip home carefully to minimise jetlag – if we can avoid sleeping on the first leg and then stay up as late as possible on the second leg we will then basically be on Australian time and will have minimal jetlag. That was the theory – we actually both slept for an hour or two on the first flight, and then slept reasonably well as planned on the second flight.

Wednesday 4 February 2009 – does not exist – we flew over the dateline!

Thursday 5 February 2009

Arrived in Sydney only an hour late which we had planned for – Flight QF 108 is commonly known as QF One-Oh-Late because it is often delayed in New York, so we allowed lots of time to change planes in Sydney, and we arrived back in Melbourne on schedule, feeling very fresh.

We went through Customs in Sydney, prepared with lists of what we had bought and what had been posted home, and also prepared to show our wooden items and our chocolate items, which we declared. As it turned out, nothing was inspected, we were simply asked what we had and after we'd described it they were happy to let us through without inspecting them. The Quarantine dogs were sniffing around all the bags and we saw the dog react to one backpack which was searched and a contraband apple removed. When we'd collected our luggage they were waving the owner's declaration card – she obviously hadn't declared her apple and was in trouble for this! (For my German family planning to visit Australia: be very careful about what food you try to bring in, and declare it all. Chocolates are OK, most packaged processed food is OK but anything containing fruit, vegetables, raw or dried eggs will be confiscated. It's better to not bother. Australia is free of many nasty pests and diseases [Rabies. Fireblight of apples. Phylloxera of grapes. The diseases causing the dieback in bees. The Giant African Snail. And many, many more!] which can be brought in this way and all Australians know the lesson of the rabbit and the cane toad.)

Driving back home from Melbourne airport, everything here is very dry – after last week's horror weather many of the European trees have actually dropped most of their leaves so it almost feels like autumn with all the leaves on the ground. It's bad though – the trees will die with this much heat stress, and the dry leaves are a fire risk. The two trees left in our garden (a native lilly-pilly and a Jacaranda) are looking amazingly well and very green, but they have not had any water for the 13 years we have lived in this house so were already adapted to not having water. It almost looks as though we have the greenest trees in the street!

Arrived home at about 3:45 pm (total travel time from hotel to front door was 34 hours and 15 minutes) and dragged the suitcases up the garden path to the veranda, then opened the door. Our cat, Saskia, didn't bother to come and meet us but when I went to find her she looked incredulous to see me and immediately started purring!

The house is fortunately not too hot inside – about 27 degrees, we had feared that it could be very hot! After quickly unpacking all chocolate items from R4 and depositing them into our chocolate fridge we then headed out to the post office to collect all our mail (a huge bag of letters, and all the parcels we sent have arrived safely); dispatched a birthday card to Leon's daughter Dhanica (she's 18 tomorrow) then went shopping for the basics – milk from our organic shop and bread, butter, cheese, and some cereal for breakfast from the supermarket.

Took everything home and dumped it in the fridge, then opened all the doors and turned on the exhaust fans to cool the house down as much as possible. We then sorted out dirty washing and got some laundry done and had a fairly quiet evening, trying to make the backup computer work (it has decided it doesn't want to start up).

I fell asleep on the couch but woke up after a not too long nap and we went to bed at 10 pm – about our normal time.

Friday 6 February 2009

Up at 5:30 (our normal time) after sleeping well in our own bed, then had a quiet morning (our own shower is wonderful!) unpacking the parcels until it was time to close up the house before it gets hot (forecast is 32 today) and head to the hairdresser.

After getting our hair cut correctly, we went and did some more shopping, visiting the new supermarket near us that opened while we were away (our old Safeway is scheduled to turn into a Dan Murphy liquor shop but I don't know if they got council approval).

Took the shopping home and had a quick lunch of a BBQ snag (an Australian sausage considered inferior to any other sausage on the planet but infinitely better than the British sausage!) fried in

macadamia nut oil, then headed into town to visit our bank and get things such as the backup hard drive and Leon's marine cameras out of the bank vault. Stopped in at our local Russian deli for some sliced Kassler for dinner, also collecting some chicken from the chicken shop (the couple who run it were delighted to see us again and she was amazed at my figure) and the ingredients for a basic fruit salad from the good fruit shop. They are forecasting 43 degrees tomorrow so we won't be cooking anything more than the fruit salad!

Back home, we continued unpacking and looking at the enormous pile of mail that has accumulated over the last 3 months. In the end we picked out the ones that looked like bills and dealt with them and left the rest until later. Also opened the annual family newsletter from my cousin in Coorow, WA to find the sad news that the family farm has been sold. I've known that it's been on the market for a couple of years now and been hoping to get back there one last time but that now won't happen.

Getting a little tired in the afternoon but we've managed to get over the jetlag really well. We would have been fine to go to work today – but I'm glad we didn't!

Had a ham, cheese and salad sandwich for dinner – I was still hungry so I quickly curried the left-over sausages and ate some on a slice of toast.

I fell asleep on the couch again in the evening while Leon got the backup computer working and failed to get the backup hard drive that had been in the bank vault working. We haven't lost any data but we are going to have to look harder at how we protect our data!

Opened the house up to cool it down and went to bed at around 11.

Saturday 7 February 2009

Woke up at 2 am and had trouble getting back to sleep – it was somewhere around 26 degrees outside still. Eventually succeeded, then Saskia decided to wake us up at 5 am.

The forecast for today is now 44 degrees so we decided to head to the local large shopping centre (Chadstone) which has (a) undercover parking so the car doesn't get too hot and (b) air-conditioning.

Once it started to warm up we closed the house up and when the shopping centre opened we drove over there, only to discover major power problems there, with half the shops without any power and no air-conditioning working! We wandered around for a couple of hours but it then started to get hot inside (some of the problems were fixed but not the air-conditioning) then gave up, bought more bread and headed home in the 40 degree heat to our own little air-conditioner in our dining room, and spent the rest of the afternoon trying to get our diaries finished off.

At 2:00 pm it was 45.7 degrees near us, and 45.4 in the city. The computers are not in the air-conditioned room and it's well past 30 degrees in here.

Anyway, I think this is a good point to wind up the diary.

Overall observations:

Firstly, on the USA: we know our visit has been rather odd, and we've missed probably most of the things we should have seen. When planning the flights we had only a little over a week left and wanted to earn as many frequent flyer points as possible so we picked locations at random, really, "there's a camera shop in New York; San Francisco is the longest possible flight from London and is close to Monterey Bay Aquarium; the Smithsonian in Washington; what other cities are on the West Coast? Seattle – the Tom Bihn factory!" That's how it was planned and that's mostly what we did.

We know we didn't do the country justice and we saw very little of what it has to offer. We had less than a week and half and in that time we did pretty well.

Nothing went wrong on the trip. We never lost our luggage, we never got sick, lost only minor items such as gloves, never ended up without a bed for the night, and only once had a suitcase go bouncing along an escalator alarmingly but it seems that nothing was damaged. (We open the meringue biscuits tomorrow.) In a 3 month trip you expect something to go wrong!

Public transport all around the world is expensive. We complain about the cost here in Australia but we don't realise how good we have it!

Roads in Germany and in the USA are surprisingly bad. Again, we complain about the state of our roads here but they're better than many in the rest of the world.

Beggars are evident everywhere around the world, much more so than in Australia.

We have good food here in Australia, at good prices. (Which I already knew, but it bears repeating.) I knew much American bread was sweet, but I had thought that the San Francisco sourdough would be good and frankly, it's very ordinary. If you make the effort here, you can get good bread, but nothing like Hincels! Most food overseas was about the same sort of price that we pay, but that was in currencies worth twice as much as the Australian dollar. Overall, food was about twice the price as in Australia.

And we reckon we're pretty independent travellers, and we travel pretty hard. In the 3 months we had basically one quiet day when I had a bad cold. We use our feet and public transport for the most part – in Europe itself we used a total of 3 taxi rides and for the rest of the time relied on our feet and public transport. We did exactly one guided tour, of the Boeing factory, which it wasn't possible to do any other way.

In case it isn't obvious from the diaries, we had a wonderful time!

Some statistics:

My diary ended up 95,602 words long. Leon's is about 56,000 words and he prepared more than 900 photos for it (not all of which were included).

Number visited:

Museums 24

Aquariums 4

Zoos 2

Interesting transport 12 (cog trains, funiculars, cable cars, gondolas, monorails.)

Christmas markets 15

And the final weather for today? In Melbourne it got to 46.4, the hottest day on record (records have been kept for 150 years). Near our place, it was 46.7 degrees celsius. This is the hottest I've ever experienced. We've had the worst bushfires in Victoria for 24 years, with at least 100 homes destroyed and 40 dead – both numbers are expected to rise significantly.

Leon's diary can be read here:

<http://www.bluering.org.au/leon/pdf/Leon&AudreysWorldTripPart31.pdf>